

Redebeitrag für Ralf Hagemeyer auf der EASPD – Konferenz in Thessaloniki für den 11. Juni 2009, Thessaloniki

Speech given by Ralf Hagemeyer, board member BAG:WfbM

(As delivered)

Ladies and Gentlemen,

today's EASPD conference here in Thessaloniki highlights on 'how to bring persons with disabilities towards work'. This describes very precisely our daily aim in workshops for persons with disabilities throughout Germany and in many comparable centers for persons with severe handicaps in Europe.

Since many years, it is a widely shared experience to see persons with disabilities participating equally in working life through accompaniment, support and sustainable assistance where that is necessary and wanted.

'To bring persons with disabilities towards work' means to accompany, to enable them to develop personally, to get closer ties to the local labour world thus to enter the working life.

What does that mean in detail?

People with disabilities like everyone else do share the same desire for appreciated work, would like to be part in a working process and to create together with colleagues. Work and here in particular the identification with the results and the community of their colleagues is an essential bridge for societal recognition.

Unfortunately an idea which seems to be unrealistic to reach for many persons concerned due to economisation and competition. The constraints of a profit-seeking production world exclude very often persons who due to their reduced productivity and their limited education. They won't be able to cope by their own with market demands.

As many people with or without disabilities get access through promotion and vocational education, many are left aside because they simply don't get assistance and are therefore excluded permanently from working life.

In my country around 1 million people with disability do live in working age. Many of them have to find their independent way into working life by different state organised assistences and measures.

Nearly 300.000 persons with disabilities have legal compensation rights which is in particular the right for workshop employment. The financing of workshop places is assured without expecting economic benefit. And I particularly speak about persons permanently in danger to lose societal inclusion due to the lack of an appropriate working environment.

Under market conditions no employer would ask for their labour due to their very limited working productivity!

On their path to overcome those obstacles workshops were very successful in the recent years. Inside our centres the question whether a person is able to work fast and efficient to execute a customer's order or not is not on the agenda.

The daily questions in our working groups are:

- what must we do to enable a more severe handicapped person to work together with his colleagues successfully?
- what must we do or organise to enable her or him to do so?
- what kind of individually tailored help the person seeks and should be arranged?
- which bridges have to be built to overcome disability – caused obstacles?
- how is it possible to organise longlasting assistance which does not lead into discrimination?

We therefore use four essential pillars:

1. A concept of vocational training which through differentiation enables everyone to an individually tailored education, sometimes in a lifelong procedure
2. A concept of regional advice, occupational planning and information towards mediation – addressed to the individual person with a disability but as well to be used in the environment which is seeking to a useful workplace arrangement
3. A concept of cooperation in regard to the choice and the design of a treatment through individual advice and agreement
4. A concept of access through direct workplace creation for people who not yet or not permanently could reach an individually tailored employment alongside their needs and competences

Briefly: we understand ourselves as constructors of bridges and commit ourselves to establish working opportunities and environments tailored to individual needs.

This happens together with real economic actors regionally and abroad. Through these links we make participation in working life possible. But we are indeed also connected with the 'industrial laws' such as an adherence to delivery dates, quality and product standards. You might imagine under which daily difficulties this should work and even under the current economic crises. The very close links to the business partners turns out to be a burden. As general manager of a complex workshop in Germany, I really do know what I am talking about.

But it remains very specific to our workshops: the conception of a working place is established alongside the individual needs of every workshop employee.

Static, unchangeable workshop concepts cowered behind workshop walls cannot correspond to the above mentioned requirements. They were replaced by flexible ones. The place where this happens is one element in the creation of adapted working opportunities – one environmental element which might promote inclusion or not.

Workshop organisations change constantly as people are changing. Workshops in Germany used to be regional organisations to arrange work and participation connected with the families and completed with housing opportunities to avoid any institutional segregation. Ever since we weren't comparable to segregating centers.

Workshops are very innovative in regard to the construction of bridges. Bridges towards ordinary employment settings and back if this is the individual's choice.

As the number of successfully converted persons in ordinary employment settings is constantly low you obviously see the excluding character of the labour market. That is far more valid for persons you meet in our centers.

In that context exists a broad range of new and tested offers which were elaborated in workshops. I shortly want to name some of them to show up how obsolete the opposition is between being part and being outside any ordinary employment settings:

1. Occupational and empowerment planning on the basis of the individual's competence in cooperation with local schools
2. Vocational training offers prior and lifelong-learning methods afterwards in a structured, individually tailored working environment
3. In profit-oriented companies organised practical work experiences
4. Work in workshop working places outside the workshop: these are working places organised outside a workshop. These working places could be partly established in profit-oriented companies. The assistance on site is assured through the link to the workshop. The status-quo of the workshop employee remains the same for social security reasons.
5. Work in working places of profit-oriented companies: through an arrangement with companies in the profit sector, workshop employees can use work opportunities outside the workshop. It is possible to preserve the legal status of a workshop employee until a working contract was signed between a former workshop employee and the future employer.

So with, through and via the workshop work concept it is possible to be part and take part in societal life.

Our supporting organisations already developed integration companies to overcome the wide gap to employment in the ordinary labour market. They referred very often to models they have originally seen in Scandinavian countries. These companies do work on a profit – oriented basis with twenty-

five to fifty per cent of disabled employees. Nearly six thousand disabled persons do find employment in these companies as a bridge to sustainable ordinary employment.

A close co-operation between workshops, integration companies and other services for professional participation show already positive effects. These regional networks might be considered a fundamental and completing pillar to the local small and medium-sized companies and still remains the best precondition for giving people with disabilities the possibility of practical work experience within a company. We share your experience that precisely these companies do offer employment to people with disabilities.

This creates networks for adapted employment which can have a stabilising influence on the social and economic situation of the entire region. They all serve persons in need in the local community and not only a small target group.

I am deeply convinced that the obsolete categories 'inside or outside' the labour market will dissolve and lose their significance. Through that development any exclusion will come to an end. Finally everything is about the chance of a person with a disability to realise equally a professional career.

We appeal to those in political office and to the decision-makers in the European Commission and in the Committees of the European Parliament to get together with the service providers for professional rehabilitation, and with European educational and economic organisations with the goal of working out economically viable employment concepts, protected by social security. At the same time, those in position of political responsibility must realise that market rules cannot and must not be applied to our sector.

There are always winners and losers in a market. People with disabilities are rarely part of the first group. But there is far more to be obtained: the realisation of anti-discrimination belongs to a fundamental societal consensus and to the creating power of all stakeholders in the social sector. All of us, service providers for supported employment and service providers for adapted employment must explain to politicians that this type of employment is necessary, if we want to achieve a change in our social systems. All integration models are far more than high walls surrounding segregated buildings or simple production sites. They should rather be considered as places where person-centered concepts lead to enable persons with disabilities to overcome discrimination and to participate in working life. They all deserve our support, if we do not want to risk their exclusion, if they cannot or should not work due to their disabilities.

Unfortunately, it is only our limited imagination in regard to possible workplace arrangements which causes this reflexion. It is neither the person's will nor it's restricted working possibility. Such change can only happen if we radically and consistently change our way of thinking, and it will only be successful if the entire system is changed rather than individual aspects. This presupposes that all stakeholders involved in promoting the participation of people with disabilities are willing to support these changes and to act together. In an inclusive labour market, there is no room for utilitarian thinking.

We demonstrate our intention to protect freedom, equality and solidarity in Europe by being prepared to guarantee equal chances for participation to those fellow citizens who cannot earn their livelihood without support.

This also applies to the municipalities, the smallest units in our democracy.

Any rehabilitation which is arbitrarily awarded and exclusively oriented on competition law increasingly turns out to be an obstacle. It not only promotes legal uncertainty, it is damaging to the social state and to the value system all over Europe.

The question arises of which nature are the compensation schemes to enable persons in need so that they can overcome disability. This should be organised without discretion.

Our institutions have always been organisations which continued to learn and develop. They will continue developing in the future: becoming „assistance centres“ for people who, for mental, psychological or physical reasons, need society's assistance, to a large degree, some of them throughout their lives.

I would hope to be able to rely on you as partners in this development.

Thank you very much for your attention. I am looking forward to personal discussions with you on this topic in the further course of this event.