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Mentoring Programmes as a successful instrument for career development of people with disabilities and disadvantaged

Abstract
[Excerpt] For many years the Mentoring, as a form of support for young people without work experience, is well-known practice. In the past ten years the Mentoring has proved itself as a wide-applied method of support in the career of people with disabilities. A good example of successfully held Mentoring programme in Europe is the "Equal Employment Opportunities: Mentoring and Training for Disabled People and Employers" Project. It is a transnational initiative supported by the "Leonardo da Vinci" Programme of the European Commission. The project includes 3 European countries: Bulgaria, Greece and the UK. The duration of the project was 24 months.

Keywords
work, disabilities, person, task, workplace, independence, compliance, benefit, policies, equality, law, involvement, intellectual disability, communication, reasonable accommodation, equipment, technology

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MENTORING PROGRAMMES AS A SUCCESSFUL INSTRUMENT FOR CAREER DEVELOPMENT OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES AND DISADVANTAGED

For many years the Mentoring, as a form of support for young people without work experience, is well-known practice. In the past ten years the Mentoring has proved itself as a wide-applied method of support in the career of people with disabilities. A good example of successfully held Mentoring programme in Europe is the "Equal Employment Opportunities: Mentoring and Training for Disabled People and Employers" Project.

It is a transnational initiative supported by the "Leonardo da Vinci" Programme of the European Commission. The project includes 3 European countries: Bulgaria, Greece and the UK. The duration of the project was 24 months.

One of the project's products was a six-month mentoring programme, getting together young disabled people (students and graduates) and employers, who are interested in the work potential of those people.

WHO CAN BE THE MENTOR?

The Mentor can be anybody – a friend, relative or colleague, or even a stranger. It is accepted that the Mentor is somebody elder, more experienced one, who can be a positive model for behavior, a tutor, a leader.

WHO CAN BE THE MENTEE?

The mentee is a person without the life and work experience needed, who desires to receive practical examples, guidance and support from a more experienced person with better and enriched professional and life knowledge.

In a six-month duration, mentoring couples worked together, getting to know each other better, exchanging experience and good practice. There can be a lot of different benefits of this type of cooperation, but some of the most important of them are:

- Mentees with disabilities, could obtain practical skills and knowledge in real work atmosphere;
- They can develop their abilities to work in a team, without bothering of their disability;
- They may increase their self-confidence and consciousness that they can cope with real work situations;
- People with disabilities themselves show that they can go well on their workplace not worse than their non-disabled colleagues;
- There are benefits for the employers, too: they can observe the work of people with disabilities and to reassure themselves, that they are no worse than their non-disabled colleagues. Once they have seen good examples how person with disability successfully works in a company, the employers will be much more willing to hire those people to be part of their staff.

Mentoring programmes give opportunities for the employers to observe good practice, techniques and technologies, which compensate possible lacks, caused by the disability. For example person with visual impairment during his/her work may demonstrate to the employer specialized software for vocal transformation of text, which compensates the loss of vision and enables the person to work with a computer. This way the employer finds out that with just a little adaptation of the work placement, the disabled person is able to be a fully operative and peer employee.

Within a mentoring programme, the staff might overcome the prejudice and reservations towards disabled people and to become more positive and benevolent to them.

In general, the benefits from a participation in a mentoring programme are apparent for both sides in the process.

A proof of the benefits of the Mentoring programmes is the fact that after the six-month mentoring programme within the “Leonardo da Vinci” Project, mentioned before, the majority of mentees with disabilities, after completing the process, were able to start a job. On the other hand, mentors became more open-minded and liable to hire disabled people in their companies.

The “Equal Employment Opportunities” Project has been selected as a best-practice in Europe within the “Leonardo da Vinci” Programme and Ministry of Education and Science and the Ministry of Labor and Social Affair of Bulgaria, awarded this project with Certificate of Quality.

Thinking about Mentoring programmes in favour of people with disabilities, we shall mind the importance of the Certification process. The purpose of this Certification is that after the mentoring programme, the only way to prove the benefits and the work experience of it, is to have it certified in a way, enabling recognition of these skills by institutions and organizations, offering work positions.

Consequently, the logical prolongation of the project “Equal Employment Opportunities: Mentoring and Training for Disabled People and Employers” is another “Leonardo da Vinci” project, called “Validation of Mentoring”.

The main purpose of this project is to create procedures and framework for validation of mentoring programmes as a successful supporting instrument in the career of people with disabilities.

At the end of this European initiative the team expects to achieve the validation of mentoring programmes foresaw within the project, which will ensure the recognition of the practical knowledge and skills gained during the above mentioned mentoring programmes. This fact will promote the raise of the trust from the employers’ side towards mentoring and will encourage their implementation in practice. Meanwhile the observation of the experience of the partners’ organizations of the project shows that companies from the profit sector are much more susceptible to implement different types of practice for informal training, if that practice has been tested and proved to be successful beforehand. When it goes to informal training and career support for disabled and disadvantaged people, the employers are even more sensitive towards the barriers and challenges they would face by working with these people.

Namely with the aim to support them, the experts working on the **Validation of Mentoring** Project, developed a **Guide**, containing the methodology and the leading principles laying in the base of mentoring programmes for disabled and disadvantaged people. This project’s product aim to facilitate the organizations using at the moment or those planning to implement similar training schemes, by providing all the information needed in available format.

The effective procedures for validation of mentoring programmes, worked out within the **Validation of Mentoring** project will be in great advantage both for the organizations providing informal training and license institutions which monitor the whole process.

The institutionalization of the programmes for informal training, as mentoring, directly will influence the positive process of inclusion of disabled and disadvantaged people into the open labour market and will support successful development of their work career.

More information about mentoring programmes for people with disabilities and disadvantaged, could be found at the following websites:

www.mentoring-validation.org; www.marie-curie-bg.org/mentoring.