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# Managing Disability in Poland and European Union Countries: How Big and Small Companies Manage Disability and What They Receive in Return?

People with disabilities remain on the margins of the job market. This is because companies are reluctant to hire and manage employees with impairments. In contrast to organizations that are overwhelmed with obstacles to employ people with disability, we shall present the best practices of companies who successfully hire and manage impaired employees.

This article presents reasons for implementing disability policy together with gains made by the companies that do so. We present different approaches to managing disability—diversity policies in big companies (Sodexo, Carrefour, Hutchinson, and IKEA) as well as uncoded solutions in small enterprises (Altix, NZOZ Rudek, and the Office of the Polish Ombudsman).

**Keywords:** disability management (*zarządzanie niepełnosprawnością*), people with disabilities (*niepełnosprawni*), employees with disabilities (*pracownicy z niepełnosprawnością*), good practice (*dobrze praktyki*).

## Introduction

As a group, people with disabilities are threatened by exclusion on the job market. Hiring people with disabilities as a policy is not a popular strategy among companies operating on the open market. Many companies have doubts as to whether disabled employees can prove effective, hesitate as to how this might influence outside perception as well as relations inside the organization, and consider the costs of such efforts (i.e. workplace adaptation and employee training). Other companies lack institutional guidance as to how to adopt such a strategy aimed at disability or what

legal requirements must be met. Companies also hesitate to employ people who are different from their current employees or customers and are unsure as to how to approach people who are different. Despite qualms and difficulties, some companies decide to open themselves up to people with disabilities. We identified best practice in companies hiring people with disabilities through research making up a part of the “From a Comprehensive Diagnosis of the Situation of the Disabled in Poland to a New Model of Social Policy on Disability” Project, managed by Prof. Barbara Gąciarz (AGH University of Science and Technology). In the “Creating Equal Opportunity in Hiring People with Disabilities: Employer Best Practice – Polish and International Experience” project module,<sup>1</sup> coordinated by Ewa Giermanowska, we carried out comprehensive research on legal regulations and company policies on disability, followed by in-depth interviews with HR departments, board members, employees with disabilities, their superiors, subordinates, and coworkers.<sup>2</sup> We describe ten case studies of companies and institutions in Poland and ten from Europe with the aim of presenting the best comprehensive policies on disability, which include not only recruitment, but also training and promotion. This paper presents examined companies<sup>3</sup> that employ people with disabilities and that may provide an example in such practices. Chosen companies include global and major organizations as well as small or local enterprises.

Different companies take different approaches to managing disability. Global organizations usually have a specific, codified diversity policy that is adapted locally. What is more, the national headquarters of the companies collaborate with each other and present their practices to others. It is for this reason that the practices of global companies are similar regardless of the country they operate in, yet they have an accent related to the national culture. Small companies do not always have a disability policy. This is especially true of Poland. Small companies in Europe, in comparison to those in Poland, have policies regarding disability that are more standardized and provide more support to disabled employees. However, this might be the result of a more open attitude toward different disabilities in different cultures as well as of the economic situation.

1 A quantitative study, whose results are referred to in the article, was also conducted within this module.

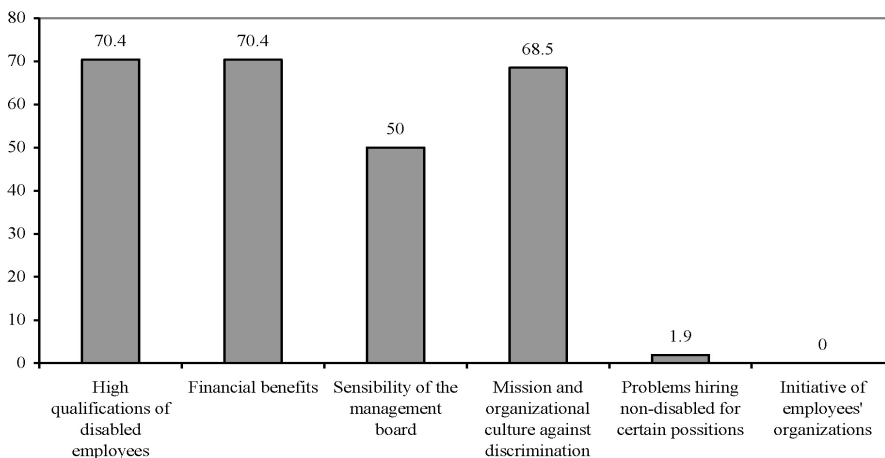
2 More about the project at <http://polscyniepelnosprawni.agh.edu.pl/> (retrieved on June 16, 2014).

3 We describe only the case studies of companies.

## Policy on Disability: The Take-off

Companies decide to employ people with disabilities for different reasons. Quantitative research conducted among 100 companies employing people with disabilities<sup>4</sup> revealed that the major reasons declared by companies are financial benefits together with company mission and its organizational culture. Another reason supporting such a decision is the high level of qualifications of disabled candidates.

**Graph No. 1.** Reasons for Hiring People with Disabilities in Poland (%)



Source: E. Giermanowska, Project by the AGH University of Science and Technology

The qualitative (case study) research<sup>5</sup> among ten Polish and ten European companies and institutions<sup>6</sup> presenting best practices in hiring people with disabilities confirmed the influence of the above-mentioned reasons. It also revealed other motivation. Disability policy in companies and institutions investigated in the research might be described as a result of the following:

Intrinsic motivation

1) Organizational culture and company human resource policy,

4 An opinion poll undertaken as a part of the “Creating Equal Opportunity in Hiring People with Disabilities: Employer Best Practice – Polish and International Experience” Project.

5 The investigation involved comprehensive desk research into legal regulations and company policies on disability, followed by in-depth interviews with the HR department, board members, employees with disability, their superiors, subordinates, and coworkers.

6 In each group of Polish and European employers there were three public institutions or companies owned by the government and seven companies operating on the free market. However, considering the title, we shall concentrate on companies only.

- 2) The individual experience of management board / one of employees,
- 3) Action consistent with CSR, and
- 4) Company profile—i.e. companies providing services and products for people with disabilities.

Extrinsic motivation

- 5) Standards and regulations imposed by the government,
- 6) Standards and policies adopted by the company headquarters (especially as a local interpretation of diversity policy),
- 7) Company history, especially as a sheltered work facility,
- 8) Difficulty in filling specific job positions,
- 9) Employees acquiring disability status during their work life (i.e. as a result of ageing or accidents), and
- 10) Possible financial benefit, although this was never portrayed as a prime motivation, where potential material gain was seen as an additional advantage.

Company motivation for adopting a human resource policy supportive of hiring people with disabilities was usually a combination of various intrinsic and extrinsic reasons. Altix, a Polish IT company producing and distributing software and hardware for the visually impaired, was actually established by the visually impaired. Thus, hiring people with disabilities is a consequence of company history, the individual experience of the board members, CSR activities, and company policy supporting people with disabilities, which is the group that uses company services. Ikea Deutschland, on the other hand, hires people with disabilities as a reflection of an organizational culture open to diversity, socially responsible policy, and German legal regulations requiring a 5% employment level of people with disabilities among companies hiring more than twenty employees. Whatever the philanthropic grounds are, business reasons such new (easier) opportunities for recruitment, customer target group, improving company reputation, or decreasing costs (in Poland if a big company has a percentage of disabled employees below 6% they are fined) play an important part, at least in convincing the management board or the shareholders.

### **Policies on Disability in Large and Small Enterprises**

Different approaches to disability management may be described among companies presenting positive examples in hiring people with disabilities. One may distinguish major or global companies with defined HR policy and a specified approach towards disability that includes all possible career aspects—hiring, training, promotion, etc. Excellent examples of such comprehensive policies may be found

in global companies such as Thales, Ford, Ikea, Carrefour, and Sodexo. What is more, companies that set an example in managing disability usually have model sustainability, CSR, and diversity management. Usually, managing disability functions, within either broader HR or diversity policies, is sometimes related to CSR. For example, STU Ergo Hestia (an insurance company) established its “Integralia” foundation. Its task includes integrating the disabled into the job market via internships as one of its CSR aspects. As a result, some of the interns find employment in the company. STU Ergo Hestia is an excellent example of organizational culture open to disability, which is demonstrated in both its HR and CSR policies.

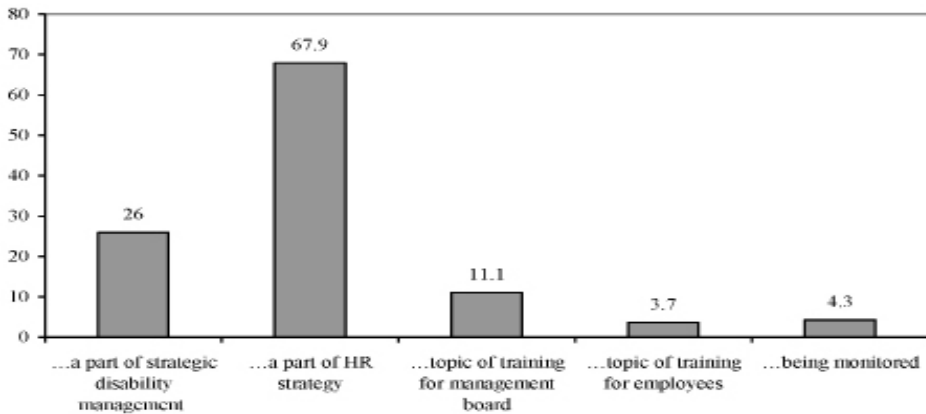
A starting point for hiring people with disabilities in big companies is connected with the signing of an act or declaration that sets standards. Such acts include the “Code of Practice on Managing Disability in the Workplace” (International Labor Organization), “United Nations’ Global Compact” (United Nations Organization) on a global scale, and “The Diversity Charter” on the local (Polish) one. Some companies need assistance or guidance in implementing such a strategy. For this reason, they usually approach third sector organizations that provide help and experience. Companies with codified disability policy also monitor the functioning of the policy, including by way of external audit. Such organizations usually have employees dedicated to disability / diversity management (IKEA, Thales, and Ford) and try to acquire certification documenting good practices, which is not only a way to achieve the independent audit of policies, but also an excellent way to build a good company image. For example, Ford was the first organization in Europe to receive IDMSC certification from the International Disability Management Standards Council confirming successful disability management.

Incorporating disability management into a broad strategy usually facilitates the process as specific targets and actions are defined, monitored, and accounted for. An example of such a comprehensive and well-constructed policy in managing disability is Carrefour (Poland). At Carrefour, hiring people with disabilities is a part of the sustainability policy and is managed by the HR department. This approach to disability is based on “The Universal Declaration of Human Rights” and the Conventions of International Labor Organization. Carrefour also signed the “United Nations’ Global Compact” and the “Code of Practice on Managing Disability in the Workplace.” Carrefour also launched cooperation with the Business and Disability Network. Implementing its policy of disability management in Poland, Carrefour has collaborated with the Polish Association for the Deaf as well as with organizations such as the Disabled for the Environment Association (EKON) and the Platform for Integration of People with Disabilities (PION). At Carrefour, one of the targets of store managers is to achieve a certain percentage of employment

for disabled employees. Managers are additionally motivated to hire people with disabilities through financial rewards—the percentage of people with disability employed influences their bonuses.

Although smaller enterprises might have an inclusive attitude towards people with disabilities, their approach is informal and neither codified nor structuralized in terms of program or policy. Many processes are conducted as a replication of a practice experienced in the company history (i.e. a person with a disability is interviewed the same way as the interviewer remembers that their superior interviewed other persons with disabilities). Such organizations rarely have documented HR policy, where if they do it usually specifies only the most important aspects. HR policy in small companies is also decidedly concurrent with labor legislation. Possibly due to the absence of regulations covering atypical cases, small companies adopt a personal and individual approach. Such an individualized approach allows for flexibility and nonstandard action in atypical situations.

**Graph No. 2.** Hiring People with Disabilities in Your Company is... (Poland, %)



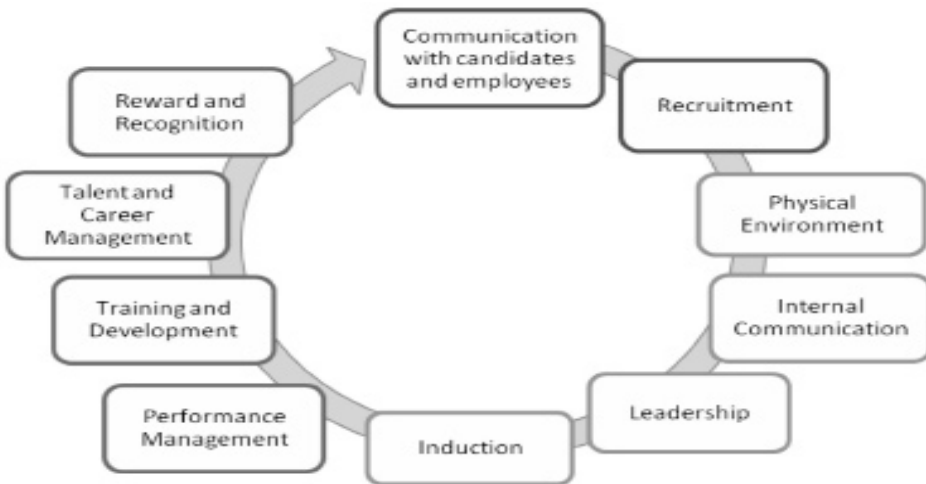
Source: E. Giermanowska, Project by the AGH University of Science and Technology.

Although the results may prove to be similar abroad, a study among Polish companies and institutions demonstrates that hiring people with disabilities is usually done within the HR strategy, where an independent policy is rather rare. Thus, a comprehensive and well-designed HR policy is important. However, some of the companies have developed strategic disability management. Hiring people with disabilities is also more a question of training for management than training for employees. Some of the companies train managers, trusting that they will cede the knowledge to their subordinates. Unfortunately, hiring people with disabilities

is hardly monitored. One may expect that big companies with a specified strategy towards disability constitute the approximately 10% of companies, just like the percentage of those with a structured and institutionalized approach, which train employees and monitor employment. Indeed, both employee training and monitoring seems essential for successful disability management.

### Managing Diversity within Human Resource Processes

Best policies on disability include all the stages of employee development in the organization: the recruitment process, adaptation to the workplace, induction, training and development, and promotion opportunities. All of those areas were covered in the case study research.



#### Stage I: Communication and Recruitment

Companies with best practices in managing disability use various methods to attract candidates. Big companies with defined CSR or diversity policy usually communicate openness for disabled employees on their websites. Independently of the size of the organization, companies communicate in job advertisements that a specific position is available for people with disabilities or that the organizational culture is open to such candidates.

Apart from advertising jobs, companies use various strategies to reach disabled candidates. Rehab Station Stockholm, a rehabilitation company, sponsors sport

teams and trains sport fans with disability. They believe that people active in sports are also active in other areas and make excellent employees as well. Rehab recruits its coaches and physiotherapists from among people with disabilities who are engaged in sport. Altix recruits its staff from among its clients while Thales funds scholarships for the best students with disabilities. Some companies collaborate with third sector organizations (Carrefour and Sodexo) or with government institutions (Thales). Such cooperation enables companies to shorten the recruitment process. Carrefour, in its collaboration with an NGO, receives a list of candidates that were first interviewed by the organization for certain job positions. Furthermore, to shorten the time needed and decrease the costs of the induction process, some organizations and government institutions provide an assistant or job coach for newly employed people with disabilities.

Some companies, whether as a result of a conscious strategy for disability employment, thanks to comfort in cooperation with certain organizations, or the perfect match between certain employees and job positions, concentrate on specific groups with disabilities. Max Hamburgerrestauranger from Sweden, having experienced difficulty in finding candidates for entry level restaurant host positions, decided to approach the mentally impaired who would match the position perfectly, solving Max's problems while benefiting from the possibility of social integration. Interestingly, Sodexo (Poland) employs the same groups of disabled persons for similar positions, albeit different ones. Marionnaud, an exclusive perfumery with high standards as to staff appearance, concentrates on people with internal medicine diseases. RehabStation Stockholm hires people with mobility impairment as they understand customer needs better, which is a remarkable advantage of employees with disabilities also reported by NZOZ Rudek, a Polish physical therapy company.

In some companies, thanks to successful cooperation with third sector organizations, people with certain kind of disabilities are hired. In all organizations that hire people with disabilities, matching the person to the position so that the disability was not a barrier in performing work duties was essential. In some cases, disability might even be an additional advantage—deaf–mute employees are often hired for production work at the Dr. Irena Eris Cosmetic Laboratories, where the level of noise on the shop floor is uncomfortable for other employees, but the hearing impaired remain unaffected. Concentration on a particular group is also a great convenience, as adaptation of work facilities of only a specific kind is required, and employees might be better (more deeply) prepared for working with people with disabilities—i.e. communication training for working with visually and hearing impaired is different.



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## Stage II: Onboarding: Internal Communication, Infrastructural Adaptation, and Induction

For successful disability management it is important to prepare both employees and infrastructure. Before a person with a disability starts work, it is important to adapt their workplace—provide all needed facilities and technical support. This may be financed by the government, but not all companies use state support. Small companies claim that the procedure is too demanding and time consuming. Major companies prefer to adapt the workplace themselves in order to avoid bureaucracy. In some cases, companies are unaware of the possibility of support. It is easier to start hiring people with disabilities in organizations working in healthcare, as their infrastructure is already adapted to meet the needs of people with difficulties.

It is not only the infrastructure that needs to be prepared. This is also true of coworkers. It is important to train employees on how to behave and communicate with people with certain disabilities—i.e. not to distract the dog of a visually impaired person, face a hearing impaired person while talking, etc. In other cases, some rules regarding common areas must be established. At NZOZ Rudek (a physical therapy institution hiring visually impaired masseurs and masseuses) all employees had to learn to follow a certain order in the kitchen and employees sharing consulting rooms with disabled colleagues had to learn to put everything in its place. Employing a person with a disability may result in a broadening of the work duties of other employees. At NZOZ Rudek, receptionists must complete patient registration cards (forms that must be completed in writing) for their visually impaired colleagues.

All the processes in the company need to be adapted so as not to exclude any groups of employees. Integration and training must be organized considering the needs of people with disabilities. All training at Altix is organized at locations that meet all the requirements of the visually impaired, materials are provided in electronic format, and the visually impaired are given the needed electronic devices so that they can participate in the training actively.

Big companies usually have standardized onboarding procedures. Sometimes they include people with disabilities, while in other cases they do not. It depends on the manager just what steps they take to introduce an employee to the group. In small companies, induction is established “traditionally.” Employees introduce a new employee in the same way that they remember others or they themselves were introduced.

### Stage III: Employee Management

Employees with disabilities are treated on the same terms as other employees. No differences in treatment were declared by either managers or by coworkers. Disability was never reported, by either of the two groups as a distinguishing characteristic among employees. How a person works or cooperates was declared to depend on personal characteristics, values, and fiber.

Setting goals as well as employee assessment takes into consideration the individual situation of the employee. Core targets of disabled and other employees do not differ much, yet the particular situation of disabled employees must be taken into consideration each and every time, especially when discussing responsibilities. Managers declare that all employees must be treated equally, if not, it is usually both sides that loose. If an employee is treated more favorably, usually either the employees feel bad about it or managers are eventually dissatisfied. At the start of hiring people with disabilities at Carrefour, cashiers with disabilities had lower daily standards than other employees. The situation was quickly verified and it turned out that they performed equally well and often even better than their fully-able colleagues. However, managing a team with disabled employees is demanding in production companies due to legal regulations specifying working time that is shorter for certain groups as well as more frequent breaks. When few employees have different working times and there exists the possibility of working at different positions, developing a time schedule may prove difficult, especially when it must match the production process. Such a problem was solved at the Dr. Irena Eris Cosmetic Laboratories, however.

Employees with disabilities at all of the investigated companies had equal opportunities for training when compared with other employees. Major companies have an advantage as they have the resources necessary to provide support for employees who need personal assistance during training or during business trips. Unfortunately, disabilities might sometimes be a barrier to promotion. Deaf-mute or mentally impaired employees may rarely be promoted to positions of managers, while employees with mobility impairment may hardly be expected to take positions requiring frequent travel. Employees with disabilities develop by broadening their work duties, rather than through vertical promotion. Chances for development are greater at big companies with complex structures, where employees can gain experience in various fields. In both small and large companies employees can develop through specialization and professionalization. People with disabilities may often be promoted to independent specialist positions and subsequently manage small teams.

At major companies, employee development is monitored. This is especially true if employees are disabled. At *Électricité Réseau Distribution France (ERDF)*

it was noticed that it takes more time for employees with disabilities to be promoted than their colleagues. Therefore, a monitoring mechanism was introduced. The HR department periodically compares the situation of employees with equal work experience with the company as well as with similar positions and education. If employees with disabilities are found to be in worse situation, their superiors must explain the reasons. Monitoring employee careers is not only useful in terms of anti-discrimination policy, but is also a useful tool in terms of knowledge management. Regrettably, monitoring policy is rare. This is especially true of small Polish companies, where such a detailed policy is difficult to introduce and necessitates a significantly developed HR disability policy.

### Benefits for Organizations

Various changes in organizations implemented targeting people with disabilities are also beneficial for other employees, like the mentioned monitoring process. Infrastructural adaptation is sometimes appreciated not only by employees with disabilities, but also by customers. *Allehånde Køkken*, a restaurant-catering company, is often chosen by customers because of its mission: to train and hire cooks with hearing impairments. A company that has a strong and valuable mission is seen as being more trustworthy.

Companies that employ people with disabilities not only have a better image as perceived by customers, but also among employees. A company that is not afraid to hire the impaired and to support groups excluded from the job market is perceived by employees as socially responsible. Such employees tend to be more engaged, seeing that should they become less fortunate, the company will support them.

Hiring people with disabilities may sometimes indirectly foster an improvement in communications and teamwork. Employees pay more attention to communication issues in general and for this reason their skills improve. They also see their team, and start to help each other, taking responsibility for other team members. Coworkers of disabled employees declare that working in a diverse team makes them more sensible to the needs of others.

Hiring people with disabilities also provides certain financial gains. However, not all companies take advantage of these. Depending on state regulations, companies may receive financial support for disabled employee salaries or avoid paying fines for excluding people with disabilities.

During times of demographic crisis and a dearth of employees on the job market, one must not forget people with disabilities as a source of candidates who are excluded from the job market by some companies. Hiring people with disabilities

opens up new sourcing possibilities, where cooperation with NGOs decreases the amount of time needed by the hiring process.

Managing disability in companies is still an emerging topic, especially in Poland. Major companies usually manage disability within their HR or sustainability strategies and have specified policies for doing so. However, managing an employee in such companies sometimes necessitates going beyond regulations. Small enterprises are more flexible, though their policy is just a set of practices adopted in the workplace. If they expand, a more specific policy is needed. In spite of the differences between big and small companies in various countries, they profit equally from hiring people with disabilities.

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### **Zarządzanie niepełnosprawnością w Polsce i państwach Unii Europejskiej. Jak duże i małe przedsiębiorstwa zarządzają niepełnosprawnością i jakie korzyści odnoszą?**

#### Streszczenie

Zatrudnianie pracowników niepełnosprawnych nadal jest rzadkością i wyróżnia firmę na rynku pracy. Efektywne zarządzanie niepełnosprawnością wymaga przemyślanej strategii obejmującej nie tylko rekrutację pracowników ale wszystkie procesy HRM.

W artykule zaprezentowane zostały przykłady dużych i małych przedsiębiorstw działających na otwartym rynku pracy, zatrudniających pracowników z niepełnospraw-

nością oraz stosowane przez te przedsiębiorstwa interesujące sposoby zarządzania niepełnosprawnością we wszystkich procesach HRM.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Niepełnosprawność, pracownicy z niepełnosprawnością, zarządzanie niepełnosprawnością

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