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EMPLOYMENT OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES AS A CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY INITIATIVE: NECESSITY AND VARIANTS OF IMPLEMENTATION

Boris Miethlich¹, Ľudomír Šlahor²

Abstract: Although companies recognize and promote the benefits of a diverse corporate culture, persons with disabilities (PWD), are more likely to be unemployed. Using secondary sources of information, this paper examines the need to address the employment of PWD as part of a Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) strategy, highlighting various implementation measures and variants. It shows that the employment of PWD can only be promoted by companies themselves. Measures at the national and international levels have so far shown little success. For a successful implementation, an obligation in the CSR strategy is not enough, measures need to be described explicitly. At its core, it is always necessary to remove physical and mental barriers in the company in order to enable the employment of PWD. The adaptation of CSR initiatives concerning the employment of PWD should be further investigated. The research should particularly focus on “best practice” approaches from business practice.

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Keywords: CSR, Persons with disabilities, Diversity, Employment

Introduction

Disability is still one of the characteristics distinguishing persons and groups from each other, exposing them simultaneously to social, economic and political exclusion and discrimination (Klimczuk, 2013). Therefore, it is not surprising that persons with disabilities (PWD), with the same professional qualifications as persons without disabilities, have lower career prospects (Berthoud, 2008). PWD are often completely excluded from the labor market, which at the same time leads to an exclusion from social life (Barnes & Mercer, 2005). For this reason, from an individual as well as a social point of view, there is a need to create more jobs for PWD in order to integrate them into society. In addition to regular employment in the open labor market, there are several functioning employment models for PWD. These employment models vary according to the type of financing and the degree of integration (Csillag & Gyóri, 2016). Some companies operate sheltered work centers or other separate employment opportunities for PWD (Rabby, 1983) or regularly place orders in sheltered work centers (Segovia-San-Juan, Saavedra & Fernández-de-Tejada, 2017). These initiatives are usually driven by governmental regulations. However, it was proven by various Western countries that legislation alone is insufficient to create jobs for PWD. Companies rarely implement legal directives and guidelines and do not claim government support (Wiggett-Barnard & Swartz, 2012; Vilchinsky & Findler, 2004; Satcher & Hendren, 1991).

For companies, disability is a sensitive element of the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) strategy. However, obligation in the CSR strategy is not enough. The challenge is not only to make the approach of inclusion of PWD visible (Lysaght, 2010; Gilbride et al. 2003), but to also adapt the CSR strategy as concrete activities within the company itself. Especially when it comes to the corporate culture and work environment (Fasciglione, 2015; Lysaght, 2010; Gilbride et al., 2003). Promoting employment and inclusion of PWD could be an integral part of a company's social engagement (Monachino & Moreiram, 2014; Markel & Barclay, 2009) and is, therefore, an important social responsibility which needs to be addressed through CSR strategies (Kuznetsova, 2012).

The employment of PWD has so far received little attention in the literature on CSR (Pérez et al., 2018; Markel & Barclay, 2009). This is remarkable as it has been empirically proven that disadvantaged groups continue to be under-represented despite all efforts (e.g. legal provisions, anti-discrimination, equal treatment, etc.) and are more likely to be unemployed (Markel & Barclay, 2009). Although while there is a growing interest of a comprehensive understanding of the implementation of CSR initiatives in the past two decades (Wang, Tong, Takeuchi & George, 2016), there is only little reference in the literature to the implementation and adaptation of the employment of PWD as a CSR initiative.

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The aim of this article is therefore to present the current situation of employing PWD as part of CSR strategies. The research is based on secondary literature on the employment of PWD in companies and disability in CSR. This article explains why the employment of PWD should be addressed as part of the CSR strategy and how the CSR activities can be adapted within the company.

The need to address the promotion of employment of PWD in the CSR strategy

There are still physical and mental barriers when employing and occupying PWD (Hidegh & Csillag, 2013). As a result, even today, PWD with the same professional qualifications have lower career prospects compared to persons without disabilities (Berthoud, 2008). Finding jobs and professional development are big challenges for PWD (Barnes & Mercer, 2005). So far, companies seem to ignore the potential of PWD (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2008) even so it is empirically proven that the occupation of PWD has various benefits for companies (e.g. employee loyalty, company image, diverse customers, customer loyalty and satisfaction, innovation, productivity, work ethic, safety, inclusive work culture, etc.) (Lindsay et al., 2018). For unemployed PWD, this means only marginal opportunities to contribute to the productivity of the economy. Consequently, governments face a growing number of disability beneficiaries. Those are already nearly three times more expensive than unemployment. On average 6 percent of the working-age population in the OECD countries receives invalidity benefits (OECD, 2009). The exclusion of disadvantaged groups from the value chain can be seen as a waste of resources on an individual, entrepreneurial, national and global level (Dyda, 2008). This is illustrated by the importance of both supply and demand factors (Crisp et al., 2009) in addressing unemployment and social inclusion issues of PWD (Bennett, 2011).

It might be concluded that companies need legal regulations and monetary incentives to take responsibility for employing PWD (Györi & Ócsai, 2014). However, the reality in various Western countries has proven, legislation alone is insufficient for the economic integration of PWD (Wiggett-Barnard & Swartz, 2012; Vilchinsky & Findler, 2004; Satcher & Hendren, 1991). For example, governmental regulations and guidelines are not implemented because the governments don't provide obligate and enforceable criteria for companies (Wiggett-Barnard & Swartz, 2012), and governmental support, probably also out of ignorance or fear of obligations, is not used (Vilchinsky & Findler, 2004). The employment and inclusion of PWD is an important social responsibility that needs to be addressed through CSR strategies (Kuznetsova, 2012). Guidelines, such as the "Enterprise 2020" of the EU, "ISO 26000" and the strategy "Intelligent, Sustainable and Inclusive Growth" of the UN, as well as initiatives like "UN Global Compact", "Global Reporting Initiative" or CSR national action plans on non-discrimination employment, indicate that the employment of PWD is a major concern (Csillag & Györi, 2016). In recent years, it has been observed that since international intuitions such as the UN proclaimed PWD as equals, including the right to employment, and as an important group of human diversity, this concern has also become more important for companies (Kuznetsova, 2012) and is increasingly considered in CSR strategies (Fasciglione, 2015; Kuznetsova, 2012; Hernandez et al., 2008).

The adoption of CSR and company policies on the inclusion of PWD is mainly observed in large corporations and multinational corporations. This seems to be explained by the fact that these companies have better conditions and more resources to achieve diversity among employees and address this concern (McMahon et al., 2008; Rabby, 1983). The company size has a significant impact on their employment policies, practices and labor needs (Bruyère et al., 2006). The degree of incidence of employment of PWD as part of the CSR strategy depends heavily on the corporate sector. For example, the IT and telecommunications industries are more market- and customer-oriented and invest heavily in the design of barrier-free products and services. Accordingly, these industries are more likely to need employees with disabilities. At the same time, it may be easier for companies in these industries to create an inclusive and accessible work environment. Companies in consulting, research and development are heavily involved in protecting human rights and non-discrimination of their employees and providing more flexible working models. IT and R&D companies focus primarily on their skills and competencies in recruiting new employees. Financial sector companies are very customer oriented and focus on providing accessible services, facilities and online services (Kuznetsova, 2012). However, real "disability champions" are missing, companies that could serve as role models for business cases and best practices for other companies (Fasciglione, 2015; Hernandez et al., 2008). Positive examples are important to demonstrate and understand the benefits of such

activities (Wehman, 2011; Markel & Barclay, 2009; Hernandez et al., 2008). However, further progress could be made by calling for CSR reporting, developing international CSR standards, or awarding particularly dedicated companies (Csillag & Györi, 2016). Unlike business organizations, public sector organizations tend to be “expected” rather than “favored” to employ PWD (Bennett, 2011). Employment of PWD extends social responsibility of corporate organizations (Samant et al., 2009; Schur et al., 2005) and is a real opportunity to take CSR seriously, both inside and outside the organization (Csillag & Györi, 2016).

However, a positive attitude and a generally positive perception of a company are not necessarily associated with increased intentions to hire or retain PWD (Hernandez et al., 2000). This is also reflected in the fact that the majority of multinational companies respond to PWD in their organizational norms and values, but do not further incorporate this into their corporate culture, personnel policies or work environment (Lysaght, 2010; Gilbride et al., 2003). The confessions are usually limited to non-discrimination, equality and human rights issues. Although many companies are increasingly recognizing the benefits of diversity in their workforce and mentioning PWD as part of their diversity statement, they do not specify their commitment (Ball et al., 2005). PWD represent more of a challenge to companies than other disadvantaged groups (Markel & Barclay, 2009). Disabilities have different manifestations and degrees of severity and can change over time (Woodhams & Danieli, 2000). Each individual workstation must be tailored to the needs of the employee and the respective corporate context (Markel & Barclay, 2009). The traditional approaches to achieve equality and equal opportunity are therefore unsuitable (Woodhams & Danieli, 2000). Nevertheless, the integration of PWD into the company must be understood as a standardized process with the aim of promoting employment under the same conditions as it is for other employees (Munduate et al., 2014).

Variants of implementation of the CSR initiative to promote the employment of PWD

In the following, several measures to promote employment of PWD will be described. The main element in the proactive engagement of PWD is the reduction of mental and physical barriers within the company (Markel & Barclay, 2009). An organizational diversity climate is an essential prerequisite for integrating PWD into the workforce (Araten-Bergman, 2016; Samant et al., 2009; Schur et al., 2009; Schur et al., 2005). To create a culture that is accessible to the disabled, it is necessary to reduce prejudices and stereotypes (Houtenville & Kalargyrou, 2012). This can be achieved by raising the awareness of all employees (Segovia-San-Juan et al., 2017; Houtenville & Kalargyrou, 2012; Bengisu & Balta, 2011). Continuous signals from the top management illustrating the intent of integrating PWD in the company are important (Ball et al., 2005; Schur et al., 2005), especially since many adjustments in the workplace and the support of other employees are needed (Colella, 2001). Companies should emphasize the importance and their positive attitude towards employing a diverse workforce (Markel & Barclay, 2009). The commitment of a company to employing PWD substantially reduces the barriers (Schur et al., 2005).

Often, individual adjustments to the workplace and work environment according to disability are necessary (Kuznetsova, 2012; Bengisu & Balta, 2011; Ball et al., 2005) or assistive technology might be needed (Markel & Barclay 2009). Through barrier-free workplaces (Kuznetsova, 2012; Ball et al., 2005) respectively the implementation of universal workplace design strategies and the use of accessible technologies (Schartz, Schartz & Blanck, 2002), jobs can in principle be made accessible to a large number of disabled persons. In addition to the workplaces, the entire infrastructure of the company should be accessible for PWD (Segovia-San-Juan et al., 2017). This will free the environment from access discrimination (Markel & Barclay, 2009). In most cases, the need for individual adjustments or assistive technology in the workplace does not cause any or only marginal cost (Lengnick-Hall, 2007). In addition, the corporate website should be barrier-free and accessible in simple formats (Segovia-San-Juan et al., 2017; Kuznetsova, 2012). This also applies to the online application processes and printed materials (e.g. large print, Braille or audio recordings) (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2005). Additionally, adjustments of the job profile (Schur et al., 2005; Colella, 2001) or the general conditions may be required. Such as the need for an irregular work schedule, change in shift schedules (Markel & Barclay, 2009; Schur et al., 2005; Colella, 2001), flexible working hours or the possibility of remote work (telecommuting) (Schur et al., 2005).

In addition to the proactive employment of the PWD, companies can also support and promote their career entry. This can be done through training and placement programs for PWD in entry-level positions (Sherbin & Kennedy, 2017). PWD can be made fit for work and return to the labor market after a long period of unemployment or disability by means of a temporary job or internship (Bennett, 2011). Internships and other employment opportunities are also important for graduates with disabilities to get started quickly (Kuznetsova, 2012). Collaboration with disabled persons' organizations, rehabilitation centers, and local educational institutions are an interesting way of developing job positions for PWD within the company and subsequently placing them with PWD (Schur et al., 2005).

Disabled persons face a variety of recruitment and employment barriers (Ball et al., 2005). Disability must therefore also be considered when recruiting (Segovia-San-Juan et al., 2017). By participating in job fairs, companies can make their commitment visible and signal that they are open to the employment of the PWD (Ball et al., 2005). The recruitment strategy can also include cooperation with disability organizations, rehabilitation institutions or local universities (Schur et al., 2005). The interview procedures and techniques should be reviewed to see how they limit the applicant's ability to demonstrate that he or she qualifies and meets the essential job requirements (Schur et al., 2005). The right person for the right job should be found - regardless of disability (Bengisu & Balta, 2011). Companies should ensure that interviews, tests and other components of the application process are barrier-free. For example, it might be necessary to provide sign language interpreters (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2005).

Furthermore, when selecting managers and supervisors, care should be taken to ensure that they are willing to accept PWD within the company (Schur et al., 2005). In addition, leadership development opportunities for PWD should be offered. It is also important to be able to provide role models within the company to show other PWD what is possible (Sherbin & Kennedy, 2017). PWD should also be encouraged to form their own networks or interest groups within the company (Sherbin & Kennedy, 2017; Schur et al., 2005). In addition, the evaluation and reward model of managers should include criteria on the treatment of PWD and resources and incentives for the staff should be provided to mentor and train the PWD or to engage in the adaptation of the working environment (Schur et al., 2005).

The table below shows an overview of the measures previously described to promote the employment of disabled persons in companies. These measures can be implemented into the CSR strategy of a company individually or in combination.

Scope	Measures
Working Environment	Accessibility (barrier-free), universal workplace design strategies, accessible technologies, assistive technology, individual adoptions of the workplace, barrier-free corporate website
Corporate Culture	Promoting a diversity climate, encouraging PWD to form networks or interest groups within the company
Human Resources	Sensitizing employees and managers, providing a barrier-free recruiting process, participation in job fares, offering internships, trainings and placement programs as well as entry-level positions to disburden the entry of PWD in labor, leadership development opportunities for PWD, providing role models within the company
Job	Adapted, flexible and/or irregular working hours, telecommuting, adjustments of the job profile
Management	signal the willingness to employ PWD (internally and externally), define the commitment in terms of actions, provide incentives for employees regarding the promotion of employment of PWD

Source: Authors

Conclusion

The difficulties faced by PWD in the labor market, as well as the failure of public policies to promote the employment of PWD, demonstrate the need to address the issue as a CSR initiative by companies. It is essential for the employment of PWD to reduce physical and mental barriers within the company. Nevertheless, pure avowal in the context of a diverse corporate culture, is not enough to employ PWD.

Companies must explicitly formulate in their CSR strategies how and in what form this concern is addressed. Only in this way can a corresponding CSR initiative be successfully implemented. At the same time, it is important to communicate the commitment and make its positive benefits visible within the company as well as for the outside world. Various measures are available to promote and facilitate the employment of PWD in companies. These measures can be implemented individually or in combination as part of a CSR initiative. The focus should be on removing physical and mental barriers by adapting the work environment, sensitizing employees and managers, adapting the application processes, and creating incentives within the organization.

Considering the scarcity of publications on this topic, it seems necessary to further examine the encouragement of employing PWD as a CSR initiative in practice. The research should particularly focus on evaluating best practice approaches. This can then serve a company to employ PWD quickly and purposefully and to help other national and international regulators develop appropriate measures and tools to help businesses promote employment for PWD.

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