

## **ESF-project “Bridging severe disabilities @ work”**

### **Promotor background**

Groep Maatwerk is the umbrella organisation that represents all (48) “*customized work companies*”, previously known as “sheltered workshops”, in Flanders, Belgium.

We are employing +/- 21.000 people, whereof 17.500 persons with disabilities. About 70% of them has an intellectual disability. From labor law perspective, all workers in our companies are considered as “fully-fledged” workers.

Customized work companies in Flanders are mainly of the “industrial” type with a lot of subcontracting work. Although the companies receive funding they have to be profitable to be able to pay the wages (at least the minimum wage).

A customized work company is primarily a place of employment for people with an (occupational) handicap who want to work but who are not, not yet or not anymore ready to work in a regular company (the Flemish employment office assigns the right to work in a customized work company, due to the severity of their disability).

Customized work companies aim to assign as much as possible jobs to people with a disability, paying special attention to the most severely handicapped.

### **Challenge**

The labour market in Europe is changing.

Knowledge and technology are becoming the real drivers of productivity, and workers increasingly need to acquire skills and to continuously adapt these skills.

These evolutions are making educated and skilled labour more valuable, and unskilled labour less attractive.

This is especially problematic for disabled/disadvantaged people. And extremely problematic for people with severe (intellectual) disabilities.

In a working environment, people with severe (intellectual) disabilities are mainly capable to perform simple, basic tasks, but these jobs are disappearing. Manual simple activities are subject to an increasing competition and automation and are moved to other (non-European) countries. The labour market and employers are demanding more complex and flexible competences.

In Flanders people with severe disabilities are mainly employed in customized work companies. We experience and in the near future expect even more challenges to find suitable job activities for people with severe disabilities.

Also other countries may face the same challenges for this group. But their answers may be different: another setting (collective and/or individual setting), in a paid/partly/non-paid working environment or a mixture. Also the way the border between non/partially paid and paid work is organized, and especially how transition between these environments is achieved, can be very relevant to offer new answers in the light of valuable employment/labour-like activities.

## Goal

In this project we want to find out which are the future work opportunities for these (mainly but not exclusively intellectual disabled) people with quite limited capabilities.

People with severe disabilities face increasing difficulties in finding valuable work/labour-like activities. By comparing different business models, methodologies, and detecting and analysing critical success parameters, we want to elaborate and improve the actual work context and work opportunities for people with (severe) disabilities.

In this perspective, it will be relevant to detect what kind of activities are eligible for this target group, and how a better match can be achieved between the skills required by (sometimes high and demanding economic activities) and the available skills that of these people.

Finally we want to contribute to the ultimate goal: a better inclusion in the community by increasing qualitative employment/labour-like activities for people with (especially but not only) intellectual disabilities.

## Partner search

Partners we would like to involve in the project, are umbrella federations/employers that focus on the employment/labor-related activities for one or more of the following groups:

- People that are not (yet) ready to execute a paid job, but have at least a perspective.
- Aging workers with *severe* disabilities who are not capable anymore to work in a paid working setting, as we see that this group *ages* faster than regular workers.
- Influx of students from (special) education, and especially young people with (mainly but not exclusively intellectual) disabilities, as we see that the transition to the labour market is becoming more complex for them.



Many countries are struggling with this challenge. The diversity of expertises between partners will ensure that the results of the project will be transferable to other countries.

## Project

We submitted a transnational ESF project at our ESF agency, called "**Bridging severe disabilities @ work**".

We already received an approval and some limited funding to develop out initial proposal in the coming six months (1/1/2018 till 11/5/2018), where after and if approved, the project will last for another 30 months, to be started as from 1/10/2018.

