

# Theory and Reality on Working Life of People with Disability: The Case in Poland

Dorota Kobus-Ostrowska

**Abstract**—Work for everyone, especially for person with disability is a condition in independence; it secures basic needs and develops manual and intellectual capabilities. The work is a source of income, and it builds and strengthens of self-esteem and competence. The purpose of this article is to identify work as an important factor in everyone's life, despite Polish disabled persons rarely having the chance to undertake a job. In order to achieve this purpose, two methods were used: comparative and qualitative. The theoretical part of this article is based on studies of a wide range of Polish and foreign literature devoted to the issue of the occupational development of people with disabilities. The article was also enriched with the institutional and legal analysis types of support for people with disabilities in Poland. Currently, a Polish person with disability who wants to enter or return to the labor market is under a special protection. Those entities employing workers with disabilities may obtain a subsidy for the salary of a person with disabilities. Unfortunately, people with disability in Poland rarely participate in the workforce. The factors that contribute to this include the difficulty in obtaining work, the uncertainty of keeping it, and the low salary offered. Despite that domestic and foreign literature highlight the important role of disabled people as a workforce, very few people with disability in Poland are economically active.

**Keywords** —Disabled person, work, employer, rehabilitation.

## I. INTRODUCTION

THE purpose of this article is to identify work as an important factor conditioning the development of a disabled person. First of all, it brings independence: provides basic needs and makes it easier to start a family. It is therefore an essential factor in the development of an individual. For people with disabilities, employment is also an opportunity for the implementation of activities in the occupational and social dimension. This stems from the fact that it is through employment that a disabled person can use and develop their manual and intellectual capabilities. The social dimension of work is manifested in the sense of accomplishment and of being needed in the family, and is strengthened by the fact of coming into being in the society. In addition, the work also serves as a form of rehabilitation because it improves those areas of life that have been negatively affected [1]. Finally, taking into account the theoretical perspective on work, it is thanks to work that the person with a disability should have the opportunity to create an environment consistent with their own vision of the world [2]. Unfortunately, in Poland, in 2017, the economically active people with disabilities accounted for only 28.9% and their employment rate is only 26.3% [3]. The disabled in Poland rarely undertake work. And though a

number of factors contribute to this, certainly the professional inactivity of many people is determined by the difficulty in obtaining work, the uncertainty of keeping it, and by the low salaries offered.

Despite the significant positive aspects of work and the fact that it occupies an important place in everyone's life, the attitude to performing work still varies [4]. This fact is determined not only by psychological factors, but also by economic incentives. And thus, an important role in the activation of people with disabilities is played by the motivation of the involved, the expected value of remuneration and support offered to employers of people with disabilities.

## II. METHOD

In order to achieve the purpose mentioned in the article, two methods were used: comparative and qualitative. Data were collected through observation, interview, and literature review. The article was also enriched with an institutional and legal analysis directly related to the subject under consideration.

## III. DISCUSSION

Employment is a purposeful and organized action, during which, certain material and spiritual goods are produced in order to meet human needs. For people with disabilities, work is a particular manifestation of their social integration. Employment can be examined in many aspects [5]:

- Social aspect - resulting in improvement of the quality of human resources, professional work is one of the fundamental activities of human life; it creates favorable conditions for self-realization in this sphere. By contributing work a disabled person acquires a sense of one's dignity, value, and independence;
- Integration aspect - work is an effective way of professional activation, an expression of the strengthening of the policy of equal opportunities for people at risk of social exclusion or marginalization. What is more, the circumstances of professional work are conducive to establishing and developing social relationships outside the family, and it is especially valuable for people with disabilities because it gives them a sense of acceptance and belonging to a group;
- Rehabilitation aspect - work allows a disabled person to improve those functions of the body that have been impaired, which in many cases gives rise to the self-realization of people with disabilities [6];
- Economic aspect - means that the disabled are getting full, or at least increased independence thanks to the salaries they earn. Consequently, it is an important relief for social

Dorota Kobus-Ostrowska (Ph. D) is with the University of Lodz, Poland (e-mail: ostrowskad@uni.lodz.pl).

security systems and social care programs, and expenses incurred by people with disabilities who work, are often higher than those incurred solely from social benefits, and feed the state budget with indirect taxes.

Therefore, a person with a disability undertaking employment benefits from the psychological and social dimensions of working. The psychological benefits result from the fact that the disabled people can use and develop their abilities through work, while the latter manifests itself in a sense of fulfillment of being needed in the family and noticed by society [7]. Moreover, work turns out to be a value in itself: it is a desirable good and a source of all values. Work is one of the most important aspects of life among the Poles, only the family is more valuable than work. Such a high place of work in the hierarchy of values is probably due to the fact that work is a source of satisfying many essential needs. Work is a source of income, it improves the sense of usefulness and belonging, builds and strengthens the sense of self-esteem and competence, as well as allows the disabled to be self-reliant and independent [8].

It is thanks to the performed work that people with disability have a sense of community, which significantly prevents their isolation during their employment and beyond [9].

It is worth noting that the right to work is a constitutional law of every man. The provisions on the right of persons with disabilities to work are present in all documents of Polish and international law. The idea of engaging people with disabilities to be active in many areas of life is found in a number of documents of international nature, inter alia, in the Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities [10], in the assumptions of the International Day of Disabled Persons 2003 – “Nothing about disabled people without disabled people”, as well as in national documents, such as the Charter of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities passed by the Polish Parliament. The latter document includes, among others, a Catalogue of 10 rights indicating the most important areas where intensive measures are required [10].

People with disabilities have the right to work in the open labor market in accordance with their qualifications, education, and opportunities. So much for the law, but what is the reality? Without a doubt, before a person with a disability starts to work, a series of actions must be taken so that a disabled person can adapt to the surrounding reality. These actions should include [11]:

- The adequate process of education and training, taking into account not only the type and degree of disability, but also a thorough analysis of the potential labor market and real employment opportunities with the use of acquired skills;
- Development of a specific method of job placement for disabled job-seekers;
- Coordination of activities undertaken by a person with a disability in the search for jobs.

Finally, to maintain employment, it is necessary to supervise in each case the organization of the workplace for

the disabled and to maintain a positive relationship between the disabled person and the employer.

Currently, persons with disabilities who wish to return to the labor market or to enter it for the first time are subject to special protection in many countries, as well in Poland. Significant regulations in this area are included in the Act on Vocational and Social Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities of 27 August, 1997 [11]. The current regulations enable persons with disability to obtain financial assistance for starting and running a business, or give them the chance to benefit from support under the active labor market measures (pursuant to article 11 of the Rehabilitation Act). In the first case, a disabled person may obtain [12]:

- funds for starting a business;
- cash contribution required to set up a social cooperative;
- the subsidy on interest on loans taken out for running a business;
- reimbursement of social security contributions;
- support as an unemployed or job-seeker under the available labor market measures [13].

In Poland, the organization employing workers with disabilities may obtain:

- subsidy for the salaries of persons with disabilities [11];
- reimbursement of expenses for the adaptation of existing work places for persons with disabilities [11];
- reimbursement of expenses incurred by the employer on equipment for a workplace [11];
- reimbursement of expenses of training employees with disabilities [11];
- reimbursement of the costs of employing a worker helping a disabled worker at work [11].

In addition, employers can create supported employment enterprises, and in consultation with non-governmental organization, also vocational rehabilitation facilities.

Unfortunately, despite a number of available forms of support in Poland, for many, work is difficult to obtain. During the crisis, employment opportunities for people with disabilities are even more limited. In addition, regardless of the level of unemployment, this state of affairs is also affected by the belief prevailing in the society that disabled persons can only work in institutions such as the Supported Employment Enterprise, regardless of their personal potential or professional qualifications. Thus, in advance, we can say that in Poland, the disabled are doomed to unemployment or professional inactivity, regardless of the position on which the qualifications of a candidate could be successfully used and their professional potential developed. The situation with regard to employment of persons with disabilities could look very different; this is evidenced by countries with a high efficiency of the implemented social policy, i.e. Denmark or Sweden. These countries have developed a complete social acceptance for people with disabilities and actively involve them into professional life.

Also important is the issue of awareness of the competency of disabled people in all - including professional - spheres of life [14]. Today's, society is becoming increasingly convinced that people with disabilities perform well in the arts, and can

achieve success in the field of sports often surpassing the results gained by non-disabled people [15]. Professional orientation or professional counseling understood as a stimulus to action, and goes beyond focusing on support for solving current problems. This is a developmental orientation, focused on the future, which, through the group and individual methods, facilitates making career choices and achieving professional maturity. It is based on stimulation of development through a variety of methods of professional activation in contrast to the intervention methods that focus on adjusting or making up the shortcomings when forced to act by the crisis [16]. Emphasizing the essential role of professional activation for the stimulation of professional development of disabled people, Kowalik indicates that "high motivation to work, a realistic assessment of their own ability to work and positive self-assessment are the most important factors that ensure the success of vocational rehabilitation" [17]. While physical or mental dysfunctions can impair the professional functioning, the lack of suitable qualifications and the educational aspirations often underestimated by the family reduce, more so, the chances of a disabled person of finding satisfactory work. It appears also that in the process of recruitment, while assessing the candidate's suitability to work, a large role is played by social competence [18]. This is, however, acquired when working surrounded by other people.

The salary should be a tangible expression of the work of every man, including the disabled. And although often (which is inherent in our nature) employees would like to get much more than they have, in the case of people with disabilities the value of their remuneration is abnormally low in Poland. This is confirmed by numerous studies conducted among the disabled [19]. And yet, increasingly, the work performed by people with disabilities does not involve only simple tasks. Typically, people with disabilities work full-time, performing, in many cases, the same tasks as people without disabilities. Unfortunately, the amount of remuneration offered often equals only the fixed minimum wage. It is difficult to understand the fact that a disabled person who performs a complex, often a responsible role, receives the lowest remuneration. It is worth noting that the work performed by them and the revenue generated from it are a source of revenue for the state budget. What is more, households of people with disabilities spend almost entirely (every month) their earned income [20]. Consequently, they pay not only direct, but indirect taxes too. Therefore, the economic aspect of the work done by people with disabilities involves not only the possibility of achieving income, but also the fact that these people have equal status with other tax payers. Thus, if their work contributes also to a higher gross domestic product, all necessary effective measures should be used to activate people with disabilities, which would be also important from the viewpoint of their rehabilitation.

Work is also a key form of rehabilitation for people with disabilities. This is the work that accelerates the process of professional development and makes the disabled persons responsible for their decisions and actions. However, so that any measures bring about tangible benefits, the following

actions are necessary:

- early assessment of deficits;
- early and comprehensive rehabilitation, including professional rehabilitation;
- willingness on the part of persons with disabilities to cooperate with an advisor or professional guardian;
- support from the closest friends and family;
- social acceptance of people with disabilities participating in professional life;
- availability of active labor market measures at all ages and for all, irrespective of the type and degree of disability;
- positive attitudes of employers towards the employment of people with disabilities;
- involvement of business organizations in the professional activation of the disabled and the consistent implementation of the concept of corporate social responsibility;
- building awareness of the competence of disabled people in all spheres of life - including the professional sphere.

First of all, it is necessary to underscore that two elements are crucial for the implementation of the activation rules: when a rehabilitation procedure is started and how a disabled person is prepared for the job. Obviously, the sooner a disabled person starts the job, the more effective this process is. Thus it may be done even shortly after the rehabilitation procedure is completed [21]. Thus, in countries such as Sweden or Denmark, the rehabilitation process is organized in such a way that rehabilitation counselors or professional counselors take care of a disabled person, preparing them to undertake employment immediately after their program is complete. The support of the closest friends and family throughout the period of rehabilitation is also favorable. This is confirmed by the fact that a positive attitude towards the future that accompanies a disabled person on the successful completion of treatment, as well the strong family involvement at this stage of rehabilitation makes it possible to restore activity and prevent the feeling of loneliness or sense of discouragement to others [22]. The professional approach of counselors is also important. They pay special attention to occupational preferences and willingness to cooperate. As pointed out by Majewski, "preparing for employment should be a process of close cooperation between counselors and job seekers, based on trust and competence of the specialist" [23]. The task of the counselors is to encourage the persons they are working with to become aware of their possibilities in the context of work, and to develop jointly the professional target and the measures to achieve it. This formula of cooperation between the counselor and the client requires from a specialist not only knowledge of the labor market, but also appropriate social skills.

It is also necessary to have access to a wide range of active labor market measures, ranging from training through intervention or public works, to the possibility to raise funds to start economic activity. Support at this stage is particularly valuable for people with disabilities, regardless of whether they acquired disability or were born with it.

Especially valuable are examples of involvement of business organizations in the issues of activation of people with disabilities. Equally valuable is the positive attitude of employers towards the employment of people with disabilities [24]. One of the ways of involving businesses in this activity is to use the concept of corporate social responsibility [25]. In addition, while promoting employment of the disabled, local governments may also conduct training and publishing activities, organize conferences, seminars, and information campaigns, during which they promote knowledge of the principles of employment of people with disabilities [26].

#### IV. CONCLUSION

In a large number of countries, professional activity of the disabled persons is recognized as significant since it brings economic benefits to all citizens. Moreover, this is critical in the life of every disabled person, as it prevents social exclusion, isolation and social marginalization. Professional activity encourages action and motivates persons with disabilities to take and keep a job. Moreover, professional activity brings self-reliance and independence. Finally, it also brings tangible benefits for the economy in the form of higher government revenue from taxes and lower spending on social benefits. The individuals deprived of the possibility to work, with a sense of undervaluation and impairment in social terms, are the counterbalance to people who are working. Often these are people who are afraid to take any job, and therefore remain professionally inactive. It is therefore necessary to prevent a disabled person from being pushed to "the margins of the world of work". Employment seems to be particularly important for them because in many cases, it promotes normalization of their lives. However, first we should give attention to the problem of the amount of remuneration offered to people with disabilities. If entrepreneurs continue to offer minimum salaries to people with disabilities, then each time they will only pretend to employ them, leaving the disabled on "the margins of the labor world".

#### REFERENCES

- [1] A. Lawson, *Disability and Employment in the European Union. Collective Strategies and Tools*, in: J. Heymann, M. Ashley Stein, G. Moreno, *Disability and equity at work*, Oxford University Press, New York 2014, pp. 391-419.
- [2] M. Piasecki, J. Śliwak, *Wybrane zagadnienia z aktywizacji zawodowej osób niepełnosprawnych*, Fundacja Fuga Mundi, Norbertinum Wydawnictwo - Drukarnia - Księgarnia, Lublin 2008, p. 10 et seq.
- [3] [www.niepelnospawni.gov.pl/niepelnospawnosci-w-liczbach/bael/](http://www.niepelnospawni.gov.pl/niepelnospawnosci-w-liczbach/bael/) (accessed on 16.06.2018).
- [4] W. Kozek, *Praca w warunkach zmian rynkowych: wybrane zagadnienia*, Warsaw 1994, First Business College, p. 22.
- [5] K. Szawłowski (ed.), *Rehabilitacja, podstawy diagnostyki funkcjonalnej, usprawniania leczniczego i reintegracji społecznej*, Gdańsk 1998, Medical Academy.
- [6] I. D. Karwat, P. Kalinowski, *Kierunki realizacji rehabilitacji zawodowej z uwzględnieniem rodzajów niepełnosprawności*, (in:) L. Solecki (ed.), *Problemy ludzi starszych i niepełnosprawnych w rolnictwie*, Lublin 2004, Instytut Medycyny Wsi, pp. 254-258.
- [7] S. Waszczak, *Psychospołeczne bariery w rehabilitacji zawodowej osób niepełnosprawnych*, (in:) *Aktywizacja Zawodowa Osób Niepełnosprawnych*, Krajowa Izba Gospodarczo-Rehabilitacyjna, Warsaw 1-2/ 2006, pp. 289-302.
- [8] S. L. Saunders, B. Nedelec, *What Work Means to People with Work Disability: A Scoping Review*, Journal of Occupational Rehabilitation 2014, Volume 24, Issue 1, pp 100-110.
- [9] M.A. Paszkowicz, *Wybrane aspekty funkcjonowania osób z niepełnosprawnościami*, Uniwersytet Zielonogórski, Zielona Góra 2009, pp.65-67.
- [10] L. Adams, K. Oldfield, *Opening up work: The views of disabled people and people with long-term health conditions*, IFF Research Ltd, Equality and Human Rights Commission, Manchester 2011, pp. 28-30.
- [11] The act of August 27, 1997, on Vocational and Social Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities (Journal of Laws of 2011, 127, item 721, as amended).
- [12] The Law on Employment Promotion and Labour Market Measures of 20 April 2004 (Journal of Laws 2008, No. 69, item. 415, as amended).
- [13] Ossowski R., *Jakość życia – efektywne pełnienie ról rodzinnych zawodowych jako wyznacznik udanej rehabilitacji*. (in:) Kościeliska M., Aouile B. (ed). *Człowiek niepełnosprawny, rodzina i praca*. Bydgoszcz 2006: Akademia Bydgoska im. Kazimierza Wielkiego.
- [14] Przybyłka A., *Wybrane aspekty pracy osób niepełnosprawnych na otwartym rynku pracy*. "Aktywizacja zawodowa osób niepełnosprawnych" 1-2(5-6). Warsaw 2006: Krajowa Izba Gospodarczo-Rehabilitacyjna.
- [15] Herr E., Crammer S., *Planowanie kariery zawodowej*. "Zeszyty informacyjno-metodyczne doradcy zawodowego" nr 15. Warsaw 2001: KUP.
- [16] Kowalik S., *Problemy osób niepełnosprawnych w rehabilitacji środowiskowej*. (in:) Psychologia Rehabilitacji. Warsaw 2007: Wydawnictwo Akademickie i Profesjonalne, p. 238.
- [17] Johanna Mithen, Zoe Aitken, Anna Ziersch, Anne M. Kavanagh, *Inequalities in social capital and health between people with and without disabilities*, Social Science & Medicine, Volume 126, 2015, pp 26-35.
- [18] *Aktywność zawodowa osób niepełnosprawnych w województwie łódzkim. Raport końcowy*, Regionalne Obserwatorium Rynku Pracy, Łódź 2011, p. 86 et seq. [www.obserwatorium.wup.lodz.pl/images/stories/Raporty/raportniepelno-sprwup1.pdf](http://www.obserwatorium.wup.lodz.pl/images/stories/Raporty/raportniepelno-sprwup1.pdf) (accessed on 20.05.2017).
- [19] Boshen K., *Early intervention in vocational rehabilitation*. "Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin" 35/1992, pp. 72-83.
- [20] Davis D., *Bridging the claims dollar gap through rehabilitation*. "Risk Management" 2/1983, pp. 34-42.
- [21] Majewski T., *Rehabilitacja zawodowa osób niepełnosprawnych*, Warsaw 1995, CNR- RON, p. 22.
- [22] I. D. Karwat, P. Kalinowski, *Kierunki realizacji rehabilitacji zawodowej z uwzględnieniem rodzajów niepełnosprawności*, (in:) L. Solecki (ed.), *Problemy ludzi starszych i niepełnosprawnych w rolnictwie*. Lublin 2004, Instytut Medycyny Wsi, pp. 256-257.
- [23] D. Karwat, *Niepełnosprawność osób niepełnosprawnych jako problem społeczny i medyczny w Polsce*, Lublin 2002, LIBER, pp. 70-78.
- [24] J. Hashim, S. Wok, *Predictors to employees with disabilities' organisational behaviour and involvement in employment*, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal, vol. 33/ 2014, pp. 193-209.
- [25] Rybak M., *Zarządzanie zasobami ludzkimi w firmie. Strategie – procesy – metody*, Warsaw 2008, SGH.
- [26] Sobczak W., *Rola społecznej odpowiedzialności biznesu w aktywizacji zawodowej osób niepełnosprawnych*. "Aktywizacja zawodowa osób niepełnosprawnych" 1-2(5-6)/2006. Warsaw: Krajowa Izba Gospodarczo-Rehabilitacyjna.