

People with Disabilities at Work: an Italian Experience

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Abstract

The purpose of this exploratory study was to investigate the experience of people with disabilities within organizations. Through in-depth interviews, we collected the experiences of thirty employers, and workers with disability. In addition, two case studies enabled us to verify the trading procedures put in place by the actors involved. The data were analyzed using a phenomenological approach in order to provide the participants' feedback. The results show the importance of accommodation adjustments made to the working environment, to different organizational plans and procedures needed to carry out the tasks and the presence of a coach within the organization. Finally, the decision to grant the accommodation is affected by the same type of arrangement, the current cultural values of the organization and the perceptions of the employer regarding the usefulness of the changes for the company.

1. Introduction

Work is one of the factors that allow the social inclusion of disabled people [1,2]. However, the unrealistic expectations of workers and employers along with the unwillingness of colleagues to collaborate frequently hinder the work experience of disabled people [3]. Even though 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 [4].

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities introduces the concept of reasonable accommodation that refers to changes and adjustments, that put in place to ensure that people with disabilities can enjoy human rights on an equal basis with others [5-6].

A lot of studies show the benefit associated with the provision of reasonable accommodations. Several researchers examine the accommodation process in relation to specific disabilities, other studies analyze decision making in relation to the request for and the granting of special arrangements [7].

Finally, another important series of studies are about the coach's role who, depending on the type of organization, may be the owner, human resources manager or a colleague who works closely with the disabled person when he first joins the company [8-9].

Despite these numerous studies, there are some limitations in the existing research. First, most of the empirical studies have focused on certain variables and specific outcomes without considering a more comprehensive approach, together with a comparison of the experiences of the three stakeholder groups most involved: employees, employers, and service providers. Secondly, the data available do not allow for an in-depth understanding of the variables involved in the decision making process. Finally, rehabilitation professionals and consumers lack an empirically-backed list of factors related to the requests and provision of reasonable accommodations in the workplace [10-11].

The purpose of this exploratory study was to investigate the experience of negotiating reasonable accommodation for a group of small and medium-sized enterprises through the voice of employers, workers and services during the hiring process and trial period. In addition, two case studies enabled us to directly study the factors that determine the decision-making and implementation. This investigation was guided by these research questions:

- which accommodations can be negotiated within organizations?
- what factors that lead to a decision to grant an accommodation?

2. Methods

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

- A questionnaire sent to all the companies that hired a disabled worker in the past year, aimed at measuring the employers' degree of satisfaction about the experience and checking their willingness to repeat it;
- In-depth interviews carried out 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 the interpretative phenomenological

approach (IPA) addressed at exploring in detail the participants' views about their experience. The results have been subsequently returned with the participants using the Delphi method to share the interpretation of data and obtain further details;

- Two longitudinal case studies offered the opportunity of investigating the various stages of the hiring process and exploring tools which can allow employers to manage the inclusion of a disabled worker in a more conscious way. 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 into a supermarket. 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 accommodations 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

The accommodations can be identified in two stages: during the job interview and during daily activities. When a candidate has a job interview and then joins the company, the employers and worker may decide to modify the work environment, for example in order to make it accessible or the times and duration of work (typically part-time contracts are preferred, perhaps with personalized work times). Most of the changes, however, are directly determined during the course of employment, when the employee has to cope with an unexpected situation or a problem that makes it difficult to perform the tasks. In such cases, the accommodations cannot be planned beforehand but are worked out during an ongoing negotiation. During workplace activities, there are three types of adjustments: procedures to complete the tasks required, use of aids and assistive technologies, and the presence of a company tutor.

In terms of the factors that lead to a decision to grant or refuse an accommodation the fundamental fact is that the request always follows the onset of a problem. In other words, the arrangement can be requested only after direct observation of the need to tackle an unforeseen circumstance within the workplace. In these cases, the decision to introduce an accommodation, however, is mainly based on trial and error. In practice, the accommodation identified is experienced directly in the field; if the outcome is positive, then the accommodation is integrated into the organization's work policy, otherwise it is abandoned. Employers stated that one of the decisive factors in choosing an accommodation is precisely the type of change required. It is easier to grant an accommodation that relates just to the employee (e.g. special keyboard), without the involvement of the organization, rather than one that requires changes that also involve colleagues. The workers and service providers underline that when the arrangement involves colleagues, these colleagues may be more reluctant to accept it and then the disabled worker may feel discriminated against.

Secondly, the culture of the organization seems to play a decisive role. Employers and service providers say that if the values shared within the company are based on equality, it is more difficult to grant an accommodation, because it could be seen as unfair to the other employees. Conversely, when the values are based on fairness, it is easier for an arrangement to be seen as reasonable and, therefore, to be positively accepted. Disabled workers also noted the importance of the culture of the organization, because it orients the attitudes of other employees and determines the treatment that the employee receives.

The third important element is instead to the perception of the usefulness of the accommodation and there may be a disparity between the views of the employers and the employees. Employers may consider unnecessary those accommodations. Conversely, disabled workers may be paid a little attention to their needs and a lack of unwillingness on the part of the organization to support them. In this case, the role played by representatives of the support services who seek to protect the worker and to accompany him/her during the experience are very important.

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