

Guest-editors' Introduction

When it emerged more than two decades ago, supported employment was hailed as simple and sensible practice whose time had come. Its rapid growth was driven by heightened expectations of what people with disabilities might achieve, fueled by advances in instructional technology and sustained by shifts in law and social policy favouring the social and economic integration of people with disabilities. Supported employment overturned the traditional stance of many providers of employment and training that individuals with disabilities had permanent impairments rendering them unfit for most ordinary work, and were best placed in sheltered employment if they were capable of being employed at all. More recently, the focus on the individual with developmental disabilities – a hallmark of supported employment – has been refreshed. While making a neat match between a person's capabilities and the requirements of a particular job is essential, doing so is one part of a systemic, lifelong joint endeavor for the person and those supporting him or her. Today, more than at any time in the past, individual users of supported employment services drive the process of finding, learning and keeping a job, not just once but perhaps several times in the course of adult working life.

Supported employment today exhibits a greater understanding of the personal and systemic complexities of the socio-economic context within which it operates. Since its beginning, radical shifts have taken place in many of the different circles relevant to supported employment initiatives: the workplace, the personal networks of individuals with disabilities, costs and constraints faced by employers, local employment conditions shaped by social partners, mainstream training initiatives, and regional and global trends. Many of these have been influenced by developments within the European Union.

This special issue adopts a European perspective on current trends in supported employment for people with developmental disabilities. Within the fifteen countries of the European Union (EU), social policy is seeking the social inclusion of all citizens. Europeans with developmental disabilities are targeted both as citizens with disabilities and as prospective employees within

their own countries. First, the European Union currently endorses a rights-driven, rather than welfare-based model of disability. Human rights are expressed as equal opportunities for full participation in society. The right to employment is paramount, reflecting the dominance of industry in this mainly prosperous global region beset nonetheless by unacceptably high levels of unemployment.

Second, the executive arm of the EU, the European Commission, has enacted a focused European employment strategy embracing citizens with disabilities. Guideline 19 specifically calls on each country to promote. . . “the integration of people with disabilities into working life” [2].

The context from a policy point of view appears supported from a supported employment perspective. What then has been achieved? Looking back over the last ten years there are a number of indicators of positive progress in employment for people with disabilities and in the growth of supported employment. We have seen the mainstreaming of European objectives within national employment strategies. Common policy guidelines were adopted in the light of the Amsterdam Treaty and the subsequent Jobs Summit held at Luxembourg in December 1997. The fifteen Member States of the EU were directed to submit National Action Plans setting out their strategies for achieving employability, entrepreneurship, adaptability and equal opportunities – known as the “four pillars of action”.

The European Commission has invested substantially in hundreds of pilot projects through the European Social Fund – the ESF – and a range of training and employment initiatives such as HORIZON, ADAPT, FORCE, NOW and YOUTHSTART. Many of these have provided important stimulus to the growth of supported employment.

In line with these investments, we have seen a striking growth in the European Union of Supported Employment (EUSE), and the number of national member Unions, since 1993. Now a recognised non-governmental Organization or NGO, with full representative rights within the EU, the EUSE draws larger and more diverse participants to its international conferences at Rotterdam (1994), Dublin (1995), Oslo (1997) and Rome (1999).

Global policies, regional funds, national mainstreaming, local know-how and individual motivation are the winds which blow in favour of supported employment. And yet it is becalmed, certainly not under full sail, an option for only a minority in most European countries. We can speculate why this might be. Do individuals fail to meet standards set in the workplace? On the contrary, evidence that men and women with developmental disabilities have the capacity to work effectively continues to amass, both from research within Europe and from the longer-term perspective of the United States. Many achieve satisfying outcomes as employees and co-workers, directing their own career paths.

Do employers perceive the costs of recruiting a person with developmental disabilities as discouragingly high? Comparative data to support this conviction among European employers are as yet incomplete. But recent findings suggest that in the United States, employers' costs in adapting workplaces in the wake of the Americans with Disabilities Act have been much lower than anticipated [2].

Is the supply of jobs dwindling? Restructuring of industrial sectors within the EU does continue. We have seen considerable shifts from heavy industry and manufacturing to the creation of jobs in other sectors, such as the service industries. The revolution in information technology has already had a marked effect on European business and has further fueled the trend to restructure the way that businesses are organized, with increasing capital investment in new technology and a general increase in the level of skill required from workers. Workers are tending to change jobs more frequently and there is a greater emphasis on worker adaptability as jobs change at an increasing pace. While levels of unemployment fluctuate across the EU, there are generally more part-time and temporary jobs being created at the expense of full-time permanent jobs. These factors offer a challenge to supported employment and people with developmental disabilities especially. And yet research on EU-funded innovative pilot projects, government research and academic studies within Europe point to people with disabilities as valuable members in the employer's workforce. Outcomes for those who find work are generally positive compared to those achieved through more traditional alternatives. Also, the number of people gaining employment through supported employment has continued to increase over the last few years, leading us to remain optimistic about the prospects for the future from the perspectives of both employer and employee.

Are national governments willing and able to invest in inclusive job strategies? In many countries, it is said, budgets already stretch to encompass an increasing population of non-productive people and burgeoning demands on health services. Little remains for innovation. And yet many could, with support, enter the tax-paying workforce, forsaking sole reliance on welfare benefits. It is commonplace for people with developmental disabilities to have dual status as part-recipients of benefits, and part-members of the active labour force. Variations in welfare-benefit policy, availability of mainstream funding for supported employment, disability rights and minimum wage legislation mean that the ease with which a person with disabilities makes the transition from welfare to work with appropriate support depends largely on where they live, rather than on their personal circumstances.

At European level, policy issues must be addressed in order to meet employment objectives of the employment strategy, for example the enhancement of employment opportunities for people with disabilities, as a key element in combating long-term unemployment and despite the considerable efforts made by Member States in this domain [2]. While the framework for positive advance in inclusive employment exists, much remains to be done. As in many enterprises, the devil appears to be in the detail of policy implementation. Certainly there has been much in the way of pilot funding from the European Commission that has been used to explore supported employment options, although recent *tranches* – slices – of EU funding have not favoured supported employment initiatives. Despite the EU's history of funding innovation, funding at national level for employment of people with disabilities still remains heavily and disproportionately invested in sheltered employment options. Inertia rules any efforts to extend supported employment services on the part of voluntary and statutory providers, even though they have overwhelming evidence of its potential, and have the technology to do so. Seasoned outsiders wonder how service agencies at the same time relish larger and more succulent omelettes, but resist breaking any eggs – especially their own.

Even within a region with common interests and shared history, variations in practice abound. The papers in this volume adopt a contextual approach to practice in supported employment. First, two papers address national contexts. Beyer and Kilsby report the results of a United Kingdom survey of the development of supported employment agencies, along with net exchequer costs and the outcomes achieved by a network

which has developed since 1985 and is now extensive, but largely without mainstream government financial support. Schafft and Spjelkavik report on trends in Norway, at once European and yet standing apart from membership of the EU, a country which has seen rapid growth in recent years and is now embarked on a national program of supported employment development.

A further two papers examine the quality of the experience of supported employment. Schneider gives an account of approaches to applying assistive technology from the German perspective. Assistive technology is a rich resource which has been under-used in enhancing employment opportunities and thus extending the range of jobs available to people with disabilities. Walsh, Mank et al. document an evaluation of EU-funded initiatives in four countries with distinctive cultures and patterns of employment. The INCLUSIO[©] partners in Ireland, the Netherlands, Spain and the UK formed a consortium to add value to the services they developed in harmony.

Papers from Ireland and Scotland focus on outcomes of supported employment for individuals with developmental disabilities in Northwestern Europe. Each adopts a case study approach. Coyle and Maloney review the process of planning employment and other life goals with and for 16 men and women supported by an Irish service agency. Their analysis of a Person-Centred Planning process identifies the steps shown to be effective in achieving employment outcomes, as well as gaps which invite improvement, helping to answer the question, what works best for whom? Riddell & Wilson assess the impact of supported employment in Scotland by presenting in-depth case studies of three individuals entering the workplace for the first time. Based on what these informants tell of the impact that supported employment has had on their lives, the authors assess its efficacy in enhancing social inclusion.

Finally, Sutton & Walsh re-address global trends in their, *Brief Report* on INCLUSION INTERNATIONAL'S Open Project on Inclusive Employment. The project, led by Ireland's member organization,

NAMHI, was carried out between 1994–1998. Advocates and professionals in fifty-two countries responded to a postal survey inviting them to report on how widespread either open or supported employment was for people with developmental disabilities in that country. The findings reveal that national wealth and sophistication do not necessarily mean more inclusive employment for citizens with disabilities.

The contextual influences bearing on the development of supported employment have been explored. However, less is known about the potential impact of supported employment on local, national and regional environments. As it deepens, will the presence of people with developmental disabilities in the regular labour force spill over into the mainstream? For example, will highly effective models of supported employment developed for employees with developmental disabilities ultimately generate useful strategies for other job seekers with marginal status, such as the long-term unemployed? This is a question for tomorrow's researchers. The editors acknowledge with thanks the help of their colleagues in the many countries where supported employment today enhances life opportunities for thousands of men and women.

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