WORKPLACE INCLUSION OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES:
AN EXPLORATORY STUDY IN A PUBLIC RESEARCH AGENCY

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Introduction

Some studies on disability and employment:

- Corporate culture and the influence on the recruitment of people with disabilities (Marrone et al., 1995; Glozier, 1998; Brand et al., 1988; Florian, 1981).


- Social factors within organizations and work experiences of people with disabilities (Cleveland, et al., 1997; Zuckerman, 1993; Colella, 1996, 2001).

Overall, literature has mainly focused on accommodation as “technical measures” to be implemented in organizations, and has mainly investigated the point of view of the employer and coworkers. Few more recent studies have instead evidenced the importance of social factors in the inclusion process and have involved people with disabilities.
Research context

- Italy and the reform of mandatory employment (national Law 68/99):
  - The number of people with disabilities hired in Italian organizations has gradually increased.
  - Organizations have to deal with the complex issue of the inclusion of people with disabilities in the working context.

- National Research Council (CNR), the major public research agency in Italy:
  - 7996 employees work within the CNR.
  - 371 employees are people with disabilities.
Aims of the study

- Investigate how employees with disabilities of the CNR perceive their work well-being.

- Identify factors that could promote or hinder workplace inclusion.

The research was part of a broad research-project on organizational well-being in the CNR, whose first results have shown that the management of disability is mostly left to individual initiative and workplace inclusion seems to be a critical aspect for the Agency (Colì & Rissotto, 2013).
Sample

The study involved 21 employees of the CNR, having different types of disabilities, such as people visually impaired and blind, people with limited mobility and with difficulties in articulation of language, people with mental disease and cognitive delay.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of participants</th>
<th>Number</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Age group</td>
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<td>Degree</td>
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<td>Total</td>
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Research method

- Data collection:
  - Semi-structured interview focused on relevant themes of organizational well-being in the CNR.
- Method:
  - Grounded theory.
- Data analysis:
  - Software NVivo9.
Results – People with disability’s representation of work well-being

- Work environment
  - Physical environment
  - Organizational environment
  - Relational environment

- Diversity management and equal opportunities
  - Professional growth and career
  - Allocation of tasks

- Communication and knowledge management
  - Flow of information
  - Management of communication
  - Scientific and administrative competences
  - Knowledge sharing

- Responsibility, value and professional development
  - Workload
  - Professional growth
  - Skills valuation
  - Career advancement

- Sense of belonging and professional identity
  - Usefulness of work
  - Compatibility of work
  - Sense of belonging

- Work well-being
Work environment

With regard to Physical aspects of the work environment, people mainly described positively their working context, presented as comfortable, bright, spacious and so on.

Concerning Organizational aspects of the work environment, the perception seems to be different. People spoke about non-allocation of tasks, lack of information, uninteresting work and lack of incentives as aspects that mostly contribute to their work-related stress. Employees sometimes attributed the non-allocation of tasks to their lack of ability:

“The problem is not that they don’t want to give me the tasks, the problem is that I am not able to do things and consequently they give them to other people because they are more capable. For those who are quicker it is easier...”

With regard to Relational aspects of the work environment, participants were mainly satisfied with relationships with their working group colleagues, but satisfaction decreased considering the relationship with their own manager and with colleagues of other offices.

Some employees feel isolated from the relational perspective, whereas others feel not involved or not integrated into the working activities of their group:

“Nobody ever comes into my office, as if I were an infectious person”.

“I feel down because people in this office sometimes have negative attitudes towards me. For example, they tell me not to talk about the things they do in this office, or they tell me off, or they tell me not to take the initiative”; “Since I have difficulties, they told me I can’t participate in the meetings, in the conferences, or in the tasks that others are doing ...”.

Also the physical location of the office can contribute to promote isolation rather than integration of employees in a work context, as in the case of the blind telephone operator’s office located in the basement and away from all other offices:

“They call us the living dead, because we work in a basement and we don’t meet anyone”.
Diversity management and equal opportunities

Concerning “Diversity management and equal opportunities”, interviewees said that managers gave little attention or no attention to their expectations of Professional growth and career, to their specific training such as studies or specializations and to their scientific and professional abilities.

Some employees argued that discrimination might arise in an hypothetical career path:

“There are no reasons for discrimination, but if we were to advance in our career I think there could be reasons!”.

Other employees attributed to their disease, and therefore to their mental and physical health state, failure in the Allocation of tasks and the consequent lack of work motivation.

“Before my disease I was highly motivated to work, in a few years I had many tasks, but then with the disease everything changed...”.

Some employees did not believe that the non-allocation of tasks is an injustice, attributing it instead to their lack of abilities.

“I don't believe that it is an injustice because if I could do things ... but I am not very able ...”.
**Communication and Knowledge Management**

Regarding “Communication and Knowledge Management”, an important aspect is related to the Flow of information. The exchange of information was more frequent between colleagues rather than between working groups. Although there was the perception of a rather frequent exchange of information between colleagues, some employees said that people who have important information try to keep it for themselves, because the possession of information is considered a form of power:

“He who has power can advance in his career in the Agency, therefore keeping the information for himself gives him more power”.

Other aspects are related to the Management of communications, Integration between scientific and administrative competences and Knowledge sharing. Participants said there was a top-down management of communications and that they were not usually involved in decision making affecting them. Some employees thought that the integration between scientific and administrative competences was not fostered and that in their office attention was not given to professional growth and knowledge sharing:

“The administration employees should work for researchers and be pleased with this collaboration. However, there are administration employees with such a tiny brain … they’re bureaucrats”.

Concerning “Responsibility, value and professional development”, participants spoke about four main aspects.

Regarding Workload, the perception of a light workload prevailed rather than a heavy workload. A too light workload was one of the aspects that could cause lack of satisfaction. Other elements were the kind of work and the coherence between tasks and skills.

“If they give me something more to do, I would use my brains, I would work an hour more”;
“The workload is light! Before, I was a body shop mechanic, I worked 10 hours a day and I liked it a lot, because you complete the work, you fix a broken thing and you feel good, you feel satisfied. Here at CNR it is not the same, but they’re two different jobs”. Even a child of fifth grade of elementary school, who is a bit smart, could do my job”.

With regard to Professional growth, some participants said that managers did not pay attention or paid little attention to the desire for professional growth of employees. Some others said that managers did not encourage or little encouraged the development of the abilities of their employees.

Regarding Skills valuation, employees felt that they were not valued for their actual skills and abilities and that the label of “disabled” would seem to prevail over that of “employee”.

My only regret is to be not valued for what I am, to not make my skills available to the Agency, because they don’t recognize your skills. They think that you are a disabled person and you are sick”.

With regard to Career advancement, most participants considered that this process occurred with little or no transparency, while others believed that it was little equitable or not equitable. Some employees underlined the impossibility to have a career.

“I do not have a career. They do not let me have a career path!”.
Sense of belonging and professional identity

Concerning "Sense of belonging and professional identity", participants spoke about three main aspects.

Regarding the Usefulness of work to the purpose of their office, only a small part of employees considered it useful. In some cases the lack of usefulness seems to be linked to the changes introduced by new technologies, that make some tasks less necessary:

“I don’t feel very useful. Once there was so much work, I was a salesman, now with the internet and email my work has decreased. It is not that others don’t want me, but my job is going to end because of technology”.

With regard to the Compatibility of work with personal commitments, most participants thought that it was rather compatible or highly compatible, also due to the presence of a specific law for people with disabilities:

“There are specific laws for people with disabilities which I can take advantage of”.

Regarding the Sense of belonging, among participants a high sense of belonging prevailed. On the whole, people said they were mostly pleased with their work. They sometimes spoke about a discomfort due to their work, that did not contribute to giving back to the person a specific identity.
Results - Factors that can promote workplace inclusion

- Taking into account employees’ opinions.
- Recognizing and valuing employees’ skills.
- Guaranteeing a career path and professional growth of employees.
- Promoting good relationships between employees and between employer and coworkers.
- Paying attention to physical location of the office.
- Taking into account the characteristics of the job.
Conclusions

- Workplace inclusion is:
  - A complex process, in which organizational/managerial factors seem to have an important role, as well as social and environmental ones.
  - An interactive process, which refers not only to the employee with disabilities, but also to coworkers, employer and organization as a whole.
  - Organizations capable of supporting the inclusion of people with disabilities are probably more attentive to the management of diversity in general, more able to recognize and enhance the expertise of all employees and to promote positive interpersonal relationships. These factors could be important not only for employees with disabilities, but also for all employees, contributing to improving the welfare and productivity of the entire organization.

- Authors’ recommendations:
  - Develop further studies within the Agency, in order to involve a larger number of employees with disabilities, and to analyze data also taking into account the different kind of disability.
  - Compare the points of view of employees with disability with the points of view of other employees and of employer.
  - Develop similar studies in analogous contexts, such as other research agencies or universities, in order to study the workplace inclusion of people with disabilities in complex organizations and identify best practices in this field.


