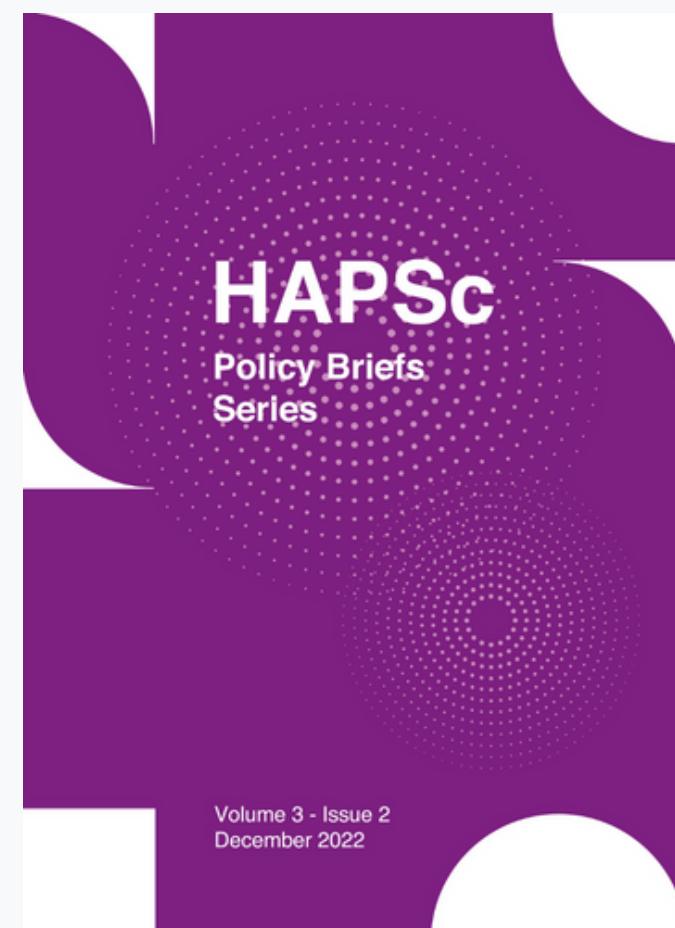


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Diverse People in Diverse Businesses: Creating an Ecosystem around Inclusiveness

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Diverse People in Diverse Businesses: Creating an Ecosystem around Inclusiveness¹

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Abstract

In Greece only one out of three people with difficulties in basic activities is employed (Eurostat, 2011). These significantly low employment rates among people with disabilities (PWDs) have negative implications regarding their living standards, making them economically dependent on social benefits and socially excluded. One of the main factors for that issue is the deficient rates of absorption of PWDs in the private sector, although multiple EU and Greek policies for the increase of these rates currently exist. This policy brief emphasizes on the existing situation, the reasons why disabled people are excluded from the private labor market and the potential of investing in all-inclusive work-systems for businesses. Finally, it provides policy recommendations, on both European and national level, for motivating enterprises to increase diversity in their workforce, through the creation of an EU Disability Inclusion Index and Regional Disability Projects.

Keywords: People with Disabilities; Inclusion Policy; Disability Strategy; Labor Market; Social Entrepreneurship.

Introduction

According to Eurostat, approximately a quarter of the EU-27 population had a long-term disability due to health problems (Eurostat, 2022a). For disabled people, their integration to the labor market is directly associated with their social inclusion. In accordance with Article 27 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006), persons with disabilities have the right to work on an equal basis with everyone else. However, the unemployment rates of disabled EU citizens remain high. The implications of low employment rates amongst disabled persons have a negative impact on their living standards. In fact, during the past decade, almost one out of three disabled EU citizens was in a high risk of facing poverty or social exclusion, depending heavily on social transfers (Eurostat, 2022b). In Greece, a main reason for the low disability employment rates where, approximately 30% of PWDs are employed (Eurostat, 2021), is the unclear situation regarding the legislature and the governmental initiatives on disability (Strati & Evangelinou, 2007). As a result, PWDs are dealing with extensive difficulties in finding and maintaining a job in a business. Thus, their absorption in the private labour market and the creation of an all-inclusive context remains an unsolved issue.

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Existing Situation

In order to find solutions about that issue, the EU launched the Disability Strategy for 2021-2030 (European Commission, 2021), built upon the Disability Strategy for 2010-2020 (European Commission, 2010), a policy to reassure the protection of the fundamental rights and the participation of disabled people in every aspect of social life. The Disability Strategy focuses on increasing PwDs participation into the labor force, through setting EU standards for an all-inclusive working environment, according to the provisions of the UNCRPD (United Nations, 2006). Nevertheless, EU policies must be combined with targeted actions at the national level.

Additional information

In Greece, the national legislation provides the basic framework for the occupation of PwDs in the public sector. According to law 2643/98 (Official Journal of the Hellenic Republic 220/A', published: 28/09/1998) on the field of employment, a minimum percentage of employees with disabilities is legally established for both public and private sector. Regarding the private sector, Greek businesses with more than 50 employees are obliged to cover 8% of their staff with disabled employees. In the public sector, the corresponding percentage is 5%, while people with minimum disability percentage 50%, who are registered in OAED's records of the unemployed, are going through a special hiring process.

Concurrently with the announcement of the EU Disability Strategy for 2021-2030, the Greek government published the National Plan of Action on the Rights of People with Disabilities in 2020 (Government of Greece, 2020). The plan aims to improve education and create new jobs for the disabled in the public and private sector in the next few years. Regarding the private sector, it provides motives to businesses to overhaul their workplaces and hire more disabled people, for example through covering 90% of all costs for the recruitment of a disabled person, including increase in subsidies for payments in part-time and full-time jobs. The main institution that participates in accomplishing these goals is OAED- Hellenic Manpower Employment Organization- in collaboration with the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Culture and Sports. However, even if the plan shows some important improvements in comparison with older initiatives, the measures regarding the private sector seem to be limited.

The disability employment gap

The disability employment gap is defined as the difference between the employment rate of non-disabled people and the corresponding rate for the disabled. According to Eurostat, EU employment

rate of non-disabled people was at 71.7%, while the disability employment gap was estimated at 24.5% (Eurostat, 2022c). Thus, the employment rate of disabled people was approximately 47.2%, which means that less than one out two PwDs had a stable job. In Greece, the non-disabled employment percentage is significantly lower, at 58.3%, with the disability employment gap being slightly higher, at 28.2% (Eurostat, 2022d). Therefore, in 2020, only one person out of three with long-lasting activity limitations was included in Greek labor market (Eurostat, 2021).

Reasons for exclusion/Difficulties in the private sector

- **Inaccessible workplaces**

Many Greek businesses don't have the necessary – and required – facilities to make their working environment accessible for disabled people, according to EU standards (CEN-CENELEC, n.d.) & (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2019) & (Lecerf, 2019). At the same time, it is possible that they are not willing to overhaul their workplace, to provide their disabled employees with accessible tools and technology and to cover their transportation costs, as they consider it a high-cost procedure with low potential to increase productivity.

- **Underemployment**

Employers tend to avoid hiring people with long-lasting limitations, as they believe that, because of their disability, these people won't be as productive as people with no activity limitations (Brodey, 2019). However, even if a disabled person is occupied, there is still a high possibility that it will be underemployed, which means that it will be occupied in a part-time job which does not reflect its skills or financial needs (Brodey, 2019). In some cases, underemployment can be combined with in-work poverty, that is poverty among the employed population. According to Eurostat in Greece, 13% of employed people with disabilities were facing in-work poverty in 2019 (Eurostat, 2019).

- **Struggling with hiring procedures**

Common recruiting ways often may not be suitable for people with disabilities (Accenture, 2018). Therefore, many PwDs, for example a neurodivergent person, that could be someone with autism, Tourette Syndrome, dyslexia, and other differences in learning and mental health, may be excluded from a job that they are adequately qualified for, due to an unsuitable hiring method for them.

- **Lack of motivation to find a job**

All these difficulties that PwDs are facing in the labor market have discouraged them from seeking for a job. Under these circumstances, the vast majority of disabled people are economically depended

in social transfers. According to Eurostat, in 2019 79.3% of the Greek population – and almost 68% of EU's population- with a long-standing activity limitation would be living on the edge of poverty without the social benefits (Eurostat, 2019).

- **Absence of a targeted framework around Supported Employment**

Supported Employment is defined as a personalized model of support for disabled people to find and retain paid employment long-term. The EU Disability Strategies (2010-2020 & 2021-2030) underline the importance of Supported Employment, as a way of increasing disability employment rates. Yet, Greece has no legal framework to support the implementation of that method, except for some exceptional initiatives. Thus, it's not a widespread practice among institutions and foundations related to that field. As a consequence, PwDs are not provided with the appropriate assistance from the state, during their effort to enter the labour market.

The “inclusion incentives” for businesses

Enhanced innovation



As Haben Girma, the first deafblind graduate from Harvard Law School, once wrote in Financial Times, “difference drives innovation” (Girma, 2017). Enhancing the inclusiveness in enterprises can lead to innovative practices, as there will be new perspectives regarding hiring procedures (Bernick, 2022), working methods and types of products (Accenture, 2018).



Safe, modern and productive workplace

Improving the workplace and providing the employees with technological tools is beneficial for everyone, as it ensures that everybody, disabled and non-disabled employees, can access working facilities with safety. Moreover, a diverse work environment can lead to enhancement of productivity, for instance, by lowering staff turnover by up to 30% (Workplace Initiative, 2017), while all the new technological tools can contribute to developing fresh working methods, in combination with AI.



Improved reputation and more funding opportunities

In Greece, very few businesses have included disability diversity in their Human Resources Management policies, their services and products. However, there are some exceptions, such as the case of Kotsovolos company (Kotsovolos, n.d.). Kotsovolos recently introduced its disability inclusion program “Technology without obstacles”, which is supported from major tech companies, Microsoft and Samsung. Thus, the initiative has led to international exposure for the company, a key element for the increase of its reputation and funds. Consequently, the example of Kotsovolos shows that ensuring the appropriate funding to design and create an accessible work environment is an achievable plan for many Greek companies, SMEs and even small start-ups, that will increase their attractiveness not only to investors, but also to the consumer base.



Diverse supply base

Disabled people are representing an important part of the consumer market, especially if their relatives and close social circle is added (Accenture, 2018; Hughes, 2020). As a result, producing all-accessible products and services will lead to the expansion of the supply base in a growing, untapped market that is consisted, only in the EU, of more than 100 million citizens.

Recommendations

❖ Following America's paradigm: A European Disability Equality Index

The Disability Equality Index (DEI) is an existing benchmarking method in USA that is created from Disability:IN, a worldwide non-profit resource for business disability inclusion, that evaluates the participating companies regarding of the inclusiveness in their workspace. Companies are being marked in the areas of culture and leadership, workplace accessibility, employment practices, community engagement and supplier diversity. Businesses are assessed on a scale from zero to 100. These with a score of 80 or more are considered as “Best Places to Work for Disability Inclusion” (Disability:IN, 2021).

In EU, this idea could be implemented in two levels. At first, through the formation of an “EU Disability Inclusion Index” for businesses, as an assistive, non-compulsory tool for evaluating EU enterprises in national level, created from EU institutions in collaboration civil society’s organizations, such as the European Disability Forum. The EU DII will be based on the EU regulations and standards, so that it provides widely accepted criteria that correspond to the EU’s labour market situation. However, it is important to outline that the EU DII should not be a regulation, but an optional tool for the member-states, so that they can use it as a way to increase motives for businesses and to improve the efficiency of their national disability policies concerning the private sector.

Regarding the evaluation criteria, these could be similar with those that are used from DEI in USA, which are culture and leadership, workplace accessibility, employment practices, community engagement and supplier diversity. Nevertheless, more areas could be added, such as product accessibility, which should be shaped in accordance with the Directive on the accessibility requirements for products and services (European Parliament & the Council of the European Union, 2019) that aims to ensure that a number of services and products are accessible for all within the member states.

In Greece, before the utilization of the EU DII, some preparatory steps would be needed. First of all, the state should focus on engaging Greek NGOs -related to disability issues- to collaborate with OAED, with a view to undertake the organization of the process. The procedure should contain three main fields of action: the terms of submitting an application for enterprises, the creation of an Evaluation Committee and the formation of an award system.

To begin with, participating to the EU DII should be free of charge for businesses. Nonetheless, each business will have to make a short video presenting its policies on disability, in combination with a policy paper that will describe them in more detail.

Afterwards, the Evaluation Committee, consisted of both OAED employees and members from the civil society, will be responsible to evaluate the applications and proceed to an on-sight assessment of the enterprise’s work environment. Finally, the award system should contain two types of awards. The first type could be the Awards per category, for instance the “Disability Smart Built Environment Award” or the “Disability Smart Recruitment Team Award”, which are some of the categories being used in the initiative “Disability Smart Awards”, from Business Disability Forum. The second type could be related with the final score that an enterprise has in the EU DII. Therefore, there could be fundraising awards for high-score businesses, so that they invest on new methods of work diversity,

and also targeted funding and consultation for low and middle score businesses, so that they can improve their disability policies.

❖ Regional Disability Projects,

Projects undertaken by OAED in collaboration with the civil society that provide free support and advice to Greek SMEs on disability and how to accomplish an inclusive workplace. Such actions can be found in UK, for example in the project “Smarter London SMEs”, an idea from the non-profit organization Business Disability Forum (Business Disability Forum, n.d.). In addition, awareness-building activities, in-work education programs on disability for the staff, surveys on PwD employment and pilot programs, for instance the experimental creation of Human Resources Management units specialized on the Supported Employment, could be some effective supplementary projects for improving inclusiveness in business environment.

Conclusion

For disabled people, their integration to labor market will be a key factor for their social inclusion and the enhancement of their living standards. The EU has created the basic infrastructure through its Disability Strategies, while the Greek Government seems to have been mobilized the last two years through the National Plan of Action. Nonetheless, the efficiency of both the Disability Strategies and the national initiatives regarding the improvement of inclusiveness in Greek enterprises is questionable. Therefore, more targeted actions are needed, such as Regional Disability Projects and especially a mechanism such as the EU DII. In Greece, the utilization of the EU DII could highly motivate Greek businesses, and especially SMEs, as it will be an important opportunity not only to increase their reputation and funding but also to achieve exposure on EU-level.

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