

Incompany workshop DSiN-UWV.

Theme: Participation by employment – Empower people and supporters.

By dr. Mitzi Waltz, associate lecturer in Autism Studies at Sheffield Hallam University, England, and researcher at DSiN. Mitzi Waltz is known for research in disability studies and is the author of the book *Autism: A Social and Medical History*.

Report by Karin van den Bosch

Self-employment and social enterprises are frequently suggested as ways to create work for people with a disability who are unable to find employment with mainstream employers. In this lecture, Dr. Mitzi Waltz discussed the UK situation for these and other employment programmes aimed at disabled persons.

In her presentation Mitzi Waltz discussed the UK employment situation for people with disabilities. Interested readers are referred to her powerpoint presentation too, which contains most information of the lecture. Below you can find a summary, and a report of the discussion.

Summary:

Mitzi Waltz opened her lecture by saying that she has a negative, and sometimes cynical, point of view, but that she will also address positive examples of employment. The situation she sketches is namely a rather negative one: Disabled people are blamed for their worklessness, verbally abused and sometimes actually unsafe, or forced to work without payment.

Of disabled people in the UK who are in paid work of some kind, 18 percent of men and 8 percent of women are self-employed. But, according to Waltz, the UK disability employment and unemployment figures are not trustworthy. Waltz described several statistical tricks that are practiced in the UK to make disabled people count as 'employed'.

First she discussed employment programmes. She knows a few good examples. But some of these also look better than they are. "Access to Work" is a good UK employment programme, but "governments best-kept secret" and maybe deteriorating for their employees. Another good example is the New Enterprise Allowance scheme, for people who are long time unemployed. A third other good example (Score) is from the US.

Then Waltz discussed both self-employment and social enterprises for people with disabilities. She thinks self-employment is not a good option for many disabled people. Disabled people are mostly inexperienced sole proprietors running undercapitalised small businesses. These type of businesses are most likely to fail. Many disabled people are vulnerable, and this makes them an easy prey for bad-willing suppliers or partners. Disabled people lack not only financial capital, but also social capital. Isolated or excluded individuals need initiatives that create social capital. There are very few self-employment opportunities that are financially viable for people with low intellectual ability and low educational attainment.

Social Enterprises can take different forms. Perhaps the most common is a company that has primarily social or environmental objectives, and reinvests surpluses (profits) into meeting these or back into the business. Some social enterprises have been set up to create training and/or employment opportunities for disabled people; others provide services or products for disabled people. About 4 percent of "social entrepreneurs" are people with a disability (this is lower than the population average). Social enterprises are twice as likely to fail as other types of businesses.

Waltz presented good, bad and ugly examples of social Enterprises. Bad ones in the Netherlands can be called “stadsslavernij”. These are companies that take on a new set of low-paid “trainees” each year, then replace them with a new cohort rather than creating long-term, sustainable work. This attracts maximum state funds for the enterprise but produces little value for the workers, who have often been compelled to take the post by the benefit system. On the other hand they can be interesting for disabled people as workplace experiences, as Waltz’s own son experienced at Oxfam.

Another example is the “treadmill” of jobs/benefits. Many workers are in temporary or training posts, and will then bounce from training placement to benefits to Work Programme to social enterprises for the remainder of their lives, introducing uncertainty, instability and constant retraining in a population that often thrives best with certainty, stability and predictability.

Charity shops are presented as an example of even worse (ugly) social enterprises. These organizations get their labour for free. This is not a good deal for the people working there, nor is it a sustainable model for communities. When people don’t get paid, they cannot spend.

A final example is the “disability industry” ghetto. This means disabled people running disability-focused business. Although it is sometimes a good option, there is a limited market for these businesses. They fail after protracted difficulties in finding enough customers.

Maybe a solution is an individualised approach to employment, based on personal budgets for support. Another recommendation is to work directly with Disabled People’s Organisations (groups run by and for people with disabilities—distinct from mainstream “disability charities”) to drive innovative, person-centred practice. Sometimes starting a cooperative business is a good and more stable solution for disabled people with little enterprise experience yet. And hopefully, a new UK government next year—although that may not solve the problem.

Discussion:

During the discussion people in the audience also put forward possible solutions. Disabled people have to compete with healthy low-educated people on the job market. A solution might be to bring the company into the school for special education (VSO). Another option is that people should finish VSO with a portfolio that shows their talents. This is not common practice yet.

A second problem is that after finishing special education the learning stops. Life-long learning is not meant for VSO-students. They can only go to specific courses for disabled people. It’s necessary to think out of the box to create educational opportunities for people with disabilities.

A good example is a business club of a soccer team. The members of this business club are individuals having their own company. They installed a rule: if you want to be a member of this business club, you have to employ at least one disabled person in your company. “We are connected with this soccer team and with a social goal”.

Somebody in the audience mentioned that we shouldn’t underestimate the power of the workforce: they want to work in a diverse workplace. It’s also good to bear in mind that not all employees with a disability disclose themselves as disabled.