

# The Employment of disabled people in Stad Gent

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Driven by the need to improve services for disabled people, the City of Gent in Belgium has been examining its own employment policies and undertaking a number of activities. This case study explains the process staff have gone through and their progress to date.

## The Business Case

The City of Gent in Belgium has been working to improve services for disabled people within the City. Employment of disabled people, as a fundamental factor in social inclusion, has formed a part of this work. Seeking to lead by example, the City has examined its own internal employment policies with a view to having a workforce that is more representative of the make up of the city.

Gent City Council employs 4,973 members of staff (excluding teachers). Based on the principle of a representative workforce (4.5% of citizens of working age in Flanders has a disability) there should ideally be over 200 disabled employees within Stad Gent. At the beginning of 2011 there were 59 employees recognised as disabled by the Flemish Agency for Persons with Disabilities. Internal research showed that these individuals tend to work mainly in lower levels or executive positions and are largely over 50 years old.

Research also showed that disabled jobseekers didn't tend to see local government as a potential employer. This view was seen as worrying as local government should have an exemplary role, is not profit driven, and has a sufficient scale to provide support.

## Approach

As a starting point, the City of Gent chose a target of 2% (the legal mandatory minimum in Belgium) employees with disabilities - aiming to eventually increase this figure further within the organisation via ongoing work with stakeholders.

## Working Group

To begin the process, project staff developed a working group. The aim of the working group was to investigate the situation and to inform and raise awareness with stakeholders. An internal group of employees with disabilities within the Department of Personnel and Organisation took on the task. The working group was composed of staff from several departments, the Office of the Aldermen, individual staff with disabilities and representatives of trade unions. The working group were given clear aims and a mandate to develop policy proposals for improvement.

The goal of realising full accessibility was seen as an intrinsic part of economic and social progress for all.

Conversations with individual services have also had a keyrole in the process. These have included: Career and Training Services, Recruitment and Selection, Internal Service for Prevention and Protection at Work, and the Disabled Person's Unit.

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## **Actions**

The working group undertook a number of complementary actions to understand some of the underlying issues:

- A confidential survey of staffmembers with disabilities about their experiences and needs. The survey provided valuable information, tips and issues which motivated the group. Those involved with a disability appreciated that conversations were held with them, instead of about them.
- An information and introductory meeting between relevant intermediaries related to the employment of disabled people and city services. The meeting was a positive experience for all involved.
- A lunch session for city staff, with individual testimonies by staff with disabilities and background information about support services and colleagues. The session provided useful examples and a realistic acknowledgment of the legitimate questions, concerns and negative experiences of those involved.
- A literature review, and interviews with relevant third parties regarding employment policies and reasonable adaptations for disabled people in the workplace
- A large-scale survey of the number, function and level of employment of disabled people within the City Council. With an additional open-ended question: "Do you have any questions or tips about equal opportunities?"

The City Council survey was delivered to 5,025 employees with a successful response rate was 62%. Most significantly, 168 people who responded said that they had either an

(occupational) disability or a special education diploma. 168 employees who meet the criteria is the equivalent of a rate of 3.34% (1.34% over the legal status of the mandatory minimum of 2%).

In general, the response to the survey was positive, but with some concern regarding the confidentiality of results. The results of the questionnaire are to be investigated further.

## **Challenges**

Gent City Council found that whilst regulations such as a UN convention for persons with disabilities, or targets or quotas for local governments provide an ethical framework, they are, unfortunately, not a guarantee of success. Although, importantly, project workers found the employment of disabled people was seen as a priority by the Department of Human Resources and that goodwill existed in all of the services around the table in this process, the pressures of business often take their toll.

- Project workers felt that despite goodwill, in the current climate of cost-cutting and restructuring, business leaders are likely to place more and more importance on 'traditional' employees (those able to make an immediate return to the workplace, those with broad functionality and flexibility, and avoiding loss of productivity)
- The support of future and current colleagues could be tested where compensations / adjustments have to be made for a disabled colleague especially where existing staff are not replaced
- The economic downturn has implications for new employees where "last in-first-out" applies



## Work in Progress

A number of policy proposals have been developed and are in progress:

- There has been a decision in principle to adapt the selection procedure in favour of disabled people (the filling of certain positions only by people with a disability)
- More appealing advertisements for vacancies aimed at attracting disadvantaged individuals
- A modification of the City Council website to include a section on Equal Opportunities and a specific section for "disabled persons".
- A proposal to be able to discuss any requested "reasonable adjustments" in a selection situation
- A proposal and implementation plan for the communication of vacancies
- Better distribution of vacancy information through more appropriate channels
- Embedding support for disabled employees through encouraging all workers who register as an employee with a disability to contact the Welfare Department
- The policy proposals are still to be officially accepted and implemented, and once this has happened, they will need to be communicated internally

## Other Developments

- There are ongoing talks with the Facility Management Department. A positive side effect of undertaking this work has been the awareness of fellow city services. This is expected to lead to more joint and efficient working in the future
- The survey into employees with disabilities has raised the question of whether there should be a permanent focus group of employees with disabilities. This is still under consideration.
- The Disabled Persons Unit, has developed a vision regarding reasonable adjustments and has started a collection of good practices
- The use of job coaching within the City Council is being investigated

A number of additional proposals from the Disabled Persons Unit have been developed (regarding access to internal communications and IT applications, training, coaching employees and managers) these are being discussed further in late 2011.