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Social Enterprises - Viable Solutions for People with Disabilities?

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Abstract: Social enterprises are possible solutions for the integration of people with disabilities, one of the most discriminated social categories in the labor market. Through an in-depth analysis of articles related to this field, published in scientific journals in the last 5 years, we want to investigate the role of social entrepreneurship in increasing the employment of people with disabilities. Content analysis has identified key benefits, such as increased living standards and a lower risk of dependence on social benefits. At the same time, there are disadvantages such as: increased segregation and isolation or reduced chances of integration into the free labor market. This paper contributes to the broadening of knowledge about social enterprises that employ people with disabilities, opening new possible directions of research. Second, the paper highlights practical implications for the inclusion of people with disabilities in the labor market.

Keywords: social economy; integration into the labor market; discrimination

1. Introduction

At the 31 December 2021, Romania had a number of 865,573 people with disabilities, of which 52.75% are of appropriate age to work, respectively between 18-64 years (National Authority for Persons with Disabilities, 2021). According to the data processed by the Alaturi de Voi Association from Iași, only 7.3% were employed, which represents a very low employment rate compared to the European average of 35-40% (www.alaturidevoi.ro).

Recent research shows that in Romania, people with disabilities are put in a position to approach the labor market in the absence of any benchmark regarding their abilities, limitations and expectations. Poor self-assessment of employment opportunities, coupled with a passive social work system, without employment incentives, discourages people with disabilities to look for a job (Petrescu & Neagu, 2018).

Other authors consider that the main reasons are related to poor infrastructure, the challenges of transport to and from work, as well as stigma and social discrimination, given that employers associate disability with lower productivity and greater need for work supervision (Birău & all, 2019). In addition, that state institutions are insufficiently involved in the cause of people with disabilities (Safta & all, 2011). Thus, there is a lack of concern in schools to help these people in the process of identifying the qualities and skills that will enable them to qualify for different positions. Moreover, there is an inconsistency between the vocational training system and the Romanian Labor Code, and the professional counseling and guidance services for this category are absent or do not work properly. As for companies, they are

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disinterested in the benefits that could result from hiring people with disabilities and have great difficulty in adapting the infrastructure to the needs of this category of people.

Baciu & Lazăr (2017) showed that discrimination against people with disabilities is incorporated in the Romanian culture and in the institutional practices of the entities that work with and for people with disabilities. Thus, interviews with company representatives show that most employers prefer to pay the penalties imposed by law, rather than hiring people with disabilities. Other researchers (Smith & all, 2018) have observed that the employment of people with disabilities in the free labor market determines their isolation, the risk that they will be placed in low-skilled positions and without opportunities to advance professionally or be discriminated against on salary criteria. The results of a survey conducted in Poland (Politaj & Koza, 2018) which included 466 people with disabilities show that disability is often a serious obstacle to entering the labor market as an employee. For example, managers have a poor understanding of disability or the support they need to provide and expect high costs if they hire people with disabilities (Cavanagh & all, 2017).

One of the measures that provides support the professional integration of people with disabilities is the social economy. It is located on the border between the market economy and the State and is the framework concept that brings together various types of organizations that combine welfare with social solidarity (Cace & all, 2018). Its main purpose is the socio-economic inclusion of disadvantaged people and does not focus on making a profit. The national legal framework is regulated by Law no. 219/2015 on the Social Economy. According to this law, social enterprises are distinguished from other economic operators because they have a social mission, reinvest 90% of the profit, and at least 30% of the employed staff belong to a vulnerable group.

2. Methods

In order to respond to the objective of identifying the role of social enterprises in increasing the employment of people with disabilities, we analyzed a sample of scientific articles published in 2017-2022 in specialized journals. Using a series of keywords - people with disabilities - employment discrimination - social economy - social enterprise, we extracted, with the help of the google scholar search engine, a series of research articles. Through the thematic analysis of these articles we identified the opportunities, but also the risks of employing people with disabilities in social enterprises. At the same time, we have extracted some inclusive workplace strategies that can be used to promote the employment of people with disabilities.

3. Results

3.1. Benefits

The study found that employing people with disabilities in social enterprises has the following advantages:

- increasing living standards and lower risk of dependence on social benefits (Smith & all, 2018, Kalargyrou & all, 2018, Macaulay & all, 2018b);
- improving physical and mental health, increasing self-esteem (Kalargyrou & all., 2018, Macaulay & all, 2018b);
- economic security and job stability (Macaulay & all, 2018a, Smith & all, 2018);

- treatment with respect and dignity, because equal principles are respected (Macaulay & all, 2018a);
- offers the possibility of personalized employment, focusing on strengths, analyzing the needs and interests of the person, seeking and capitalizing on the potential of the person, matching it with the needs of the employer (Smith& all, 2018);
- providing mentoring in order to acquire skills, abilities to progress and the people with disabilities feels supported (Villotti & all, 2018, Smith & all, 2018).
- social inclusion; through the work done and the products made, they become visible in the community and become recognized as valuable contributors to that community (Kalargyrou & all, 2018, Smith& all, 2018).
- raises public awareness, reduces stigma, changes the concept of disability through a transfer of confidence to those with disabilities (Kalargyrou & all, 2018).

3.2. Risks

Social enterprises may not be sufficiently viable and efficient. For example, analyzing the situation in Romania Tudose & Rusu (2018) find that only 19% of certified social enterprises have carried out activities on a sustainable basis, having a seniority of over three years and more than a third of them go through financial difficulties from / after the first year of operation. The inefficiency of social enterprises leads to a low level of pay, which cannot ensure a decent standard of living. Other authors have also found that there may be a risk that people with disabilities may become dependent on the support pension as their main source of income (Smith & all, 2018).

Another risk that may arise is that they may exacerbate the segregation and social isolation of people with disabilities. For example, one research in Spain shows that compared to employment in the free labor market, the sheltered employment improve the situation in the short term, but reinforces the long-term social stigma (Cruz-Morato & all, 2021).

In addition, social enterprises offer few opportunities for the personal and professional development of the person with disabilities, as they have more of a “client” role, and colleagues without disabilities usually assume supervisory and protective roles (Smith& all, 2018). For example, Beyer & all (2010) conducted a study that compared the quality of life of people with intellectual disabilities employed in the free labor market with those in social inclusion enterprises. The result is that employees who are supported to find work in the open market have reported better health, higher productivity and better emotional well-being than people with intellectual disabilities in insertion businesses.

3.3. Solutions

Engaging people with disabilities in social enterprises can be improved by:

- streamlining management procedures and internal organization, production processes for social enterprises to achieve commercial viability. This requires social entrepreneurs to be creative, energetic, to seek innovative solutions and to find resources to overcome the barriers that arise (Micheli & all., 2021; Garcia-Sabater &all., 2020)
- complementary services such as training, psychological and legal counseling, vocational assessment, training and support in skills development through individualized ways and specific techniques (Petrescu & Neguț, 2018, Micheli & all., 2021). For example, it is recommended to maintain a balance

between care and employment (Blonk & all, 2020) and to provide social support to employees with disabilities through empathy, focusing on productivity has a positive effect on productivity (Setiyanto & Walandari, 2019);

- developing and learning people with disabilities to become entrepreneurs (Bagheri & Abbariki, 2017, Politaj & Koza, 2018)

- flexible employment schemes for people with disabilities, such as work from home, long-distance work and flexible working hours, lead to increased productivity and job satisfaction (Giovanis & Ozdamar, 2019).

4. Conclusions

For people with disabilities, employment offers a lot of benefits, but it is also associated with some challenges. For this reason, the solutions found and which have been successfully applied in practice must be taken into account.

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