

The importance of soft skills in the employment of people with intellectual disabilities

In 2019, two laws came into force in Slovenia, which were adopted with the aim of greater integration into society and thus greater employment opportunities for people with special needs. The Social Inclusion Act and the Personal Assistance Act are intended to significantly improve the opportunities for people with special needs and, inter alia, people with intellectual disabilities to switch between the status of a social rights beneficiary in terms of social transfers and the status of a job seeker. This means that they would have the opportunity to test their skills in various forms of regular employment, unlike previous jobs - due to legal restrictions in the only forms of work and employment, ie in sheltered employment centers. An important novelty is that an individual with a mental development disorder, who would have reduced skills in the workplace or would no longer be able to perform work and tasks within a certain job due to various reasons, can regain the status of a social rights beneficiary and financial compensation and social security than it had before. This further raises questions and finds appropriate solutions on how to best train individuals with different problems and barriers and offer them such skills to convince employers of their virtues and abilities, so that they are more employable and employers make decisions. for them.

We found one of the answers by participating in the "Soft skills" project. "Soft skills" is a European project that aims to improve an individual's behavioral skills and thus facilitate access to employment for people with special needs and other groups of less qualified people. The European Commission is working with EU countries to strengthen a common framework of key competences, including knowledge, skills and behaviors, that will help individuals first in their personal fulfillment and later in finding regular employment and integration into the community. Key competences include 'traditional' and 'horizontal' skills. Nowadays, when the world of work is changing dramatically and the world economy is not creating enough jobs, there is a growing emphasis on "horizontal" skills. Namely, employers want and demand that their employees, in addition to knowledge and technical skills, also have good soft, interpersonal skills. These soft skills are human skills, his personality traits, behavior. Based on these findings, the development of soft skills is a particular challenge for the future in terms of empowering people with intellectual disabilities and other groups of low-skilled people and people with disabilities. Both in Slovenia and elsewhere, there is the development of appropriate policies and types of programs, but they have not yet achieved the expected results in their goals. In their current form, vocational training and related activities based on a formal training organization do not meet the expectations of people with special needs, who often do not have access to formal training. To achieve the latter, it is necessary to develop a new vision of vocational training and link it to the acquisition of soft skills.



During the first Soft skills project, Régie des Ecrivains and its 6 partner organizations from France, Belgium, Austria, Spain and Slovenia - CUDV Draga decided to create a common method and educational tools for lifelong learning teachers and work instructors. mentors in the workplace. To this end, the project is based on the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) and alternative educational approaches, as well as on the experience of experts from the experience of learning in the workplace. ECVET was created on the basis of a recommendation from the European Parliament and the Council of 18 June 2009. It complements the concepts and principles of other European tools, such as the European Qualifications Framework. ECVET promotes the transfer, recognition and gradual collection of acquired knowledge and is part of the lifelong learning process. The system has several advantages: it promotes the recognition of skills and knowledge acquired in formal or non-formal education, so it is useful for participants; as part of a lifelong learning approach with adaptations, ECVET offers certification for practitioners, teachers; ECVET promotes international mobility and transparency. Against this background, the ECVET approach is particularly interesting for groups of people with disabilities.



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ECVET has a specific structure that includes: units of learning outcomes such as statements of what the learner knows, understands and is able to do after completing the learning process and defined in terms of knowledge, skills and competences can be assessed and validated; knowledge as a result of assimilation of information through learning (principles, theory and practice related to the job); skills such as the ability to use knowledge to perform tasks and solve problems - are cognitive, involving logical, intuitive and creative thinking, and practical, involving manual skills and the use of methods, materials, tools and instruments; competencies as a proven ability to use knowledge, skills and personal, social and methodological skills, procedures in work or study situations and in professional and / or personal development. Skills are therefore social skills similar to our "soft knowledge". ECVET is the result of a European recommendation that has been adopted and implemented in European countries and also in Slovenia, where the methodological framework itself remains flexible.

What exactly are soft skills?

The concept of "competence" has a variable meaning, depending on the context and all involved. Nevertheless, most experts agree to consider the use of different sources in specific circumstances. Competence is so strongly linked to action. Therefore, competence / skill is developed in either a social or professional context and responds to specific expectations in this regard. Like competencies, soft skills do not have a uniform definition or meaning. In addition, they exist under different terms, so there is no consensus on the definition of soft skills and the concept. The chosen approach is important in this context. Our approach treats soft skills as interpersonal and human skills that are close to personality traits. They are

important in professional life and complement specialized knowledge and skills. Unlike hard skills, which are specific to one or more professions, soft skills can be used in multiple professional circumstances. Soft skills are useful for training, career choices or just mobility, which affects groups of people with lower qualifications in particular. They differ from horizontal, transverse skills, which, although they can be used in a wide variety of work situations and settings, are related to the professional context. This e.g. it applies to knowledge of a foreign language or the ability to write and other skills that are different from life skills, such as a personal inclination towards something or someone and personality traits reinforced through lifelong experiences. Curiosity or tolerance is an example of life skills. These life skills are the basis for the social and professional integration of a person.

Identify the main soft skills needed for the job

The Soft Skills project partners initially focused on identifying the main soft skills needed for employment. All partner organizations of the project have experience in supporting and training unemployed people. We collected data from our local environments to identify the most important soft skills in the professions that are most important to our target group, at CUDV Draga for people with intellectual disabilities.

Based on these elements, we identified 5 categories of soft skills that belong to personal intelligence, namely personal growth, self-awareness and commitment - include skills that are essential for an individual to cope with and understand emotions and interpersonal intelligence, namely interactions and reliability, which enables the individual to understand relationships and interact effectively with others, taking into account various factors.

The list of soft skills to be included in the training is covered in the following five categories and should be in line with the requirements of the current labor market:

- Thinking about personal growth: learning to learn, independence, adaptability and accepting professional comments;
- Self-awareness: self-reflection, self-confidence, emotional intelligence, personal presentation;
- Commitment: sense of organization, sense of responsibility, initiative, ability to anticipate;
- Reliability: compliance with rules, efficiency, diligence at work, sense of ethics;
- Interaction: communication, leadership, teamwork, assertiveness.



Catalog of soft skills references and expected results

Given the lifelong learning and improvements and the recognition of previous learning outcomes and skills of the individual in the training process, the project partners decided to divide soft skills into four stages of gradual acquisition of knowledge. We opted for a logic very similar to the logic of the French coordination association AEFA or the European RECTEC project "Référentiel de Compétences transversales". To this end, Blom's method of taxonomy was used, which offers a classification of four levels of knowledge acquisition as a common framework for determining the steps of learning at each stage of mastering soft skills, from less to more demanding. Each level is complemented by general descriptions showing a person's achievements. The proposed definitions are important regardless of context and professional work. They are collected in the European catalog of soft skills references with the aim of connecting with specific professional situations, through which individuals will be able to develop certain soft skills. It will make it possible to differentiate the level of requirements according to the professional context, taking into account the specific needs of the professions. In conjunction with existing job profiles, the aim will be to identify and define the most anticipated soft skills and the levels of their knowledge required for each of them in different jobs.



The catalog will be used to check an individual's prior knowledge and monitor his/her progress, a training plan with goal setting and an evaluation with an assessment that confirms the acquired level of difficulty of a certain soft skill. The catalog as a learning outcome is a central element of project development, which is the basis for the development of the training

program, methods and forms of work and the approach and methods of evaluation. It is intended for practical use in connection with specific professional situations.



Mastering the profession does not only mean mastering technical skills. It also means having an attitude towards the workplace, so it is important to take into account both the technical skills as well as the attitudes and soft skills used by the individual in the workplace. The method is useful for identifying the most anticipated soft skills and the level of knowledge acquired required for different jobs and skill levels, from worker to manager. At the beginning, the partners chose seven lower-skilled professions, namely: Assistant Chef, Assistant in Sales, Gardener, Assistant in Biotechnology, Cleaner, Operator in Viticulture, Welder / Boiler Maker. We believe and strongly hope that in addition to the general catalog of soft skills references, there will also be training programs for teachers and participants with lower professional skills, which are in development and will contribute to more concrete shifts in obtaining professional qualifications for people with disabilities. thus employment opportunities, especially at the same time as the expected more appropriate conditions for their implementation with changes in legislation in Slovenia.

We are now continuing with the new Soft Skills 2 project (2021-2023), where we will emphasize the importance of soft skills and connect with various organizations and companies. The goal is to systematically install Soft Skills training for people with lower qualifications in organizations and companies. This would provide them with better employment opportunities and also the development of their career path, because it is one of the important areas in the implementation of the deinstitutionalization process and preventing exclusion.

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The team of Soft skills of CUDV Draga