Disability as a risk factor on the access to labor market

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Abstract. The study is focused on studying the issue of people with disabilities and their access on the labor market. The research attempts to highlight the experiences of people with disabilities regarding employment, coping with discrimination and how the Romanian labor market is ready to receive these people.
For conducting the research we used the questionnaire and focus group methods. We interviewed a total of 60 people with disabilities of various types (sensorial, mental, and physical) and 60 employers from different sectors of the economy.
Results showed that despite the many social policies launched in the last years, the percentage of people with disabilities on the labor market in Romania is still very small. There are many reasons both from employers and people with disabilities. There are also still huge degrees of discrimination and indifference.

Keywords: disability, employment, labor market, social policies

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1. Introduction

Social integration of disabled persons still remains one of the greatest challenges that Romania is confronting at present, while the policy promoted in this field is expected to regard both the disabled persons’ rights and the assurance of a certain life quality degree.

The social protection measures are meant to compensate the physical, sensory or mental deficit, in order to achieve equal chances for every individual. Lacking such measures, the deficient persons’ situation would generate some major social gaps and a visibly decreasing degree in terms of social cohesion, social integration, as well as related to their physical and economic independence.

On 20th of June 2012, the overall number of registered disabled persons was declared – 686,551 persons of which only 27,109 employed. Of the total recorded, 669,334 disabled persons (97,49%) are in family’s care (non-institutionalized) and/or live independently, while 17,217 individuals (2,51%) are institutionalized in public residential units of social assistance for adults with disability, under the coordination of the Ministry of Labor, Family and Social Protection – General Directorate Protection of Persons with Handicap (ANPH).
However, though during the late years a relatively increasing rate of employed people with disability in Romania, the statistics provided by ANPH show that the active people with disabilities employed are represented at a very small scale.

2. Purpose of the study

The present study is meant to identify the main obstacles preventing the people with disabilities in finding a job, by tracking the impediments of professional integration as well as revealing the drawbacks opposed by employers.

3. Methods

This study analyzes the disabled persons’ opinions on finding a job and employment, as well as the employers’ attitude and regards toward the applicants with disability, subsequently following the identification of elements that can influence the employment of a disabled person.

The targets of the further research were oriented to:

- Identification of the factors explaining the small number of persons with disabilities integrated on the free labor market;
- Identification of the barriers confronted by disabled people while trying to get employed;
- Outlining the general opinion of disabled persons in terms of factors and conditions that may lead to increase the amount of employed people with disabilities

In pursuit of achieving this study we had in view the following hypotheses:

- We presume that employers’ attitude and regard towards people with disabilities are generally positive, but they are not especially inclined to actively involve in the social and professional integration process because they lack some successful models mostly offered by the public employers;
- We presume that the decision of employing a person with disabilities depends at great extent on the type and handicap degree;
- We presume that employers’ decision to employ a disabled person relies mostly on the indirect financial costs and on the other employees’/collaborators’ opinions;
- We presume that interaction or knowledge of disabled people’s challenges influence the employers’ decision to recruit such an applicant.

The study lot consisted of 60 subjects, 39 with locomotor disability, 12 with visual impairment and 9 with hearing impairment.

We processed interviews for each subcategory of disabled persons. Gender distribution is heterogeneous – the present study was attended by 36 male subjects and 24 female subjects. All interviewed persons were looking for a job opportunity. The choice of subjects considered their educational level (graduates of faculty or vocational school prevailed), handicap type and handicap severity.

The scarce amount of subjects interviewed is due to a serial of difficulties encountered during the identification and contact establishment of the people affected by various deficiencies still searching a job. Considering the low rate of disabled persons active on the free labor market, in order to interview a consistent number of subjects looking for a job, we would have been meaningfully helped by some support from authorized institutions, not only from the special NGOs contacted.
The questionnaires were distributed both physically and electronically to the employers. Out of 123 questionnaires, 60 were selected because they coped certain criteria: they were completely filled in, they contained answer argumentations, the companies were located in Bucharest, the activity field of the companies allowed employing persons with visual impairment, hearing impairment or locomotor disability. The employers who filled in the questionnaires are managers, Human Resources experts or appointed as decision-makers in labor recruiting.

All employers are active in the private sector and only 22 are under legal liability of either recruiting disabled persons (according to the present legislation, these employers must have more than 50 employees). We were not enabled to include in our study also employers from the public labor field that are under the legal liability of employing more than 4% disabled persons, because of various reasons (human resources employees invoked lack of time or even lack of information on this matter).

Research methodology for this study comprises two parts – the qualitative personnel requirement analysis applied to the persons with disability and quantitative personnel requirements analysis applied to the employers.

During the process of identifying the obstacles preventing labor integration of the disabled people, we used two questionnaires and we organized a focus group attended by impaired subjects willing to find a job. Unfortunately, we were not able to achieve a focus group of the employers, because of the lack of time or unavailability invoked by the latter ones.

A 13 questions-questionnaire was filled in by disabled persons looking for a job, while an 8 questions-questionnaire was filled in by the employers or their representatives. The questionnaires were filled in both physically (on paper) and electronically. The questionnaires meant for the persons with disabilities were purposely sent to the associations oriented to promoting the disabled persons’ rights (Associations of Visually Impaired Persons-Bucharest branch, Associations of Hearing Impaired Persons-Bucharest branch, “Queen Elisabeth” Educational Centre, Associations of Physically Disabled Persons). The employers filled in the questionnaires mostly online, while identification of the companies in search of employees at the research time was accomplished with data from specialized sites.

The questionnaires for the two groups of subjects were anonymous and consisted in open questions, in order to detect the strongest opinions of those involved. The questionnaires were distributed between 5th of November 2012 and 20th of November 2012.

Focus groups organized with disabled persons focused on items as the following:
- employment discrimination;
- difficulties encountered while searching and finding a job;
- knowledge of legislation and institutions undertaking projects that aim social and professional integration of the disabled persons (ANOFM, ANPH, etc.);
- active measures of encouraging employment of people with disabilities;
- educational system and qualifications offered by the Ministry of Education to the graduates affected by various types of deficiencies.

The focus groups were organized between 21st of November 2012 and 28th of November 2012.

4. Findings

The experience of persons with disabilities related to employment on the free labor market reduces to the periods either when they have to file their unemployment records and ANOFM finds some jobs for them (generally they are offered with positions for people without disabilities, because there are no special
jobs for impaired persons on the labor market) or when they are compulsorily required to attend some professional training classes, more or less accessible to them.

74% of the persons with disabilities inquired have no knowledge of their personal abilities, therefore they cannot precisely know they are eligible to apply, neither regarding the field nor the job.

As for the recruiting process, most of the inquired persons stated that the employers reject them after they find out about their disability.

Another matter debated by the disabled persons is the lack of information about prospective employment – there are few jobs offered to impaired persons and the information updated by vacant jobs lists is poorly disseminated.

Most of the interviewed subjects stated that, in the past, they found a job due to their friends or acquaintances, while the help they could get from state bodies of specialized NGOs was definitely scarce.

A significant part of the subjects declare that they had to accept a work environment that proved extremely challenging for them (consistent overtime – significantly more than their medical state allows them -, intense physical work, although they are recommended to avoid physical effort, unskilled work, because they could not find anything else adequate either to their qualification or to their desire to professionally reconvert).

The interviewed subjects with disabilities identified several categories of impediments: cultural challenges like educational lapse (low educational level or difficulty in using an international language) or even using the Romanian language (communication means limited by certain intellect or hearing impairments), environment challenges – lack of an adapted transportation vehicle or economic challenges – money scarcity and financial restraints (most of them stated that their salary generally amounts to the minimum legal wage and it covers only the utilities and daily expenses).

Regarding the legislation for people with special needs, 57% of the subjects declared that they are not accurately informed about the national and international laws providing their rights, while most of the respondents know the institutions they need to address for finding a job.

The study subjects’ opinions on the active measures meant to stimulate the employment of people with disabilities concentrated on (1) the keen necessity of more extensive facilities granted by the state to the potential employers, so that they may become more interested in creating jobs for persons with special needs, (2) more efficient ways of informing the public audience about the importance of employing a disabled person (thus there occurs the possible transition from assisted person status to payer of taxes and duties) and (3) facilitating the proper active environment, so that reaching the job place in due time should not become a challenge.

The interviewed persons with special needs consider that Romanian educational system does not offer qualifications according to the job market requirements and the courses organized by ANOFM (National Employment Agency) for qualifying workers are neither adequate for the abilities they are endowed with. This is the reason why most of them either could find jobs in entirely different fields than those they had been trained for or they had to accept jobs as unskilled workers.

Employers’ general opinion about recruiting disabled people complies with their previous experience. Although they did not know the matters related to persons with disabilities (some of them had disability cases in their family or knew the problems confronted by disabled acquaintances), most of the employers that answered the questionnaire stated that they would prefer the state or NGOs to assist these impaired persons by creating some special jobs.
Interacting with disabled people also influence the employers’ opinions in terms of the reasons why so few persons with disabilities actively work. Those not knowing personally people with special needs think that the environment access challenges fully substantiate the high rate of unemployment within this social category.

22% of the interviewed employers stated that they had or had had disabled employees. Most of them declared they had only one employee with disabilities or at most three. No employer declared more than three employees with special needs.

All responsive employers revealed the fact that they had never been contacted by any state institution with regard to recruit people with disabilities, while 24% of them recognized they did not know about the fiscal relief they could benefit from in case they employed a disabled person.

The employers also identified the high costs of employment for people with special needs as one of the obstacles preventing the latter ones’ integration within the free labor market. The employers sustain that companies are tax exempted only for duties, while the investment requested by the employment process is completely at the employers’ expenses and not charged to state. The employers’ discontent related to the disabled workers was pointing the low productivity, the more frequent medical care needed (more sick leaves), the limited work experience as well as the fact that the fiscal facilities offered by the state are hard to be accessed, while the labor investment is difficult to recover.

Extensive support in accessing the jobs and offering more profitable fiscal relief are the main levers to motivate employers toward recruitment of people with special needs.

“Would you rather prefer persons with a certain disability type when you have to proceed to recruitment?” At this question most of the employers answered that they prefer persons with locomotor deficiency, while as the lowest chance of being chosen they mentioned those affected by intellect deficiency.

As a conclusion: the employers avoid to recruit persons with disabilities and only a small percentage of the inquired ones recruited disabled workers, while regarding the way they mean to integrate people with special needs within the work environment, most of them declared they prefer to pay taxes, charity contributions or purchase products and services from protected companies instead of hiring from this category.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

A very restrictive number of employers may be open to offer jobs to persons with disabilities, while an even smaller amount agrees to pay the special needs workers as to their performance. Few employers are available to recruit disabled people, in spite of the fact that they consider the latter “normal individuals”.

By this investigative study, we paid keen attention to the Romanian legislation regarding the protection and work recruitment of persons with disabilities. On analyzing all legislative documents issued in Romania in compliance with disabled persons’ protection as well as studying the official provisions related to their integration within the labor market, we further concluded:

- Romanian laws are mainly oriented not toward stimulating the integration of persons with disabilities within the labor market, but toward preventing their discrimination by means of increasing the taxes or fiscal contributions taken from the employers who refuse to recruit disabled workers;
Romanian legislation generally stipulates more interdictions and less sanctions for the cases when official provisions are infringed, therefore we can plainly state that a consistent part of the legislative clauses are meant to become mere recommendations. A law that provides the frame for a serial of liabilities, while it does not issue the adequate sanctions, is not practically applicable, thus it reaches the status of recommendation, which is prone not to be observed even by state institutions that are supposed to be the most open to disable persons recruitment.

There is an urgent need for generating some legal stipulations meant to stimulate the employers to create jobs for people with special needs as well as for compensating the lack of stimulents that could help employers enhancing the access to work location (access platforms for the locomotor disabled persons, computers adapted for visually impaired workers, etc.). At present, the state grants just some financial incentives as tax exemptions for disabled persons’ assistance.

Romanian legislation is overdue regarding the promotion and implementation of effective social policy in order to achieve the professional and social integration of persons with disabilities. Therefore, by the obsolete measures comprised, Romanian legislation pertaining to this field is rather a frame of passive social assistance (accomplished by means of subsidies and allowances) than an active one that should create the necessary premises for work integration of the disabled persons as well as for facilitation of their full access to the free labor market.

6. References

