

Social acceptance and employment policy of people with disabilities in Greece

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Abstract

This article examines the employment of people with disabilities in the light of relevant policies and social acceptance in Greece. The method adopted is that of a literature review. The data examined show that in Greece various policies have been developed concerning people with disabilities with the aim of their equal inclusion in employment. However, the legislation is not reflected in practice. People with disabilities have limited opportunities compared to other people without disabilities to claim jobs. This is largely due to the fact that employers have perceptions that indicate a lack of social acceptance for people with disabilities. However, national policies also show that people with disabilities have not been widely accepted. The policies that exist for employment are inferior to those concerning social welfare. This also results in people with disabilities not seeking to work, not because they do not want to or do not need to, but because it is more economically efficient for them to maintain the benefits they receive. This highlights the need to design and implement policies that truly provide opportunities for people with disabilities to integrate into the labor market.

Keywords: Social acceptance; Employment; Disability; Policies

1. Introduction

The search for work has been an essential path for a political emancipation, the means to claim voice, visibility and rights and the way for people with disabilities and special educational needs to integrate into society (Oliver, 1990). The demand of disabled people for stable employment arose from their need for inclusion, which motivated and characterized their struggles. Their intention was to reposition public and political attention on the role of the economy, political and cultural barriers that hinder disabled people and contribute to their isolation, with the ultimate goal of their participation in society as equal citizens (Oliver & Barnes, 2012). Work in this effort has been the driving force that has offered and offers the possibility of equal access to the overall social system, enhancing the full participation of disabled people in all social sectors.

Work offers the opportunity for disabled people to integrate into the wider social world, giving a resonant presence with their presence (Oliver, 1990). The demand for the inclusion of disabled people concerns the process of gradually expanding and establishing relationships and political rights (Kim & et al., 2017). Inclusion strengthens people's sense of belonging and expands their political rights (Bates & Davis, 2004). Similarly, Simpson & Price (2010) refer to inclusion as a process of ensuring social rights, political rights and full participation. It is essentially about ensuring that people with disabilities have full and fair access to activities, social roles, rights and relationships directly with non-disabled people.

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2. Social inclusion and work

Supporters of social inclusion have rightly stressed the importance of paid employment as a catalyst for income, status and relationships (Bates & Davis, 2004). Ferrucci (2014) has referred to the value of work and its contribution to the inclusion of disabled people. Work, according to him, concerns primarily employment relationships that involve payments, in which each person has their duties but primarily has to do with the acquisition of relationships that are qualitatively different from those based mainly on the economic aspects of work or the achievement of specific productivity goals. Work concerns the acquisition and realization of a profession, in which a human being relates to others and this strengthens acceptance and solidarity between people (Ferrucci, 2014).

In the lives of people with disabilities, therefore, work is a crucial issue that can contribute decisively to the development of meaningful interpersonal relationships (Nota & et al., 2014). Through work, opportunities are offered that allow for the enjoyment of both feelings of solidarity and self-respect (McVilly, 2013). Schur (2002) has argued that employment can lead to the development of skills that facilitate participation in a variety of community and political activities outside the workplace. It also increases the perception that people with disabilities receive equal respect and have equal influence in the political system, reflecting their greater sense of inclusion in society.

At the same time, Finkelstein (1991) has demonstrated the contribution of work to the realization of the integration of the disabled person into society as a whole, through the possibility of their physical presence in a space that had been forbidden to them, in an environment that had been considered undesirable. The idea of integration through work is essential for disabled people because through it, existing inequalities and oppressive ideologies that surround them are questioned (Barnes, 2000). Through it, they are given the opportunity to have their voice heard, to project their stature and to reclaim their bodies by overturning existing ideologies that insist on subordinating them. The value of the integration of people with disabilities is essential for all the social relations that are produced because through them, diversity can be “valued” and meaningful relationships can be created (Ferrucci, 2014).

Milner & Kelly (2009) point out that as people with disabilities experience being “out of place” when they suddenly gain moments of collective experience as can be offered to them through work, it automatically gives the opportunity to allow different views of the community. It automatically allows those who are “inside” society to listen and learn from communities about those who are outside it. This way achieves a collective effort to construct integrated ways of being together. By engaging disabled people in work, therefore, it gives the opportunity to overturn stereotypical perceptions of their way of being but also to feel that they belong to the wider whole, making the vision of an inclusive society achievable.

In summary, the demand for work and inclusion has been of prominent importance since the beginning of the social model and continues to be strongly raised by people with disabilities, constituting an essential demand for their well-being. However, it seems to be a difficult task to achieve. Considering the passage of time since the first struggles and the first reports of disabled theorists and activists, one would expect that changes would have occurred in the lives of disabled people, but in reality it is difficult to identify areas of improvement.

3. Barriers to employment

Martz (2007) in an attempt to investigate the reasons that contribute to and lead to the non-vocational rehabilitation of disabled people in the Russian Federation conducted a study examining the barriers to employment faced by people with disabilities. For her, inclusive employment presupposes a work environment that is physically accessible and that encourages an attitude that supports people with disabilities. However, the data she collected from 316 Russian adults with disabilities living in various cities in Russia were discouraging as a total of 1915 barriers to employment were identified. Their list included physical barriers, behavioral barriers and lack of facilities. Furthermore, this sample reported a total of 1718 accommodations that would require changes to enable them to work and continue to work, including meeting their physical and time needs, as well as those related to working conditions or job duties.

The scientific literature has repeatedly demonstrated that work accommodations, i.e. reasonable adjustments to the space to serve the needs of all staff, can make the difference between job loss and a successful work experience. Reasonable work accommodations and space adjustments (Williams et al., 2016) help individuals to keep their jobs (Corbière et al., 2014), increase workplace productivity (Solovieva et al., 2011), and improve overall job satisfaction (Villotti et al., 2012).

At the same time, one of the most important barriers that employees with disabilities face when entering the workforce is the attitudes and stereotypes of colleagues and supervisors. The attitudes and prejudices of employers and colleagues, the rejection of their skills, and the competition seem to make it difficult for them to maintain the jobs offered to them. Individuals who believe that a coworker with a disability is responsible for an increased difficulty at work and for a greater workload have lower expectations towards that coworker and generally more negative reactions and attitudes towards employees with disabilities in general (Burge et al., 2007).

Thus, the general tendency of employers in both the private and public sectors is to avoid hiring disabled workers both because of their insufficient knowledge about disability and assumptions about reduced productivity and a decrease in the quality of services provided. They assume that they are prone to systematic absence from work due to their difficulties, are antisocial resulting in the inability to establish a cooperative climate in the workplace and that they are less committed to their work obligations in general (Wilson-Kovacs et al., 2008). Furthermore, the devaluation of the work potential of disabled people is also seen in other manifestations such as they are rarely assigned demanding roles, and there is an absence of remuneration and other work incentives, thus leading disabled people to devaluation and marginalization. The paternalistic culture that often prevails does nothing but marginalize people with disabilities and intensifies discrimination and hostility (Wilson-Kovacs et al., 2008).

Research conducted by Gunderson & Lee (2016) in Canada studying the earnings of people with disabilities shows that people with disabilities are still paid approximately 10% less than a comparison group without disabilities, all of whom have the same characteristics that determine their wages. The discrimination that people with disabilities experience during their integration into the labor market is numerous and is also found in the earnings they claim. At the same time, research conducted in Australia by Darcy et al. (2016) who studied the cases of complaints that have arisen in recent years due to discrimination in the workplace, revealed that most of them concerned the employment of disabled people and were related to facilities, mismanagement of people with disabilities and their replacement with new employees after a certain period of time. Important factors that led disabled people to file complaints were also rigid organizational practices in their workplace. Accordingly, the findings of a study conducted in Canada indicate the existence of discrimination and labeling on the part of the job and the employer as primary factors that prevent the success of the disabled respondents in securing and maintaining their employment in the labor market. Therefore, perceptions of disability have a greater impact on their inability to maintain and secure employment than the lack of favorable workplace practices and measures (Shier et al., 2009).

Although legislation in many countries requires employers to employ people with disabilities, many employers still decide against hiring workers with disabilities. Araten-Bergman (2016) pointed out that there is a large discrepancy between what an employer states and what they actually do. Although many employers tend to express positive attitudes and declare their intentions to hire disabled people, they often do not. The reasons for such a decision are multiple, some of which have already been mentioned. In addition to a common lack of knowledge about disabilities in general, employers are often unaware of the needs of employees and are not informed about how they can be accommodated in the workplace. Concerns that employers report regarding the accommodation process are the cost and training time that must be devoted to employees with disabilities.

However, even when employers are willing to hire and accommodate people with disabilities, other challenges and obstacles may arise in the practical process of integrating future employees with disabilities into the workplace. For example, employers may not have the resources to support people with disabilities.

According to Wilson-Kovacs et al. (2008), employers perceive disabled employees as more expensive. This is due to the costs they have to incur in modifying the work environment to suit the needs of disabled employees, the self-harm they assume they will cause and the associated insurance costs they will have to bear, and the belief that the dismissal process will be problematic. Thus, for employers, hiring and even more so promoting disabled employees is seen as a significant risk that should be avoided. This is why disabled people are more likely to be fired within a short period of time after being hired (Mitra & Kruse, 2016).

Research by Moore et al. (2020) showed that another factor that constitutes a barrier to the entry of people with disabilities into employment is training in new technologies. The need for education for students with disabilities and special educational needs is something that has been highlighted in the relevant literature highlighting the important role of technology (Vouglanis, 2023; 2024; Vouglanis & Diragas, 2022; Vouglanis & Driga, 2023; 2024; Vouglanis & Salapata, 2024).

A similar study by Wang & Li (2018) in China showed that men with disabilities are more likely to find employment than women, and this is because women are considered less productive. Also, according to studies of feminist disability

theories, women with some kind of disability face more social obstacles when trying to find the balance between work and family. On the other hand, research conducted in Canada showed that women with some kind of disability are unable to take initiatives, are incompetent, dependent and with little contribution to society. In a qualitative study conducted by Gustafsson et al. (2014) regarding those employers who had previous personal experience in hiring people with some kind of disability showed that they were positive about hiring these people (Fisher & Purcal, 2017). Of course, there is also the other side of employers, who while stating positive about hiring people with some kind of disability, in practice do not do so (Kulkarni & Kote, 2014). Furthermore, in a study by Fisher & Purcal (2017) they reported that there were countries (United Kingdom, Canada, Australia) that maintained a reluctance to hire people with disabilities and in particular people who faced mental health problems or learning difficulties. This attitude was most often due to misconceptions about the abilities of people with disabilities, i.e. their productivity or the quality of their abilities, but also the cost of their adaptation to the workplace (Vornholt et al., 2018). In conclusion, other factors that created a more cautious attitude of employers towards integrating people with disabilities into their workforce were the following: legal status, employer fear and concern, and working conditions (Kulkarni & Kote, 2014; Zappella, 2015).

4. The case of Greece

Under Law 2643/1998, the recruitment of people with disabilities, war victims and generally disadvantaged people in the wider public sector, in banks and in public benefit organizations is mandatory. The mandatory percentage of recruitment varies depending on the condition and the position offered. The notices issued mainly concern permanent contracts, but from time to time fixed-term contracts are also offered to acquire previous service or to meet specific needs. Recruitment in the private sector is also mandatory, in companies that employ more than fifty people. An exception is companies that have shown a loss on their balance sheets up to two years before the notice, where the percentage of recruitment is around 2%. A necessary condition for the recruitment of vulnerable groups is registration in the Manpower Employment Agency registers at the special offices of special social groups. Employees are also protected from dismissal without a serious reason such as complete inability to adequately cover the job position or a criminal record. In addition, they are entitled to additional vacation and medical leave, depending on the category of disability. The law also provides for the possibility of covering part of the salaries of employed persons as well as a grant for the configuration of the space, if modifications are needed to adapt the employee. At the moment these lines are written, the law is essentially repealed and all recruitment will be carried out by the Supreme Personnel Selection Council, without any particular changes to the process other than providing greater flexibility in the selection of positions, always for the public sector.

The disadvantages of Law 2643/1998, and clearly from the perspective of people with disabilities, are that any announcements or decisions concern a broader general framework, as among the vulnerable groups protected by the law, a very large percentage of healthy people without any disability, such as those with many children, belong. This results in the dissatisfaction of people with disabilities and this does not seem to change with the new legislation, which does not distinguish between disabilities. In addition, the outdated medical model is followed. This means that it is based on the percentage of disability of each person, which is assigned by a medical evaluation team, which does not evaluate the abilities and capabilities of the person being examined. This results in positions not being filled by individuals capable of providing effective and productive work, but on the contrary, on the one hand, there are individuals who have much more abilities for a position assigned to them and on the other hand, individuals who cannot cope with their position while they could very well offer from another position.

Regarding employment in the private sector, the situation becomes a little more ominous for a person with a disability. Employers seem to be wary of hiring a person with a disability, mainly considering whether this is suitable for the position and will not be a drag on their business. State wage subsidy is not always applied and it seems that the hiring of a disabled employee always depends on fixed-term integration programs through the Manpower Employment Agency which are subsidized, so the employer's burden is reduced. Of course, these programs are not preferred by people with disabilities for two reasons. The first is that the disability benefit is usually lost and obtaining it after the end of employment is a laborious and long-term process. The second and most important is that many people with disabilities are indirectly insured and self-insured through work, resulting in them usually joining welfare when their insurance expires, something that most people want to avoid, as there are obvious problems with their medical coverage.

A solution to these problems is attempted by Law 4331/2015, which simplifies some of the disability certification procedures and allows people with disabilities to work in Social Cooperative Enterprises and training programs of the Manpower Employment Agency, without interrupting the corresponding allowances or benefits. Of course, the jobs are usually fixed-term and do not offer significant experience, but they are a very positive example of the improving

situation. With the implementation of Law 4440/2016, the recruitment system in the public sector is undertaken exclusively by the Supreme Personnel Selection Council and aims to eliminate the inequalities experienced by people with disabilities and those directly concerned. The new legislation adds disabled people and their relatives as a separate category in the new job advertisements. Public bodies and bank subsidiaries are required to hire disabled people at a rate of 10% of the advertised positions.

Some of the advantages of working as a person with disabilities are additional leave and early retirement. People with disabilities are now entitled to 6 days of regular leave for medical visits per year and in some cases where it is deemed necessary, the 22 days of regular leave are doubled and reach 44. Additionally, if the employee completes 15 years of work and after this period the disability occurs, he automatically retires on a full pension. If the employee has not worked in the past and starts his career as a person with a disability, in 15 years he will be able to retire with a full pension. He also has the right to retire on a reduced pension, earlier than 15 years, if he is deemed incapable of work by the Disability Certification Center.

The term accessibility, according to article 2, par.71 of Law 4067/2012, is understood as the characteristic of the environment, which allows all individuals - without discrimination of gender, age and other characteristics, such as physique, strength, perception, nationality - to have access to it, that is, to be able to autonomously, safely and comfortably approach and use the infrastructures, services (conventional and electronic) and goods available in the specific environment. Accessibility in the built environment is ensured through accessible design, that is, a design process in which the needs of people with disabilities are specifically examined with a view to products, services and infrastructures so that they can be used, as far as possible, autonomously by people with various disabilities. By clarifying the definition, one easily understands that accessibility does not only concern the technical part concerning the daily movement of citizens with disabilities, but also access to all information and services. So on the one hand, we have a set of laws and decisions, which define, for example, what modifications will be made to older buildings and what specifications will be used for newly built buildings. The regulations mainly include specific dimensions of corridors, elevators, sidewalks, etc. and concern indoor and outdoor spaces and the purpose is easy access to buildings. Also basic are the regulations made for the movement of people with disabilities. Special seats are provided for and a percentage of buses is defined that will have specific modifications so that a wheelchair can be boarded on predetermined routes. Corresponding provisions provide for regulations for special taxis and seats on trains and metros, parking spaces, etc. (Papakonstantinou, 2019).

Moving on to the part of ensuring access to information and services, there was a relatively recent legislation with Law 4074/2012. The aim is to access information without disability being an obstacle. Here technology has provided solutions. The obligation for all individuals to access information search and communication services is carried out by implementing new technologies such as audio description, automatic subtitling, text enlargements on electronic pages, etc. Access to services mainly refers to the facilitation of service through the corresponding electronic channels of the public sector and includes bodies such as regions, municipalities, tax offices, etc. In the private sector there is no obligation for such facilities in services, but many companies present themselves as incorporating facilities for people with disabilities (Papakonstantinou, 2019).

The reality for people with disabilities is somewhat different, especially in our country. During the pandemic they faced significant problems (Vouglanis & Driga, 2024). If in the case of services the situation has normalized, which is of course mainly due to the onset of Covid19, which with the restrictions imposed, forced government organizations to expedite electronic simplification procedures for all citizens and by extension people with disabilities. However, this is not universally true for physical access and transportation. Many complaints are made daily regarding damage to sidewalks, closed crossings and ramps from cars or other obstacles, illegally occupied parking lots as well as bus routes that are either insufficient or the mechanisms do not function properly. This has the result that access to work becomes more difficult and in many cases acts as a deterrent to the active search for it. The situation seems to be constantly improving in recent years, mainly due to the awareness of citizens, but also of the state. This of course happens mainly in large urban centers and much less in the region.

Law 4443/2016, stipulates that any form of discrimination based on race, color, national or ethnic origin, lineage, religious or other beliefs, disability or chronic illness, age, family or social status, sexual orientation, identity or characteristics is prohibited. The positive thing is that people with chronic illnesses (HIV, Heart failure, etc.) are now also included and that neither each illness is specified by name separately, nor is a certain percentage of disability defined. The purpose of the legislation is to protect all people belonging to vulnerable groups from discrimination in everyday life and at work. The most basic discriminations that exist are direct, those in which a person with a disability is excluded from a process due to disability, indirect, which mainly refer to the difficulties faced by people with disabilities due to bureaucracy, etc., harassment due to different appearance and limited abilities, and the failure to

provide the necessary modifications in the workplace for the adaptation needs of people with disabilities (Papakonstantinou, 2019).

Of course, there are many cases of a combination of all or some of the above categories of discrimination. A striking example is the 2017 survey by the Hellenic Statistical Authority and the processing of data by the National Confederation of Persons with Disabilities, which shows that only 16% of employees with disabilities received some of the modifications required to facilitate their work, aiming at proper performance and access to their work. The situation seems to be worse in the case of working women with disabilities, where the percentages are much lower compared to men, especially if people from other minority categories (color, origin, etc.) are added to the sample, the percentage drops to very low levels (Maroto et al., 2019).

People with disabilities appear to have fewer opportunities for professional discrimination, and this is not so much due to physical limitations, but mainly to the difficulties they face in the workplace from colleagues and superiors (Carr & Namkung, 2021). The employment exclusion experienced by people with disabilities usually varies depending on the type of disability, the extent of the impairment, and whether it is visibly perceived. In particular, people with disabilities who are immediately apparent have more difficulty in finding work, but also in the work environment in general, unlike employees whose disability is not visible. The situation seems to be even more difficult for people suffering from mental illness or intellectual disability (Boman et al., 2015). The economic crisis, combined with the distrust and reluctance of employers to hire people with disabilities for fear of inadequate performance or even stigmatization due to prejudice, makes the employment future of people with disabilities more difficult.

5. Discussion

In our society, work, in addition to its livelihood role, which is essential for people's survival, is also a self-determining factor. For most people, it is the most important part of their daily lives, as it also takes up most of the day. This also applies to the unemployed who are actively looking for work. Work often determines our social environment and is a catalyst for our personal relationships, especially for those over the age of 30. On the contrary, unemployment can also have negative effects on health. The economic crisis in Greece, in addition to its effects on the country's economy, had serious complications, especially for people with disabilities (Kentikelenis et al., 2011). Mental disorders were observed in people with disabilities, mainly depression and physical dysfunctions due to poor quality of life, due to the insecurity that existed in the labor sector. In addition, the continuous, unsuccessful job search during that period was equally psychologically damaging and resulted in the deterioration of the health of many people with disabilities (Papakonstantinou, 2019).

On the contrary, it has been observed that people with disabilities who work on a regular basis appear to have a better state of mental and physical health as they feel that they contribute to society and at the same time cultivate social contacts, develop activities and develop their skills through work. Beyond the livelihood aspect, they feel that they are part of the whole and contribute to society, as they are productive through their daily lives which are full of activities. The great benefit is the better quality of life of people with disabilities which comes from the more positive attitude towards life and the mobilization due to employment.

Two of the main fears that people with disabilities face are the loss of benefits and the change in their status in their insurance coverage due to work. In most categories of disability, the benefit is lost either in full or, if there are two bodies, by one of them. This does not only happen in some limited categories that continue to receive it in parallel. This acts as a deterrent to the majority of people with disabilities as in many cases, the financial benefit from the salary is from moderate to negative. In addition to the loss of the benefit, new factors enter the daily life of the person with a disability such as travel to and from work, nutrition, etc. If we add the fact that the prospective employee is going to dedicate four to eight hours a day to his work, with additional time required for travel to and from work, a third party easily understands that work in this case does not seem tempting. Especially if the final benefit is small or zero. On the contrary, many prefer undeclared work where they are not deprived of their acquired rights (Papakonstantinou, 2019).

Exceptions are training programs that enhance employment, but are of a fixed term, or people working in social cooperative enterprises, the so-called Social Cooperative Enterprises. The second fear is the change in the status of insurance capacity in insurance bodies, from indirectly insured to directly due to recruitment. Usually, people with disabilities in Greece are insured, regardless of age, in first degree relatives with the justification of ongoing treatment. With direct insurance in the public body, that is, the one provided due to the employment contract, it is difficult for a person with a disability to switch to indirect insurance in the event of termination of the contract or due to dismissal. In the event that direct insurance coverage expires, welfare takes over the medical care of the person with a disability. This is something that people with disabilities want to avoid as pharmaceutical coverage mainly includes generics and

many of the drugs are not prescribed. It is therefore important to take steps in the right direction so that there are substantial incentives to find work.

Concluding, we emphasize the significance of all digital technologies in the field of education and in people with disabilities training, in order to remove the barriers and bridge the gaps, which is highly effective, productive, facilitates and improves assessment, intervention, and educational procedures via mobile devices that bring educational activities everywhere [60-63], various ICTs applications that are the main supporters of education [64-86], and AI, STEM, and ROBOTICS that raise educational procedures to new performance levers [87-93]. Additionally, the development and integration of ICTs with theories and models of metacognition, mindfulness, meditation, and the cultivation of emotional intelligence [94-118], accelerates and improves more the educational practices and results, especially in people with disabilities, treating domain and its practices like assessment and intervention.

6. Conclusion

In summary, the above presents the continuous exclusion that disabled people face in all aspects of their efforts to integrate into the labor market, the obstacles they encounter are multiple and require drastic action. The reality that disabled people experience reflects the inertia and the negligible political initiatives for their integration. It is therefore important to investigate the context within which the efforts of disabled people for professional rehabilitation take place as well as to examine the changes in the political decisions of states regarding subsidy and redistributive practices, in order to establish their continuous exclusion from the labor market as a result of their treatment by political actors as a 'problem' for the structure and organization of modern societies. Responsibility phobia, the focus on accumulating profit and acquiring an 'efficient' workforce are considered the highest values that determine the existing order of things.

Compliance with ethical standards

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The Authors proclaim no conflict of interest.

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