A Job Good Enough: the Path to Workplace Inclusion in Small and Medium-Sized Companies in Northern Italy

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Abstract

This investigation aims to understand the work experience of people with disabilities from the point of view of disabled employee and employers. Focusing on a sample of small and medium size Italian enterprises we interviewed employers and employee involved in a hiring process. Using a phenomenological approach we studied which factors can ease or impede a positive job placement through a sequence of choices and decisions. Moreover, through two case studies, we explored which kinds of "accommodations" promote positive performance of the disabled worker in the company, as well as the way they are designed and implemented by a path of negotiation between employers and employee. Finally, we offer practical suggestions for improving the management of the hiring experience.

1. Introduction

Besides being essential for economic and personal growth, work is one of the factors that allows the social inclusion of disabled people [1].The Italian law (68/99) requires employers to hire a percentage of disabled workers, legislation in itself is unable to ensure their effective inclusion in companies [2].Research shows that the main factors affecting the inclusion of disabled people in organizations are personal traits (qualities of the disabled person and the employer), environmental factors (such as legislation) and organizational characteristics such as norms, values, policies, the nature of jobs, and reward systems [3-4].

Disability management analysis has focused on the issue of matching companies' productivity goals with the needs of workers through "reasonable accommodation" conceived as an interactive process involving employee, employer and colleagues [5]. There are different benefits associated with the provision of accommodations in term of performance and productivity but also with respect to job satisfaction, job tenure, the desire to remain in the organization and positive interaction between employees [6-8].

Recent studies highlight that employers' attitudes towards inclusion play a key role in ensuring the successful integration of disabled people at work. The literature emphasizes some important issues:

Understanding of disability: employers can embrace either a "medical" or a "social" model, seeing disability just like a personal problem or, on the contrary, considering how the environmental aspects (organizational procedures and practices) may "disable" people and affect them [9];

Size and type of activities: the size of the company (i.e. SMEs or large companies) and the type of activities carried out deeply affect the job placement of disabled people [10];

Attitudes: employers' attitudes encompass perception of the worker's profile (type of disability, gender, motivation, and lower qualifications), and presumptions about productivity (lack of productivity or rate of absenteeism) and costs (workplace accommodation), safety expenses, additional duties and responsibilities) [11-12];

Previous experience: negative previous experiences lead employers to be more reticent; conversely, greater knowledge about disabled people would enhance their hiring chances particularly since they constitute a loyal pool of workers. The quality of experience can be mediated by the services [13-16] .

Types of accommodations: several studies have examined the accommodation process about some kind of specific disabilities such as physical, neurological or mental problems. Accommodations may relate to changes in the environment or in the location, modifications in the job or the organization of work, the introduction of assistive devices and equipment and the presence of a colleague that supports the disabled employee [17-22]

Our research aims to identify the elements that influence the hiring of disabled people and facilitate their inclusion in the workplace. Focusing on a sample of small and medium size Italian companies, we

interviewed employers and employees and examined how the process which facilitates or hinders a successful job placement occurs through a sequence of choices and decisions. Moreover, we explored which kinds of "arrangement" promote positive performance of the disabled worker in the company, as well as the way they are designed and implemented. Finally, we offer practical suggestions for improving the management of the hiring experience.

2. Methods

We adopted a mixed-methods approach in the investigation, using three instruments:

A questionnaire sent to all the 350 companies that had hired a disabled worker in the past year, aimed at measuring the degree of employer satisfaction related to the experience and testing their willingness to repeat it;

In-depth interviews with 30 employers and disabled workers during the hiring process to capture the recruitment practices in real time (thus limiting problems of recall in retrospective interviews). The collected data has been analyzed using a phenomenological approach addressed at exploring in detail how participants are making sense of their experience. The results have been subsequently shared with the participants using the Delphi method to share the interpretation of the data and obtain further details;

Two longitudinal case studies which offered the opportunity of investigating the various stages of the hiring process and exploring tools which can enable employers to manage in a more conscious way the inclusion of a disabled worker. We followed the career path of two workers (one with physical disabilities, the other one with mental problem) from the first employment application to the end of the trial period. Moreover, we analyzed how supervision activity is managed, carrying out direct observations, collecting accounts from the supervisors, and investigating the methods they adopt to introduce accommodation in the workplace.

Finally, we introduced two experimental tools addressed to ease the companies in managing the hiring process of disabled people: a battery of indicators directed to assess the level of inclusiveness of the workplace; and a set of operational guidelines for improving the interaction with disabled workers.

3. Results

Analysis of questionnaires showed that 50% of respondents said they were fairly satisfied about the experience but 60% pointed out that the worker played a role not very useful in the organization and 35% has added that employers had only a little benefit when they hired the worker. Despite this, 45% declared organizations were quite willing to repeat the same experience.

Our research shows that employers' attitudes play a key role in influencing decisions which are crucial in hindering or promoting the effective inclusion of disabled workers. Such decisions apply to five organizational and educational areas of intervention:

Management of the recruitment process: employers can choose to internally manage the recruitment process or to ask external services for help in supporting the worker's inclusion and encouraging colleagues to get involved in developing an inclusive environment;

Placement of the employee: the employee may be relegated to a marginal role, addressed to execute poor or inessential tasks, or do a job useful to the organization, especially designed through an analysis of organizational activities;

Evaluation of the worker: the applicant can be evaluated according to the disability (what he/she is not able to do) or to his/her ability and actual work potential (what he/she can do with the aid of assistive technology and the support of colleagues);

Membership of the organization: the company can recognize as members only workers who meet a "regular" standard or can extend membership to actively include all workers, disabled or not, within the organization;

Introduction of accommodations: the company may decide to limit any change in workplace organization or negotiate improvements with the workers to make the work environment and procedures more inclusive. these can be scheduled before the entrance of the worker in the organization or, conversely, during their performance.

4. Discussion

The research has some operational implications with respect to the opportunity to improve the work experience of disabled people:

- the motivation of employers: the hiring cannot be the only response to a regulatory requirement but must be one that benefits the disabled person and the organization;
- the identification of the job: the task must be adapted to the characteristics of the candidate but must also respond to a need of the organization and be really useful for colleagues. In order to do this it is necessary to carry out a job analysis to investigate all possible areas of the organization within which to place the worker with disabilities;
- evaluation of candidate: the assessment of current skills and future potential of the employee must be carried out. It must then take into account accommodations that, on a personal and organization level, can facilitate the employee in carrying out his task;
- negotiation of accommodations: each employee must be in a position to be able to do the job required, regardless of the presence of a disease. This allows everyone to give his contribution to the organization;
- participation in the life of the organization: each employee must become a fully-fledged part of the group. This is possible only if every employee is valued for (his own) ability but even if every employee is involved in the path that leads each member to be part of the group.

To date, few attempts have been done to develop educational strategies aiming to support employers in dealing effectively with these critical decisions. Our inquiry suggests that promoting employers' training through the extensive use of indicators and guidelines would be highly beneficial for helping them to plan and put into practice an inclusive workplace, so ensuring a high quality working experience for all.

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