

THE BARRIER-FREE WORKPLACE FOR DISABLED PEOPLE

BEZ ŠĶĒRŠĻIEM BRĪVAS DARBAVIETAS CILVĒKIEM AR INVĻIDITĀTI

Marga Živitere, Dr. oec.

Information Systems Management Institute

91 Ludzas, Riga, Latvia, LV-1003

E-mail: marga.zivitere@isma.lv, telephone: +371 67100589

Viktorija Rjaščenko, Dr. oec.

Information Systems Management Institute

91 Ludzas, Riga, Latvia, LV-1003

E-mail: viktorjas@gmail.com, telephone: +371 67100607

Abstract. According to the European Disability Strategy 2010-2020, to achieve the EU's growth targets, more people with disabilities need to be in paid employment on the open labour market. The purpose of this article is to examine and discuss the main barriers and the reduced opportunities of employment for disabled people from employers' side. In this context, on the basis of review of the literature and experts' interviews the particular criteria for an identification of the main barriers and methods to reduce them, as well as suggestions and recommendations for further improvements specifically in Latvia are made. The study is based on research Information Systems Management Institute conducted within European Community Leonardo da Vinci projects 'Ability not Disability in Employment' (2003-2005), 'Increasing Employability of Disabled People' (2008-2010) and 'Ability not Disability in the Workplace' (2009-2011). Three surveys were carried out, both analyzing the situation in Latvia in the context of the European Union. The first survey compared the situation in Latvia and Luxemburg, the second – the situation in Latvia, Bulgaria and Turkey, the EU candidate country, and the third – the situation in Latvia, Germany, Italy and Lithuania. The paper has been prepared with the financial support of the EU Commission.

Key words: Latvia, barrier-free workplace, main barriers, reducing barriers.

Introduction

One of the new dimensions in the development of society is the new Strategy to barrier-free workplace for disabled people (European Commission, 2010b, p. 4). In his preface to the EU's *Europe 2020 strategy* José Manuel Barroso stresses that Europe has to emerge stronger than it was previously from the economic and financial crisis. While “the crisis has wiped out years of economic and social progress and exposed structural weaknesses in Europe's economy,” it is essential and achievable to “turn the EU into a smart, sustainable and inclusive economy delivering high levels of employment, productivity and social cohesion” (European Commission, 2010a, p. 5). *Europe 2020* puts forward three mutually reinforcing priorities: smart growth; sustainable growth; and inclusive growth. It is explained that smart growth means developing an economy based on knowledge and innovation – an area, where universities together with the business sector and representatives from the political system at different levels (national and supranational or European) are the key players. In another European document – *European Disability Strategy 2010-2020*, it is emphasised that “full economic and social participation of people with disabilities is

essential if the EU's Europe 2020 strategy is to succeed in creating smart, sustainable and inclusive growth" (European Commission, 2010b, p. 4).

As it is stated in the *European Disability Strategy 2010-2020: A Renewed Commitment to a Barrier-Free Europe*, "One in six people in the European Union (EU) has a disability that ranges from mild to severe making around 80 million who are often prevented from taking part fully in society and the economy because of environmental and attitudinal barriers. For people with disabilities the rate of poverty is 70 % higher than the average partly due to limited access to employment. Over a third of people aged over 75 have disabilities that restrict them to some extent, and over 20 % are considerably restricted. Furthermore, these numbers are set to rise as the EU's population ages. The EU and its Member States have a strong mandate to improve the social and economic situation of people with disabilities" [13, p.3]. In this strategy employment is mentioned as one of eight main areas of action and it is stressed that the EU action will "enable many more people with disabilities to earn their living on the open labour market" (European Commission, 2010b, p. 7).

In the context of European strategy, the analytical review of the current situation of the worldwide economic crisis and tendency of the employment of disabled people, in particularly, gets critical by the reduction their employment opportunities, because employers dismiss the first disabled people (see figure 1).

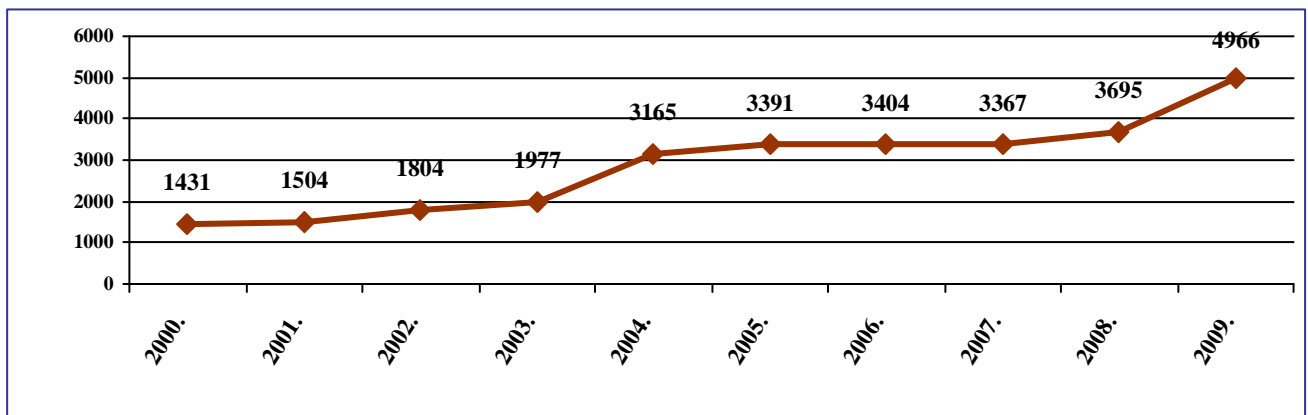


Figure 1. The registered number of unemployed disabled people in Latvia (on February 28, 2009)³⁴

This figure shows that the registered number of unemployed disabled people from 2000 till 2009 dramatically increased (by 3 and half) in Latvia. The tendency is extremely negative and this tendency is long-term, but not only connected with the current economic crises.

³⁴ State Employment Agency of Latvia. Available in <http://www.lm.gov.lv/text/151>.

Using the experience of work on different European projects depicting the barriers to employment for people with disabilities, in this research, the authors search for the ways to reduce the barriers in recruitment and employment of people with special needs, promote evidenced-based practices and systems change that increase employment opportunities for this group of people. The research is focused on the demand from employer's side of the workforce development system in order to understand better what works in promoting effective practices and systems change. This will decrease the barriers to employment people with disabilities and increase employment opportunities for people with special needs.

Research methods

Much has been written about the barriers faced by disabled people in their attempts to access the labour market (e.g. Barnes. and Sheldon, 2010; Bruyère., Erickson & VanLooy, 2004; Bučiūnienė, Kazlauskaitė, 2010; Roulstone, 2000, 2002, 2004a, 2004b;. Roulstone et al, 2003; Roulstone and Barnes, 2005; Waldschmidt, 2009). The topic - the barriers-free workplace has been given rather limited research attention in the Latvia so far (Ilena, 2007; Korņiljevs, Ļubkina, 2011; Živitere, 2007, 2008, and 2011). For all that, when the time comes to recruit, hire and promote, people with disabilities are often overlooked. Every employer looks for to hire qualified people, and want to draw them from the largest possible "pool" of candidates. This "pool" will include people with disabilities - who comprise a productive sector of the workforce today.

This survey on the barrier-free workplace for people with disabilities was carried out within the framework of Leonardo da Vinci project "Ability not Disability in Workplace" (AnDiW, 2009-2011) which is the previous Leonardo da Vinci transfer of innovation project "Ability not Disability in Employment" (AnDE, 2003-2005). The present study includes the questions on topics which have previously been covered in earlier research studies looking at the employment of people with disabilities, from the employer's side, in the enterprises in Latvia³⁵. The aim of this research is an interest to evaluate a tendency of the barriers and changes in the reduction of barriers to compare these earlier findings with those of the present study. In both cases the studies have included questions on the following issues:

- the main barriers to employment for people with disabilities in the workplace;
- the most effective means of reducing barriers to employment for people with disabilities;

³⁵ Please note that care should be taken in drawing conclusions about changes over time as the surveys differed in design, population and question wording and context. These differences will affect the findings to an unknown extent.

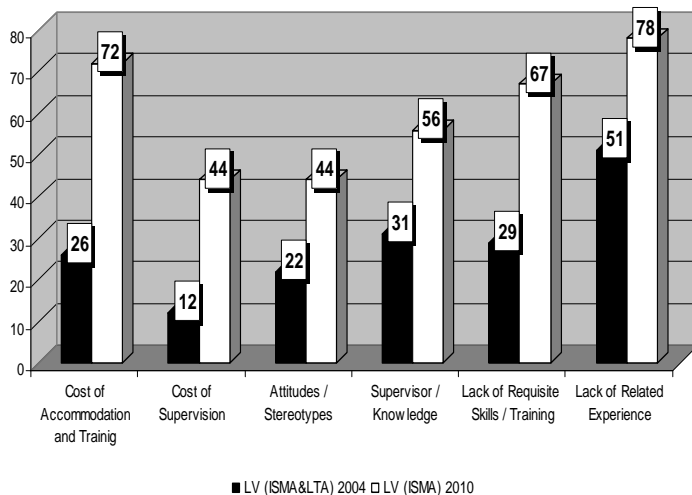
- reducing or making changes regarding barriers to employment of people with disabilities in the workplace.

The studies of barrier-to workplace for people with disabilities nowadays were made on the basis of information gained, of employers' and experts' quantitative and qualitative questionnaires as comparisons with previous studies within the framework of the Pilot Project (AnDE) conducted in 2004 by the Latvian Traders' Association and Information Systems Management Institute. The first studies included 966 respondents: employers or representatives of their enterprises. 74% of those represented medium enterprises, 24% represented small enterprises and 2% represented large enterprises³⁶. In preparation for the 2nd survey the same methodology was used as in 2004. The second round of survey was carried out in 2010 year but only in the Republic of Latvia. In the second survey were selected the largest and the most important companies of various branches, the respondents who are less connected with people with health problems were excluded, so it was expected that the results of questionnaires would represent the widest spectrum of problems.

An interview with respondents on issues was related to, in the first - the identification of the main barriers to recruitment and employment people with disability into the workforce; in the second - the difficulties and organizational benefits of such practices from a business perspective

Results and Discussions

In the first part of the survey *the main barriers to employment for people with disabilities in the*



workplace the researchers identified six main barriers (Figure 2).

As it is shown on the figure 1, the ratings of the main barriers in answers of the respondents' in the first and second questionnaires were considerably different. Respondents of the second survey indicated lack of related experience as the main barrier (78%) while the respondents

³⁶ Annex 5. Research results about the employment of people with disabilities in enterprises in Latvia and Luxembourg (2005). In *Annex to the Distance Education Course "Employment of People with Disabilities"*. SIA "Mācību grāmata", Riga, p. 48-52; AnDiw (2009-2011). Information Systems Management Institute. *The questionnaires*.

of the first survey rated its importance only in the Figure 2. Percents Reporting Barriers to Employment for People with Disabilities (Latvia, 2004 and 2010) fourth position (61%); cost of accommodation and training (72%); lack of requisite skills/ training (67%). The above mentioned barriers had the tendency to increase a role of costs. These conclusions were used for further second and third group of questionnaires.

The second group of questionnaires *the most effective means of reducing barriers to employment for people with disabilities* (see Figure 3): Visible Top Management Commitment (82% - 2004); Employer Tax Incentives (78% - 2010 against 26% -2004). The respondents – representatives of the companies, participating in the survey believe that the barrier reduction measures will lead to tax saving policy, for the companies make their performance according to their strategic plans, which are profit orientated. Thus, if the state granted more tax saving incentives, more companies would hire people with disabilities.

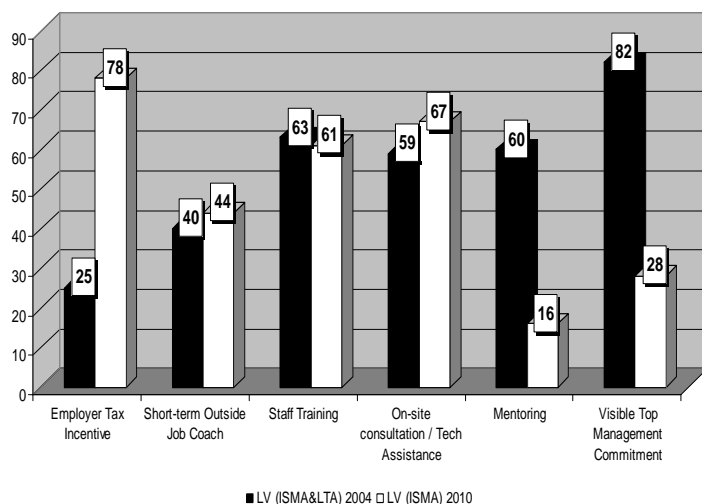


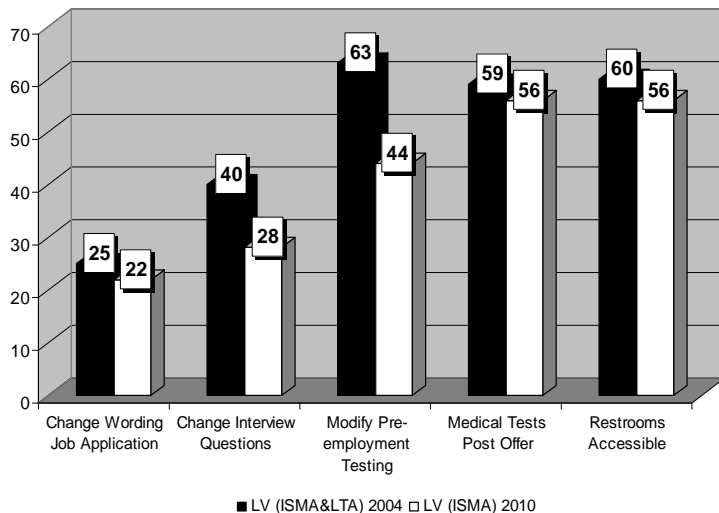
Figure 3. Percents Reporting Effective & Very Effective Measures of Reducing Barriers to Employment of Persons with Disabilities (Latvia, 2004 and 2010).

The third stage of the survey deals with the questions aimed at reducing or making changes in the barriers to employment of people with disabilities, they give the idea of how to reduce barriers and make changes in employment policy of the enterprises which hire people with disabilities. The analysis of the answers of the respondents will be taken as the basis for the future research work (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Percents Reporting Difficulties or Utmost Difficulties to Make Changes in the Employment policy of People with Disabilities (Latvia, 2004 and 2010).

Ratings of the main barriers by the respondents in 2004 and 2010 are not considerably different. The respondents indicate barriers of modify pre-employment testing (63% against 44%), restrooms accessible (56% against 60%) and medical tests post offer (56% against 59%).

Testing experts on the current situation, most companies prefer to hire people with disabilities only part-time or for hourly rate wages that relate to the fact those companies have not



had experience in recruitment of these people before. And certainly, every businessman who deals with a person with disabilities for the first time would like to insure such employee’s professionalism and efficiency. As a result many companies in Latvia don’t want to hire people with special needs full-time.

The biggest concern for businesses is the cost of adaptation, because they are very high. Consequently, it dramatically affects the company's production cost and the whole business. Entrepreneurs are also ignorant of the adjustment costs as such, for the information on this topic is not easily found in the public sources.

Answers of survey questions show positive attitudes towards people with disabilities on the part of companies employees, they are ready to provide necessary assistance and support, both moral and professional to people with special needs, working in their companies . This fact proves the positive changes in the social mentality of people in Latvia when compared with earlier times: people want to accept the other person, despite the fact that this person has special needs and his or her abilities are somehow limited.

The most unfavorable fact which the survey shows are that entrepreneurs are aware only of tax saving policy that will be available, recruiting people with special needs, but they are not sufficiently informed about the subsidies and other financial aid, and sometimes even misinformed about available benefits, if the company hires disabled people. Thus, it often happens that people with special needs are not hired because of employer’s lack of information on these issues, as well as their ignorance about the subsidized public funds, European Social Fund benefits, the State Employment Agency projects.

Conclusions

The survey shows a considerable number of problems in economic, legal and social sectors, which influence the employment of disabled people in Latvia.

Summing up the results of the research with the aim to attract the attention of Latvian society and the representatives of the business world in particular towards *reducing barriers to employment of people with disabilities*, the authors of the article came to the conclusions mentioned below.

1. In general Latvian companies play a passive role in recruiting people with special needs, especially those that have never considered hiring a disabled person. They believe that Latvian public associations and foundations should be the first to offer disabled people a job option.
2. The conducted survey in the frames of the research shows a considerable number of problems in economic, legal and social sectors, which influence the recruitment and employment of disabled people in workplace as well as depicts the fact that the majority of representatives of the business world in Latvia are ignorant about all the benefits for the companies if they recruit a person with special needs in particular the subsidized public funds, European Social Fund benefits, the State Employment Agency projects.
3. Representatives of mass media should inform society about people with disabilities, their employment needs, problems and their potential. However there are many ways to improve the employment situation for disabled people at the present moment and in the future.
4. The research results from a quantitative and qualitative study conducted in 2004 and 2010 consisting of one-to-one findings specify the presence of development tendency to decrease the barriers towards recruitment and employment disabled workers compared with soviet reality. The present economic downturn has had an adverse impact on the situation of people with disabilities, making a call for society to act urgently.
5. There are positive changes in the social mentality of people representing all layers of the Latvian community, they are wanting to change the situation in recruitment of people with special needs to the best, to reduce barriers towards their recruitment, to create and guarantee all the necessary conditions for their active, harmonious life with all its values, using the experience of the developed countries of the world.

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