

## Loredana Dicsi

### *Communication & Membership Officer, European Disability Forum*

It is an honour to be here today not only as an EDF staff member but as a person with disability. I am working at EDF as a membership officer internal communications and youth. It is not my first job, I worked in Romania as a teacher in the school for the blind, then in a call centre and before EDF one more job in an NGO on European projects for young people.

I'd like to start with two questions.

- What is the average rate of employment people in Europe? According to Eurostat, it is 73.9%
- What is the average rate of employed people with disabilities in Europe? 48.1%

The number of employed people with disabilities seems to me too high when I see my friends with disability around I think is much higher. And indeed people from institutions are not in these statistics, collected by the EU through the Labour Market and Labour Force Survey.

Despite the accuracy or not of the figure, the difference is still significantly high. Why? Because people with disabilities are facing many more barriers in getting on the labour market. I would like to share my experience of the barriers I faced and solutions I, or jointly with my job coach, supporting services or friends, found.

On my journey to find work (*journey* because it took me quite some time), I could distinguish different types of barriers: barriers linked to mind sets, barriers linked to accessibility and personal linked barriers.

The ones linked to mind sets are: preconceived ideas, stereotypes, discrimination etc. When I finished my master degree in Belgium I went to the employment agency to register myself as a job seeker. The agent at the help desk was very surprised by my request. She insisted on telling me that if I work I am going to lose my benefits as person with disability. Yes that is true I answered her and if I marry too. And But despite this I want to work. It was true when I got married I lost my income replacement revenue despite the fact that I was not working yet. But when I started to work I lost half of my integration allocation too and of my disability allowance there was only 90€ (per month?) left.

On my journey I had many situations when my disability due to preconceived ideas was the main barrier. I was often asked questions like: can blind people work with a computer? I didn't know. Oh can you read e-mails? When I left from an interview I was asked "is someone waiting for you outside?". At my negative answer the person was surprised. "But how do you go then?" Was the next question. By public transport I answered.

Once I applied for a job as a counsellor for new-comers. Reading the advert I said "this is my job". I have all the assets. But during the interview I felt their closed attitude, they were trying to find for each of my assets a problem that would be linked to disabilities. I found them not realistic. However they e-mailed me that the job was given to someone else.

Another time when I announced before the interview was set that I am visually impaired, they told me that I'll be called at another moment to set the date for the interview. In fact, I was never again contacted and when I called they said the advert was not anymore available or the vacancy was occupied.

To overcome mindsets is not easy, but awareness helps and informs the employers about the support existing to help them and their employee with disabilities.

Accessibility: here are many to be mentioned but the most important would be: Access to information and services Access to the working place, reasonable accommodation. Linked to accessibility I have another story. I applied for a job in a well-known foundation where they needed someone for their helpdesk to give information on how to apply for their projects to give technical advice on how to register different databases. I passed all interview tests etc. When I went for discussion for reasonable accommodation at work and the equipment I need, I found out that unfortunately two out of six softwares I was supposed to use were not accessible and there was no way to improve them and nor to change them as they were used on regional level. So I didn't get that job just because the softs were not accessible and not because of my competences.

Barriers linked to person for example: health issues linked to disability, self-esteem. Am I able to work, etc? Some people with disabilities are afraid to declare their health problems. If they leave their allowance which is sure they may not be able to get it back if they lose their job or not get back immediately. Sometimes it takes up to two years. How are they going then to manage financially? So it becomes too risky. But also they question their ability due to all the mindsets.

With adequate legislation, support services and coaching, disabled people can work like anyone else.

My journey was long and difficult. It was difficult to get the first job, but at a moment I lost it and starting from the beginning was not at all easy. I never gave up. I always said I can do it. I have the right to work, I have the necessary competences, and I have the strong will to work. I am in a country where I am lucky to also have the equipment I need.

We are the best resource to change the mindsets of employers we are the best ones to show our abilities and bring a shadow on our disability, we are our best ambassadors.

My driving motto is:

Believe that mindsets can be changed. Believe that you are a citizen like anyone else with rights. the United Nations Convention on the Rights of persons with Disabilities is there to prove this. Believe you can do it if you want. You are a disabled person but a PERSON with abilities. The only difference between disabled and the rest is the way we are doing certain things, but the result is the same and that is what counts.

Thank you very much.