

Tips and Tricks for students with a disability in practical training and work

On the 12th of October 2010, the LINK network organised a seminar with the theme 'The transition from Higher Education to the labour market for students with a disability'. LINK - Learning Inclusively Network + Know-how- is a European Network co-financed by the Life Long Learning Program of the EU and its members are from the UK (SKILL), Ireland (AHEAD), Sweden (Stockholm University), and Belgium (SIHO) en Slovenia (DSIS). The Network aims to share and develop knowledge in the field of studying with a disability.

The seminar on the 12th of October was organised by the Dutch Partner (handicap + study) and held in The Hague. A delegation from each of the LINK partner countries participated and these delegations consisted of students/graduates with disabilities, employers and staff from centres of expertise in the field.

At the end of the day, all participants indicated that they learned a lot on the theme and were inspired by the views shared. The most important tips and tricks that the delegations came up with are listed below:

Advice for students

- Focus on your strengths. Realise you have an extra value: you bring diversity and you can change the culture within the organisation. Use your disability as a selling point, maybe your disability has given you experiences and competencies other people haven't got. Think about that before you apply.
- If you need adjustments in the workplace to fulfill a specific job role, disclose this in the job interview, so the employer can provide the necessary adjustments. You must show some trust in your prospective employer.
- You have to know what the core competencies are for a certain role, whether you can carry out the role without adjustments, and if not, what possible adjustments would allow you to meet the requirements of the job.
- Don't try to solve every problem in advance. When you start your internship, solutions are found along the way and your worries will disappear. Challenging experiences are important and will help you to mature.
- It is wise to inform yourself of the legal regulations, so you know your rights and can tackle problems when you are talking with your future employer.
- You are not your disability, but you will have to inform an employer at some point. When and how is important. Do you inform them at the interview stage? Remember, your competencies and experiences are as much 'You' as your disability is.
- Don't worry too much. If the necessary adjustments are made to enable you to perform, you are an equal and a fully competent colleague.
- Work as a volunteer to get some work experience. This is good for your self-confidence and your CV.

European advice on transition to work

- Do not just be glad that someone invited you for a job interview. Be eager and do some research on the company. Do you want to work there? Can this employer provide what you need? It places you on the same level as the employer and may help in your interview.
- The employer has to accommodate you so you can do your job properly, but you are the expert concerning your needs. So, you must be involved in finding solutions that work for you, just be aware that your employer must arrange the adjustment.
- First impressions are very important. Make an effort.
- Show your passion and your motivation. If you feel you haven't shown this enough during the job interview, send an e-mail afterwards.

Advice for employers

- You have to see the possibilities and not the potential problems. But most of the time potential problems are the main focus: my company is too small, my team cannot accept you. When an applicant has a disability, it doesn't mean that their competencies and experience are less valuable.
- Applicants with a disability are experts on their own disability and usually know what they need in order to function. The employer is responsible for arranging the adjustments they need to complete the job. It is important not to put this responsibility on the new employee, because it disturbs the relationship between employer and employee.

Be aware of the advantages to employ a person with a disability. If this person has the same capacities as the other job-applicants, then you have extra benefits:

- You have a unique selling point, because there is a different and diverse culture in your company.
- Looking for creative solutions for potential problems creates an atmosphere of thinking outside the box and stimulates harmony and unity in the company.

Advice for government and education

- To avoid misunderstanding about what is a disability, it is important to get a universal or European definition of 'disability'.
- Employers have to be stimulated to recruit people with a disability. It appears that when they employ one person with a disability, barriers are broken and it becomes easier for them to employ more people with disabilities.
- In a lot of countries the compensation for reasonable adjustments and the supplement of the salary is well established and organised. It is important that these available grants are well publicised in order to encourage employers to hire more people with disabilities.
- Legislation and programs for awareness and image-forming are very important. Good practice can change the negative mentality and stimulate employers to employ people with disabilities.
- Students with a disability tend to focus on their problems when they apply for a job. By training them to present their qualities and show that their disability can be also be a benefit (extra experience, knowledge and persistence), a job-

interview can become much easier for them and lead to a higher probability of success.

Current Situation in other European countries

In Slovenia each employer with 20+ employees has to hire a disabled person. If they don't, they have to pay a fine. The obliged minimum percentage of persons with a disability in the workforce differs per sector. It is higher in sectors with a lot of work related accidents and work related diseases. The quota system doesn't work very well, in that companies would often rather pay the fine. But there is also a positive effect: employers who have employed a young person with a disability are usually far more likely to employ more people with disabilities.

In Sweden a lot of universities set up alumni networks and mentorship programs to make a link between university and work (for all students), i.e. programs to bring work and study closer together. These programs are for all students, but they function particularly well for students with a disability.

AHEAD (Ireland) focuses on programs for awareness for employers. Legislation only is not enough. You shouldn't push employers to hire a person with a disability, employers have to realise the value themselves for it to result in lasting change. This kind of change is stimulated for example by mentorship projects in companies which provide a 'safe' platform for companies and graduates to learn.

In the United Kingdom employers are obliged by law to invite an applicant with a disability for a job-interview as long as this person meets the required competencies. Skill works hard on helping companies to make inclusive job specifications which don't rule out large numbers of candidates by including minor unnecessary requirements like 'ability to drive'.

In Flanders there is one body for companies employing people with disabilities. The employer gets a percentage of the salary from the government and expenses for reasonable adjustments. There is a lack of information for the employers which results in a focus on 'what is not possible'. So job-applicants with a disability usually need to be much more competent than the other job-applicants to get a job.

Do you want know more about LINK? Look at our website www.thelinknetwork.eu.