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ISIS - A project for people with special needs focussing on the qualification and vocational integration of blind and visually impaired women

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Through fundamentally new sociological approaches to disability as a social phenomenon, the consensus regarding the way of dealing with people with disabilities has begun to change within the last few years. Inclusion became a key word in this consensus. Disability is acknowledged as a phenomenon that is a consequence of and structured by society and needs to be integrated. The maturity of a modern and open society is now - also as a consequence of this development - more and more seen in providing the possibility of emancipation, self-fulfilment and equality of all its members, including people with special needs.

Despite this positive development, visually impaired people are still often excluded from participating in the living environment and, particularly, in the working environment. The reason is not a lack of possibilities for a positive contribution towards society, but a prevalent and prejudiced way of thinking, feeling and acting within society.

Nevertheless, it now seems very promising to make use of the chances new information technologies provide to overcome these inclusion barriers. That way, the range of traditional professions - from masseur to switchboard operator - can be expanded towards new professions, and prejudices regarding the abilities of people with special needs can be overcome. The ISIS project (Information - Service - Integration - Training) at bfi Steiermark demonstrates that blind and visually impaired people are able to do highly-qualified jobs.

Within the last years, bfi Steiermark has established considerable, top-of-Europe know-how in the field of qualification for blind and highly visually impaired people. Altogether, 390 mobility projects for more than 7,500 apprentices, pupils, young workers, students and trainers have been supported throughout Austria so far. The Leonardo da Vinci programme supports transnational vocational education and training. bfi Steiermark has taken part in that programme from the very beginning and, for instance with the BiQ (horizon) project, supported the integration of unemployed visually impaired and blind people into the labour market.

The development and adjustment of the European Computer Driving Licence to the needs of blind and visually impaired people on a standardised European level and the preparation of websites for blind people are only some results based on European projects that had bfi Steiermark as a partner.

Based on the results of transnational projects and on behalf of the Federal Office For Social Services in the Province of Styria and bfi Steiermark, the national ISIS platform was planned and implemented some years ago. ISIS is positioned within an approach of job creation programme and equality for blind and visually impaired people; it sets measures to secure existing and create new jobs and to facilitate access to information and communication technologies.

Regional, national and international networks have developed through a cooperation with target group-specific projects in vocational preparation and vocational training. We integrate pilot projects into these networks, and the regional and international members of the target group profit from it in the form of increased chances for educational and vocational integration. Vice versa, these very varied experiences are also utilised in the product development of the ISIS platform.

Regional networking with different target group-specific institutions and services is very important. Our European partner organisations can now be found in almost all EU member states; they mainly operate as target group representatives, as adult education institutions and in the vocational rehabilitation of visually impaired and blind people.

The results from LILEBP (Lifelong Learning for Blind People), a project funded under the EU Socrates programme, and, therefore, the experiences on a European level was the basis for a regional introduction of aptitude testing and educational counselling in the Province of Styria. Via this organisation-independent aptitude testing and educational counselling facility for blind and visually impaired people the target group received, for the first time in Austria, vocational qualification and vocational training measures. In addition to a bigger offer with regard to qualification, these measures also brought individuality and increased chances to get a job.

Until that point, job-related ability and aptness of blind and heavily visually impaired people could not be defined via standardised aptitude testing procedures. With the aptitude testing, which is adjusted to the target groups' special needs and integrated into a holistic educational counselling model, the clearing results in the Province of Styria improved by yet another feature.

This offer is accessible for the entire target group as an essential clearing tool within a network of employers, job coaches, headhunters, counselling organisations, work assistance, and vocational qualification organisations.

To secure a lasting sustainability of the services, aptitude testing, crisis intervention and educational counselling were - under the name of "Competence Magnifier" - integrated into the services of the Styrian Association of the Blind and Visually Impaired People. Of course, this project is managed by a highly qualified and heavily visually impaired psychologist.

The individual requirements of visually impaired people with regard to suitable working aides need extensive know-how and a counselling model that is adjusted to the individual life and work situations. Depending on age, psychosocial environment, kind of visual illness, and requirements in every-day life and profession, this holistic treatment focuses on our customers' needs.

Before the Technical Assistance for blind and visually impaired people had been established as part of the ISIS project, visually impaired people were dependent on the counselling competences of the suppliers of working aides in Vienna. Of course, this often also involved being dependent on certain products and services. Therefore, it was

hardly possible to use different hard- and software products to optimise the equipment with working aides.

The services of the Technical Assistance for visually impaired and blind people has become a big success in the Province of Styria and an indispensable tool for the inclusion of visually impaired and blind people.

The Technical Assistance supports enterprises that want to establish jobs for a visually impaired or blind employee and need to set adaptive measures. It compares costs and benefits of offers and adapts them to the needs of the future employee; of course, the focus lies on a brand-independent acquisition of working aides and on an ideal integration of the working aides into the structure of the enterprise. To bridge the time until the necessary technical resources are funded by the respective funding bodies and to enable an immediate start of the vocational training or employment, our project - via this service - provides free impairment-specific hard and software.

During the entire training and employment period, our expert provides free technical support and counselling to permanently guarantee ideal working conditions and to secure upgrades to the respective in-house requirements.

This service can also be consumed by people with sensory disabilities as part of their social rehabilitation.

To reach a highest-possible degree of equality in everyday life it is essential not to narrow down the individual demands of blind and visually impaired people due to a cut-back of subsidies.

Our experience teaches us that this holistic approach and support can also bring a reduction of costs in subsidies since parallels in the acquisition of working aides, which happen due to missing preliminary analysis, can be avoided.

Growing up in different social environments (including their infrastructural conditions), the educational background and the respective degree of development-supporting measures that have already been consumed require a holistic view of the customers and an adequate development of services. To increase the efficiency regarding the creation of jobs for visually impaired and blind people we were the first institution in Austria to develop a seminar concept that is in accordance with the requirements of both the economy and the unemployed visually impaired people in an individual and forward-looking way.

Due to technical developments and changes regarding the job profile, the traditional jobs for blind and visually impaired people have been subject to far-reaching changes. It is hardly possible anymore for visually impaired or blind switchboard operators to get a job in a call centre since the requirements have increased considerably. Even in the so-called protected working areas in the public services it is hardly possible anymore to employ visually impaired and blind people as switchboard operators.

However, the quick technological development and, consequently, the development of the working aid technologies are also the basis for our target group to conquer new professions.

bfi Steiermark was the first organisation to offer a comprehensive and modular-type training programme for this profession. That way, the traditional profession of a switchboard operator received a modern standard. The use of EDP tools on an ECDL level makes sure the students can also deal with the front and back office work in this profession.

The tasks and working areas of call centre agents are manifold. They range from inbound calls (e.g. information services, order services, hotlines, and service numbers) to outbound calls in sales, appointment management and address management. Call centre agents deal with all these tasks - mostly without any formal qualifications. So far, there has not been a standardised training in terms of formal school-like courses or an apprenticeship. Usually, the qualifications are taught in education and training courses by adult education institutions or, directly, in in-house trainings in call centres.

In order to fulfil the job profile in a competent way the following personal requirements are necessary: sociability, personal charisma, clear pronunciation, endurance and (stress) resistance, ability to work in a team, time-related flexibility.

These required competences open new vocational perspectives for visually impaired and blind people. Usually, increased auditory sensitivity and, often, more tactfulness in personal conversations are their particular strengths, and vocational inclusion and a possible autonomy as “fully-fledged” employees are sustainably supported.

The use of and the professional work with working aides (e. g. magnifying software, voice output or reading device) as well as the EDP competences, which can be acquired, soon remove supposed barriers within the work organisation.

On behalf of the Federal Office For Social Services in the Province of Styria, bfi Steiermark submitted a forward-looking project for blind and visually impaired people. This project is a call centre - the TeleTrading House - with the special target to employ handicapped transit workers - primarily blind and visually impaired women - as call centre agents, thus preparing them for their integration into the first labour market. This sub-project was developed together with Danish and Swiss telesales enterprises with a focus on the employment of highly-qualified members of the target group.

This innovation regarding the vocational inclusion of people with special needs is the only employment model of its kind in Austria. The high rate of women in this unique model can be seen as exemplary since blind and visually impaired women are a particularly disadvantaged group. The TeleTrading House offers all the “classical” business areas of a call centre, such as inbound and outbound calls and mailing services.

During her/his work in the TeleTrading House (dual training model), the transit worker with disability receives basic qualifications in the areas of soft skills and marketing and, thus, theoretical and practical knowledge and skills that support an integration into the first labour market. Following a basic qualification that is aimed at the abilities and strengths of the customers (EDP basics, personality training and customer care competence) the professions offered in the TeleTrading House are practically trained. Additional qualification needs for higher qualification are identified in the training needs analysis, and the transit workers are - in an integrative way - invited to attend standard seminars.

Our practical experiences regarding the employment of people with special needs as call centre agents show that it is absolutely necessary to give the employees their individual space to familiarise with the working aides and the call centre technologies. Therefore, the transit workers start with their work placements to integrate them into the working environment at the end of their 18th employment month. To guarantee a highest-possible number of jobs on the free labour market, we cooperate with the work assistance for blind and visually impaired people in the Province of Styria.

Our efforts have proved to be successful. In the last few years, the project - via its rotation procedure - has managed to place and permanently integrate 20 persons on the free labour market. More than 100 visually impaired and blind people have received vocational qualification via our adult education offers.

The high quality and the orientation towards the target group's needs in the national and international sector were achieved through dualism. Well-sighted and visually impaired experts work together from the development and conception to the coordination and implementation of our services and offers. Our project employs - in leading positions - visually impaired and/or blind experts, who bring in their abilities and strengths via the different platforms in our enterprise.

To provide an example for practical dualism I would like to mention my position as the ISIS project manager. Before I worked for bfi Steiermark I had hardly any experiences in dealing with visually impaired and blind people. During my work in the EUROCHANCE EU project (its aim was to increase the foreign language competences for blind and visually impaired people) I was, for the first time, able to exchange experiences with our blind expert, Mr. Ogris, and to start a cooperation that is still ongoing. Both of us have different abilities and strengths, and we gain a lot through our cooperation. Mr. Ogris is an important expert with a huge knowledge of the target groups' needs in Austria and a very creative person, who supports me in the development of concepts. In our cooperation we complement one another, give each other respect and esteem.

At the beginning, I was a bit reserved as far as dealing with visually impaired and blind people was concerned - I lacked experience and contact. Mr. Ogris' openness and his competent behaviour made me curious and, finally, convinced me. Now I can say that various awareness raising measures, managed by Mr. Ogris, for our sighted employees and trainers have resulted in a new and normal way of dealing with people with special needs in our enterprise. Our enterprise has fully implemented the inclusion of people with special needs for both my colleagues in the ISIS project and the seminar participants in the public courses of bfi Steiermark.

Focusing on the abilities and strengths of the individual brings completely new perspectives and possibilities of inclusion and equality.

Curriculum Vitae



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