



## Conclusion workshop October 19th 2010: Employment for persons with a disability.

This workshop fits in the Interreg IVA project, Tackling Social Exclusion. The subvention programme "Interreg IV A – 2 Seas" of the European Union is a trans-border co-operation project for the period 2007-2013 between France, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and Flanders. In the framework of this programme, the Ghent Municipality is co-operating with the cities of Southampton (United Kingdom) and Rotterdam (the Netherlands). This project is entitled 'Tackling Social Exclusion'. We will be working together for the period of January 1st 2009 up to December 31st 2011. The province of East Flanders is also supporting this project with a subvention.

With the project, we are pursuing the living quality of all inhabitants. We are striving towards an integrated accessibility of the services (including for people with a temporary or permanent disability).

During the workshop, jointly organised by the Cell Persons with a Disability and the non-profit organisation Licht en Liefde, discussion tables were being held during which crucial themes as regards employment opportunities for visually impaired people were being addressed. 'Hands-on' experts counselled each of the following topics: adjustment of working stations, mentality and job climate, modification of the function, job search, regular work versus volunteer work and the unemployment trap. Our visit to Varsenare was concluded with an impressive 'diner in the dark' during which virtually the same 'hands-on' experts each were responsible for one table. Hereunder, you will find the most significant conclusions of the discussion tables.

### Adjustment of the working stations

'Hands-on' expert: Nick.

This visually impaired young adult is currently able to appeal to visual supporting means. Those means include a loupe, a cell phone with speaking software, scanning of documents to be subsequently magnified on PC, etc

Evidently, the visual impairment is undeniable. But he is being perceived by the participants as someone who might need reading glasses.

The consequences of his severe visual impairment are not immediately visible and obvious.

He likes alternation and movement. This is certainly an explanation for his engagement in two part-time jobs: the first in the Turnhout region and the second in the immediate vicinity of Bruges. The significance of



networking is being stressed. A widespread range of contacts generates a smooth job application and the necessary job adjustments. This visually impaired person likes to travel and is an experienced user of public transport.

### **Bottlenecks:**

- The use of public transport requires more time and effort than the use of proper transportation means.
- A double adjustment will be necessary: the first for the actual working station and the second destined for transfer requirements.

There is a need for investments as regards adjustments to working stations. Although there are ample opportunities since the beginning of the digital era, they are generally relatively unknown to employers. The necessary adjustments are (mostly) refunded. The required adjustments are readily available at the VDAB (Flemish Agency of Employment and Professional Training), with the support of the employers.

### **Bottlenecks:**

- A long prior administrative procedure needs to be followed. Some adjustments systematically require a medical examination, although the data are readily available. Such administrative procedures are superfluous.
- Persons with a disability should be involved in looking for the best possible adjustments of working stations. All too often, well-intentioned by inefficient measures are being taken in his place.
- The VDAB also makes adjustments to working stations. There is quite some unawareness with the users themselves. It is not at all easy to individually look for new evolutions. It is recommendable to appeal to specialists.
- As co-ordinating authority, you may try to avoid the unemployment trap. People should be able to take risks more easily. If job requirements prove to be unsuccessful, people should be able to retrieve their remittance indemnification.

### **Sensitising:**

- Nick stresses the importance of being able to personally express the required adjustments to the working stations to his colleagues. These adjustments are part of the working stations and will also determine his working environment. Leaving a door open, may generate nasty consequences.
- To cope in a creative and flexible manner with a job may also mean that various job requirements are rallied and entrusted to persons with a disability. This phenomenon is also called job carving.



- The implementation of a function screening may best exceed the departments and tasks. This will allow for circulation within the organisation.

## Mentality – working climate

'hands-on' expert: Inge

This young female employee was born blind. She is working at the Flemish Agency of Employment and Professional Training (VDAB).

The ignorance with employers is still extensive. In fact, we may state that there is insufficient knowledge of the professional skills of visually impaired or blind people.

The taboo is predominant. People are afraid to hear other people. There is fear for the dependent visually impaired or blind person. And it still remains to be seen that a distinction is being made between the two categories.

It is important to sensitize colleagues. Openness is crucial. All too often (mostly always) the initiative has to come from the visually impaired/the blind person. Also during her training at the college of higher education, she introduced herself and explained to her colleagues-students which matters needed the most attention.

Typical is also the astonishment of others about the skills of blind and visually impaired people. The participants at the workshop will most certainly remember the 'Diner in the dark.' 'Hands-on' blind and visually impaired persons perfectly dished up the dinner.

### Bottleneck:

- Persons with a disability need to inform, to explain, to sensitize, etc. Not everyone masters all these skills. The recurrent character of these actions requires quite some energy. To make something of your day as a person with a disability, you will consume more energy than any other average person.

During job applications, you quickly encounter a comprehensive series of difficulties. Ask for road directions towards the job applications address. Written tests can be converted into Braille or speech. At psycho-technical examinations, this is impossible. The Braille line does not read all the included signs. In her letter of application, she explicitly mentioned her disability, while simultaneously highlighting her additional skills and capacities.

### Bottleneck:

- If one is only recruited when successfully having taken such psycho-technical examinations, this generally ensues in the end of the job application.



The 'hands-on' expert underlines the significance of a realistic working environment and the choice of a realistic job. It is worthwhile to be honest from the very start (what are my capacities, which are my deficiencies, which modifications will be required, etc.). She states that – being a person with a disability – you have a personal responsibility. An open communication and a realistic self-image are valuable assets. The way in which you face the world is essential.

It is crucial to receive the support from your environment and family in choices as regards training. The centre for student counselling steered her in a direction which she did not considered an option. Only owing to the close support was she able to brace up and carry on her own training preferences. This has allowed her to do the work she likes.

### **Bottlenecks:**

- Many job requirements routinely require a driving licence, whereas this is not necessary for doing the job properly.
- The waiting period for specialised Office for Route Definition and Route Counselling. She managed to obtain the support she asked for.
- It is important that you remain in charge of your personal route direction. This is not at all self-evident.

### **Sensitisation:**

All too often, employers have insufficient basic knowledge as regards the measures in view of recruiting persons with a disability.

### **Adjustment of the function**

'Hands-on' expert: Herman. Following a long career in the private sector, he is now enjoying early retirement and is active as volunteer.

If you wish to be or to remain employed in a company, there is a need for composing a customised range of duties, including a redistribution of tasks amongst colleagues. He has never noticed that his colleagues expressed negative comments. It is important that nobody gets overburdened and simultaneously maintains a fully-fledged range of duties. The significance of an open communication, which allows for examining the opportunities but not the limitations, can not be underestimated. At the same time, consultation between employers and employees should also entail in discussions about competences and the loss of return. Maturity, realism and self-knowledge are key issues.

There is a discrepancy for visually impaired people. In order to obtain correct contributions of the Federal Public Service Authority, you need to prove what you cannot do. However, when looking for a job, you need to demonstrate your skills. This is a particularly awkward situation to deal with.



### **Bottlenecks:**

- Many of these elements refer to an open corporate culture and excellent ties between colleagues. This can not be commanded.
- Not all tasks can be adjusted. For instance, in accounting there is no readily available speech software for the SAP programme application.
- Circulation is not always possible within the same segment: not everything is transmittable.

Finally, the 'hands-on' expert emphasises the importance of being able to work according to possibilities, available energy and health. This is an appeal to an economy on a human scale.

### **Job search**

'Hands-on' expert: Eric is a quinquagenary job-seeker.

He experiences a predominating feeling of dishonesty. There is an extensive choice of volunteer work, but it is quite difficult to find paid job opportunities. Non-blind job-seekers clearly constitute an impossible competition. Owing to his volunteer work, he was able to build a vast network which helps him in his job search.

He has negative experiences with the specialised Office for Route Determination and Route Counselling (GTB): consultants have insufficient experience with visual disability, and he also has to cope with the administrative bureaucracy while asking for assistance. They think in stead of the people with disability, and are not thinking along with them. Consequently, they miss the opportunity to use the expertise of 'hands-on' experts.

When posing target-oriented questions, he did not receive any response from the Federal Public Service Authority and the Flemish Agency for Employment and Professional Training (VDAB).

He views his proper competencies in a very sober way: a negative demerit is that he works more slowly and a positive advantage is that he works in a more concentrated way.

Persons with a disability should be given the opportunity not to appeal to their proper organisations such as the Braille League. But then they need to address the specialised Office for Route Determination and Route Counselling (GTB) which is lacking the required expertise.

### **Bottlenecks:**

- Administrations are one big tangle: it is difficult to find out every single detail individually. For instance the lowered labour cost subventions for persons with a disability who are working as independents. This system was not clearly explained to him when he



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initiated his career as independent. Eventually, he had to stop his activities owing to financial reasons.

- Job descriptions often are very vague. This makes it extremely difficult to correctly assess the function.
- When placing one's résumé on the website of the Flemish Agency for Employment and Professional Training (VDAB), there is no possibility to mention 'visual disability'. Consequently, the 'hands-on' expert received a considerable number of unsuitable job applications, for instance as a lorry driver.
- It is remarkable that the website of VDAB does not possess an Anysurferlabel.
- The difficulty of multiple discrimination. You will find but very few job opportunities as a person with a disability. Quinquagenary job-seekers are certainly not very popular. The combination makes it all the more difficult.

## **Work versus volunteer work. The unemployment trap.**

'Hands-on' experts: Inge (working) and Christine (conscious volunteer).

Work has a number of advantages. People are able to extend their social network.

Family and friends recognize and appreciate the undertaken efforts. Working people acquire a financially more favourable position, hence an increase of social opportunities. The feeling that one is socially appreciated is most certainly important. Working people can define their and achieve their choices more freely.

However, working also has its disadvantages. The fear of failure takes a predominant place. Will one be able to cope, also on the long term? If not, working people will lose their remittance indemnification.

This is one of the reasons for opting for half-time job opportunities.

Without a job, there still is a possibility for self-fulfilment and social integration. It costs a lot of efforts (to seek help) in looking for a job, it is quite difficult.

Being a volunteer, one also has opportunities for self-fulfilment. Moreover, one can determine their proper rhythm and manage their proper time schedule.

Volunteer work is all too often being regarded as 'mere' volunteer work. This is not a correct assessment. Volunteers experience their efforts as meaningful. Minor social appreciation creates a lower self-esteem in comparison with a fully-fledged job.

Paid or volunteer work is a choice and should remain a choice. It is jointly determined by education and environment. It is important to recognize this fact and to take it into account.



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## Bottlenecks:

- When one decides to work, one takes a considerable financial risk. Once when once again becomes unemployed (what is not illusory), we can only fall back on the frugal unemployment benefit. For many people, this is financially unbearable. The rigidity of this system (either people are working, either one receives an unemployment benefit) leads to shunning risks. Smooth combination of both systems, being able to return to the previous situation when the job requirements are or become too stressful, will ensue in closing the unemployment trap.
- Curiously enough, working is not always interesting from a financial viewpoint. Low wages combined with increased expenses may constitute a considerable threshold.
- Looking for a job to which you are entitled, is a particularly demanding task. Mutually divergent answers lead to doubts and uncertainty.
- Next to jobs, other parts of life should also be feasible. The additional efforts to this effect, in comparison with persons with a disability, will jointly determine whether or not they will start working.