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SOCIAL ECONOMY IN SLOVENIA – EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

Aleksandra Tabaj¹

Abstract

People with disabilities are one of the most vulnerable groups in the labour market. Comparing to people without disabilities, their unemployment rates are higher, possibilities for employment lower. One of the important factors is also discrimination, visible and non-visible at labour market. Therefore, countries promote employment possibilities of persons with disabilities with specific regulations and programmes. In Slovenia, after 2006 new form of employment possibilities in social economy arised – employment centers. In ten years, more than 40 employment centers were established with over 440 employed people with severe disabilities. The article presents main characteristics of the employed persons with disabilities in employed centers and SWOT analysis for further developing this important subject.

Key words: employment, persons with disabilities, social economy

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Introduction

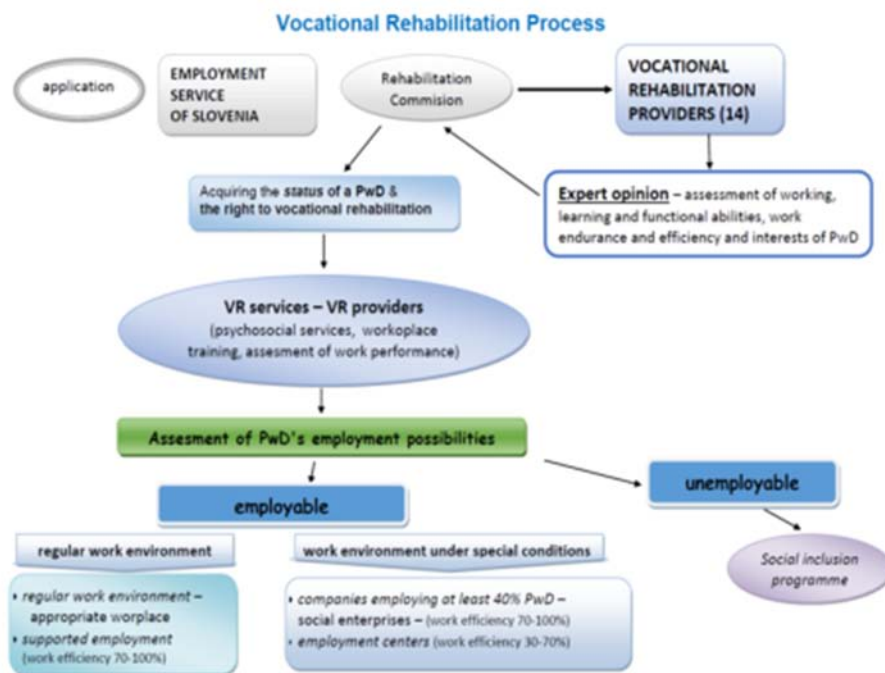
In 2006, Slovenian Employment and Rehabilitation for People with Disabilities Act entered into force. In the act, new form of social economy possibilities for unemployed people with severe disabilities was set – employment centers (EC). Prior to this, Ministry of Labour provided several pilot projects, in which it tested solutions regarding most severely disabled persons.

Act provides procedure for transition from employment rehabilitation to employment centers (Figure 1). Process starts at Employment Service of Slovenia, with the cooperation of vocational rehabilitation providers and Rehabilitation Commission. After vocational rehabilitation process, the decision of Employment Service of Slovenia for employability in

¹ Ph.d. Aleksandra Tabaj is the head of the Development Centre of Employment Rehabilitation at University Rehabilitation Institute Republic of Slovenia (aleksandra.tabaj (at) ir-rs.s)

employment centers has to be taken. This decision is taken into consideration when person with disability despite the workplace adaptation (reasonable accommodation), is not able to be employed in regular workplace. Their work efficiency is assessed from 30 to 70 %. Beside the option of workplaces in employment centers, also possibility of protected places in the companies employing persons with disabilities exists. People with disabilities, after having decision for protected workplace, can decide to go to companies for disabled persons, if they have adapted workplaces.

Table 1: Vocational Rehabilitation Process



Source: Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equall Opportunities, 2004

In 2016, Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equall Opportunities, after 10 years of existence, ordered evaluation of employment centres to University Rehabilitation Institute, Republic of Slovenia. Prior to that, Ministry ordered two follow-up evaluations in the first years of employment centers. The expert group prepared qualitative and quantitative methodology for evaluation, to combine both methods for encompassing the broadest view on this theme. In the questionnaire,

we provided 50 questions for employment centers, taking care general data, data on employees, organizational settings, work programme, professional support and data on finances. Beside quantitative data also SWOT analysis was prepared to get feedback on strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to employment centers.

Employment Centers and employed persons with disabilities

In Slovenia, in 2015 worked 44 employment centers, almost half of them (47,7 %) were smaller (up to 10 employees). One third (34,1 %) of them employed 11 to 20 employees. Only 1 employment center employed more than 40 employees. Thus, these organizations are more often small enterprises (Table 1).

Many of employment centers were created within the existing network of disability organizations, employment rehabilitation providers, and companies for employing persons with disabilities. The community as the founder of the employment centre was present just in one case.

Table 1: Data of employees and other staff in years 2013-2015

	No. Of EC = 35	No. Of EC = 40	No. Of EC = 44
	2013	2014	2015
No. of employed professional workers	42	45	59
No. of employed professional co-workers	54	63	58
No. of persons with disabilities employed	339	392	445
No. of employed persons at public works	10	12	11
No. of other employees	0	5	8
Total of employees in EC	445	517	581
No. of persons in training (vocational rehabilitation) – not employed	73	61	70
No. of persons in ALMP programs – not employed	6	9	4
Volunteers - not employed	5	13	17
Community service work – not employed	24	28	25

Source: Tabaj and others (2016: 15)

The data in Table 1 reveals that employment opportunities for persons with disabilities in the years 2013 – 2015 are still growing. In 2013, 35 employment centers operated, while in 2015, 44 employment centers were present. They offered from 339 to 445 working places for severely disabled persons – the increase was 31 %. Beside persons with disabilities, other staffs were employed, e.g. professional workers and co-workers, people in public works and other staff. Employment centers offered also opportunities for training to other people with disabilities – about 60 - 70 persons with disabilities per year trained in last years.

Data in table 2 presents the growing needs for employment possibilities for persons with disabilities. The numbers on decisions of Employment Service of Slovenia for this protected work possibilities are growing faster than actual workplaces in employment centers. Sum of all decisions in 10 years of operating employment centers from 2006 to 2015 is 893 decisions, while in practice, only 445 persons with disabilities were employed in employment centers - only half of the population was able to find appropriate work in employment centers (49,83 %).

Table 2: Data on decisions for employment in employment centers

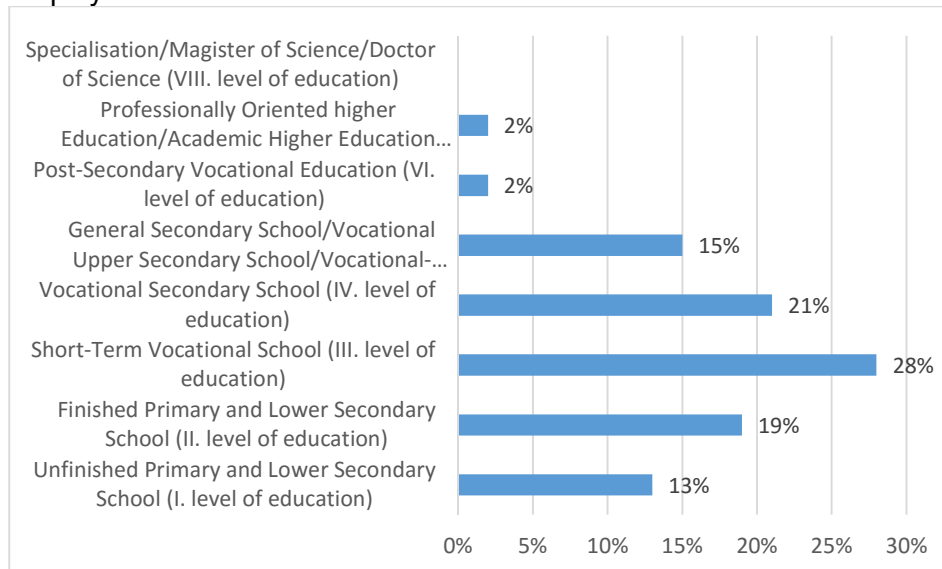
2006	170
2007	76
2008	54
2009	73
2010	74
2011	59
2012	88
2013	94
2014	94
2015	111
Total	893

Source: Employment Service of Slovenia (2016)

In the evaluation (Tabaj and others 2016: 17) we asked employment centers if they plan to employ more people with disabilities. Half of them reported negative answers (47,72 %). The rest reported their plans for 1 new employee with disabilities (35 %), 48 % for 2-3 new places and others (16 %) for 5 - 12 new places for persons with disabilities. Therefore in the nearest future, there will be no changes in this trend for offering more appropriate work places to people with severe disabilities.

Education level of employees with disabilities is not showing good results (Figure 2). Their education is predominantly based on primary and secondary education in 96 % of all people with disabilities employed in EC. Just 4 % of employed persons with disabilities have higher and post-secondary vocational education.

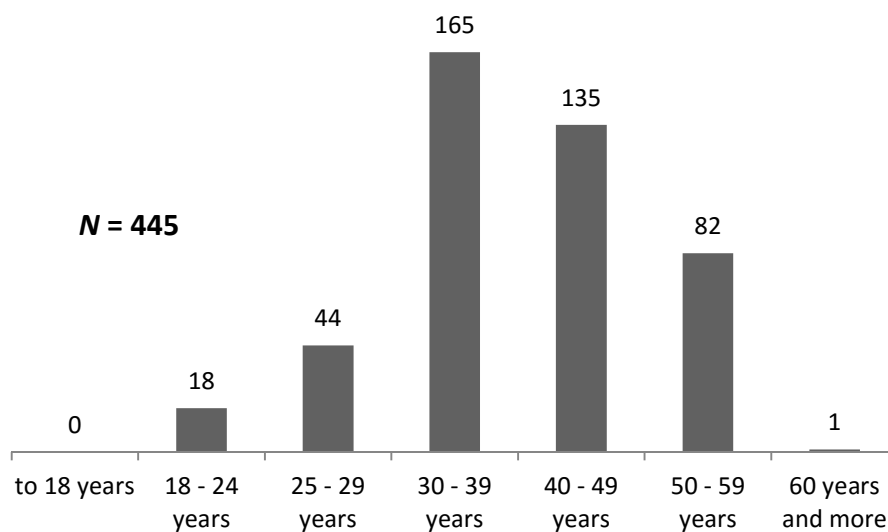
Figure 2: Education levels of employed persons with disabilities in employment centers



Source: Tabaj and others (2016: 19)

Their age shows trend of ageing (Figure 3). The majority of employed persons with disabilities has 30 to 49 years (72 %), 18 % has 50 to 59 years, while younger than 30 years is only 14 % of the population.

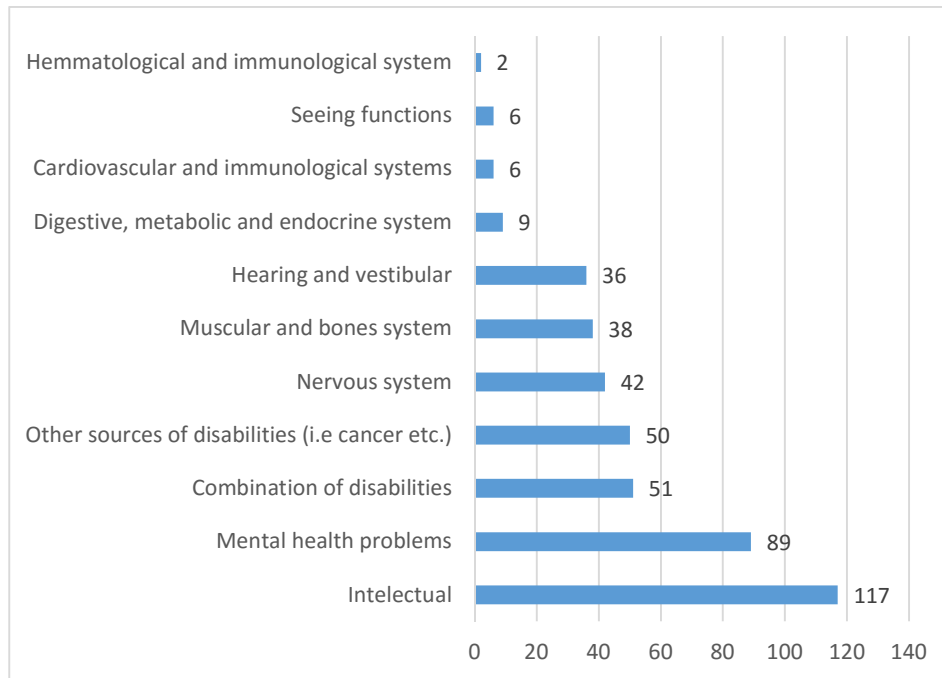
Figure 3: Age structure of employed persons with disabilities in employment centers



Source: Tabaj and others (2016: 21)

For the research on the main health problems due to the disability International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (2001, 29-36) was used as the base. For the population of employees with disabilities, as the main disability were found intellectual disabilities (26,23 %) and mental health problems (19,95 %), representing almost half of the population (46,18 %) of employed persons with disabilities (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Employees with disabilities, by health problems



Source: Tabaj and others (2016: 23)

SWOT analysis and focus groups

In the qualitative analysis of employment centers we joined together two most used methods – focus groups and SWOT analysis, for in-depth analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of present situation of employment centers. We organized two focus groups with professional workers and management of employment centers, heterogeneous regarding their characteristics (no. of employees, region, years of operating, branches, organizational structure). Meetings were recorded and transcribed; at final stage we prepared analysis. In the first meeting in Maribor on 21. April 2016, 9 professional/management workers participated, and on the second meeting in Ljubljana, 25. April 2016, 6 professional/management workers participated.

Strengths:

- With the new law on Employment and Rehabilitation of Persons with Disabilities Act, basis for operating new form of employment for severely disabled persons was set. This was one of the most important opportunities for this population, which has the lowest productivity levels (assessed from 30 – 70 %) for entering the labour market. Quality of life was for that population increased by employment. In the future, it is important that this group stays included on the labour market and that the possibilities will be developed furthermore.
- Employment center gives constant supported work environment and through professional support and counselling work facilitate empowerment of employees with severe disabilities in work, personal and social level as well as in financial matters. Very often, employed persons with disabilities have financial problems. Many of them are facing judicial financial problems, they face existential crisis due to the fact they were long-term unemployed and very poor.
- Inclusion in employment center lowers the level of prejudices and develops attitudes and acceptance of improvement of their own value for persons with disabilities.
- Employment centers offers opportunity for comprehensive treatment – their mission is important – employment for severely disabled people who cannot find place on labour market due to their disability.
- Follow-up support for persons with disabilities is the key factor for success - the successful employment centre is the result of successful connection of all employees.
- One of the key factors for success is also the openness of the organizational forms and programmes, besides the financial support from the state.

Dilemma: big or small employment center?

- Small centers have easier and simple work organization, as well as more individual rehabilitation approach, flow of information is more direct, social attitudes and dynamics are good. On the other side, small employment centers have due to the fact they are small, difficulties regarding financial management (i.e. special regulation of state supports) and development of the organization. Small centers are usually more often stagnating than developing. Small centers have difficulties concerning absentism due to illnesses.
- Bigger employment centers are more stable and less vulnerable at labour market. More business partners are better for planning

constant work-flow. To be dependent on just one business partners is very risky.

- The supported network background (i.e. NGOs, disability organizations, companies for employing persons with disabilities, vocational rehabilitation providers, etc.) are helping employment centers in cases of adaptation to the needs of professional partners and difficulties in production.

Weaknesses

- Legal financial support, defined in the Rules book of employment centers, stimulates small employment centers which are contradictory for the development – employment centers are not in favour for further employment. This stimulation for smaller employment centers could be treated as the benefit trap.
- The second observation was addressing the issue of employment for non-disabled persons in employment centers. Commission regulation (2014, point no. 100) addressed this issue: »...sheltered employment means employment in an undertaking where at least 30 % of workers are workers with disabilities«. While in Slovenian regulation prior to 2017 it was necessary, that employment centers employed only persons with disabilities and professional staff. Concentrating so many persons with disabilities in Slovenian regulation was considered as an obstacle towards more successful employment centers. It is difficult to organize work just with severely disabled persons, with no non-disabled co-workers. Beside this, it is also a form of non-inclusive environment.
- Mission, population employed and resources of employment centers are regulated as social economy, but in administration/practice, they are not eligible for development resources under social economy enterprises.
- Without development resources the future of employment centers is not clear. The opinion was that employment centers will stagnate and shut down without development.
- Technologically, employment centers are not developed. People with disabilities main's work carried out is simple production, their abilities for more complex work are very limited.
- The issue of ageing of population employed in employment centers, specially due to the fact of drop down in work productivity and absence as the consequence of illnesses. Population with mental health problems drop down in productivity levels is connected with medication.

- Employment centers are confronted with expectations that they will work for unreal prices »because they are financed by the state«.
- Dumping prices competition – in cleaning and simple production. Non-loyal competition is present also among employment centers and other programmes (social inclusion programme, sheltered workshops and social enterprises).
- Revisions as financial burdens, especially for small employment centers, yet they prepare financial and content report for Ministry of Labour each year.
- The possibility to return people with disabilities in the social inclusion programme if they are no longer able to be employed in employment centre. Otherwise it will be very likely, that due to the drop down of abilities, employment center could break-down.
- Not enough cooperation with providers of vocational rehabilitation and Employment Service of Slovenia. The barrier is also the lack of trust among them.
- The issue of organization of work/logistics – for example it is hard to find an object for cleaning for 5 workers.
- Long-term development should not be based just on simple works production and cleaning. It is necessary to put resources to the development of work places.

Opportunities

- Sharing of professional workers was proposed as an incentive for more adequate support.
- The development of employment centers was seen as financing the development group like incubators or connection with providers of vocational rehabilitation. Thus far no good practice was recognized.
- Employment centers as legal entities, addressed by the law, have different possibly concerning their own organization and status.
- Programme content could be very broad, but have to be adapted to the population of severely disabled persons.
- The list of regular employers who do not succeed in quota regulation (i.e. legal demands to employ persons with disabilities in regular companies) – opportunity to fulfil quota regulation. Thus far the foundation that takes care of quota regulation did not spread this information of employers, yet this proposal is very old and would be beneficial to the activities of employment centers (as well to the companies for disabled persons).
- More active role of the Association of employment centers and Ministry of Labour with promoting employment centers and cases

of good practice. It would be wise to support development projects in potentially perspective areas.

- To promote businesses of employment centers abroad – with the incentive to jointly work abroad.
- More active role of Ministry of labour when public procurement is addressed. It is possible within legislation to give to employment centers (as well as companies for people with disabilities) direct public order (with special procedure). In practice, this happens very rarely.
- To prepare national strategy for employment centers with set priorities and objectives.
- When person with disability gets the decision for employment center at Employment Service, more attention should be addressed towards precise and adapted explanation to person with disability what this means and what should person with disability do.

Threats

- Employment centers noticed fear and opposition towards »different«, which have also an influence on the work of employment centers.
- In practice, when employment centers gets a big business order, it is impossible to employ more people with disabilities very quickly, the reason lies in the procedures for submitting the approval from the ministry.
- Interpreting subvention for wage for person with disability just for one specific work place means that every new work place will take new assessment, which is by professional/management workers opinion, nonsense.
- Transition from employment center to social inclusion programme should be developed in cases where persons with disabilities are no longer able to work.
- The threat appears that new vulnerable groups with equal rights will come on the labour market, but their abilities will be higher. This will potentially cause the group of severely disabled persons' opportunities at the labour market to be decreasing.
- Professional and management workers have very varied tasks, but there is no education and training for them. Their work is very demanding - working with people but at the same time they have to be also the manager: professional workers should be psychologist, social worker, mentor, development worker and managers in one person. This is a very heavy burden.

- The process of vocational rehabilitation is very rigid and long. It takes sometimes several months to get the decision for employment center.
- Calculations for public procurement: if they are not calculated at least to cover minimum wages, due to the competition, it will mean that the employment center could not survive in business.
- Public works are sometimes not loyal competition for employment centers.
- Technologically, simple works are decreasing with the development, yet for this population is the only option for work.
- Not good cooperation within community – there is almost no interest from local community to support work of employment centers.

Conclusion

After finishing data collection and preparing SWOT analysis with proposals we addressed the research report for Ministry of labour (in October 2016). In the report, proposals were made for the ministry, to furthermore develop employment centers area. We put also special attention to the financial situation of employment centers. In 2013, 10 employment centers (31,25 %), in 2014 8 employment centers (21,05 %) and in 2015 14 employment centers (33,33 %) operated with losses. This demonstrates their difficult situation at the labour market (Tabaj and others 2016: 50). For the employment centers to remain solvent, they should have at least 11 % more resources (ibidem, 51).

Proposal, about regulation in the Rules book that only persons with disabilities should be employed in employment centers, we exposed as not beneficial for employment centers and not in compliance with state-aid regulation. At the end of December 2016, the new rules book for employment centers was put into force, with putting in compliance Slovenian regulation via European Union rules.

Resources

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