

Exposing Myths on Returning to Work and Socially Inclusive Jobs

Summary

Return-to-work programmes and socially inclusive jobs are the subject of numerous myths. A closer look at the facts enables these myths to be exposed quickly, but it is also important to understand why they exist. They arose a long time ago, and in view of changes that have taken place in the meantime, we need to shift our mind-set and regard rehabilitation and inclusion as a means of facing the challenges of our own times, such as the digital economy and demographic change. This article also discusses the understanding of how persons with disabilities are included in society through the elimination of barriers and empowerment of the affected individuals to participate in it and live their lives as they wish. It will become apparent why the creation of inclusive workplaces and programmes for occupational rehabilitation are of both social and economic importance, not only for the individual but also for other groups in society and society as a whole.

Keywords: return to work, inclusive jobs, disability management, demographic change, digital economy

Introduction

The founders of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities set an important milestone for inclusion. This has not only raised awareness, but also established that inclusion goes beyond integration. Certain prejudices nevertheless still exist regarding return-to-work programmes and socially inclusive jobs.

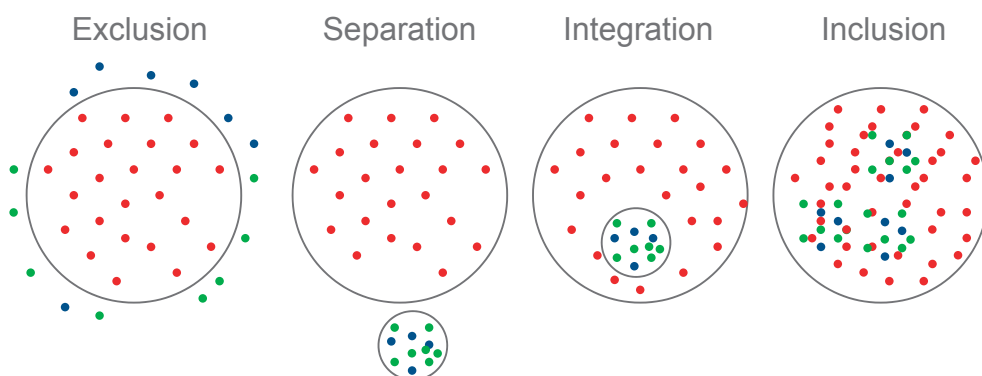
Concepts of inclusion

The first myth lies in the understanding of inclusion. For some, the idea is to include people with disabilities via “well-intentioned” separation, and so to provide them with special homes and workshops. These homes may serve to “protect” society from these persons in the face of cultural stereotypes against disabilities. This can be described more accurately as segregation rather than separation. Conversely, if society regards persons with disabilities as objects of

charity, the facility may serve to protect people with disabilities from the hardships of life. Both approaches have the same result: the disabled individual is shut away and others decide what is in his or her best interests.

A society based on separation does not necessarily intend to harm people with disabilities. However, it still violates human rights. Separation means that the part of the population which does not correspond to the social ideal is shut away.

Figure 1: Concepts of inclusion



Compared to this, integration is a real advancement. People with disabilities are seen as members of society. They are given special assistance in order to be able to take part in life in their community. They go to special schools and work in special companies. Yet even though they appear to form part of society, a barrier still separates them from those who are considered “normal”.

It is this barrier which inclusion seeks to break down. Inclusion begins with a somewhat radical notion: either nobody is disabled or everybody is disabled. An inclusive society regards all of its members as equal but different. Individuals have the same dreams and desires for their lives, but they differ in the degree of support they require to fulfil their needs. The inclusive society works on reducing barriers to participation. Facilities, for example, are no longer planned purely with a “standard” human being in mind. The guiding principle is that everyone must be able to use the facility, including those who deviate physically or psychologically from this standard. What follows from this is that inclusion requires, first and foremost, a shift in consciousness. The goal is a society in which diversity is the rule and disability no longer a defining criterion for individuals.

Despite this, inclusion does not render rehabilitation programmes unnecessary. The adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities on 13 December 2006 launched the debate concerning the function of

rehabilitation in an inclusive society. The authors of the UN convention were evidently aware of the possible danger. They ensured that rehabilitation was given a prominent place in the convention – as a means of promoting inclusion. Inclusion does not mitigate the need for rehabilitation but is instead proof that the concept of rehabilitation remains valid.

Underestimation of abilities

Although we have made good progress in inclusive thinking, it is still quite often the case that persons with disabilities are regarded in the first instance in terms of what they are not able to do. Too often, their abilities are not considered, due to cultural stereotypes which shape our perception of others. Sadly, most people, employers included, do not take the trouble to take a closer look. It is important for people with disabilities to discover that they can overcome their limitations. Further, we as society must enable people to realise their potential, even where they do not correspond to what we have determined to be the norm. This raises the question how we deal with the diversity of mankind.

Inclusive economies are better at mobilizing the talents and skills of all – regardless of disability. The resulting diversity is among the criteria for innovation and creativity, the drivers of economic prosperity in this century.

We must also not forget the importance of work as an aspect of everyone's lives. Work is a means by which we support ourselves. Being able to earn one's own money is probably one of the most uplifting experiences life holds in store for us. It is an affirmation of our autonomy. Work is more than that, however. When speaking about our jobs, we used to talk of a vocation. The word underlines the spiritual dimension of work: realising one's potential in order to further the progress of one's community and mankind as a whole. To be able to say "I am making a difference" is probably the healthiest and most satisfying thing one can accomplish.

Like the rest of us, persons with disabilities possess talents and qualifications, which they wish to use and which we should support them in using and discovering.

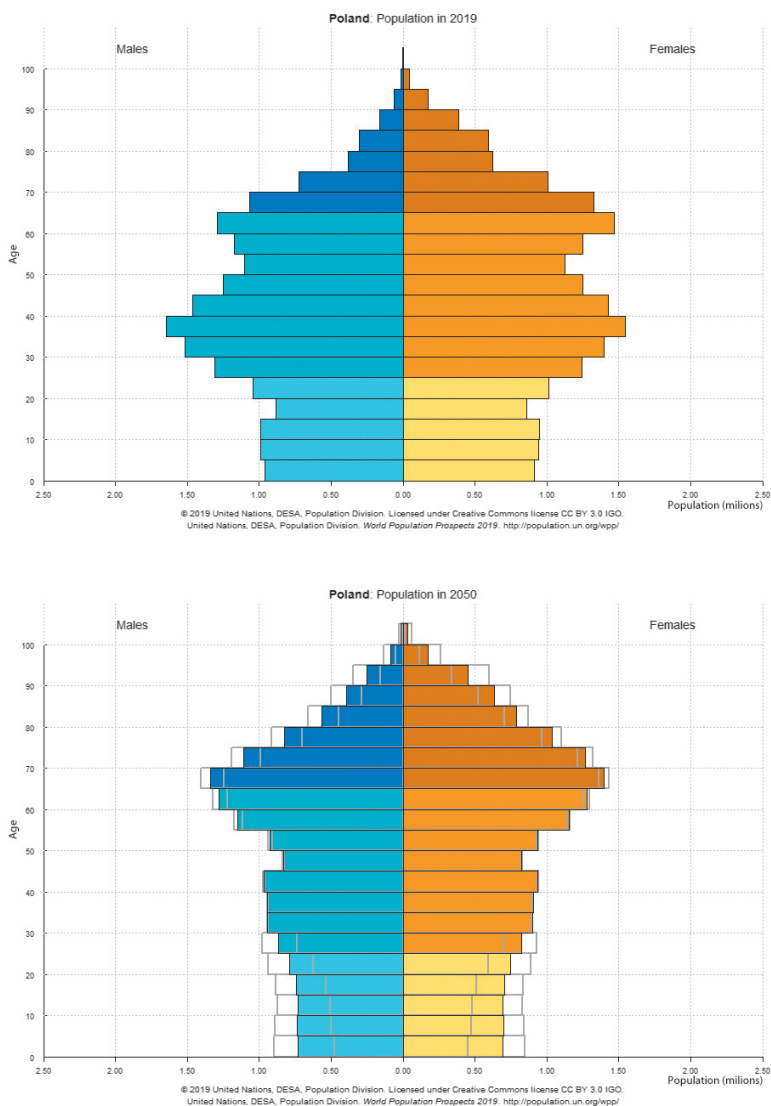
Inclusion is also prevention

Another common myth is that inclusion programmes can be set in action only after an accident or disease, and in either case following a period of absence from work. Inclusion is however also a task of the prevention experts and disability managers. It is a preventive concept in so far as it should be applied as soon as an employee is at risk of incapacity for work – in other words, before illness or injury turn into permanent incapacity for work.

Importance of return-to-work programmes in the face of demographic change

Return-to-work programmes are often seen as a form of charity. The truth however is that we need to put comprehensive rehabilitation measures in place in order to face the challenge of demographic change.

Figure 2: Poland's estimated population development; source: United Nations 2019



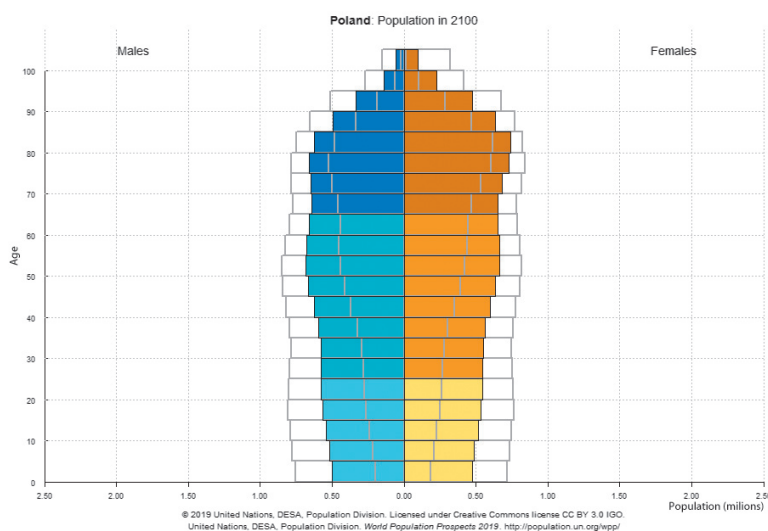


Figure 2 shows the numbers for Poland’s estimated population development, from the year 2019 to the years 2050 and 2100. The “Christmas tree” morphs into a “cypress tree”, which shows that the old-age-dependency ratio reaches a critical point. A growing number of countries are facing an ageing society, and based on the numbers we know today, similar developments in the age groups of the population will take place in almost all regions of the world.

This challenge is two-fold, because it means that the proportion of older workers will grow. In itself, this is not a bad thing. However, analyses show that older workers report having long-standing health problems more frequently than young workers. It is important that we are aware of this, because long-standing health problems and disabilities increase the likelihood of a person leaving the labour force. Coupled with a shrinking supply of young workers, the economic inactivity of older workers poses a serious threat to further economic growth. Not only will this affect the quality of life of millions of individuals, it also has tremendous implications for the viability of numerous social models: declining labour forces mean more people depending on welfare and social insurance benefits and fewer people paying taxes and insurance contributions. It does not take much to see that we are heading towards a problem here – a problem which can only be countered with a mix of strategies including immigration, better education, and return-to-work strategies.

As skilled labour becomes increasingly scarce, companies will need to focus more on retaining the workers they already employ.

Effective return-to-work programmes will also help to relieve the burden on long-term care systems, because a relatively higher proportion of ageing people

also means more people with physical disabilities and chronic diseases. These diseases will also initially lead to rising health insurance costs and, in the long term, to an increased likelihood of care in old age being needed.

Effects of the digital economy on return-to-work programmes

Another global challenge is the technological transition. This development will have an influence on various aspects of rehabilitation. Many of the world's economies are already at a point at which machines could substitute workers in all sectors; some sectors are however more exposed to this than others. Automation will affect production and logistics; service industries, however, are a different story. Computers are assuming routine activities and robots are increasingly being used for physically demanding tasks. At the same time, however, the demand for human workers who can fulfil complex tasks entailing human interaction is growing.

This development will affect the low-paid end of the labour market. In some cases, the salary of a human being is still lower than the cost of a robot. However, computers are increasingly being used to manage workers. Wearables can be used to tell workers where to go and what to do there. Technology enables companies to employ unskilled workers for jobs which in the past required formal training.

Rehabilitation managers need to find options for people who possess no formal education on which they could build a new career. If this trend continues, this may mean the end of vocational rehabilitation for entire segments of the workforce, because automation will make it difficult or impossible.

Digital transformation does of course have its positive side, especially the fact that technology will enable us to reduce many barriers for persons with disabilities even further. For instance, paraplegics are already using exoskeletons to train their bodies. The systems are not yet suitable for use for everyday tasks, but this may change in the future, and innovations in the field of biotechnology may improve the quality of life even further for many people with disabilities.

It is however wrong to think that technology will ultimately turn disability and rehabilitation into a non-issue. We will see important innovations which will make life easier for people with disabilities, but technology will not solve all problems. On its own, no exoskeleton in the world will dispel the prejudice of an employer sceptical of considering a paraplegic as a candidate for a job vacancy. Technology may help us to decrease the relevance of physical restrictions; this will however only increase the importance of other factors such as rehabilitation management, return-to-work management, and psychology.

Benefits of return to work

This article has already exploded several myths concerning rehabilitation, inclusion and return-to-work programmes. The most common myth however is the preconception of rehabilitation as being a luxury item. The evidence from scientific studies suggests the opposite. According to a study published by ISSA in 2017¹, return-to-work programmes are beneficial to employers, workers, the social security agencies and society as a whole.

Sick and disabled workers are the first group of persons one might think of as being beneficiaries of rehabilitation. Rehabilitation programmes are designed to facilitate the return to work, as a result of which the individual does not become completely and permanently dependent upon benefits as a substitute for income lost due to illness or disability. Even more important is the psychological and social impact of rehabilitation. Rehabilitation offers opportunities for the individual concerned to participate in society and thus feel included and respected as an equal member of it.

Another group which will benefit from rehabilitation are companies and employers. As a strategic approach to enable workers with a chronic illness or a disability to return to work, rehabilitation offers numerous advantages for businesses. Managing disability or chronic illness addresses health-related absenteeism and loss of productivity due to presenteeism.

Furthermore, caring for the health of one's workers increases the probability that they will enjoy good health well into their 50s and 60s. They are consequently less likely to leave the company due to a long-standing health problem. From this point of view, rehabilitation is a means of fostering not only job retention, but also the retention of valuable expertise – a key factor for success in a shrinking labour market.

Specifically, the average return-on-investment ratio for expenditure by employers on work reintegration and rehabilitation was calculated to be 3.7 times higher than for investment as a whole.

Social insurance agencies can support the process of implementing disability management structures, and it is very much in their own interests to do so. First, there is the obvious advantage that successful rehabilitation diminishes expenses for pensions, medical treatment, sick pay and other benefits. Second, assisting companies in the area of rehabilitation can foster good relations with employers when they find that the services of social insurance agencies offer good value for money. The ISSA study calculated that in the medium effect-size scenario, social security systems yield an estimated average return on investment of 2.9.

Last but not least, the state economy and society as a whole can benefit tremendously from rehabilitation as a means of maintaining the employability of

¹ The Return on Work Reintegration, International Social Security Association, 2017

the workforce and reducing the numbers of people dependent on welfare and social insurance benefits. Rehabilitation can help to create a virtuous cycle in which successful return to work translates into more people paying taxes and social insurance contributions, in turn meaning lower additional wage costs and better employment prospects for all.

Moreover, if the insurance fund would otherwise have to pay long-term benefits to compensate for damages and lost income, the ratio is skewed even further in favour of rehabilitative measures. For example, when the pension payments made over the lifetime of the affected individual are taken into account, the ISSA members calculated the advantage of replanting an injured hand as opposed to amputation to be ten times the sum invested in replanting the hand.

In this social perspective adopted in the ISSA study, only the costs and benefits relating to productivity are taken into account. In the medium effect-size scenario, the estimated productivity gains outweigh investments by a factor of 2.8.

The study shows clearly that return-to-work programmes are neither a luxury good, nor charity. They are a worthwhile investment, and we must recognize that any decision to postpone such investments will have a negative payback. Attempting to save money by cutting rehabilitation budgets is counterproductive.

Return to work and social inclusion are indispensable

The conclusion from the discussion above is that inclusion is one of the threads holding the fabric of society together. It addresses our responsibility to the individual and society as a whole. Social peace is however not the only reason for us to invest in social inclusion and return-to-work programmes: from an economic point of view, too, we cannot afford not to invest in rehabilitation programmes.