THE SIGNIFICANCE AND CHARACTERISTICS OF SOFT SKILLS IN THE PROCESS OF EFFECTIVE MANAGEMENT OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

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Purpose: To identify the factors determining the opinions of employees and employers regarding the importance of soft skills in the process of disability management.

Design/methodology/approach: The objective of the study will be accomplished by conducting an anonymous survey at businesses employing people with a recognized disability condition, directly and indirectly (through agencies).

Findings: based on the analysis of the research history in the project under consideration, identification of factors was attempted.

Research limitations/implications: The limitations in the study process arise from the diagnostic survey method used. The respondents' opinions (both open-end and multiple-choice answers) are based on declarations, leaving the researcher with a degree of uncertainty as to whether the study participants gave their honest answers. Possible inconsistencies may be due to the respondents' fear of consequences, overinterpretation, misunderstanding the questions.

Practical implications: The study results may be used by organizations employing people with disabilities, they serve as a reflection on building soft skill-based relationships, show the interviewees' perspectives and attitudes to the issues being discussed. Based on the findings, managing staff can pay attention to those aspects of management that affect cooperation in diverse teams and eliminate problems that arise from employees' lack of knowledge and concerns by offering workshops and training.

Social implications: The study may contribute to an improvement of the knowledge and understanding of the matters of disability and have a positive effect on forming attitudes and opinions (emotional, cognitive and executive factors).

Originality/value: The paper is targeted at employees, managing staff, emphasizing the importance of soft skills based on an individual's sensitivity in the process of disability vs. diversity management as a key component of good collaboration among employees, professional success in the personal dimension. The paper is addressed at employees, managing staff, researchers, students, practicians.

Keywords: collaboration, disability, disability management, organization, rehabilitation, soft skills.

Category of the paper: research paper.

1. Introduction

With the rapid changes occurring in the world around, an individual has to depend on intellectual reflection in the process of adjusting and adapting to the new reality and challenges, and such reflection is becoming a sort of a necessity. The expanding job market, with increasing numbers of people with various types of disability, is certainly this kind of a situation. The social consequences of the regulations setting out the standards for employment and vocational rehabilitation of disabled people include certain changes in the awareness of the general public, which are seen as a long-term, diverse and uncontrolled process. Multiple concepts are proposed in subject-matter literature referring to the classification and characteristics of an individual's competences, both those determining our functioning in a professional context and those which are personal. Soft skills (competences) include, among others: interpersonal skills, communication skills, organizational skills, creativity, analytical thinking, independence, resistance to difficult situations and stress; they are strongly unique of an individual, substantially affecting specific behaviors of that individual. They may be labeled as personal, as they encompass the individual's social skills and their autonomy (Chmielecka, Matuszczak, 2020, p. 15). In that sense, competences can be divided into personal (handling stress, time management, emotional intelligence) and interpersonal (motivation, team work ability). The other group comprises hard skills, i.e. expert knowledge and specific skills affecting our performance targeted at achieving certain goals. The difference between hard and soft skills is that the former are measurable and can be assessed, unlike soft skills which are a matter of interpretation, often depending not only on the person's knowledge but also their perspectives, attitudes and experience. They are viewed as showing in specific behaviors of an individual, and as such they can be observed and interpreted. "Professional competence" is the function of the knowledge, skills, attitudes as well as the professional ability and talent. These are defined as socio-technical. Another description that can be found in literature is 'universal skills', meaning those which an individual can use in a variable environment to adapt to change (Chmielecka, Matuszczak, 2020, p. 13).

2. Disability

A real-life effect of creating policies for people with disabilities is the orientation on the individual as a subject, employment in the open job market, organization of support in achieving independence in various areas of life, including presence in the public debate (Kubicki, Pawlak, Mica, p. 23). However, numerous research projects and expert opinions demonstrate that we are experiencing successes and failures in the area of creating policies for the disabled people,

despite the unambiguous directives and recommendations arising from the EU legislative framework. The causes of failure which are most commonly mentioned in subject-matter literature are the following: the incomplete reform of disability certifications, access barriers for services, diagnosing but not responding to disabled people's issues and needs, enforcement of disabled people's rights, particularly in respect of gaining self-sufficiency and independence, inclusive education and adaptation of the schooling system (Kubicki, Pawlak, Mica, pp. 25-26). In the definition of social capital of people with disabilities, we refer to certain environmental and cultural conditions that indicate the need for transformation of social awareness in the perception of disabled people. Adoption of a humanistic perspective serves this purpose most efficiently, as it contributes to the development of social sensitivity (empathy) and building a social model for resolving the issue of disability based on the assumption that disability is a normal condition and the objective is reintegration and professional activation (Rymsza, 2016, pp. 18-19). The direction of change is oriented towards a belief that disabled people take decisions for which they take responsibility (Masłyk, 2016, p. 29). A measure of vocational rehabilitation is a change of attitudes among the people with disabilities themselves, so that they perceive themselves in terms of their vocational qualification and not their disability (Ruman, 2017, p. 91). This is particularly important in a knowledge society, oriented towards conscious and permanent growth. Lifelong learning leads an improvement of professional qualifications and skills, as well as knowledge management. Vocational activity cannot be detached from the entirety of the process of rehabilitation of a person with disability. Vocational adaptation, or rather the vocational adaptation process, is essential as it is based on unique experiences which may support or hinder someone in taking new challenges in their work environment. The proactive attitude and innovation in the business itself may be highly relevant, as it is a stimulus for maintaining the relationship between the disabled person and the work environment (Chodkowski, 2019a, p. 83). A measure of vocational adaptation is the matching of the work conditions with the employee's needs, both those arising from the disability as such and those being the consequence of their current living situation. Striving towards building and maintaining a state of relative balance between the requirements set by the organization and the individual's capacity illustrates the dynamic of the adaptation process. The rehabilitation-work relationship is bidirectional: on one hand, work may trigger the need for intensive rehabilitation in a person, and on the other hand effective rehabilitation improves the disabled person's adaptation to work. Within the framework of comprehensive rehabilitation impacts, we can distinguish medical, psychological, vocational and social rehabilitation. Each of these helps neutralize and minimize the consequences of disability while at the same time expanding the life perspective of a person with disability. We cannot disregard the integrative function of adaptation, which affects the level of professional satisfaction in an employee as well as the financial profits and reputation of the business (Chodkowski, 2019a, p. 85). However, as we analyze the trend for social activation of people with disabilities, we can see a certain dissonance in that excessive care measures may lead to reduced activity in

life and maintaining the present model of functioning, while restricting and blocking the opportunities for change for disabled people (Rymsza, 2016, p. 21).

3. Overview of research on the vocational activity of people with disabilities

Vocational orientation studies conducted in the group of people with disabilities show that the strongest orientation in that group is the vocation to work and career orientation. Occupation orientation is the least powerful factor. The level of education of the interviewees is a strongly distinguishing factor (Kasprzak, Michalak, 2016, p. 75). The authors of the studies believe that people with disabilities are perceived as being weaker and less performing, which may be the cause of blocking and disregarding them in the process of career development in accordance with their potential (Kasprzak, Michalak, 2016, p. 81). Masłyk (2016, pp. 35-36) compared the feeling of political empowerment with the level of social capital in various countries of Europe on the basis of the European Social Survey of 2014. Based on his analysis, he claims that persons with disabilities tend to view their empowerment as lower than people with no disability, yet the higher the level of democratization in a specific country, the stronger the people's belief in their empowerment. The author believes that the differences may be rooted in the functioning of the institutions, the social structure and the historical considerations. Social capital reinforces the order, thus leading to social integration through development of positive attitudes towards support, help, social solidarity. In that sense, social capital can be understood as the resources of social networks (Masłyk, 2016, pp. 43-44). Among the factors hindering the implementation of effective solutions in the field of employment, there are the organizational, economic, cognitive and cultural considerations. One of the barriers affecting employment of people with disabilities may be the employers' belief of their lower performance and work quality, periods of absence and health conditions caused by their disability, as well as concerns about being responsible for safety (Dykcik, 2010, p. 296). Another barrier are the employer's biases and stereotypes, concerns about non-disabled personnel accepting the persons with disabilities, and insufficient knowledge about the possibilities to use the potential of people with disabilities and managing their issues (Giermanowska, Racław, 2014, p. 119).

Data analyses show that Poland, despite undertaking multiple initiatives in this area, is among low vocational activity countries, with the majority of the disabled people staying outside the job market (Giermanowska, 2016, p. 69). Job market analyses indicate that vocational activation of people with disabilities is linked to their needs. Based on the analysis of conference materials, A. Migas (2006, pp. 39-40) tries to address the method of realization of disabled people's potential needs. The comparison indicates that it is possible when the following are engaged in such measures: the public sector, the private sector, non-government

organizations, employer organizations, local governments, rehabilitation and social integration centers. Work has a number of functions in an individual's life:

- The growth/development function facilitates personality and competence improvement.
- The economic function builds the feeling of stability and safety.
- The psychological function, understood as a source of vocational and non-vocational activity.
- The rehabilitation function, i.e. improvement and maintenance of health, welfare.
- The socialization function, i.e. preventing exclusion, maintaining social contacts (Kasprzak, Michalak, 2016, pp. 67-68).

In her analysis of the findings of research projects dedicated to the disadvantages and advantages of work by people with disabilities, Giermanowska (2016, p. 80) enumerates the factors that increase the level of satisfaction with one's work, including the opportunity to establish interpersonal relations, sense of accomplishment, financial gains. She recognizes the following as disadvantages: low salaries, excessive work burden, inconvenient working times, inadequate aspirations, failing to take into account the limitations arising from disability. The fears arising from lack of knowledge, reproduction of stereotypes and bias, affect the direct contacts (Giermanowska, p. 81).

4. Managing disability in an organization

Human resources management with due consideration of the aspects of disability of an individual is a challenge for contemporary organizations. Even though it functions as a standard of the contemporary job market, important for building a reputation for a business. In the present model of social policy, employers create the disabled persons employment policy by creating new jobs, identifying barriers in employment and readiness to undertake and solve problems that arise from an individual's disability (Giermanowska, Racław, 2014, p. 118). At the same time, it is known that without changing the employers' and employees' attitudes to the barriers arising from practice, no change of the model will be possible.

The process of competence management is dynamic, process-oriented and subject to continuous change; hence, we may speak of its continuous improvement and striving to accomplish a state of balance. The subject-matter literature indicates that this relationship may encompass a state of complete divergence, balance, mismatch, shortage or excess of competences. The state of balance is the most desirable option as it facilitates fulfillment of needs and affects compliance with management standards, albeit with regard to ongoing situations (Walkowiak, 2007, p. 32). However, the situation context may favor creative searches and resolutions, or initiate adaptation to change and attempts to adjust to the situation. New challenges may be a source of an innovative approach, interpretation and changes in

implementation of the regulations, and solutions matching the needs and expectations of people with disabilities. In this perspective, disabled people's entry onto the job market may be viewed as creating and building a new reality, based on extensive, multidirectional relationships, collaboration and understanding.

Disability as a kind of impediment in vocational adaptation can be viewed in a personal or social context. Considering the disability certification system for employment purposes, 3 degrees of disability are distinguished: minor, moderate and major, as well as 12 groups of potential causes of disability (Journal of Laws of 2023, item 100, p. 5, Articles 3 and 4; Journal of Laws of 2021, item 857, § 32). Some of the above are characterized by a very complex context and affect the barriers and stereotypes involved in vocational activation and employment.

Disability management in the workplace has been defined by the International Labour Organization as a process in the workplace designed to facilitate the employment of persons with a disability through a coordinated effort and taking into account individual needs, work environment, enterprise needs and legal responsibilities (ILO 2013, p. 4; Uścińska, 2015, p. 8). The specific recommendations state that a disability management strategy should be linked to a workplace-level policy on the level of individual feeling of safety through eliminating the risks and hazards, adaptation of the workplace and the responsibilities to the actual ability, and enabling employees with a disability (including those who acquire a disability while in employment) to receive early intervention and referral to treatment and rehabilitation. A mission thus defined should be incorporated in the social policy of the state as well as the success and growth strategy of the enterprise. The fundamental principle of a disability management strategy is an equal opportunity policy, comprising the recruitment and retention process (Giermanowska, 2009, p. 86). The information received by the author in discussions with employers indicate that those organizations which pursue a more open policy towards disability understand the importance of knowledge in overcoming stereotypes and biases of the population. They can also perceive the relationship between building a positive image of the business and employing people with disabilities (Giermanowska, 2009, p. 94). Disability management should be coordinated by people with appropriate training in the field of issues arising from the characteristics of disabilities, or in regular contact with experts. Consultation and giving regular support to employers, both on the national and the international level, serve to support and build the strategies mentioned above. Another integral part of an informed policy of an enterprise is the provision and organization of specialist support for employees with disabilities by third party organizations. The manner of presentation and discussion of matters related to disability transposes directly to the approach towards the understanding of the relevant matters by all the workforce. Employers creating and organizing situations that favor acquisition of reliable and available knowledge will not only facilitate building positive perspectives among employees and managing staff regarding disability, but also help to build mature attitudes. Procedures applicable to employment of persons with disabilities should be

an indispensable part of human resources management. Investing in human capital is the key component of disabled people's employment policy (Chodkowski, 2019b, p. 123; Lipińska-Grobelny, Wolan-Nowakowska, 2017, p. 59). The contemporary concepts in subject-matter literature define diversity management as the ability to perceive differences among employees within and outside the organization. Such differences may depend on individual identity-defining qualities, determining the direction and history of socialization, as well as the manner of performing certain social roles. The objective of that strategy is to prevent discrimination, to support equal rights and to maximize the use of an employee's potential (Mazur-Wierzbicka, Wieczorek-Szymańska, Leoński, 2022, p. 40). This would not be possible without identifying the differences among employees on the basis of a reliable analysis and knowledge which is free from bias and stereotype. Comprehensive diversity management encompasses rational, emotional and operational measures.

5. Own research

The presented study was carried out using the diagnostic survey method. The purpose of the study was to gather opinions on the significance of soft skills in management of disability at organizations that employ persons with a certified disability condition. An anonymous questionnaire, composed of 25 questions, was filled in by employees of commercial businesses working together with persons with disabilities. Ultimately, 120 correctly filled questionnaires were approved for the analysis. Managing staff, including managers, leaders and business owners, were interviewed on managing diversity teams, comprising a total of 30 persons from the commercial services, food service and hotel sector. The study covered 54 female and 76 male respondents. The employees were diverse in terms of age: 31 of them (26%) were within the 18-25 age range; 52 persons (43%) in the 26-35 range; 25 (21%) in the 36-45 range; and 15 (13%) over 46 years of age. Further differences included the work experience: the largest group of 63 persons (53%) were employees with 10 to 15 years of experience. The study questions were about the following aspects:
1. Can soft competences affect the readiness and attitude to work together with persons with disabilities and if so, to what extent?
2. What issues tend to occur in terms of work organization in teams where disability management takes place?
3. Which factors determine the awareness and perception of the needs of persons with disabilities in the work environment among their colleagues?

Non-disabled employees view soft skills as the ability to establish and initiate contact (85% answers), own proactive attitude in relationships (62%) and open-mindedness (51%). None of the interviewees considered them to mean sensitivity, and only one in four respondents

believed that soft skills were relevant to the ability to collaborate in a team. The respondents mentioned such arguments as the ability to reach an agreement, compromise, and responsibility for one's duties. The employees opined that persons with disabilities exhibit a low level of a proactive attitude in the process of taking decisions and defending their positions. Based on their own experience and observation, the respondents claim that persons with disabilities are distanced in social relationships (52% of answers), withdrawn (40%) and passive (30%). In the opinion of some of the respondents, this is due to them being a minority (25% of answers), being shy (20%) and avoiding conflict (33%). At the same time, 42% of respondents could not or would not provide any arguments. Even though the majority of the surveyed employees can see a link between having a job and succeeding, they were unable to determine whether having a job is a success for a person with a disability - there were as many as 68 undecided persons (57%), most of them in the youngest age groups. 75 respondents believe that their company pays little attention to team integration and fails to consider the employees' expectations in this respect, while the measures they are undertaking are viewed as copying schematic patterns or earlier projects. A group of 35 respondents with longer work experience declared readiness to offer help and support to a person with a disability at the workplace. At the same time, 33 persons are not ready to take this responsibility, they believe that a disabled person may be too engaging, demanding attention and pushing their duties to others. Interestingly, this group of interviewees had little experience with disability, which may somehow explain their opinions as a product of their perspectives and attitudes instead of their own experience. 12 respondents (10%) declared that they witnessed intolerant behaviors towards a person with a disability from other employees and superiors. The interviewees mentioned malicious comments, ignoring someone, disregarding them, using obscene language and expressing negative opinions.

In the opinion of employers and managing staff, the following important problems are raised by non-disabled workers: fear of layoffs as a consequence of hiring persons with disabilities (65% of answers), believing in preferential terms of employment applicable to persons with disabilities (44% of answers). Yet no employer confirmed the existence of an employment policy based on preference in treatment of persons with disabilities. It may be surprising that 22 employees declared to have received such information from their direct superior. Such concerns are definitely more common among employees with lower levels of professional competence. Well-educated employees, on the other hand (12%), view persons with disabilities as competitors. Among the problems in their organizations, the managing staff mentioned certain stereotypes about disability which could be observed in the work relations, particularly as to the grounds and consequences of the disability (89%). Managers believe that the bias is due to non-disabled employees' lack of knowledge, concerns, belief in people with disabilities having lower capacity and performance at work. Managing staff note that employees are not willing to reveal their concerns and they avoid confronting the person with a disability directly. It was clearly noticeable that they engage their superiors and other colleagues in resolving

problems and conflicts with persons with disabilities. Managing staff believe that this is the result of a certain awkwardness in the relationships.

As a factor potentially determining the knowledge and awareness of non-disabled persons, the interviewees mentioned prior experience working with persons with disabilities in social relations and situations (91%). The following explanations were provided: people they knew from where they live. As regards the perception and understanding of needs, prior experience and quality of such experience turned out crucial. Better experience leads to a normalized attitude and positive declarations among the respondents as regards their readiness to offer support and help to a person with a disability. Only 18 respondents (15%) declared participation in a workshop on disabilities. A certain divergence was noticed here, as the managing staff declared that they were organizing such workshops and meetings dedicated to disabilities regularly, yet only 1 in 8 people have taken part in this form of building their knowledge and awareness of disability. The assessment of barriers at a workplace indicates that most employees tend to notice these in the common workspace. They mentioned the following items: narrow corridors, lack of adaptation in resting areas and conference rooms.

6. Summary

It has been determined on the basis of the study that organizations employing persons with disabilities create space for broadly defined collaboration and cooperation among employees. Creating and modifying space formed by diverse groups of employees requires commitment and sensitivity among the managing personnel as well as a proactive approach among the employees. Sensitivity to the issues and needs of others, being able to perceive them and, first of all, to respond to them seems to be a top priority for an organization. Having a job plays an important role in an individual's life, not only giving them the balance but also the feeling of individual safety, offering an opportunity for professional accomplishment and succeeding. It has been determined through the analysis of employees' opinions that the concept of career and professional success of persons with disabilities played a minor role in the normalization attempts. The respondents' indecision and uncertainty may suggest contesting the things which are a natural component of everyone's work. This requires intervention and response, so as to avoid increasing the gap and the beliefs regarding inequality, which may be based on disregarding people's needs. Specifically the perception of difficult situations and conflicts provides grounds for diagnosing the employees' and employers' expectations and perspectives. The matters related to the ability to respond, diagnose and resolve issues have an essential impact on collaboration within a team and on the quality of such collaboration. Investing in the formation and improvement of soft skills among employees and managing staff can be viewed as a positive factor for disability and diversity management. Hence, any initiatives serving the

improvement of employees' potential and creativity define the search and pursuit of solutions to normalize the matters of employment of persons with disabilities. Signs of intolerance, which are shown directly or indirectly, should be viewed as strongly concerning. Moreover, the respondents' disputing the decision-making skills of people with disabilities may contribute to exclusion in social contexts and to building inadequate beliefs about capabilities.

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