

Activation of persons with disabilities. An analysis of the perspective of professionals in supported employment programmes

Stefan Hardonk

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Introduction

Labour market statistics in the industrialised world have repeatedly documented the underrepresentation of persons with disabilities in the open labour market in terms of labour market participation and employment rates (WHO, 2011). Even when professionally active, persons with disabilities experience particular difficulties in obtaining sustainable work and building enduring careers (Lindstrom, Doren, & Miesch, 2011). Increasing the participation rates of this group in the open labour market represents today a key policy goal of many governments at regional, national and supranational levels (OECD, 2010). To this end, many countries, including the Flemish region of Belgium, have passed specific legislation and implemented policies that target persons with disabilities, including financial incentives to workers and employers and services that provide support to persons with disabilities entering the labour market, developing necessary skills, obtaining and maintaining jobs.

This study investigates the employment support programmes with a focus on how professionals make meaning of their interventions. Research into the experiences of employees with disabilities has demonstrated that such meaning influences the day-to-day implementation by employment support programme practitioners (e.g. Corbière and Lanctôt, 2011; Holmqvist, 2009) and thus their effectiveness in the short and long term, both in terms of empowerment of the clients and varying degrees of impact in terms of improving the inclusive character of the labour market and reducing the unfit worker-stigma.

Yet to date, surprisingly little is known about these qualitative aspects of supported employment programmes and, specifically, how professionals make sense of their employment support practices, because researchers have mostly taken the meaning of the core principles for granted (e.g. Corbière and Lanctôt, 2011). One attempt to clarifying how meaning is made of programme principles can be found in a scenario study by Donnelly and Given (2010) in which an open employment support programme is analysed from the perspective of a professional person with a disability. Their study points to a number of issues in the implementation of an employment support program in relation to core programme principles, such as negative and essentialising representations of the client and a lack of attention for the client as the knowledgeable key actor.

Corker and French (1999) and Yates (2015) have demonstrated the potential of an analysis of discourse for analysing meaning-making and uncovering empowering as well as oppressive forces that disempower persons with disabilities. The discourses that employment support professionals may draw upon in their daily practice to give meaning to their activities can be enabling and empowering, or reinforcing the stigma of the unfit worker. They are in turn related to the socio-political context that sets the targets and evaluation criteria for public programmes. Uncovering the assumptions behind employment can advance our understanding of how practices of support provision affect unequal power relations on the labour market, reducing or reproducing them. In doing so we contribute to the critical disability studies literature (e.g. references) which is concerned with questions about how oppressive ways of meaning making may permeate organising principles not only of workplaces, but also of programmes that are aimed at strengthening the position of persons with disabilities on the labour market. This could also contribute to explaining diversity in the implementation and long-term effectiveness of such programmes.

Empirically, we draw on qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews with professionals of state-supported employment support services in Flanders (Belgium). These services provide free-of-charge support to jobseekers with an officially recognized impairment¹. Participants

¹ Hier een definitie van 'officially recognized impairment' ?

were purposively sampled from so-called GTB- and GOB-services and questions were asked regarding their views on disability, their role as service providers and the roles of the clients and the employers. The analysis was conducted with a focus on how the support professionals make meaning of disability, employment and employment support.

Supported employment programmes

Supported employment programmes were introduced to provide more individualized and flexible services that operate close to the labour market. These programmes rest on an approach to guidance and support for persons with disabilities that questions the boundaries of traditional vocational guidance. Traditional approaches are characterized by their long trajectories in which a person is prepared for labour market participation through functional rehabilitation and improvement of skills. These step-wise efforts to increase the labour market value of persons with disabilities were situated largely outside the labour market in a “train, then place”-approach and they have not yielded enough success to close the disability gap in employment, for example for persons with psychiatric disabilities (Bond, 1992). By contrast, employment support services that depart from the “placement first”-principle are developed around empirical evidence in favour of a more comprehensive approach (Bond, 1998). Such type of support prioritises a quick transition into work, with much of the training and skills improvement taking place on the job, e.g. through traineeships. In addition, different vocational services such as skills training, development of competence profiles and job coaching are provided in a flexible manner that is sensitive to individual needs and demands.

The most standardised model of support was developed in the US and is called Individual Placement and Support (IPS). This is essentially a formally described interpretation of supported employment and derives directly from its basic concept (Drake & Becker, 1996). It was originally focused on persons with severe mental illness, however it does not preclude a limitation to a certain category of impairments. IPS as a standardized approach to supported employment, features a set of basic principles that should underpin a support programme. Drake and Becker (1996), Drake et al. (1999) and Bond (2004) defined these principles and in the course of the past 20 years this list has been slightly extended. All principles depart from empirical evidence in terms of successful practices (Bond, 1998). The basic principles of IPS are (1) that supported employment is aimed at achieving competitive employment, i.e. employment in the open labour market; (2) that the job search is rapid, i.e. placement is pursued shortly after the client’s entry into the programme – which overhauls the approach of traditional vocational rehabilitation which focused on training first, then placement; (3) support collaborates in an integrated manner with health services; (4) eligibility is based on self-selection, i.e. persons with disabilities who decide to work may enter the programme; (5) assessment is continuous and comprehensive throughout the support trajectory; (6) attention is given to client preferences, i.e. the client is given autonomy to steer the course of the support trajectory; (7) support is offered in a time-unlimited manner; and (8) clients receive counseling with regard to social security and other benefits. In sum, these principles clearly show how IPS is discursively framed as aiming to support the individual to achieve higher labour market value, while at the same time developing collaboration with employers.

There is relatively strong international evidence that IPS programmes are effective (Bond, 2004; Latimer et al., 2006) and have positive psychosocial effects (Cramm, Finkenflugel, Kuijsten, & van Exel, 2009), although the evidence appears to be somewhat weaker outside the US (Heffernan & Pilkington, 2011). According to Corbière et al. (2010), a crucial element for its success is the “philosophy of the programme” -- building on the client’s strengths, needs and preferences (client-centeredness) and focusing on rehabilitation and practical work experience (see also Vandekinderen, Roets, Vandenbroeck, Vanderplasschen, & Van Hove, 2012).

Competing logics underlying supported employment programmes

The increasing efforts to activate people with disabilities professionally should be understood against the background of the changing relation between citizens and the state and the key role paid work has gained in this relation. This evolution is informed by two distinct logics.

First, the chronic crisis that Western welfare states have been facing since the 1970's has resulted in social security benefits for professionally inactive individuals as becoming increasingly framed as temporary and conditional on the individual's efforts to participate in the labour market (Immervoll & Scarpetta, 2012). Social security benefits are no longer welfare state citizen's right but rather a burden to the limited resources of an indebted state. In this perspective, in the UK, persons with disabilities' entitlement to benefits has become conditional upon the enactment of job seeking behavior such as participation in work interviews (Grover & Piggott, 2005). In the Netherlands too, this activation discourse increasingly finds its way to persons who receive disability benefits, however with more emphasis on support and voluntary choice compared to other disadvantaged groups (Ministerie van Sociale Zaken en Werkgelegenheid, 2015). The Flemish region of Belgium has adopted activation policies for the general population at working age since the 1990s. This also holds true for persons with disabilities who are receiving unemployment benefits, however it does not extend to persons who receive disability pension.

Labour market participation is portrayed as good not only for the state but also for the individual, and even more so for persons with disabilities (Yates & Roulstone, 2013) by emphasizing the positive psychosocial aspects of employment, i.e. casting formal work as the major source of self-fulfillment, self-realisation and welfare (Szymanski, Enright, Hershenson, & Ettinger, 2003; Erevelles, 2002; Galer, 2012; Galvin, 2006; Kumar et al., 2012). In the active welfare state logic, every individual is held responsible for selling his/her labour to an employer and to obtain work. It is assumed that the open labour market will eventually decide if that labour is economically attractive. In terms of policy, this entails individually aimed interventions that strive to increase the market value of persons with disabilities, for example through training, rehabilitation and education, but also favourable financial arrangements such as wage subsidies (Harris et al., 2012; Jolly, 2002). This logic of fitting the individual into the labour market is associated with a medical perspective of disability, in which a focus is placed on an individual's impairment (Holmqvist, 2009; Lunt and Thornton; 1994). Consequently, measures such as rehabilitation, skills mapping, job-training, and use of assistive devices are employed to make the individual as "normal" as possible. Within this perspective, the labour market is not expected to be inclusive, because the individual is brought as close as possible to existing requirements and ways of working. The role of employment support professionals then is to focus on clients' competencies, labour market value and attractiveness to employers.

Coeval to this evolution towards an active welfare state is the growing international attention for persons with disabilities' right to work, which finds its origin in the social model of disability that was developed during the 1970s and 1980s by disability activists and scholars (Shakespeare, 2006). The social model of disability focuses on the interaction between the competences and limitations of a person on the one hand, and the accessibility of the labour market – i.e. work and workplaces – to give way to the notion of work as a right. This right has been formulated in article 27 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities - UNCRPD (UN, 2006):

States Parties recognize the right of persons with disabilities to work, on an equal basis with others; this includes the right to the opportunity to gain a living by work freely chosen or accepted in a labour market and work environment that is open, inclusive and accessible to persons with disabilities.

The article further states:

[States Parties shall safeguard and promote the realization of the right to work, including for those who acquire a disability during the course of employment, by taking appropriate steps, including through legislation, to...] Promote employment opportunities and career advancement for persons with disabilities in the labour market, as well as assistance in finding, obtaining, maintaining and returning to employment. (UNCRPD, article 27, paragraph 1, e)

In this right-based approach, States Parties are considered as a major responsible actor for ensuring that persons with disabilities can realise their fundamental right to work. Different from the previously described activation logic, obtaining and maintaining work is not framed as merely a persons' individual responsibility.

In relation to the person-work environment fit this can be illustrated using the UNCRPD, which may be considered a major discursive resource within the social model perspective. According to the UNCRPD States Parties have to ensure that "reasonable accommodations" be provided in the workplace (article 27, paragraph 1, i) as part of their responsibility to ensure that the workplace is accessible and that a person's limitations do not result in exclusion from the workplace in a direct or indirect way. Under reasonable accommodations we understand technical solutions, but also organizational arrangements, assistance, qualification measures and awareness-raising measures (Heckl & Pecher, 2008).

By considering reasonable accommodations as a fundamental right, the discourse of the UNCRPD places responsibility for the person-work environment fit – at least in part – on the employer. States Parties then are expected to ensure this right is realized through different measures, such as supported employment programmes. On the level of the implementation of the programmes this implies that support professionals should not only give attention to job coaching, skill building and training, but also to the initiatives that an employer can and should take to make the workplace and the organization more accessible, to allow the person with a disability to become an equal member of the organization.

This perspective on labour market participation of persons with disabilities emphasises the importance of inclusive labour markets and inclusive organisations. Whether or not an individual succeeds in selling his labour to an employer is not his/her sole responsibility, but a shared responsibility of different actors in society. Opportunities to work represent a right and society is responsible for doing everything that is needed to allow persons with disabilities to enjoy this right.

This is supported by an important body of research that points to the role and responsibilities of other actors than persons with disabilities themselves in achieving higher participation rates in the labor market. Individuals with disabilities are confronted with inadequate levels of support and multiple institutional and organisational barriers (Stone & Colella, 1996; Williams & Mavin, 2012). Hughes (2007) has also argued that the assumption of non-disablement underlies disabling cultural practices that exclude in different domains of society. Therefore some scholars have questioned the appropriateness of assigning responsibility to the individual, based on existing barriers to inclusion in the labour market (Patrick, 2011).

The rights-based discourse gives employment support professionals a different framework to operate within, placing emphasis on negotiating personal characteristics with accessibility of the workplace, accommodations and efforts from co-workers and managers/employers. A different language is created that provides a space for demanding that existing barriers be removed and persons with disabilities be given opportunities. Instead of increasing individuals' market value this discourse promotes interventions to eliminate discrimination, provide reasonable accommodations and work towards inclusive workspaces. It also points to employers and co-workers for taking responsibility.

Methods

The case

The empirical study focuses on professionals working in the PES and in employment support services that are state-subsidized and aim to help people with disabilities obtain (paid) employment. The specialized services are the “specialized guidance centres”, and the “specialised training, support and mediation centres”. Whereas the first centres place most emphasis on support for official recognition and assessment of one’s disability and supporting clients in determining employment goals and searching for jobs on the open labour market, the latter mainly provide training in specific job skills, support to engage in traineeships and external training/education, and mediation to obtain employment.

Professionals employed at these services include social workers, occupational therapists, and psychologists. Guidance and support are provided to persons with motor disabilities, psycho-social and intellectual disabilities. Most clients arrive at the centres through referral by the PES, after being identified as a person with a medically certified impairment affecting their capacity to carry out paid work. Mostly, clients are first referred to the “specialized guidance centre” and then later on might also be requested to visit a “specialized training centre”. Clients entering the supported employment programme however do not follow a standard-trajectory, as it is the task of first centre to establish which type of support is most adequate. It is worth noting that persons with disabilities who arrive at the first centre may be redirected to other, non-competitive types of employment (e.g. sheltered workshops), which in effect terminates their participation in the supported employment programme. This is the case for around 30% of the clients (GTB-Vlaanderen, 2014). Overall, support trajectories have an average duration of 1 year and lead to employment for about 40% of the clients. More than half of the clients is still employed six months after conclusion of support, although this proportion has decreased over the past years. This is important as the financial support is largely determined by the number of successful job placements. Official PES-standards limit support to clients to a six-month period after job placement.

The GTB employment support model departs from the Individual Placement and Support model, although supported employment in general and IPS in particular are considered first of all as an approach, more than an instrument (Gailly, De Herdt, Vandermarliere, Uytterhoeven, & Henau, 2012). In its introductory white paper GTB states:

We mogen deze stromingen echter niet herleiden tot een instrumentele methodiek, maar moeten ze zien als een brede visie die de klant steeds centraal stelt en die bruggen bouwt naar collega’s die werken vanuit welzijn of zorg en naar de wereld van de werkgevers. Zij zijn belangrijke mede-actoren in een maatschappelijk inclusiemodel. (Gailly et al., 2012)

Employment support initiatives are a key aspect in the Flemish regional government’s activation measures to raise the employment rate of disabled people to 43% by 2020. The employment rate for disabled people is historically significantly lower than the European average (Samoy, 2014) and when professionally active, disabled people are often employed in state-subsidised sheltered workshops (Samoy and Waterplas, 2012). Since 1965, a system of wage subsidies has provided financial incentives for businesses to employ disabled people. They are officially framed as a means of compensating for “estimated productivity loss caused by impairments” and “higher risk incurred by the employing organization” (Samoy and Waterplas, 2012). Currently in the Flemish region of Belgium the measure compensates wage costs ranging from 40% in the first year of employment to 20% in the third, fourth and fifth year. Extension beyond the fifth year are conditional upon a proven loss of productivity.

Data collection and analysis

Our study sample was composed through purposive sampling aimed at employment support professionals in GTB and GOB-services, who are key actors in the implementation of the supported employment programme. Furthermore, we aimed for the inclusion of respondents from various geographically-spread centres, as centres differ in their focus on either manual work (industrial employment), non-manual work (administrative and service employment) or both.

Participants were recruited through direct contacts with certified centres as well as the PES. The researchers asked for permission to interview staff members knowledgeable about the organisation of employment support. This resulted in the participation of a total of 11 respondents: 3 from “specialized guidance centres”, 7 from “specialized training centres”, and 1 from the PES. Some participants were active in guidance and support of clients of the programme, while others coordinated and supported the services, or combined these tasks. Data collection was aimed at acquiring rich information about the views of the participants with regard to the nature of their service provision, the framework in which they operate, the goals of their support, the clients and other relevant stakeholders. We accordingly opted for conducting semi-structured face-to-face interviews guided by a list of topics and questions. At the onset of the interviews, participants were asked to describe their position and role in the organization, the profile of the clients of the service and the structure of the service. Subsequently, they were asked to elaborate on the ways in which they provide employment support, why support is organized in a specific manner and what they expect of their clients. With regard to support professionals’ interactions with employers, specific questions were asked in relation to responsibilities of the different stakeholders, the role of policy measures such as wage subsidies and public funding for reasonable accommodations, and the types of barriers to inclusion in the labour market. Finally, participants were also asked about their collaborations with other stakeholders, such as trade unions and other services, and their views on reasonable accommodations for persons with disabilities, productivity and their interrelatedness. Each interview was concluded with an open question allowing the interviewees to add anything they might deem relevant.

The interviews lasted between 54 and 85 minutes. They were recorded with participants’ consent and transcribed verbatim for further analysis. The anonymized transcripts were then analysed on the levels of content and discourse through identification of text fragments that are reflective of employment support professionals’ assumptions and views related to employment of persons with disabilities.

To achieve this, the first step of the analysis was to broadly classify the content of the interviews which resulted in the four main themes presented in Table 1. Next, within each theme we analysed how the stakeholders – i.e. clients, employers and support professionals – are discursively constructed by the interviewees and how responsibility is allocated to them in these constructions. We then analytically connected these discursive constructions to the two competing logics of work as a condition for receiving support from the welfare state, and work as a right.

Table 1: Themes in results

Meaning-making about →	<i>Role and responsibility of the client/person with a disability</i>	<i>Role and responsibility of the employer/management</i>	<i>Role and responsibility of support professionals</i>
Themes ↓			
1. Initial placement and traineeships	Identifying own strengths and weaknesses Willing to train and develop skills Willing to prove/demonstrate competence to employers through	Employers as biased towards clients' competencies Employers as unwilling to make any formal commitment to clients before traineeship	Educate/raise awareness of employers to reduce their bias Training clients Find opportunities for traineeships for clients to prove their value Find opportunities for traineeships for clients to gain work experiences and self-confidence
2. Wage subsidies	Client as cheap employee Disability as risk Client as an opportunity to make the organization more inclusive	Employers as rational, calculating economic actors Employers as biased towards clients' competencies Employers as afraid of risks associated to disability Employers as allergic to bureaucracy	Explain financial benefits of hiring clients Explain compensation for lower levels of performance Explain other opportunities to reduce the disability (<i>exceptional</i>) Find perfect fit between individual and employer to make disability disappear (<i>impossible</i>)
3. Advocating for clients towards employers	Client as talented/competent Client as docile and grateful Client as motivated Client as unwanted in certain organisations	Employers as unknowledgeable and biased about disability Employers as happy with grateful and loyal employees Employers as in need of employees (supply-side shortages)	Explain strengths of clients Normalise clients Promote business case for disability Client-centred work Advise clients on which potential employers to avoid due to strong negative bias
4. Accommodations	Client in need of specific accommodations to do the job Client permanently settled when accommodations have been given Client as learning opportunity to improve working processes (<i>exceptional</i>)	Employers making efforts to make accommodations needed to do the work Employers as rational economic actors: limitations to what can be expected from them	Support professional as knowledgeable about accommodations and subsidies Assess employers' potential to make accommodations Support for revising organisations (<i>exceptional</i>)

Results

In this section, we interpret the narratives of professionals in Flemish employment support services along four key themes in their accounts: initial placement and traineeship, wage subsidies, advocating for clients towards employers, and accommodations. For each theme, we discuss how disability is given meaning to in relation to work and what the roles and responsibilities of persons with disabilities (the clients of the service), employers and support professionals themselves are in achieving employment for individuals with disabilities. The narratives of employment support professionals provide us with a perspective on how their interventions both reflect and reproduce competing logics of work for persons with disabilities.

Initial placement and traineeships

One of the core principles of employment support that fits with the goals of the Flemish government is that it should be aimed at achieving competitive employment. In other words, the programme should help persons with disabilities to obtain and maintain work in the open labour market, which basically rules out sheltered employment. Traineeships emerged from the interviews with support professionals as a key practice to work towards clients' placement. Most interviewees stressed traineeships as beneficial to the person with a disability as well as the employer. Although a traineeship is not a true job, because it is unpaid, without formal contract and limited in time and scope, it was considered as providing opportunities for learning and skill development, which positively affect the attractiveness of the person on the labour market:

We doen ook stages die we begeleiden. Dat zijn geen schoolse stages omdat we ervan uitgaan iedereen die bij ons komt heeft zijn diploma. Die opleiding die we doen daar is ook geen diploma aan vast. Ze krijgen een getuigschrift dat ze het gevolgd hebben maar het gaat om vaardigheden.

Some participants also emphasised that through traineeships their clients avoid competition with non-disabled persons in hiring procedures, which is often to their disadvantage. They talked about a protective approach:

die stages zijn echt wel een goede manier om onze mensen werkervaring te geven en ze ook vertrouwen te geven om toch nog een stukje "beschermd" op de arbeidsmarkt te gaan.

Nevertheless, elements of prejudice and stigma in the employer-perspective more broadly informed the way in which the main benefits of traineeships were expressed by our participants. Employers who are reluctant to hire persons with disabilities, because they consider them to be less productive, less reliable or a potential burden for the organisation, get the opportunity through a traineeship to experience that persons with disabilities are not necessarily different from other workers. Our participants also stressed the importance of the absence of any long-term commitment that is involved in these arrangements, which they represented as attractive to employers.

Soms gebeurt het dat werkervaringstage ook tot werk leidt en we hebben eens gekeken van "hoe vaak gebeurt dat?" en toen bleek dat 30% van de tewerkstellingen door werkervaringstage kwam en niet via een vacaturegerichte stage. Dus, dat betekent, bij aanvang van die stage is dat een zeer vrijblijvende relatie van "die persoon komt hier ervaring opdoen" en we vragen de werkgever om die persoon werkervaring te laten opdoen en we volgen dat op en we zien wel waar dat we uitkomen.

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In other words, negatively biased employers get a learning opportunity to see the value of the person with a disability for the organisation, but if s/he is not convinced after this period, there is no further commitment expected.

Only one participant openly represented traineeships as an easy way of achieving the employment-goal of the programme. In this representation it is not the need for skills development on the part of the client or an attempt to convince employers of a client's skills that drives the decision to start with a traineeship. Instead, the client is perceived to have limited labour market value, which is then problematised in relation to the labour demand in the sector of employment that support is aiming at:

Wanneer dat iemand in een bepaalde sector, een bepaald domein wil gaan werken waar dat er heel veel mogelijkheden voor tewerkstelling zijn, dan mag dat zeker meteen een vacaturegerichte stage zijn maar dat is gewoon niet zo gemakkelijk te vinden en dat zijn dingen die we gaandeweg ondervonden hebben.

One of the participants framed the loose arrangement of a traineeship in different terms, i.e. as an opportunity for persons with disabilities to regain self-confidence in work:

Ze leren ook een beetje van "waar zit juist die beperking en lukt het nog en is de job niet te zwaar?" De werknemer zelf kan ook zichzelf een beetje leren kennen en zien van "dit kan ik nog en dit kan ik niet meer" en eigenlijk ook veel mensen die denken van "dat ga ik allemaal niet meer kunnen" maar als je dan kan aanbrengen van "kijk, we kunnen eens een stage proberen, je kan het eens testen" dat ze eigenlijk nog wel meer kunnen dan dat ze zelf goed beseffen.

Other participants placed emphasis on the client's indirect gain of internships, because these provide support professionals with an opportunity to get to know their clients better. A discourse that emphasises the importance of tailor-made support based on a thorough assessment of the individual is what emerges here:

Om het cru te zeggen, dat het soms meer aanmodderen was omdat de coach ook niet genoeg wist van "wat is er belangrijk voor die persoon? Hoe kan ik die ondersteunen?" en dat het tijdens een stage duidelijker blijkt.

Several participants pointed out that through traineeships their clients receive an opportunity to demonstrate to employers their value as an employee. They get the chance to prove themselves and to show that they can be a valuable asset to the organisation. Even if the traineeship does not lead to employment in the organisation – which is sometimes known at the start due to a lack of job openings – support professionals argued that such an experience is valuable and helps to increase the person's chances for obtaining work in the future.

Die stages dat doen we eigenlijk om bedrijven te overtuigen van de kwaliteiten. We hebben enkel korte stages. Eén maand twee maand, soms 3. Dat hangt ervan af of we vinden dat iemand nog ervaring kan opdoen. Het stukje dat ze ervaring hebben dat ze naar het bedrijf gaan dat ze wel kunnen, iets te kunnen zeggen maar ook vaar bedrijven om te sensibiliseren: "kijk wat die persoon allemaal kan". Die stages proberen we kort op te volgen. We proberen ook te kijken of er mogelijkheid tot tewerkstelling is.

Traineeships appeared as an „offer that cannot be denied“ by the clients and clients can only be legitimate participants in the programme if they agree to a traineeship. Although this does not entirely fit with the IPS-principles of self-eligibility and client-centeredness, this was used as a proxy to assess whether the client has the right mindset to be a participant in the programme:

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Waar dat we wel, een tijd terug al, 2 à 3 jaar, besloten hebben van “eigenlijk vragen we aan alle cliënten die bereidheid. “ Willen mensen geen stage doen, dan is er ook meer aan de hand, dan kunnen we daarover spreken en dat uitklaren

One participant pointed out that in cases where the client denies a traineeship, s/he should be redirected to general vocational support:

Ja, dat is wat wij toch een paar jaar geleden eigenlijk wel beslist hebben, dat wij van onze cliënten een engagement vragen om een stage te doen. Wanneer mensen dat niet zien zitten, vind ik dat geen enkel probleem, alleen zijn wij dan ook niet de goede partner om hem meerwaarde.... dan kan dat wel via GTB

This is discursively intertwined with a focus on clients' motivation to work that was expressed by several participants.

We merken wel, ook al hebben de mensen een zware problematiek, als die heel gemotiveerd zijn dan kunnen die best wel nog veel bereiken. Ik denk dat dat één van de belangrijkste dingen is.

A few participants connected motivation in turn to social security benefits by pointing out that some clients were not really interested in finding work.

Als we merken die persoon is niet gemotiveerd, die komt voor zijn papieren in orde te krijgen. Dan stopt het en beginnen we daar ook niet aan. [...] we hebben pas iemand gehad € 1900,00. Van,... hoe zat die combinatie weer? Van de ziekenkas. Ja, overtuig die persoon maar eens om te gaan werken.

From our findings traineeships emerge as an instrument for simultaneously achieving multiple goals of the supported employment programme. Our participants generally talked positively about the prominent role of traineeships in their support, describing them as a way to identify training needs of the client, as an opportunity and as an important – maybe the most important – instrument that they utilise to help persons with disabilities obtain jobs. They were mostly represented in terms of success, self-awareness, opportunities for learning and demonstrating to employers the value of the client for the organisation. Furthermore, traineeships were presented as a strategy or instrument to obtain competitive employment through a step-wise approach. With regard to the roles of clients, employers and support professionals our analysis indicates that traineeships are centered on enhancing the low value of persons with disabilities on the labour market – as perceived by employers – by intervening first and foremost on the individual level. While employers remain uncommitted through traineeships, the responsibility for convincing the employer of one's value as a worker rests mostly on the trainee. The support professional acts as a person who creates the opportunities that the client should utilise.

This pragmatic support may at the same time contribute to strengthening persons with disabilities' competencies and self esteem, and reinforcing the stigma of persons with disabilities as less preferable workers.

The results demonstrate that the way in which traineeships are represented by support professionals constructs clients as lacking necessary skills and being unattractive to employers, which is in line with an individual approach of disability and with the logic of activating individuals to work. Traineeships as they are presented here assign much responsibility to the client, i.e. to become competent and attractive to employers. At the same time the employer is only expected to consent to „try out the client for a while“ before committing to anything. The role of the support professional consists of offering traineeships to employers and meticulously analysing the (lack of) skills on the part of the client that may be trained during the traineeship. This distribution of responsibilities may be dehumanising because it puts persons with disabilities in a subject position of lower labour market value and deficit. The worst imaginable outcome of a traineeship for the employer is neutral, while for

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the employee getting a real job is of utmost importance. The clients are also expected to consent to traineeships, because they are thought of by support professionals as an indicator for clients' motivation. Denial would mean the client is not interested in strengthening his/her labour market position. It is interesting to note that failure was not often used as a term to describe possible outcomes of traineeships, instead regardless of any short term success they were portrayed as an investment in the future for which the client is responsible. This does not reflect the logic of work as a right that should be achieved by all stakeholders taking up responsibilities in creating inclusive work and work spaces. Even in the many reported examples where traineeships did help persons with disabilities to become more competent and more self-confident, potentially increasing their labour market value, the client remains represented as solely responsible for his/her success on the open labour market.

Wage subsidies in the search for competitive employment

All participants agreed on the importance of wage subsidies as a tool in their work. Some represented the wage subsidies as a measure to compensate for persons with disabilities' lower levels of performance.

je maakt eigenlijk een rugzakje om de dingen die hij [worker with a disability] eigenlijk niet kan te compenseren voor de werkgever, een trager tempo te compenseren door die loonkostsubsidie, bepaalde dingen, wat er ook naar collega's moet gebeuren.

Although several participants talked about more positive employer attitudes, a bottom line representation of the measure was that wage subsidies are also an important general incentive in a strategy to convince employers:

Dé werkgever, die bestaat niet. Sommige...vorige week kreeg ik een telefoon van een werkgever die vroeg "die cliënt gaat van contract veranderen, kan je zijn dossier eens opzoeken en de kortingen in kaart brengen" dan, ja...die werkgever is daar zeer gevoelig voor. Andere werkgevers zeggen van "ja, dat maakt mij niet zoveel uit, ik wil vooral ook garanties hebben dat die persoon dat stukje kan doen, dat werk hier kan doen maar die loonkostsubsidie is een belangrijk stuk van de loonkost die terugbetaald wordt."

Some participants had developed practices that discursively confirm the position of employers as calculating, rational actors in a competitive environment:

Wij hebben een instrument ontwikkeld voor die onkostensimulatie waarin dat we de belangrijkste tewerkstellingsmaatregelen in kaart brengt van die werkgever en dat we ook cijfermatig kunnen aantonen van "ja kijk, goed, die persoon gaat zoveel kosten."

Frequently participants nevertheless told about how they regret employers' focus on negative and cost-related perceptions regarding workers with disabilities:

het is soms ontgoochelend dat dat systeem [of wage subsidies] wel vrij goed gekend is waardoor dat werkgevers daar sneller op focussen dan wij zouden willen

This lead one participant to consider resistant practices:

Eigenlijk denk ik dat de coaches bij ons pas een loonkostsimulatie, wij hebben ook de mogelijkheid om echte simulaties aan werkgevers te tonen, om dat pas te tonen op het moment dat er al een stage geweest is en dat beide partijen weten welke werknemer en welke werkgever er voor hen zit

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Another participant portrayed the wage subsidy as an important instrument to reassure potential employers that there is no direct problem when their client cannot achieve full productivity immediately, and considered this to be a process:

In principe dat eerste jaar, die VOP premie waar de persoon recht op heeft dat is enorm. In die zin heb ik wel zo iets van dat wordt wel opgevangen. De persoon gaat ook wel renderen. Dat vind ik ook wel belangrijk om aan de werkgever mee te geven van: kijk, het is in het begin wel minder maar die gaat wel renderen op termijn.

Although the participant did not mention it literally, this way of representing the wage subsidy implies that during the first period the employee and the organisation get the opportunity to find ways to optimize the work and the working environment. Exceptionally participants did talk about this relation between wage subsidies and accommodations in the workplace. For example, one participant talked about how wage subsidies may attract the wrong kind of attention for workers with disabilities, negatively influencing the sustainability of their work:

Dat is een promotieartikel. En dat heeft zijn voor- en nadelen. Want promotieartikels worden niet gestuurd, dat is een van de nadelen. De verkeerde werkgever wel eens voor financieel bejag iemand zal in dienst nemen waarbij op het eerste zicht niet veel aan te zien is maar toch een goedkeuring heeft. Dat geeft dan wel een tewerkstelling maar geen goeie of blijvende. En daar ben ik dus helemaal niet gelukkig bij.

A few participants talked about their preference to represent wage subsidies not only as a way of financing goodwill, but also to stimulate employers to acquire disability-related expertise and make accommodations in the organisation. This is an indication of a discourse that places social responsibility with employers. The organisation is treated as an entity open for adaptation in order to become more inclusive to diversity in terms of dis/ability. As such, the resources of the state in the form of wage subsidies are not used as a mere incentive, but instead they require a level of commitment of the employer to make efforts to adapt the workplace including working processes.

Maar na het eerste jaar tewerkstelling kan een werkgever een afwijking vragen en dat is een verhoging of een verlening [...]. Vanaf dit moment krijg je eigenlijk een persoonlijke benadering. Dan [...] kunnen wij meesturen, wij kunnen voorwaarden gaan zetten en echt luisteren naar de klant van wat is er goed wat is er niet goed. [...] En dan kunnen we met de werkgever gaan overeen komen en zien van kijk, soms mits dees en dees aanpassing die we financieel ondersteunen kunnen we dit en dit doen.

Other participants however highlighted that individualised approaches are difficult because they were convinced that employers are allergic to the burden of administrative negotiations and obligations:

Als dat ook nog eens moet gebeuren voor die loonkostsubsidie, dan vrees ik een beetje dat werkgevers gaan zeggen van "goh, jongens, pfff al dat gebabbel, al dat onderhandelen, voor mij hoeft dat niet, geef mij maar een werknemer waar dat er niet te veel spel aan is".

This may be considered a normalising discourse that aims to make look workers with disabilities similar to non-disabled workers.

Looking at their own role a few participants repeatedly talked about their work as match-makers. The logic being that their job is to make the best possible match between workers and jobs, thus minimizing any work disability.

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Het is zelfs de bedoeling om ergens...een goede match is een match waar dat er nauwelijks of geen productiviteitsprobleem is.

At the same time, the discourse of lower productivity among workers with disabilities remained, which is illustrated by the following conversation between two of our participants:

P1: Langs de andere kant, als de job zo op het lijf geschreven is van die cursist, ok, dan denk ik dan is die VOP niet nodig maar...

P2: Hoeveel keer komt dat voor?

P1: Dat komt gewoon niet voor, toch niet in het normaal arbeidscircuit.

Despite differences in their accounts, wage subsidies were considered by all our employment support professionals as one of the most important tools in their work. Some referred to wage subsidies as an incentive that merely helps to achieve employment in the open labour market. Others pointed out that wage subsidies may compensate for lower levels of productivity of persons with disabilities. Regardless of the intention of the strategy this way of increasing the client's labour market value attributes to clients a subject position of lack and inferiority compared to able-bodied employees. It reflects an approach to disability as an individual trait that signifies a less-than-ideal worker who cannot attain performance levels similar to non-disabled workers due to his/her impairment, and for which compensation is needed. This is related to the description by Grover and Piggott (2005) of persons with disabilities as a "reserve army of labour", which results from a shift to neo-liberalism aimed at creating a larger labour supply for entry-level jobs – neglecting the rights and needs of persons with disabilities.

In these fragments, employers are conversely conceived as rational actors who need to be compensated for this perceived lack of performance, for which they cannot be expected to take responsibility. In the relation with employers the employment support professional takes on a subject position of limited power over stigmatising ideas about persons with disabilities and his/her role is then mainly centered on informing employers about the benefits of the wage subsidies. Some participants tried however to avoid placing their clients in a subject position of lack to early in their approach to the employer by delaying information about the wage subsidies in order to avoid placing the emphasis on the client's lack.

Other participants more radically diverted from the individual discourse of disability by carefully framing wage subsidies as a first incentive providing an entry point to eventually work at making the organisation more inclusive to workers with disabilities, thereby supporting sustainable employment through shared responsibility. As such the responsibility for successful employment is shared between the employer – who is expected to make accommodations – and the client. The ideal support professional's role then would become that of an expert who assists in shaping the work environment – with the ultimate goal being the „perfect match“ of the client with the job. Meanwhile, this position recognises that making organisations more inclusive and open to diversity may require additional resources that the company may not have. The state then plays its role by financially supporting these companies. As such the stigma on workers with disabilities is discursively offset against the responsibility of employers – to adapt their organisations – and of the state – to support employers in this process.

Advocating for clients towards employers

A recurrent theme in support professionals' accounts described their work in terms of supporting persons with disabilities and combatting prejudice and at the same time reaching out to employers. In their narratives, employers are represented as difficult to convince about the worth of hiring persons with disabilities. For example, because of prejudice and a lack of knowledge about the heterogeneity of the population. Therefore, when discussing ways of advocating for their clients many participants

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focused on strategies to convince employers to hire and explaining for them the specific strengths and needs of the clients. Most support professionals positioned themselves in a discourse that revolved around a demanding and highly competitive labour market in which their role is to make all efforts to convince employers of the value of their clients and at the same time of the limited risk that they will run when hiring persons with disabilities.

The importance of making potential employers aware of clients' competencies was explained by our participants by pointing at employers' lack of knowledge and their ignorance for the subject. Employers who have hired a client are considered to have proven their willingness to give opportunities and are as a result often asked more than once if they are willing to hire another person with a disability. In this context that clients are discursively situated as members of the group of persons with disabilities. Support professionals would try to convince the "willing" employers to hire a client by referring to their positive experiences with employees with disabilities:

zo werken GOB's dikwijls, dat is een geslaagde eerste ervaring, bij wijze van spreken, de week erna hangt de werkgever terug aan de telefoon om te zeggen van "heb je er nog zo eentje?"

It is worth noting that the Flemish regional government provides resources to the services based on the number of support trajectories and the successful completion of these trajectories. This was invoked by our participants as they employed discourses of economic efficiency when they talked about their strategies. More specifically, most support professionals would quickly give up when they felt that an employer was not receptive to the idea of hiring persons with disabilities. Although some participants said that it would make them angry when they were confronted with employers who denied any collaboration, they felt it was necessary to approach this from a pragmatic point of view.

Ik heb nu onlangs weer ervaren met een telefoontje naar een bepaalde dienst...als je daar op zoveel weerstand botst, dan ga ik in de eerste maanden niet meer bellen naar dat bedrijf, ook al is het met iemand anders met een andere problematiek, omdat de weerstand bv. lag in het feit van "onze mensen waarvoor dat de werknemer moet werken, die rekenen erop dat de werknemer er is" dus die betwijfelen de continuïteit dat mijn cliënt kon kunnen bieden. Ik heb gewoon geantwoord "wil niet elke werkgever dat zijn personeel op post is?" dus ik had de ene weerstand na de andere en ik voelde mij kwader en kwader worden aan de telefoon en nu weet ik van "kijk, ik ga niet meer naar die mens bellen de eerste maanden."

In critiquing unwilling employers one participant referred to economic rationality to counter some employers' objections. The participant mentioned shortages on the supply side of the labour market thus implicitly also referring to the business case of disability, which upholds a pragmatic discourse of inclusion because companies cannot afford to lose competent workers if they wish to remain competitive:

Je hebt er die inderdaad systematisch hun verantwoordelijkheid ontlopen. Ik kan er dan niet tegen dat ze zitten te "bleiten" dat ze geen volk vinden.

Especially in economic sectors with a relatively low average tenure and supply-side issues on the labour market, loyalty may be an appealing characteristic to employers.

Support professionals also made the value of their clients clear by emphasizing the qualities and competences that s/he has developed through education, training and/or work experience. In their conversations with employers many support professionals would explicitly avoid to talk about the client as a person with a disability or as someone who is not able to perform certain tasks, avoiding

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“disability group membership”. They considered this to be a negative approach that would distract employers from the qualities of the person:

Neen, we spreken ook niet over handicap, we zeggen van “dat kan hij wel en daar gaat hij wel wat ondersteuning in nodig hebben” dus zo pakken we dat een beetje aan.

Instead, participants preferred to talk about competencies and talents and as far as limitations are concerned they emphasise what the individual needs to be able to do the work:

het woord “arbeidsbeperking” op zich al, dat is heel moeilijk want dat is iets negatief terwijl je eigenlijk wil zeggen van “wij proberen iemand met talenten naar u te brengen, ok, hij heeft ook wel een aantal problemen wat dat en dat als gevolg meebrengt maar wij brengen u vooral iemand die dat en dat wel kan maar het is wel een persoon met arbeidsbeperking.”

This approach of selling the client based on skills and talents – not as a persons with a disability – is rooted in support professionals’ representation of clients’ employment trajectories as difficult, risky and loaded with disappointment and failure:

Interviewee2: Natuurlijk, als je al een geschiedenis van misschien een aantal teleurstellingen...en die zijn dan natuurlijk wel blij dat ze die kans hebben gekregen. Als ze dan ook op de juiste plaats zijn terecht gekomen dan is er voor hen geen reden meer om te vertrekken. Dat zou opnieuw een risico betekenen om in een heel nieuw verhaal te gaan stappen.

Another strategy to counter a discourse of risk and cost relies on referring to group characteristics of workers with disabilities and connecting this to economic benefits. Diversity was mentioned by some participants as positive to work organisations, representing the responsibility for creating opportunities as shared between the client and the employers.

Ja, uiteraard is dat niet één, de verantwoordelijkheid van de cliënt maar van iedere organisatie, dat is de verantwoordelijkheid van een organisatie om ervoor te zorgen dat je een balans hebt en dat je ook en dat is filosofisch maar ik vond dat ook echt wel dat je een weerspiegeling hebt van verschillende invalshoeken binnen uw organisatie en dat kan je alleen maar hebben wanneer dat je verschillende...wanneer je ook mensen met een beperking in dienst hebt. Maar als je veel mensen met een beperking in dienst hebt en veel mensen kwetsbaar zijn, die zorg nodig hebben, dat ben je ook uit balans.

Support professionals who employed the “business case for disability” strategy, when talking about the value of persons with disabilities for employers, focused not only on the personal characteristics of the client, such as competencies, limitations and preferences. They combined a discourse of “grateful employees” with an emphasis on persons with disabilities as an asset to the organization because they are assumed to be generally more loyal, punctual and motivated than the average non-disabled employee.

De mensen zijn super content als ze werk hebben en die gaan daar 100% voor ook al is er een rendementsverlies, hebben ze een beetje rendementsverlies maar die zijn gemotiveerd en die zullen altijd op tijd gaan, terwijl dat, ik denk, misschien bij de standaard werknemer dat dat ook wel een keer kan afzakken.

Although it is presented as a positive element to the benefit of the client and the company, it does relate to a discourse in which persons with disabilities are portrayed as a group of people who are grateful when they are given an opportunity to work by others. Discourses of strong, non-disabled

workers who change jobs regularly are usually expressed in terms of challenges, learning and career development. In contrast, the discourse that we find here behind clients' perceived loyalty carries a logic of ableism, in which challenges and career opportunities are implicitly reserved for non-disabled persons. Persons with disabilities are first of all expected to be passive receivers of work opportunities and changing jobs is seen as risk taking.

Employment support professionals highlighted the difficulty of convincing employers to hire individuals with disability. The most common positionings among our participants were those of advocates for their clients, whom they represented as talented and competent and attractive employees. When attempting to place a client through conversations with potential employers, many support professionals strategically provided limited information about impairments and to keep their focus on his or her competencies and talents. This strategy is one of normalisation of their clients as employers are often biased and prejudiced about workers with disabilities. Some participants rather deployed strategies leveraging the business case for diversity. This includes assigning certain attitudes to persons with disabilities and stressing them as beneficial to the organisation, for example the higher motivation and loyalty of workers with disabilities or, more rarely, by pointing to the organizational benefit of multiple perspectives.

Although these approaches differ in the representation of how the client may contribute to the organisation – by being „normal“ or by being „exceptional“ – both are centered on disability as an individual issue de-emphasizing the role of the work environment. To create goodwill with the employer, the support professional adopts individualised approach to client-centeredness, in which most responsibility is placed with the client and employers are not expected to make specific efforts.

Finally, as far as the choice of possible employers is concerned, client-centeredness appeared to be interpreted by our participants in function of expected success. In other words, clients' preferences for certain employers in responding to vacancies or making proactive contacts were not always followed, because some participants wanted to prevent foreseeable failure. This was represented as detrimental to the clients' motivation and it was also linked to an economic logic of effective support, in which reference was made to the way in which employment support services are financed by the government. The latter is a limitation of the structure in which our participants work and which is frustrating to some of them, nevertheless it results in meaning-making of employment of the client in terms of goodwill of individual employers, not of social responsibility to support the right of freely chosen work in the open labour market (United Nations, 2006). It seems that the financial and organisational structure of employment support services supports sharing responsibilities in a way that expects the client to be a „valuable asset“, while the support professional looks for employers who are willing to collaborate. Their appears to be limited incentive for support professionals to assume a role of game-changers in how employers perceive employees with disabilities.

Accommodations

Finally, a fourth important theme concerned reasonable accommodations at work. Most of our participants described how they advised employers regarding possible measures that may increase comfort and performance of the client, availability of materials and consultants, and expected results. Generally, reasonable accommodations were thought of as centered on the individual worker and less attention is given to the role of co-workers and trade unions:

We vragen materialen aan. Ze hebben materialen nodig. We hebben heel wat leenmaterialen. [...] We gaan op voorhand materialen installeren. Soms moet er ook getest worden welk programma er past op de computer, welke softwarepakketten er worden gebruikt en is dat compatibel? Dat is soms wel een zoektocht.

Exceptionally, participants did approach their support provision in a proactive way with a long-term perspective:

Dus die bemiddelingen, die materialen of er verandert iets aan de computer, maar ook als er een nieuwe werkgever is bv. de bazen veranderen, er zijn nieuwe collega's, er is minder begrip, dan komen we ook een stukje kijken: wat is het probleem, wat gebeurt er eigenlijk? Dan gaan we kijken.

However, although most other participants recognized the importance of proactive follow-up to avoid drop-out from work, they took a reactive position and gave it less priority in their role as employment support professional.

Eigenlijk onze slogan is "gids doorheen je loopbaan" en we proberen in de mate van het mogelijke er ook wel voor te zorgen dat die werknemer, als die aan de slag is, ook altijd kan blijven een beroep doen op ons. Dat gebeurt enkel maar in situaties waarin dat het fout loopt.

Participants talked about their role in supporting not only the clients, but also the employers to make accommodations.

Tot nu toe zat het vooral op de persoon maar door het project van zorg en werk betrekken we dat nu ook naar de werkgever en er bestaat ook heel veel maar het is ook een kwestie van dat allemaal te kennen en te weten. Als er bv. zo een soort opleidingsnood zou liggen bij collega's waarom daar dan geen diversiteitsplan voor maken zodat het ook bv. die vorming een stukje gesubsidieerd kan worden voor de organisatie. Maar daar zijn we nog niet....

It is interesting to note the emphasis on finding the right information and training workers, which indicates an emphasis on the technical dimension of accommodations and less focus on aspects such as the organisational culture and the importance of adaptations in the organisation. This discursive position of reasonable accommodations as revolving around the individual gives meaning to client-centeredness in terms of meeting the needs of a person and his/her employer.

In this regard some participants referred to the possibility to formalize the engagement of organisations to the benefit of the client and without putting the client-centered character of the support at risk. One example is making explicit all requested and granted modifications of the work and work environment in a document that could act as a frame of reference for future evaluation and intervention. This idea was placed in a discourse of sustainability of employment:

Ik heb een aantal jaren terug een begeleiding gedaan, ik heb nu vorige week telefoon gekregen van iemand die zijn ontslag heeft gekregen en dat heeft puur te maken met een andere leidinggevende die de situatie helemaal niet verstaat en die helemaal niet weet van de voorgeschiedenis, die die werkzoekende zelf ...of die werknemer die had zelf beslist om het ook niet bespreekbaar te maken en het resultaat was dat hij zijn ontslag heeft gekregen, dat heeft puur daarmee te maken en dat is natuurlijk...daar staat nergens niets neergeschreven. Er wordt op dat moment ook niet over gecommuniceerd en dus die informatie is verloren gegaan.

One participant inscribed himself into a discourse of inclusive labour markets by referring to an intervention in which he made an employer aware of the fact that certain accommodations for the client were also beneficial to other workers and thus to the company.

Een heel mooi verhaal, maar dat is natuurlijk wel een extreem is iemand...een bedrijf die een nieuwe productieafdeling opende en die had iemand in stage met autisme en die heeft eigenlijk die persoon, bij wijze van spreken, om alle instructies heel duidelijk te maken. Het idee van "als hij het niet begrijpt, dan gaan de anderen het ook niet begrijpen" dus wat doet hij nu? Hij heeft alle instructies kunnen uitwerken en hij zet hem nu in op het moment als er een nieuwe werknemer komt,

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een jobstudent of een interim-kracht dan kunnen die veel sneller ingeschakeld worden.

Note that the participant describes such an achievement as an “extreme case”, placing it discursively outside the mainstream of the support activities. Nevertheless, this expression constitutes reasonable accommodations as being more than an individual matter or a one-way relation in which the organization gives and the individual receives. Instead the organization also benefits from developing and implementing accommodations and the client’s needs become framed as a learning opportunity for the whole organisation. Vice versa the discourse of inclusive work places responsibility with organisations for modifying the work environment to fit diverse states of being and to reduce stigma.

Two other participants placed such inclusive practices under a discourse of “optional, but nice to have because it is also – but separately – subsidized”:

Sommige bedrijven hebben ook diversiteitsplannen en dan kunnen we dat ook wel aankaarten dat als ze bepaalde zaken doen voor een persoon met een arbeidshandicap dat ze dat ook nog eens kunnen terugtrekken via die weg of we zeggen zelf dat die mogelijkheid bestaat en dan verwijzen we die door naar Resoc.

The inclusive work discourse gives meaning to organisations as bearing part of the responsibility for persons with disabilities’ access to work by demonstrating that they are competent to design fitting jobs. Client-centeredness is as such not only defined in the more generally accepted terms of proving clients’ individual competency, but also in terms of activating employers to make arrangements to provide access to the organization. One example of this appears from the interviews when a participant remarked – admitting that it had never occurred to him before – that it may be a good idea to not only formalise the client’s responsibility for achieving specific goals through a traineeship, but do to this also for the employer.

Some participants however discursively placed formalization of accommodations as part of a wider diversity and inclusion policy as the symbolic opposite of the client-centeredness that they saw as crucial to their role as support professionals:

wanneer we voelen dat er mogelijkheid en bereidheid is om dat groter plan aan te pakken dat we daar ook wel gaan naar verwijzen. Maar we hebben daar nog enorm veel groeimarge, dat is een beetje ook afhankelijk waar dat mensen een beetje bang zijn, schroom hebben om dat op een groter niveau te tillen omdat ze een stukje schrik hebben omdat dat ten koste gaat van dat individu en dan bedoel ik, men wil op dit moment toch nog in de eerste plaats dat die cliënt zijn werk behoudt en daar het meeste aandacht en energie naar gaat.

All participants framed their support regarding reasonable accommodations in terms of placement and less attention was given to the continuation of the employment in the longer term. Accommodations were mostly centered on the individual as a way of making it possible for the client to start doing the job, taking into account current parameters in the working environment. Most participants did not provide active follow-up to anticipate possible changes in the future at the level of the client or the organisation – which some explained to be a result of the fact that the services are not funded for such support. Most participants represented accommodations as a technical matter from which the client benefits and which does not affect co-workers or others in the organisation. Support professionals assume an expert-role in this approach, informing clients and employers about possible accommodations and funding schemes for accommodations. These findings indicate that our participants draw in part upon a social approach of disability as far as the direct working environment is concerned. Interestingly, the support professionals also saw opportunities to take up a role in supporting the employer in making the organisation more inclusive, although this was less frequently

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mentioned, giving priority to accommodations that affect the client directly. Nevertheless, a few participants did display a more radical social model discourse when they pointed out that they played a role in making organisations more inclusive. This approach assigned more responsibility to the employer and a more proactive role for the support professional. It also entailed that not only their client, but also the employers and the organisation benefit from accommodations and inclusive practices. In other words, these support professionals considered it to be their role to inspire organisational change, instead of focusing on immediate accommodations that appear to be a privilege for their client. Interestingly, some felt that this threatened the principle of client-centeredness in their support.

Discussion and conclusion

In this study we examined the narratives of employment support professionals active in Flanders to uncover aspects of meaning-making that underlie interventions of activation of individuals with disability. Based on qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews, four major themes regarding the implementation of support emerged: traineeships, wage subsidies, advocating for clients towards employers, and accommodations. Within each theme, we show how the participants made sense of their own role in support interventions as well as the roles of their clients and (potential) employers, and how they attributed responsibility for achieving employment. Specifically, we re-connect identified instances of meaning-making related to support practices and expectations towards the stakeholders with the logics of work as an individual responsibility and work as a right that society should help persons with disabilities to enjoy. The analysis also revealed how support professionals' discursive practices take the macro-structure in which they operate – i.e. rules, financial regimes and available measures – into account.

From our findings we learn that employment support professionals frequently position themselves within a discourse of disability that focuses on the individual and his/her characteristics as a starting point for explaining success or failure on the labour market. This is sometimes done by referring to specific talents of the client, but also by pointing out that persons with disabilities may be an asset to any company – thereby it is assumed that the client possesses the qualities of the group and will display them as an employee of the organisation. When it comes to the specific talents of the client, traineeships emerged as a vehicle to improve and prove competencies in an employment relationship characterized by minimal levels of employer commitment.

While these support actions fit within IPS-principles of client-centeredness and rapid placement, and are framed by support professionals as part of advocating for their clients, the meaning-making around these actions implies that potential employers and their organization are to a large extent perceived as an unchangeable reality in which the support professional should help the clients to demonstrate their value. The client him-/herself then is responsible for grasping the opportunity and “making it happen”. For the way our participants represented government measures at their disposal this means that they would use these in an argument to reduce employers' fear of productivity-losses and other economic risks associated with disability. Wage subsidies in this perspective are helpful to convince employers to hire the client, but they also provide a subject position that associates him/her with lack of performance and risk.

Only exceptionally did employment support professionals position themselves in a discourse of inclusive labour markets, and considered one of their task also to convince employers to change the organization to attain higher inclusion. In these cases, existing support measures were presented as a connected set of opportunities for the organization to become more inclusive and benefit from the diversity that comes with hiring persons with disabilities.

The logic of work as an individual responsibility and – to a lesser extent – the logic of work as a right provide a framework for meaning-making in support practices. Traineeships for example were represented by participants as a way to provide opportunities to clients, while at the same time the client does not get the role of a full and regular employee to whom the employer is formally committed. They also served to identify unmotivated and thus undeserving clients – those who refuse to start a traineeship. In line with Donnelly and Given (2010) we conclude that support professionals give meaning to clients' competencies, educational achievements and work experience, thereby providing them with more or less legitimate claims towards potential employers and hence employment opportunities. Their meaning-making contributes to the subject positions of persons with disabilities and employers, shaping the context of what may be expected and the conditions for

participation in the labour market. Although supported employment programmes revolve around bringing persons with disabilities quickly into the labour market, support practices may paradoxically end up stigmatising clients, comparable to traditional vocational rehabilitation outside the labour market. This may in fact create a frame of reference for disability and work that is not favourable to providing sustainable employment opportunities and acknowledging shared responsibility in creating these opportunities.

In their discursive practices support professionals connected their actions to the government's support policy, social security arrangements and the measures that their clients are entitled to, for example wage subsidies or the criteria for funding of support services. The main principle of supporting the individual to a rapid placement in the open labour market comes with a set of possible actions aimed at the individual. Although there are other measures aimed at supporting organisations in become more inclusive, these are structurally separate from the employment support services. This creates a position for support professionals in which they are stimulated to intervene at the level of the client in the first place. In other words, the structure of support measures comes with a discourse of fitting individuals into the labour market, which in turn limits available subject positions for the support professionals, who are in the first place expected to be experts in individual guidance and support to achieve such 'fit'. Against this structural background it should not be surprising when they use all their expertise to make their clients more attractive for employers and increase their labour market value. As far as employers are concerned, many participants talked about how they could only rely on employers' willingness to hire persons with disabilities. This points to what Loja et al. (2012) have called „the charitable gaze“, i.e. contrary to the logic of work as a right it is approached as a gesture of goodwill when employers are willing to offer opportunities to persons with disabilities, who are implicitly characterised by lack – not as an asset to the organisation. Thus the client risks ending up in a position of dependence and the charitable gaze may conceal ableist practices.

Interestingly, our findings show that most participants were aware of the risk of employment support that brings persons with disabilities closer to the labour market, but also places much responsibility for „fitting in“ on the individual. Some participants talked about their frustration over employers' prejudices and the fact that they have to rely on their goodwill. However, only a few participants showed instances of resistance against the discourse of lack and charity. The business case for disability (Andreassen, 2012) was sometimes made in terms of higher motivation, although most participants position fits with Woodham's and Danieli's (2000) finding that disability is altogether too ‚different a difference‘ to be successfully turned into a business case. Others resisted by more radically shifting attention to the responsibility of employers and questioning the representation of employers as rational-economic actors. It appears that support professionals are in a difficult position as advocates of their clients within a structure that expects them to place much responsibility with the client – not with organisations in the labour market. Structural arrangements limit the discursive resources available to them and hence the type of actions that they may take.

The critical disability studies lens allows for understanding the multiple and dynamic ways in which meaning is made of disability (Goodley, 2010). Focusing on support professionals' narratives we were able to contribute to the literature on disability and employment by providing insight into the assumptions behind their support practices, and the way in which they discursively relate to macro-societal elements. The critical approach gives ground to the importance of service professionals' discursive practices and their pivotal role in creating a context of meaning for social practices within the supported employment programme. Towards their clients and potential employers the service professionals give meaning to what may be expected of employment, the importance and role of traineeships, the use and goal of various support measures and the responsibilities and requirements of all parties involved. The logics of work as an individual responsibility and work as a right became evident in this study through a diversity of representations of disability and work, and contradicting discursive practices. It is important to note however, that our results also demonstrated the difficult position service professionals find themselves in. They are in a sense entrenched between macro-

societal structures and the micro-context of work. While they play a crucial role in giving meaning to disability and work, the structure in which they work encourages some discourses more than others.

In their analyses of success of supported employment programmes scholars like Bond (2004) did not take support professionals' meaning-making into account, although it may provide an explanation for observed differences in programme outcomes as well as long-term programme effectiveness in terms of job tenure and quality of work (Drake et al., 1999). Corbiere (2011) and Donnelly and Given (2010) did point to the importance of service professionals' implementation practices and our study builds on this by providing new findings related to support professionals' discursive practices in particular. These findings provide insight into supported employment programmes beyond formal principles and implementation strategies/methods, which may support further development of studies that aim to describe and explain the quality of such programmes. By showing how support professionals' meaning-making distributes responsibilities and provides subject positions to the clients – which may be empowering or stigmatising – our findings help to understand how professionals' support contributes to the long-term labour market position of the clients.

For governments, support services and other actors involved in labour market policy aimed at persons with disabilities this means that it is necessary to consider macro-societal structures and support professionals' practices in terms of their meaning-making. This will enable for assessing the degree to which supported employment programmes contribute to achieving inclusive labour markets. With regard to the Flemish region of Belgium in particular our findings suggest that an individually focused approach needs to be accompanied by interventions aimed at making work organisations more inclusive in order to distribute responsibilities for 'fit' and provide sustainable employment opportunities to persons with disabilities. The supported employment principle of rapid placement combined with the government funding scheme for employment support services appears to inspire support professionals to concentrate their efforts on achieving placement, giving less attention to long-term support or guiding the organisation in becoming more inclusive. A more comprehensive implementation of labour market support may facilitate sustainable employment for persons with disabilities by giving more opportunities to support professionals to employ discourses of inclusive organisations. While recent policy notes of the Flemish government (Muyters, 2015) suggest that less attention will be given in the future to practices aimed at providing expertise and support to make organisations more inclusive, our findings provide a ground for strengthening this type of support and integrating it with employment support to achieve more sustainable labour market participation of persons with disabilities.

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