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1 Presentation of the EU-Project “Learning Environment for Disabled Users”

1.1 Background overview

According to a study carried out in 2006 by Applica and CESEP for the European Commission¹, people with chronic illness and with disabilities are subject to a high rate of exclusion from the European labour market: their competences, knowledge and skills are usually hardly integrated into the mainstream world of work. People with disabilities represent one sixth of the overall EU working population but their employment rate is comparatively low, as they are almost twice as likely to be inactive as non-disabled people; when in employment, they are more likely to earn lower wages. Enterprises are very often not aware of their potentialities and therefore tend to consider them as a burden rather than a resource. Disabled people themselves often lack self-confidence and awareness of their own skills.

The current economic crisis has clearly worsened the chances for the weak categories of getting and maintaining a job, so that disabled people are the first to be expelled from the labour market as well as experiencing major difficulties in entering it for the first time.

Associated with the difficult employment and employability issue, another common problem affects disabled people at European level: a **lower education and vocational qualification level** in comparison with non-disabled people. This reinforces and is directly linked with their lower employment chances, thus leading to a doubled discrimination in accessing the labour market and in achieving, in turn, inclusion in the society.

Training and education are considered as key factors for improving social and occupational development but actually, even if provided, they have not turned out to be effective enough in improving the living and employment conditions of people with disabilities so far. Notwithstanding the positive contributions of the different national action plans for people with disabilities, very little progress has in fact been achieved in terms of increased employment rates, reduced inactivity and creation of better/more suitable jobs for disabled; at the same time, limited progress has been made in the lifelong learning area. This clearly reveals that something has not been functioning properly in the learning approaches devoted to this target. A comparative study carried out within the “LED – Learning Environment for Disabled Users” project and focused – amongst other aspects – on the methodological and training approaches for disabled currently available in Europe², has highlighted the following possible common causes as most relevant and widespread:

- teaching and learning approaches for adults with disabilities are general and not specific: training is standardized, the methodologies are not person-oriented;
- people with disabilities are barely aware of the opportunities offered by the labour market and of their potentials;
- operators and those organising training activities are not sufficiently aware of alternative learning environments and methods;
- few enterprises have the opportunity to train adults with severe disabilities effectively.

1.2 Project objective

The main project objective was to define an **innovative common learning approach** specifically targeted to disabled people, aimed at supporting their (re)integration into the labour market and, consequently, into society. The ideal environment for implementing and applying the common learning model/approaches would be a “transition enterprise”: an actual working environment which provides training, work and market competitiveness, thus going beyond a typical sheltered workshop. People working in this

¹ *Men and women with disabilities in the EU: statistical analysis of the LFS ad hoc module and the EU-SILC*, carried out by Applica & CESEP & Alphametries – Final report, April 2007 – downloadable at www.cesep.eu/publications.htm.

² The comparative report, as well as the national and European reports on which it is based, can be found at www.europe-projectled.eu/documents.html and on the attached CD-ROM.

environment can surely be supported, but the general context is that of a real company, where employees can earn some money while developing skills required by the mainstream labour market.

The learning model is tailored to the disabled person's characteristics and needs; not only job-related competences and knowledge are improved, but also those related to human relationships, mutual support, market and social context. The whole approach is focused on the **potentialities** rather than on the limitations of people with disabilities; this gives good results both in their self-confidence and in the entrepreneurs' attitude towards disability, leading eventually to a general positive impact on the employability of disabled people as well as on their social inclusion. The implementation of such a learning model should therefore foster an **effective transition** from education to employment.

Project target groups are disabled people, trainers, managers, operators, families, as well as local and national stakeholders dealing with policies for people with disabilities. Positive effects are expected concerning the employers' perspective of disability too.

This project finds a clear reference into the European Disability Strategy 2010-2020³, which aims to make it easier for people with disabilities to go about their daily lives like everyone else and enjoy their rights as EU citizens.

1.3 Project phases

The LED project, funded by the European Union's *Grundtvig*-Lifelong Learning Programme, had a duration of two years, starting in November 2011 and ending in October 2013. It was chronologically structured in four main stages:

Comparative study and indications for the learning model – Five national reports regarding the countries of the project partners plus a European one were prepared, in order to collect the most significant data available at EU level about disability policies. The studies were focused on didactic and training approaches, employment situation and employability, legislative measures, best practices, case stories, main difficulties, opportunities and needs. The next step consisted in merging such data into a comparative report, which made possible the definition of common indications for creating a shared training-to-employment transition model for disabled people.

Alternative learning model for adults with disabilities – According to the outcomes of the comparative analysis, an integrated model for an innovative and European learning approach was defined. The creation of the model took into consideration organisational and didactic aspects, learning and didactic contents, the characteristics of the transition enterprise model, learning and work environments as well as labour market oriented approaches. Guidelines specifically designed for the professionals involved in the learning model implementation were also prepared, together with a feasibility study and a sustainability analysis of the model from both the technical and financial point of view.

Training courses for trainers – A set of workshops took place at each VET⁴ centre involved in the project: they were specifically dedicated to the professionals dealing with disabled users (trainers, operators, technicians, managers, etc.), in order to test and assess clarity, user-friendliness and applicability of both the learning model and guidelines and gather opinions and possible suggestions for improving them. For this purpose, after the end of the training sessions all the persons⁵ involved were requested to fill out a questionnaire, consisting of a set of closed as well as open questions about their individual professional point of view.

Testing and validation of the pilot approach – The alternative learning model was tested directly with disabled users, to evaluate its effectiveness. Each VET centre involved in the project, according to the parts of the learning model that it had previously chosen for testing, implemented the model with its disabled

³ Related EU Web-page: http://ec.europa.eu/justice/discrimination/disabilities/disability-strategy/index_en.htm

⁴ VET = Vocational Education and Training

⁵ A total of 41 professionals, consisting in coordinators, work trainers, job guidance and vocational support operators, rehabilitation officers, ICT operators, psychologists, researchers, technical staff.

users and within its standard activities. The users were then requested to fill in a questionnaire (supported by a staff member, if necessary), consisting of simple questions related to their experience: the collection and comparison of all questionnaires were necessary to assess the users' satisfaction level and the approach effectiveness. The assessment results, in the end, allowed the final validation of the alternative learning model for disabled users.

1.4 Project partners

The LED project consortium relies on:

- four VET Centres with a sound in-depth knowledge in dealing with disabled people (*Centro Studi Opera Don Calabria "CS-ODC"* in Italy, *National Learning Network "NLN"* in Ireland, *The CEDAR Foundation "TCF"* in Northern Ireland, *University Rehabilitation Institute "URI"* in Slovenia);
- a University (*Katholische Universität Eichstätt-Ingolstadt "KU-EI"* in Germany), with the Research Group in Economic and Organisation Sociology, having research experience about the integration of people with disabilities in the world of work;
- a Research Centre specialised in labour market and training issues (*Centro ricerche Documentazione e Studi "CDS"* in Italy).

2 Executive Summary

European learning model for adults with disabilities

The European learning model, developed and tested in the consortium of the EU-project "Learning Environment for Disabled Users" (LED, 2011-2013), can be defined as a comprehensive toolbox to **support the transition of people with disabilities to the labour market**, enhancing their social integration. Its implementations will foster the employability, self-confidence and personal autonomy of the users and help tackle negative attitudes and stereotypes regarding the disability topic, whereas the transition to the labour market represents a contribution to the fight against their social exclusion as well as to increasing users' integration.

After the testing phase, carried out by the four vocational training centres in the project consortium, the earlier learning model draft has been updated and integrated with the main empirical results of the testing activities and also taking into account feedback and suggestions collected during the project. This publication contains a reduced version of the final validated document.

The **transferability** of the learning model has been a central feature since its conception, giving the possibility to implement it in different countries and contexts with diverse backgrounds.

The ideal context to apply this innovative learning model would be a **transition environment/enterprise**, where people with disabilities (users) are considered as "learning employees" within a particular vocational area. A broad definition of "transition enterprise" is adopted for the learning model: all contexts offering training to people with disabilities can apply the contents developed with this learning model and within the LED-project. The environment will be tailored to the users' types and degrees of disability and be equipped with suitable aid tools, assistive devices as well as information and communication technologies/media. In a gradual process, users will participate in learning, training and, at a later stage, working activities.

The organisation implementing the model will identify the **vocational area/profile(s)** of the transition environment/enterprise as well as the learning and training contents on the basis of regional **labour market features** and **users' characteristics** in a personal, social/relational and vocational perspective.

All activities should be carried out from the beginning following the concept of **interdisciplinarity**, connecting the perspectives of various disciplines during the whole process, and of **user-centredness**, which focuses on the uniqueness of every user.

Social integration is pursued and fostered by the focus on social and communication skills (through various didactic and training activities) and by the interaction with non-disabled people; this will also enhance the users' degree of self-awareness and motivation.

Organisations can use the European learning model in one or more phases in the vocational rehabilitation and (re-)integration process: personal and vocational profiling, personal and vocational guidance, vocational training, job placement. For each of these phases, the learning model proposes recommendations which are relevant to reach the model's goals.

Users will get the opportunity to be trained and integrated in a work environment, either in a simulated, simplified one or in a real work environment of a company, so that they can "**learn in situations**". Further key activities foresee the improvement of users' **job-seeking skills**.

Flexibility is another keyword of the learning model, something that is necessary to find the suitable balance of learning/training/working hours and to adapt the transition environments to both users' and specific vocational area/profile's features, always promoting users' involvement and active role and taking into account the possible presence of further risk factors (e.g. gender, migration background, economic status).

Qualitative and quantitative evaluation of the learning model implementation will be carried out with the use of various methods and several indicators, to analyse its progress and achievements.

In the development of the training paths, taking into account **enterprises' perspective and requirements**, as well as local/regional **labour market analyses**, plays an essential role, as also widely shown by the testing results of the project. These activities, coupled with an expansion of contacts and cooperation amongst users' families/caregivers, stakeholders, service providers, third sector associations, regional institutional and economic networks, will increase the success of the approach.

The European learning model, which is oriented to a mid/long-term scenario, has been validated positively by experts and disabled users in the LED-project and represents a toolbox with good practices which are consistent and effective for its general and specific goals.

Guidelines for trainers

The work carried out by the research group of the LED project has developed a general training model which works as a theoretical/practical benchmark for planning and managing a new training/work environment for disabled users. The guidelines for trainers of the LED-project represent an example of how such an environment can be built, following a **pragmatic approach** which takes into consideration the feasibility of the guidelines in the different contexts of Europe.

Professionals with different competences are involved in the implementation of this learning model, building a complex relational system: this complexity must be faced through a coherent, organic system with the purpose of creating efficient **synergies** among the various stakeholders and the existing good practices.

It is important to underline that the development of a learning environment for disabled users, while respecting people's individuality, must also be focused on effective production. As a consequence, while trying to adapt the environment to the disabled persons' needs as much as possible, some kinds of disabilities are inevitably left out. Much attention is therefore paid to the users' **initial evaluation**: a correct skills and abilities initial evaluation will lead to a significant rise in the number of successful pathways.

The education provided by these pathways targets transition to work, but the intermediate goals actually involve people's life projects. Training contents are therefore intended as connection/mediation elements between the person's life project and the economic and entrepreneurial reality of the local area. For this

reason, a **holistic approach** has been developed and great attention is paid to multiple-risk situations deriving from disability and further negative elements. The whole process is focused on the person as a whole, thus considering the socio-relational development as integral part of the person. In this regard, engagement of associations and families plays an essential role too: their participation should not be limited to external support, but they should be directly committed in the new environment and, when possible, act as investors.

Comparative report on testing activities

Most parts of the model have been tested in the LED-project through selection by the four centres involved, having tested them on a pilot basis with their disabled users in order to evaluate their effectiveness. Staff members' and users' opinions and suggestions were then collected and compared within a single report, providing an overview of all outcomes and indications on how to improve the earlier draft version of the learning model. The comparison highlighted that, although in the first learning model version some areas could be improved and even if the time available for testing was quite short for in-depth evaluations, the LED learning model proved to be a **valid and effective best practice framework**.

The main positive results were in users' motivation, self-confidence, awareness and in their social and communication skills. The level of satisfaction amongst users was generally very high, as practically all of them would have recommended other future users to take part in these activities. Further positive outcomes were related to the fact that, thanks to the implementation of the learning model, all centres involved had the chance to re-examine and improve their own services at different levels (users' profiling, training paths development, internal cooperation, contacts with employers, monitoring and assessment, etc.)

The comparative report on testing activities was useful to **validate** and – thanks to its roots in the international cooperation – give a **European character** to this innovative learning model for disabled users.

3 European learning model for people with disabilities - validated version

3.1 Introduction to the learning model

The core of the LED-project was the creation of an **innovative, alternative, transferable and effective learning model for adults with disabilities**, based on the collection and comparison of **good-practices** regarding training and rehabilitation approaches from different European countries, starting from those of the project partners (Italy, Germany, UK/Northern Ireland, Republic of Ireland and Republic of Slovenia) and including further research related to the other European countries. The national research and the following comparison document took into account the different national difficulties, necessities and proposals as well.

The main common considerations arisen from the comparison are that disabled people usually have a **lower educational and vocational qualification level** as well as a **lower employment rate** than non-disabled people. These circumstances are correlated to each other and lead to a **higher social exclusion risk** for adults with disabilities, which should be tackled by **improving education, training and qualification processes**. These considerations were the background for the first draft of the alternative learning model.

In order to test the learning model proposal, each VET centre (CS-ODC in Italy, NLN in Ireland, TCF in Northern Ireland and URI in Slovenia) selected some parts of it and organised training experiences with one or more groups of disabled users. Activities were chosen by the centres considering their own characteristics (e.g. know-how, experience, competences, operating environment) and the different kinds of disabilities they normally deal with. At the end of the testing phase, the four centres developed a report about the main results of their activities; each report was then collected and compared with the others to

get a general overview of the testing phase outcomes, providing indications and suggestions for improving and validating the learning approach⁶.

The document we are presenting in the following paragraphs is a shorter version of the final validated version of the learning model⁷.

3.2 General setting for transition environments

3.2.1 Scope of the learning model

This European **learning** model for people with disabilities is a **flexible model** that aims at introducing innovative elements in learning and training processes to prepare and support the transition of users with disabilities to the labour market. The model is innovative and alternative insofar as it introduces elements that recognise the weaknesses of current training situations and processes. These weaknesses were identified in the research phase of the LED project and analysed in the comparative report. According to an evidence-based approach, the European learning model takes into account recent results of research and practical experiences about learning and training processes for users with disabilities.

This is the **validated** version of the learning model, i.e. most aspects of the model drafted by the end of the first project year have been tested in the practical activities of four out of six project partners, applied with disabled users and evaluated with various modalities. After this testing phase, the learning model has been updated and integrated with the empirical results of the testing activities. Moreover, further information, feedback and suggestions have been taken into consideration to validate the learning model, e.g. the results of evaluating the training workshops for professionals held by four of the project partners and the results of dissemination and exploitation activities.

The ideal context for the implementation of the learning model will be a **transition environment** or a **transition enterprise**, in which the people with disabilities (indicated throughout the text as “the users”, “the disabled users” or “the learners”) learn, are trained and start with working activities. Throughout these activities, they should play an **active** role. The transition enterprise might also be a “**transition department**” within another organisation or enterprise, market-oriented or non-profit. It should not be a closed cosmos, but it should be connected to regional organisations and stakeholders “outside”, possibly in the form of a cooperation network. This transition environment or enterprise would constitute a connection to the labour market as well as a valuable opportunity for future integration of the users.

The European learning model conceives people with disabilities as “**learning employees**” within a specific vocational area. As highlighted in the results of the testing activities, it is important to consider employability as a core element of the learning model (cf. LED TCF Testing Report). The learning model and the transition environment shall foster the users’ **employability** in order to enable them to:

- enter the **mainstream labour market** for the **first time**
- **re-enter** the **labour market** after an illness, after a severe accident, after rehabilitation
- **enhance social integration** and relations of people with disabilities
- improve the **living conditions** and the everyday life of people with disabilities.

In a few words, the learning model can be defined as a comprehensive toolbox for the learning and training pathway of users with disabilities in a transition environment towards the future integration in the labour market.

The **target** group of the validated learning model are mainly **trainers, organisations, service providers and stakeholders working with disabled people**. Due to the **transnational**, above all **European**, character of this learning model, trainers will be able to use the contents of the report as a guide with a **European added value**.

⁶ For more details, please refer to Chapter 5 “Report on testing activities”.

⁷ The complete original version of the validated LED alternative learning model is available on the attached CD-ROM as well as at www.europe-projectled.eu/documents.html.

This learning model strives for **innovativeness** in its **multidimensionality**: there is not just one element that should make it innovative, but the main innovation consists in its **combination** of approaches, dimensions and tools aiming at employability and at the transition to the labour market. The specific innovation is practically achieved by the integration of several elements in one single comprehensive concept, integrating and consolidating existing good practices.

3.2.2 Implementation of the learning model in transition environments

3.2.2.1 Definition of vocational area(s)

The concept of transition is an essential concept for the LED project and is considered to be a key for the future integration of people with disabilities. Transition aims at creating perspectives for the disabled user: as mentioned, through the learning model people with disabilities shall start or re-enter a pathway leading to work and employment. For this goal, it is important that the vocational area where the learning model is applied corresponds to vocational profiles which are demanded in the labour market. Therefore, the vocational area selected for the users will serve as a future proper means for transition and inclusion in the labour market. It will be selected on the basis of two main elements, i.e. the (local) economic and labour market characteristics, including the areas with a predicted employment growth, as well as the disabled users' characteristics, needs and aspirations.

Some examples of vocational areas/sectors in which the learning/training path can be embedded are the following ones:

- Administration
- Accounting
- Archive (editing and documenting archive materials)
- Bookbinding
- Catering
- Digital and graphic design
- Horticulture
- Hotel sector
- Retail
- Social care
- Wood carving.

In order to analyse the local economic and labour market characteristics, the organisation implementing the learning model can carry out a survey of businesses of the mainstream labour market in their regional area. Such a survey can be designed as a labour market analysis tool to provide information about economic activity, growing and declining sectors and potential employment opportunities. A practical instrument to carry this out can be an online survey tool, so that businesses just have to click on a link to fill in their answers, sparing time and costs, and so that the statistical results will be then automatically extracted. The following items should be included in the survey for the enterprises, thus investigating relevant aspects:

- *Has the enterprise provided a work placement for a person with disability in the past two years?*
 - *If not, for which reason(s)?*
- *Would the enterprise be able to provide a work placement to a person with disability in the next two years?*
 - *If not, for which reason(s)?*
 - *If yes, for which job profiles are potential vacancies predicted for the future? (Examples: industrial operatives, IT, retail, office, etc.)*
 - *If yes, what minimum level of education or training qualification(s) would be expected for a potential employee?*
- *What are the five top employability skills which are relevant to your organisation? (examples: communication skills, team-working skills, customer-orientation, reliability, adaptability)*

The results of such a survey will highlight areas which are important from employers' view and, in the middle term, influence the possibility of a job placement of the disabled learners. In the short term, the survey's results help make informed decisions regarding the inputs for the learning and training pathway (cf. LED NLN Testing Report).

According to the testing activities carried out within the LED project, the selection of a vocational area should be part of a process involving the following steps (cf. LED NLN Testing Report):

- Identifying the disabled users' skills, interests and aspirations

- Identifying the type of vocational area they are attracted to and the type of work they would like to carry out within that sector (vocational profile)
- Weighing up the availability of such jobs, for example using the results of the businesses survey mentioned above; if necessary, considering job and vocational alternatives for the users
- If possible, finding future suitable work placements where the disabled users will be able to sample working in that area to check whether it meets their expectations and aspirations.

Also according to the testing results in the LED project, the learners, the employers involved and the programme coordinators found that the definition of the vocational area has to be strongly considered in any training model. Ensuring that an individual is interested in and suited to a particular type of employment is key to their success, and it is also important that training is offered in industries and job roles where there is likely to be opportunities (cf. LED NLN Testing Report).

3.2.2.2 Learning and training contents

The **main learning and training contents** in the transition environment/enterprise will be developed and delivered according to the specific vocational area selected by the trainers and according to characteristics, vocational preferences and opportunities and of the disabled users. Some main categories of learning contents are listed below:

- **Literacy**
- Command of basic **arithmetic**, of percentage and area calculations
- Basic knowledge of **natural sciences**
- Knowledge of **business contexts**
- **Social - interpersonal skills**
- **Communication modalities**, both everyday as well as work-related ones, e.g. telephone techniques; also with regard to understanding body language, gestures and nonverbal signs, facial expressions, establishing contact, asking for help
- **Digital** literacy and IT safety
- **Job-seeking skills**
- **Workplace equipment** and disabled-friendly design of the workplace
- **Health and safety** at work; prevention of accidents at the workplace and work-related illnesses
- Fostering **resilience**, developing work **endurance**, **adaptation** strategies and problem-solving
- Organisation of work **tasks**
- Key **qualifications** for the labour market, also market-oriented tasks
- **Travel** issues
- Issues regarding **different vocational areas and job positions**, e.g. the attitude towards customers.

The learning contents mentioned should have a vocational focus. For example, in the vocational areas “Administration” and “Accounting”, literacy should refer to “how to read an invoice, etc.”, basic knowledge of natural sciences should refer to “how to recycle paper”, etc., knowledge of business contexts should explain why an administrative office is important for enterprises and its main roles etc.

3.2.2.3 Transferability and economic sustainability of the model

Two important features of this learning model conceived for transition environments are its transferability and its economic-financial sustainability.

Transferability indicates here the possibility to apply and adopt approaches and measures in contexts which are not the same as where the approaches and measures had been developed. For the degree of transferability of this learning model, the **European orientation** is an essential element. The first version of the learning model (version for testing) was delineated on the basis of the LED-project comparative report about the European countries participating in the LED project. The comparative report focused on good-practices regarding training and rehabilitation approaches from different European countries, mainly the countries of the project partners. Therefore, the model was embedded in a European context since its conception. The indications of the comparative report on how to favour the transition to society and mainstream labour market have been taken as key references in order to suggest improvements in learning and training processes for adults with disabilities. Then, testing the learning model in different geographic, economic and vocational contexts during the LED project activities as well as validating the learning model according to these testing results has been also relevant to its transferability. As a further contribution to learning model transferability, many sources of the desk research carried out for this learning model, are mainly concerning European and international contexts.

Referring to the economic and financial sustainability of the model and its implementation, controlling and sound financial management should be on a solid basis. Economic sustainability does not only imply value-for-money-orientation and cost control by the implementing organisation, but also the active search for further external funding opportunities, e.g. within education and integration programmes at various levels, including at EU level, in networking activities with enterprises and other organisations.

3.2.2.4 Users' type and the degree of disability

In implementing the learning model, the specific characteristics and the consequences of each disability play a central role, as they influence:

- the **feasibility degree** of the learning model implementation
- the way to structure and develop the **learning, training and working activities**
- the necessary **investments of resources**
- the **selection** and the training requirements regarding the trainers.

Some differentiations among disabilities regard e.g.:

- distinguishing between **body/sensory, learning/cognitive/intellectual and mental/psychiatric** disabilities
- distinguishing between **acquired** and **congenital** disabilities
- the **degree** of the disability with particular reference to mild, moderate and **severe** disabilities.

Regarding severe impairments, it is important to take into account that in some countries elements of legislation only refer to people with severe disabilities and not to all disabled. Therefore, the legislative background of every country has to be considered accurately, too.

It is particularly complex to structure an environment for “mixed-disability groups”, i.e. groups whose members have different, multiple and complex disabilities. Therefore, the trainers should foresee measures, e.g. repetition sessions for complicated topics, to face difficulties related to communication and interaction among the users and difficulties related to the different cognitive levels.

In some contexts, computerised support is a very useful tool in order to adapt learning and working environment flexibly to different kinds of disabilities, as shown by the testing experiences within the LED project. For example, it has been possible to re-elaborate the work phases and to reconnect them to basic actions, making the work also suitable to people with reduced manual skills and with attention deficits (cf. LED CS-ODC Testing Report).

3.2.3 Learning and training environment

3.2.3.1 A holistic concept of environment

A work environment which guarantees the rights of disabled people should be **open, inclusive and accessible** (UN convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, art. 27.1).

This European learning model defines the **concept of environment** in a **holistic** way. It includes, therefore, not only the physical features of the place, but further elements like:

- the **logistical aspects**, with a special focus on impairments and mobility issues and their consequences on accessibility requirements
- the **equipment** and the **aid tools** available for the person with a disability as well as for the trainers
- the **social-communicative climate** and the relations among the people involved.

In fact, the learning model confers an important role to the **social relations** and the **communication modalities and interactions** in the learning and training context. The elements characterising this social climate include:

- the **responses** of the users to the trainer's inputs: whether the users recognise the inputs, how they react to them; presence of interest, attention or willingness
- the general **interactions** between the **trainer** and the **users**: number and features of interactions
- the **interactions among the users** and the interactions at **group level**: number and features of interactions
- the availability of the users to **cooperate** with others and to **learn** from them
- the way in which **conflict** and **stress** are faced in the group.

The LED project proposes the goal of enabling people with disabilities to “**learn in situations**”. The holistic concept of environment has great importance for this, as an environment where an **integrated approach** is applied and possibly all elements of the environment contribute to **improving** the whole learning and training process, creating **synergies**.

3.2.3.2 Logistical requirements and equipment

The architectonic and logistical structures of the buildings where the learning model is implemented must be **barrier-free according to the type of disability of each user**. It is important that **furniture** and **utilities** are disabled-friendly. This includes, for example regarding some physical impairments:

- lifts
- wheelchair ramps
- automatic door openers
- accessible bathrooms
- accessible kitchens
- disabled-friendly work tools
- signage in Braille inside the premises and outside every room.
- in the testing activities within the LED project, the relevance of air conditioning systems for the well-being of the users during the learning and training pathway also emerged (cf. LED URI Testing Report).

Every room should have demarcations and labels which facilitate the **orientation** of the users, time schedules and a clock. Other distraction elements should be avoided. There should be enough **space** for the users to enter and move in the room, and the size of wheelchairs should be taken into account. The **equipment** in every learning/training room must be appropriate; **windows**, **curtains** and possibly a **water basin** are important. When fixing the timetables and the rooms for the lessons, it is important to schedule that there are no frequent room changes.

Furthermore, the learning environment should be equipped with aid tools favouring the learning and training processes for the disabled users. Some examples of these tools, which should be available for users and for trainers, are:

- **Assistive technologies and devices** that are tailored to the specific disability of the users, e.g. sign languages, dictaphones/voice recognition or text-to-speech software, displays of text, Braille-tools, etc.
- **Visual aid tools**, including visualising instructions and visualising tasks and to-do-lists: above all in the case of some disabilities like autism, it is recommendable to convey a large part of the information by the use of visual aid tools
- **Dictionaries**: for the native language (in countries with two official languages, both languages), English dictionary and, depending on the learning context and contents, even other languages; if possible, e-dictionaries can be used as well
- **Computers**: with internet connection and the activation of the accessibility settings in the operating system (see also the paragraphs about ICT and media).

3.3 Approaches and methods for learning and training processes

3.3.1 Interdisciplinarity

Interdisciplinarity as an approach in the implementation of the learning model requires that the users are assisted by experts and staff from different **educational and vocational backgrounds**. The interdisciplinarity approach enables integration of different perspectives and broadening the horizon of learning/training processes. Examples of relevant backgrounds for the trainers are: social work, sociology, psychology, pedagogics, ergotherapy, teaching for special needs, physiotherapy, logotherapy, etc.

It is crucial to invest in the **attitudes** of trainers, which may influence the users' attitudes as far as discomfort and lack of self-confidence are concerned. The trainers shall contribute to the "rehabilitation of the mind" of the users, e.g. for rendering the users self-reliant and for getting them believe "they can do", and to the "rehabilitation of the body", in advising them on how to accomplish new tasks and to deal with their body (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations 2001).

Essential **features** of the **trainers** who will be involved in the implementation of the learning model are the following ones:

- social / communication / interpersonal skills
- knowledge of special needs education and counselling abilities
- mental openness and tolerance towards the topics of disability, precondition to treat disabled people with dignity and respect
- assessment and planning skills as well as a strong orientation towards a successful process outcome

- ability to analyse economic and market forecasts
- ability to transmit to users the motivation and confidence which are necessary to bring about positive results
- ability to choose modules' contents and tasks which are not too easy and not too difficult for the users
- ability to differentiate among different working environments for the future perspectives of people with disabilities, e.g. according to the type, to the size and to the sector of the organisations/enterprises
- ability to convey crafts- and job-related skills.

To sum up, essential features of trainers should be pro-activeness, commitment and competence (cf. European Union 2011: 36).

Regarding the interdisciplinary teams, a central aspect is the great value of collaboration among the professionals with different competences (cf. LED CS-ODC Testing Report). According to the results of the testing activities, the co-presence of different professionals results in a positive element for both the services provided to the disabled users and for the permanent training of the professionals themselves. A limit of applying such an interdisciplinary approach is the difficulty of using quantitative evaluation elements, when different professionals are involved. Anyway, the co-presence of professionals with different backgrounds contributed to improving assessments, to developing a more accurate and personalised individual project, to improving the holistic vision of the person involved and to enhancing users' transversal competences (cf. LED CS-ODC Testing Report).

3.3.2 User-centred approach

Starting from the individuality of every person, i.e. the idea that every person is unique in all his/her features, an approach pursued by this learning model is **user-centeredness**. In proposing individual-oriented methods, this learning model refers to a central element of the Supported Employment Model (European Union of Supported Employment 2010: 45).

The user-centred approach should be applied throughout all phases of the learning/training and (re)integration pathway. Various elements should be taken into account with regard to every user, and analysed in-depth in the framework of "**case management**":

- user's **characteristics** and **needs**, according to a **situation-analysis** and **problem-analysis**
- necessary **interventions**
- periodical **monitoring**.

Regarding the users' **characteristics**, which may influence the outcomes of the process and are to be highlighted according to a user-centred approach, the following ones have the priority:

- the **personal history** of each individual, including age, lifestyle and cultural background
- **impairments** and **mobility**
- the general **potential** of each individual
- the **learning skills** of each individual, including memory, listening and paying attention
- the **personal motivation and willingness** of each individual
- the personal **aspirations** and **expectations** of each individual.

To increase the user-centeredness of the services offered in implementing the learning model, it is possible to use an instrument such as "Work Star", one of a range of "Outcome Star" keyworking and measurement tools used in the testing activities of the LED-Project in Ireland. Its specific function is to help identify what the learner needs/wants/expects to achieve and to measure the progress and development in skills, attitudes and work readiness (cf. LED NLN Testing Report).

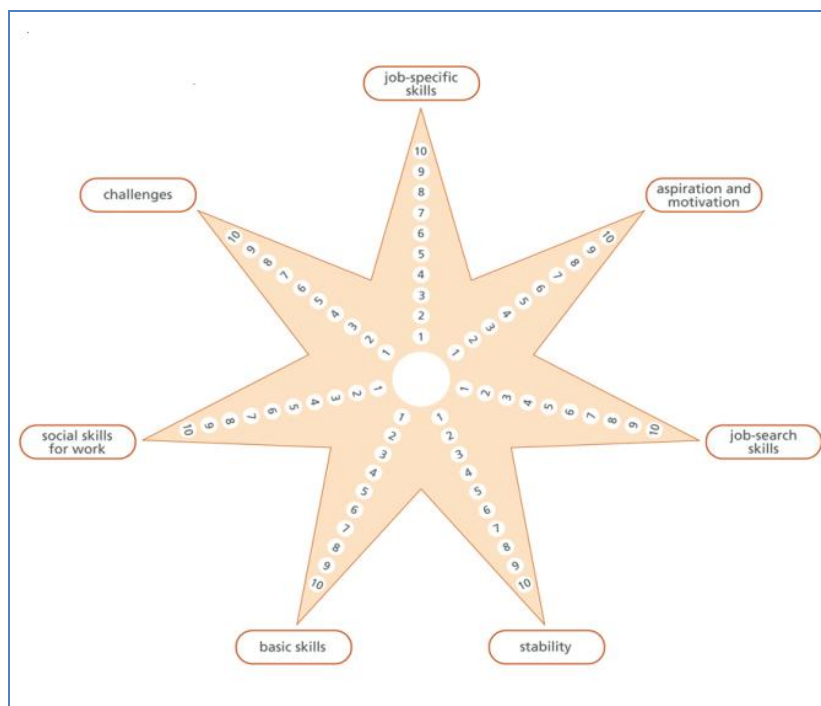


Figure 1 - "Work Star"

Each point of the star is a key area considered to have an impact on the user's ability to obtain and retain employment. For each area, an evaluation score (from 1 to 10) is assigned to the user at different stages. By the use of the work star, the organisation implementing the learning model can measure the "learning journey" of each user i.e. the progress over time. Within the LED testing activities, it has been used at individual review meetings to support guidance activities and to discuss areas for development. As the tool encouraged the learner and the instructor to focus on areas that were important to the individual, its use led to a more user-centred approach. Both learners and instructors gave a positive feedback about the use of the work star. According to instructors, the star also helped focus the learner on areas where they needed to develop. Moreover, they appreciated the fact that the tool is visual and felt it was motivating to learners to have a graphic image showing their progress (cf. LED NLN Testing Report).

Another user-centred tool to deploy in the implementation of the learning model is the individual training plan. Before users start accomplishing the training phase of their learning pathway, they receive an **individual training plan** designed around their specific needs and aspirations, but also focussing on the skills gaps, the training required to meet these gaps in the particular vocational area and sector where the user is pursuing employment (cf. LED NLN Testing Report). Such an individual training plan is part of the user-centred approach because each plan is **unique to its user and tailored to their features in a holistic way**, taking different areas of skills into account. The user's individual training plan outlines the specific "training journey" for the user and is developed and agreed between the trainer, the user and -if employers are involved in this phase- the employer as well. Inputs from the interdisciplinary staff team should also be given when required. Within the activities of the LED project, the involved employers were satisfied with the individualisation of the training plans of the users and saw this as a good system, wishing that the individual training plans be reviewed even more regularly. The reason for this is that employers may see further potential and further training-related, personal and vocational needs during the process (cf. LED NLN Testing Report).

It is essential to highlight the individualisation of training since the beginning of the users' pathway. According to the results of the testing activities, one of the main conclusions from employers and coordinators was that if a learner is not interested in the particular type of work they are engaged in, in the long term they will not be able to sustain employment in that field. User-centeredness would therefore include placing importance on the user-centeredness of needs-analysis, assessment and definition of vocational area (cf. LED NLN Testing Report). Applying a user-centred approach, though, may also require

that the trainers face some challenges. For example, it may be difficult to strike the balance between learners' needs, employer requirements and funders' expectations (cf. LED NLN Testing Report).

3.3.3 Focus on enterprises and their perspective of disability

To favour disabled people's transition to training and employment as well as work integration, it is also necessary to take into account the perspective of **enterprises and employers** (cf. Greca 2001). For the organisation implementing the learning model these actions are important also in the middle-term and long-term, that is to improve employer awareness and engagement regarding the work opportunities of people with disabilities. Employer-related and labour market-related research carried out by the organisations implementing the model should concentrate on predicted growth business areas, in order to increase the outcome of disabled users getting paid jobs in the longer term (cf. LED TCF Testing Report).

In activities with enterprises, the organisation implementing the learning model should focus on the **potentials** of people with disabilities, tackling possible stereotypes and prejudices, for example some employers' assumption that persons with disabilities are unable to work (United Nations 2006). The testing activities have shown that key to successful engagement of employers in the mainstream labour market, is to adopt a professional, flexible, listening approach, aimed at building longer term relationships (cf. LED TCF Testing Report).

Focussing on the enterprises' perspective of disabilities has the following implications for the organisation implementing the learning model:

- analysing **economic trends/forecasts** and **employment** tendencies, sectorial demand and offer in the **labour market**, the **qualifications** required and the socio-political framework
- taking into account **scientific and technological progress** and its consequences for the workplace
- contacting local **employers** or local employers' organisations, above all the businesses that highlight social responsibility issues or present a particular CSR potential;
- giving enterprises comprehensive information about the employment of people with disabilities, also creating additional webpages with a lot of useful information concerning vocational and employment rehabilitation (cf. LED URI Testing Report)
- developing a professional integration strategy for the employers and/or employer organisations with which there have been contacts and/or cooperation
- finding out about **subsidies, grants** or other financed projects that **support businesses**, e.g. state subsidies or grants of the chambers of commerce, or fiscal reliefs for enterprises that hire people with disabilities.

An important implication of considering the enterprises' perspective is trying to establish a more co-ordinated approach to engaging with employers for work experience and paid work. Organisations implementing the learning model can carry this out also by setting up staff meetings for the purposes of sharing employer contacts and finding employment opportunities for users. Contacts with local employers are also essential to feed any information gained into the contents of the training interventions (cf. LED TCF Testing Report).

According to testing results, the meetings mentioned above have been perceived by staff as useful in getting help with unsuccessful searches and in co-ordinating group search efforts in a geographical area or for a specific work type (cf. LED TCF Testing Report). Moreover, staff of the organisation implementing the learning model can benefit from the contacts with employers also because this enables to develop a deep and up-to-date understanding of what employers in a multitude of sectors are looking for (cf. LED NLN Testing Report).

As tested in the LED project within the activities related to the involvement of employers, it is also possible to appoint a professional from the business world with the title of "Employer Champion". This shall be an expert having extensive knowledge and experience of recruitment and workforce planning, being able to provide guidance and support regarding the approaches and co-operation with enterprises to the organisation that implements the learning model (cf. LED TCF Testing Report).

Problems in placement and integration of people with disabilities as well as stereotypes very often depend on enterprises' lack of **information** about the disabilities and about their consequences. Also according to the experiences of the LED project partners, frequently **employers** do not have enough information to

assess the possibilities of employment for people with disabilities. Many employers are aware only of some kinds of physical impairments, and not of disabled people's abilities. Lack of time and priority of market-oriented activities are major reasons for these circumstances. In spite of this, it is important that the organisation implementing the learning model informs employers about disability-related issues and about the advantages connected with the employment of disabled people (LED URI Testing Report).

Streaming precise, scientific and legislative information about disability issues is essential in order to change **attitudes** and to convey to enterprises the message that people with disabilities are resources and not only "costs". In this way, it is possible to increase employers' willingness and opportunity to hire people with reduced work ability (cf. European Union 2011).

Creating or expanding a **network** with local employers, enterprises and their associations (cf. LED URI Testing Report) also has a particular importance in the final phase of the rehabilitation process, the job placement, that will be presented further on. The contacts with enterprises and employers do not have to consist only in face to face meetings, but may include other forms of communication and information, as well as ways to find out economic and business opportunities of cooperation and the distribution of materials on consistent topics (cf. European Union of Supported Employment 2010: 32). The staff of an organisation implementing the learning model should also consider an important fact when involving employers, as partly already mentioned: employers are often very busy and do not have an abundance of time to spare, so that any contacts and interventions with employers should be carried out in a time-efficient way. (cf. LED NLN Testing Report).

Big companies often have a specific department which is specialised in the employment and integration of people with impairments. In these cases, the organisation implementing the learning model shall contact and involve also these departments. It is important to establish also informal contacts with employers. This applies above all to small and medium enterprises, as the organisation implementing the learning model may "open doors" in many of these enterprises only after building trust relations and taking into account the enterprise background. The specific setting in which small and medium enterprises are embedded is a relevant factor to consider.

3.3.4 Simplification and simulation of working tasks and environment

For the purposes of the learning model, simplification indicates processes to make communication, learning/training contents and processes clearer, easier and faster to understand.

It is necessary to adopt a **simplification approach** making the contents appropriate for all users, according to the type and the degree of disability (cf. LED European Report: 25; cf. ILSMH European Association 1998).

Generally speaking, two spheres should be simplified:

- simplification of **forms**; e.g. a clear and logical structure of the text, short and clear sentences, active form instead of passive form; every sentence or paragraph should possibly contain only one main message
- simplification of **contents**; e.g. using examples, using simple words, avoiding the use of neologisms, complex / long / abstract / foreign words.

Simplification is to be implemented in both written and oral communication.

In the project testing activities, the Italian system of practice firm "Simulimpresa" (enterprise simulation) has been used in the simplification process, in order to allow its use among learners with mild mental impairments or learning difficulties (cf. LED CS-ODC Testing Report).

When pursuing simplification in the training activities aiming at the improvement of employability, practice firms are a very valuable instrument. As a learning method they promote learning by experiencing thanks to the simulation of job situations. This succeeds by reproducing the structure of a real working environment, e.g. an office. The key aspects of using practice firms for disabled users are the following ones:

- the various tasks are simplified and adapted to the different kinds of disabilities, according to the learning targets of each user

- the users learn to carry out tasks and develop their abilities
- the users get an overall idea of how the environment works.

The simplification process applied to a practice firm implies that every single task is divided into different activities. This makes it easier for the user to understand it and to carry it out autonomously in a correct way (cf. LED CS-ODC Testing Report). It is important that the performance of concrete tasks and examples by the users occurs under the supervision of specialised staff, e.g. a technologist and a trainer/instructor (cf. LED URI Testing Report).

To reach simplification in learning and training environment for people with disabilities, not only tasks but also operational cycles shall be divided in smaller parts and re-elaborated. This shall give all disabled users the chance to participate in a common working process. According to the impressions gathered among the trainers, the simplification process has had positive effects: assigning tasks which are suitable to each user's skills decreases the performance stress; the subdivision of an operational cycle in many steps, requiring everybody's contribution, enhances the perception of being part of a team. Moreover, this element can also provide good productive performances. According to the testing results, simulation activities have been evaluated positively by the users. Their learning skills with regard to concrete performances and tasks have increased thanks to the use of simulated working environment (cf. LED CS-ODC Testing Report).

3.3.5 Inclusion of disabled and non-disabled-people

The co-presence of disabled and non-disabled people in learning and training environment is an important element of policies going beyond mere protection schemes for people with disabilities and addressing their active inclusion and **integration in society**. As part of inclusion policies, people with disabilities should have more opportunities to learn and to develop their skills **together with non-disabled ones**. If possible, this shall occur even in a cross-generational context also to increase solidarity among generations.

Within the testing activities carried out in Ireland, all participating disabled users took part in training activities with non-disabled people, and for 88% of them this helped develop their own skills and self-confidence very well (cf. LED NLN Testing Report). According to the results of the activities taking place in Slovenia, for nearly the totality of the participating disabled users the cooperation with non-disabled users had been useful: training with non-disabled people can help develop the skills and self-confidence well or very well for 94% of the respondents (cf. LED URI Testing Report).

Transition environments should foresee the co-presence of disabled and non-disabled employees, also when a transition learning environment becomes a transition enterprise. Non-disabled people integrated in the learning/training environment should receive both:

- vocational skills on the basis of the vocational area identified for the transition environment
- social skills specifically aiming at interacting with people with disabilities and, if possible, with the specific disabilities affecting the persons involved in the training and transition environment.

When people with disabilities take part in training programmes together with non-disabled ones, **additional support and interventions** have to be provided for the users with disabilities, due to the **differences in performance levels**. This may take the form of additional, **extra-training** hours tailored to the needs of the group having disabilities or fitting specific difficulties. In case there are complicated parts in the training, it is possible to dedicate these training contents only to the non-disabled part of the group (cf. LED Comparative Report).

3.3.6 ICT and media

Nowadays economic and social life cannot be imagined without **information and communication technologies** (ICT) anymore. ICT also offer a potential with regard to assistive technologies for people with disabilities. Using ICT in the learning/training pathway may also imply using **e-learning platforms** as a tool, according to the users' degree and type of disability. The users may interact in virtual spaces such as users' forums to compare their experiences, foster mutual help and develop self-awareness.

Including ICT in educational and vocational programmes, not only for disabled people, has a further added value, as it enables **blended learning** forms. Blended learning and distance learning, in fact, offer additional learning chances in case of severe mobility impairments and/or infrastructural and transport/facilitations

problems. Distance and online learning represents also a resource for former users after the end of the learning/training modules, in order to carry out continuing training.

According to the learning/training needs of the users and the type of vocational area and profile, the key skills conveyed in the information and communication technology field will include:

- Text elaboration
- Calculation sheets
- Electronic communication and web
- Databases.

ICT are also particularly important with regard to the **job search**: the internet, web search engines and job portals are sources to seek advertisements and potential employers and/or training centres. Moreover, ICT can be used as relevant instruments in order to increase the general employability and prepare for specific working environments and activities.

ICT knowledge and skills can be provided to the users also as “smart technology” in order to assist them with personal organisation. Some examples involve teaching the use of a smart phone that the disabled user already has or could acquire if desired, and exploring useful applications of mobile (smart phone- or tablet-based) technologies. Particular consideration should be given to communication functions of the devices, accessing services online and customising the accessibility options. Using modern technologies and communication skills are important elements to help the disabled users live independently in the community, for example by building and keeping relationships and finding opportunities. Feedback from the users up to now has been very positive, showing also that it is often difficult to get this kind of personalised independent advice and training on such devices in the community (cf. LED TCF Testing Report).

For disabled users, also the use of media in general can represent an opportunity to connect to the world, to acquire knowledge about contexts that they do not know yet. Depending on the availabilities of the organisation implementing the model, **learning sessions about how to use media** should be organised and offered to groups of users. In this context, media are not only a mean in the learning process, but may also be some of the learning goals. Media should be, of course, adequate to the specific disabilities of the users. Also in the case of media, they may be conceived as tools or means for developing transition environments to foster the creation of new employment possibilities.

Due to the new importance of social media and networks nowadays, social media may be one of the most interesting media-related topics for the users. With regard to social media, it is possible to provide the users also with an extra session about social media awareness; if the organisation implementing the learning model does not have enough expertise to provide this, involving external service providers, like a local university, may be a solution (cf. LED TCF Testing Report).

3.3.7 Group activities

Working and discussing in groups during learning/training processes has a great importance for the learners. For some users it may be even the **first time** to experience these situations in-depth within a learning/training context aiming at employability. This is not only a general consideration of education systems and didactics, but it has particular relevance also for people with disabilities. Group activities for users with disabilities shall pursue following aims (cf. LED CS-ODC Testing Report):

- learn to **interact** with other people, improving communication by encouraging mutual listening and exchange of ideas
- get involved in **team-building** processes fostering **mutual help** (also dealing with the difficulties that arise when a user has to ask for help)
- get experience with possible **conflict or contradiction situations, managing stressful situations**
- try **mediation** and **compromise, increasing emotional stability**
- enhance **problem solving strategies**; enhancing problem solving skills will occur with a range of solid strategies that are presented to the users, in order to help them with overcoming difficult situations and with decision making.

Besides these specific ones, a further goal of group activities, which is also a goal of other dimensions of the learning model, is the improvement of users' self-esteem and awareness, focussing on their strengths. From a didactic point of view, in the learning group it is essential to build mutual relations aimed at developing the learning potential of every user. Cooperative learning indicates therefore a way of interaction-based learning in a group whose members collaborate in order to reach a common goal. The involvement of every user allows building up an overall view of the group learning/training goals. Together with interactions, each user's involvement enables developing a common sense of belonging (cf. LED CS-ODC Testing Report).

The first step has to be a **short self-presentation** by all users, creating a more suitable social-communicative climate. Before starting activities in group, **rules for the communication and interactions** (interdependencies, responsibilities, interaction patterns) among the group members and for carrying out the activities should be explained and shown by the trainer, above all using visible and accessible examples. Facilitating the communication and interactions among the users is very important (cf. LED CS-ODC Testing Report). After the trainer has explained the **instructions** and before the users start participating, it is possible to repeat the instructions by showing **pictures** or playing **audio** or **video** recordings repeating and explaining them, too.

Group activities have been widely tested within the testing phase of the LED project. When guiding a group with disabled users, the professionals involved in the testing activities of the project shall illustrate the general topic to the users. This will help make users, especially new ones, feel at ease. After this, the topic shall be explained more in detail with projected slides. Depending on the type of disabilities of the users, the slides should favour images instead of words. After giving a solid content basis, an exchange of ideas among the users should be encouraged, either in small groups activities or all together with the mediation of the trainer. Using a board to write key words referring to the chosen topic or to the users' experiences may be very useful (cf. LED CS-ODC Testing Report).

Various options are available for the organisation implementing the learning model regarding the type of group activities offered to the users. The lists below indicates some examples which, according to a participative learning approach and by making use of **communication exercises**, have been tested in the LED project activities or have been used in other innovative projects for people with disabilities (cf. LED European Report):

- **simulations** of everyday life situations and tasks, activities of daily living, reactions to unexpected constellations and behavioural patterns
- **role plays** and **games**: games focus on rules which are relevant in working contexts: time keeping, attitudes, communication and language used, responsibility, self-care, different roles at work and relations to colleagues and superiors (cf. LED CS-ODC Testing Report); furthermore, games can be useful with regard to the evaluation of the steps throughout the learning process, in order to assess whether intermediate or final learning goals have been reached by the users
- **mock job interviews**: they help enhance the skills connected to an interview situation in a recruitment process; the users can carry out practical exercises where the employer and the interviewee are simulated in turn (cf. LED CS-ODC Testing Report).

The group activities mentioned above should also refer to the **future positive effects** of learning and training measures for the users. This can trigger the users' **motivation** during the learning/training process as well as their self-confidence. According to the testing results of the LED project, the overall outcomes of group activities for the users with reference to various investigation areas were definitively positive (cf. LED CS-ODC Testing Report).

3.3.8 Peer support and mentoring

As a component of this learning model, the **peer** concept refers to the possibility that **people affected by a disability** act as **counsellors and/or mentors** for other users experiencing a similar situation or disability. Peer support is also mentioned by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (art. 26.1) as one measure to enable abilities, full inclusion and participations for disabled people.

Becoming a peer mentor/counsellor for a person with disability is quite an ambitious project, depending on the type of the disability. Peer mentoring actions can start with a person with disability talking to other disabled users in the learning/training **sessions**, but also potentially offering further **1-to-1 support**. After developing the mentor activities in a more systematic way, the goal could be the **creation of a peer support network** directed towards vocational and employment achievements (cf. LED TCF Testing Report).

As actions of peer support and mentoring, it is also possible that the organisation implementing the learning model in the transition environment will deploy **former disabled learners**. They may report on their current situation and on their experiences after concluding their participation in the learning model. Asking previous users -who were successful in reaching a goal- to speak to a new class of users about their experiences, is a valuable idea in order to inspire confidence (cf. LED TCF Testing Report). Also people who have found their own professional and socio-occupational dimension after the acquisition of a disability shall receive the opportunity to tell their personal experiences to another group of users with disabilities (cf. LED CS-ODC Testing Report). Above all people with disabilities having excellent experiences and a good level of independence in their personal, working and social lives can assume an inspirational role for other disabled users (cf. LED TCF Testing Report; cf. LED CS-ODC Testing Report).

Peer support and peer mentoring activities have been tested in various countries within the activities of the LED project. According to the results of mentoring training activities for the purposes of **peer social network support**, the learning users found it very valuable in encouraging and sustaining their participation in social networks. The mentors found the activities very useful to develop their communication skills (cf. LED TCF Testing Report).

Peer support activities have also been tested within the project activities by offering training as social facilitator to people with previous/partial psychic impairment. In this testing experience, people with psychiatric disabilities were trained to work at the front office of other institutes, welcoming users with the same kind of disabilities. These activities gave very good results in terms of users' communication and interaction abilities. Also in another testing context of the project where peer support was implemented, peer support has been well-accepted by the users. Peer mentoring activities have helped the Italian users involved in improving relational skills and self-esteem (cf. LED CS-ODC Testing Report). In Slovenia, 70% of the disabled users who took part in peer mentoring activities during the testing of the LED project stated that peer mentoring had helped them develop their skills and self-confidence well or very well. As a statement regarding peer support and mentoring, the comment of a peer tutor involved in the testing activities of the LED project can be mentioned: *"I would have never thought that sharing my experience could be useful for other people"*.

3.3.9 People with disabilities as "experts" and "learning by teaching"

This learning model, besides striving for consulting and actively involving users with disabilities in the learning/training environment, proposes to consider **people with disabilities as "experts" and "teachers"**, which is also a further way to involve them actively. The users are "experts" as, due to their own experience, they have **in-depth knowledge** about the life situation of people with the same disability. Their knowledge and expertise can be combined with theory and other practical-related modules in the learning/training pathway. The users can share their knowledge with other people, both disabled and non-disabled ones.

This approach is connected to the peer mentoring and support, furthermore it allows the learning users to play an even more active role in the process and to become full subjects of the training, combining theory and personal experience (cf. LED European Report: 25).

Connected to the view of disabled users as "experts", users can also act as "mutual teachers" in the learning group. For this, the learning model refers to the didactic model **"learning by teaching"**, formulated by Jean-Pol Martin and also known as "LdL" from the German wording of *"Lernen durch Lehren"*. The latter bases on flat hierarchies in the learning environment, considering the learners and the teacher (or, adapted to this learning model: the trainer) as partners (cf. Grzega/Schöner 2008). A way to apply the "learning by teaching" method is, for example, having two users or a group of the learning users instructing to the other users some topics; the topics have been selected by the teacher/trainer or by the users themselves. Ideally,

this shall be carried out activating the participation and communication of the learners in the best way possible (cf. Grzega/Schöner 2008: 168-169).

These approaches (“people with disabilities as experts” and “learning by teaching”) also aim at increasing the **self-confidence** and the **degree of self-determination** of the users with disabilities. The own experiences, the strategies to cope with life situations and the feelings of people with disabilities are a milestone of these two learning approaches and can:

- become a **resource** for others
- contribute to overcoming **barriers and fears**
- promote an **explorative attitude**
- contribute to improving the **awareness** regarding disability-related topics.

Within the testing activities of the LED project, the approaches “people with disabilities as experts” and “learning by teaching” have been implemented in the development of “social facilitators” for the area of mental health impairment (cf. LED CS-ODC Testing Report). The framework for creating this figure of social facilitators has been a programme for the social and professional inclusion of unemployed people with mental health impairments. The users selected to become social facilitators had previously faced dramatic mental health difficulties, they had then partly recovered from this, but still in need of being assisted by the mental health authorities. The programme consisted in training them as “social facilitators” so that they can transform their personal experience of “illness and recovery” into a resource for other people. Specifically, they shall use their experience in a helping role with other users who have not recovered yet from mental health difficulties. The social facilitators act as mediators, helping other users be confident about recovery opportunities and helping them communicate their actual needs in a sincere way. Within their helping role with other disabled users, the social facilitators enhance their own personal autonomy, stability and emancipation, elements which are essential for a future occupation. According to the testing results, the figure of the social facilitator was considered more than positively by the users. At the end of the programme, the social facilitators group expressed an interesting slogan, showing the users’ new self-confidence, trust as well as their awareness of role and responsibilities: *“We are the facilitators / if you follow us / we will take you out of it”* (cf. LED CS-ODC Testing Report).

3.3.10 Approaches for society awareness: active citizenship and intercultural orientation

Active citizenship has become an important dimension for social integration and full participation in society. People with disabilities, especially those who lived part of their life in special needs institutions, have had much less chances to develop the skills necessary for **active citizenship**. Also due to an average lower education level than people without disabilities, disabled people often face more barriers. Therefore, they need particular efforts in the path to exercise their citizenship rights. The learning model also addresses this situation and aims at tackling the **higher marginalisation risk** that arises from this.

Many prerequisites of active citizenship were already mentioned in the previous chapters with regard to the learning contents and the skills that should be fostered for the disabled users, such as (cf. LED European Report: 23):

- Native language skills
- Own initiative
- Learning and reasoning skills
- Social skills
- Cultural awareness/cultural communication skills
- Digital literacy

Depending on the cognitive level of the users, the learning/training sessions may include modules dealing with the meaning of active citizenship, the way to enforce citizenship rights, how to receive assistance in exercising these rights, which organisations promote them and offer advocacy and counselling. Within the testing activities of the LED project, a citizenship-training has been introduced in the phase of personal guidance and training. It has involved exploring community facilities local to each user, for example health, leisure, social and employment facilities, including group discussions and the use of the internet. This was followed up by visits to these areas to conduct further exploration first hand, speaking to people involved

and identifying accessible individualised opportunities. Excellent feedback has been collected by the users and their tutors with regard to these activities. The users had no idea of the range of facilities open to them in their local area before, having never had the opportunity to explore this (cf. LED TCF Testing Report).

A further approach proposed by the learning model and aiming at improving the society awareness of users with disabilities is **intercultural orientation**. In an interconnected world, intercultural relations and contexts gain more and more importance. This also influences education and training systems, pathways and curricula at different educational/vocational levels. To give people with disabilities more chances to be integrated in society, **intercultural-related skills** may also be integrated in the learning modules (cf. LED European Report: 21-22). For example, the following topics belong to this area:

- dealing, without stereotypes, with **inter- and multicultural topics** during the learning sessions, e.g. about migrants, their lifestyles and habits
- making role plays and games fostering **acceptance** and **tolerance**
- learning how people, also specifically disabled people, live in **other countries**, also outside of Europe (e.g. watching videos or listening to audio recordings)
- acquiring the basic knowledge of a **foreign language**, using audio/visual tools, practising in groups/ pairs
- going, as a group, to a cultural event or a cultural fair in the region.

3.4 Measures and phases

3.4.1 Measures: outline for transition environments

The following paragraphs of the learning model present the main **categories of measures** that were identified in the national reports of the LED project partners and were then categorised in the LED comparative report. They constitute the **structural framework in which** the learning model can be implemented, and they can be seen as the phases of the reintegration process and/or vocational rehabilitation (cf. LED Comparative Report).

After the identification of vocational areas for the implementation of the learning model, users may be integrated in the learning/transition environments thanks to the measures identified.

All interventions mentioned in the following paragraphs should be functional to the vocational area characterising the learning/transition environment in which users are integrated in.

3.4.2 Personal and vocational profiling

The first phase of the process is a **comprehensive profiling** of every user, having the goal of gathering personal and vocational information. It should be a collaborative process between the user and the trainer, and it is the first step to enable the user to make informed choices about his/her future.

The learning/training process should be addressed to each user as a whole, considering the person in a **holistic** way and not only focussing on their intellectual or physical impairment. Psycho-social and vocational **factors**, health, recovery and physiological **processes** are, in fact, strongly **interconnected**. The **potential** of the person with disability for the working environment in which they should be integrated and for the community should be recognised and fostered. The personal and vocational profiling phase of this learning model starts with a **needs assessment**. The user should be supported by an interdisciplinary team (cf. LED NLN Testing Report).

When possible, **questionnaires** and/or **interviews** can be used to evaluate the needs of the disabled user. In the personal and vocational profiling context, the disabled users will also explore their learning styles to identify how best they learn (cf. LED NLN Testing Report).

It is possible to differentiate between some spheres, which shall be analysed in the profiling phase:

- The **personal/individual** sphere: personal features and goals, cognitive and physical impairments, education and formal qualifications
- The **social** one: social abilities and goals, modes of interactions and communication with other people
- The **work-related** one: vocational attributes, employment skills and goals, work history (formal and informal), working capacity and resilience.

For each user, profiling with regard to functional, physical, health, activities- and participation-related characteristics should be carried out taking into account the **specific vocational area** identified for the transition environment/enterprise. The information is saved in a single file for each user, which will be reviewed and updated in case of changes or new circumstances during the learning/training pathway (cf. European Union of Supported Employment 2010: 65).

It is very important to provide the users with accurate, clear and accessible information about the various **options** which are available, so that they become **aware** of them and increase their individual **autonomy** by making choices. Within the testing activities of the project, some users found this phase very useful, as it challenged them to look at options that they had not previously considered and some other users, not having any clear ideas yet, acknowledged that it helped them focus on their potential and their options. With regard to the profiling, all staff involved agreed that it is important for the sustainability of their future employment that people with disabilities give proper consideration to what they want from a future job (cf. LED NLN Testing Report).

If the users have already been in a profiling procedure previously carried out by another organisation/services, this phase of the learning model will consist only in profiling aiming at:

- **adapting** the transition environment/enterprise to the **users' needs**
- **improving** the transition environment/enterprise basing on the **users' potentials**.

After this phase, the disabled user will have received information about:

- the **opportunities** offered by the transition environment/enterprise
- the **performance deficits** he/she will have to **target** in a vocational, social and personal perspective in order to participate in the learning, training and working experiences.

3.4.3 Monitoring and assessment of the learning/training progress

Monitoring and assessment are milestones of the learning pathway, as they enable checking of the learning/training **progress** as well as intermediate and final **goals**. They constitute a **continuing** process, starting from the beginning of the pathway and going on transversally during the learning, training and working process. This is the reason why these measures are situated at the second place of this process, just after the initial profiling.

According to the **user-centeredness** approach applied in this learning model, which is not only a specific didactical approach but also a general principle, the **features of each individual** have to be considered in-depth in all monitoring and assessment measures. Monitoring and assessment are already foreseen in many education- and training-programmes, also for people without disabilities, though their **effectiveness** has to be improved. If necessary, organisations implementing the learning model shall start experimenting new monitoring strategies and new data collection models, possibly oriented to objective criteria. Monitoring and assessment also enable the organisation to reflect about the progress and to adjust the processes towards the final goals (cf. LED CS-ODC Testing Report). The following features of monitoring and assessment measures shall be mainly taken into consideration:

- It is a **collaborative process** among the disabled user, the trainer and possibly involving other experts/professionals, for example the future (potential) employer
- Users receive **clear and constructive feedback** on tasks completion and on performance weakness
- Users receive clear indications on how to **recognise their achievements**
- **Frequent** monitoring/assessment sessions soon enable to identify problems and obstacles and may enhance **problem-solving** mechanisms.

Assessment should not only be oriented to “classical” elements, related to knowledge and work-related skills and performance, but also to any progress regarding personal and social skills, including the motivation of the user. The following elements should be taken into account in the monitoring and assessment:

- Biological characteristics
- Psychological dimension
- Social sphere

- Relation to learning and training contents
- Comparison to goals and requirements of the learning/training pathway and to features of the local labour market and of potential employers.

Organisations implementing the model should consider the features and the consequences of the specific disability when assessing the learning/training progress towards the goals of each user's pathway. In fact, the reaching of learning goals can be affected by the specific impairments.

Like user-centredness and being both a didactical and a general principle of the learning model, **interdisciplinarity** shall be included in the assessment and comprise various fields of diagnosis/analysis and psycho-social areas, e.g. physiological, body-functional, psychotherapeutic, somatic, social, pedagogic. Recurrent dialogues and intermediate tests should be carried out with every user and/or in small groups to monitor each user's situation. An option is introducing monitoring meetings with the user on a regular basis, e.g. on a monthly basis for a formal review and feedback session. In this context, the user's progress and future direction are discussed and the goals are agreed upon (cf. LED NLN Testing Report).

Monitoring and assessment measures also have a preparatory value for the final phase of the model, i.e. the job placement. The latter is not to be seen as a simple output of the learning/training process, but as its ideal outcome. In this setting, monitoring and assessment will enable to check whether the user will have acquired/developed the appropriate characteristics and will have reached the adequate vocational attainments for a potential workplace (see the paragraph about job placement). The on-going achievements of the users should ideally be stated in written form and a copy given to the user.

3.4.4 Personal and vocational guidance

This macro-category of measures is mainly composed of two different dimensions, which though are sometimes combined in a single one: personal guidance and training as well as career and vocational guidance. It is important that these counselling and orientation services are offered before the vocational training, in order to avoid future risk of disillusionment with regard to vocational perspectives.

In the personal guidance and training, every user with disability should be provided with guidance to enhance important personal skills and features. The skills that should be acquired and/or developed, according to the needs of the users, can be categorised into the following areas:

- **Personal/individual skills:** motivation, effective self-knowledge, self-confidence and self-efficacy, positive thinking, problem-solving and coping strategies, decision-making skills, reliability, adaptability, decision-making, activities of daily living (mainly activities promoting autonomy in daily life, including explanations and tips about practical tasks, cleaning, health and hygiene, dressing properly, shopping and money, street traffic), wellbeing, travelling and transportation, health and safety issues
- **Physical skills:** by applying methods of ergotherapy, speech and language therapy etc., sensory skills training, mobility and physical exercises, speech exercises
- **Social skills:** acquiring relational skills (cooperative behaviour, politeness, tolerance, conflict- and stress-management), behaviour in leisure and spare time activities; the social and communication dimension should not be undervalued even if the users are undertaking a mainly technical-crafts oriented pathway
- **Work-related skills:** team work, time keeping, dealing with tasks and deadlines, managing job-related stress; if possible, the topics shall be oriented to the learning and transition environment/enterprise.

A useful example of guidance and training, combining the communication and the work-related skills, would be a telephone techniques session to develop and practice communication and to emphasise good customer care principles. Above all if the users have undertaken a learning/training pathway with a related vocational profile, e.g. as future employee in the customer service, this training is particularly important. The users involved in such a telephone techniques classroom reported this was very good practice, as they often found this as one of the most difficult elements of their previous work experience, particularly when speaking to external customers (cf. LED TCF Testing Report).

The users should be encouraged to enhance the self-perception of their own potentialities and abilities, both in their daily life and from a socio-occupational point of view. This can be pursued also by group activities focussing on the key question "*what I can offer*" and on making the users aware of their vocational and professional goals, basing on their strengths (cf. LED CS-ODC Testing Report).

Participation in the local community is an important aspect to allow the practical application of skills for the disabled users. As well as working on building personal skills to equip users to live independently in the community, the testing activities showed that it is important to build in visits and practice sessions based in local community facilities (cf. LED TCF Testing Report).

The topics regarding employment and jobs are the focus of the career and vocational guidance measures. It is recommendable to find more than just one vocational option for each user and to order the range of possibilities by a **preference/feasibility ranking**. In case of future difficulties in the first vocational choice, other options would remain. As support tools for the career and vocational guidance, also career advice software and free online materials, e.g. online video presentations of career options, can be used by the organisation implementing the learning model (cf. LED TCF Testing Report).

When providing the disabled users with career and vocational guidance services, it is important to consider various channels of preparation to search and find a job, focussing on the topic of job-search (cf. LED URI Testing Report). The following contents, tailored to the level of the users, shall be included into the vocational guidance measures foreseen by the learning model for the disabled users:

- **job-seeking skills and job-seeking support**, enhancing the awareness of employment options: how to write a CV, how to search for advertisements and to read/analyse them, how to seek in business/trade directories and where to receive counselling, how to organise and to structure the job-search and job application phases; the job-seeking skills and support do not just refer to a general job search, but to employment opportunities of the **sector** in which the **transition environment/enterprise is embedded**
- identifying personal **barriers** to employment and ways to facilitate the future access to labour market
- **general preparation** to work, above all for the users who are particularly far from the condition to enter employment; general **rights** and **duties** at work.

In this phase, several methods and modalities can be specifically applied by the organisation implementing the learning model, as also tested within the project activities:

- regular updating of information about **vacancies** from different websites and information sources; these vacancies should be published and disseminated in the premises of the organisation implementing the learning model (cf. LED URI Testing Report)
- **exercises** in writing a CV, applying for jobs, preparation and simulation of job interviews with typical questions, expressions and formulations (cf. LED CS-ODC Testing Report)
- internal **job-related workshops** for people with disabilities; they should deal with requirements and expected performance and cover general job-related topics as well as knowledge on “target jobs”; **workshops** directed at the job-search shall focus on concrete examples in order to improve the job-seeking skills of the users and to give them a further chance of an active participation (cf. LED URI Testing Report); a workshop can also deal with PES’s role, functions and activities (cf. LED CS-ODC Testing Report)
- setting up brief **employability courses/sessions**, including group discussions and re-exploration of work aptitudes (cf. LED TCF Testing Report)
- establishing regular small group visits to **employers, for example defined as career exploration visits**, thus creating a further link between classroom and the outside world; according to the testing activities of the project, such visits reveal a range of work opportunities open to users which the users are not usually aware of and give users the opportunity to speak directly to local employers (cf. LED TCF Testing Report)
- **visiting** working environments or simulated work environments and observing **work practices**, also in other enterprises/organisations
- organising **meetings** with people (disabled ones, according to the peer concept, or non-disabled ones), who work within the same vocational area as the learning/training pathway of the users
- a **visiting experience** to show a **working environment** to the users
- **multiple, brief work experiences** to give learners experiences in **different work settings**

Since a general work orientation has already been carried out, at this phase it is important to align the goals, the motivational and vocational features of every user with the learning/integration pathway, so that the latter is **personalised** and also **functional** to the goal of future integration in the mainstream labour market. It is particularly important that measures regarding career and vocational guidance imply an active role of the disabled users (cf. LED URI Testing Report).

3.4.5 Vocational training

Vocational training is an essential part in the pathway towards the work integration for all people and especially for groups experiencing social disadvantage and high social exclusion risk. *“Skills are acquired, they are not innate”* should be the leading message of this phase, enhancing the motivation of the users, which is a key aspect.

The phase of vocational training introduces the main shift **from “learning/training environment” to “working environment”**. Such a shift shall possibly take place with a gradual introduction to the working environment (cf. LED NLN Testing Report). The disabled users are trained under the on-going support and supervision of staff skilled for working with disabled people, and step by step the users will start carrying out working tasks on their own. If possible, this vocational training phase can (also partially) take place in an external, real working environment of an enterprise, or it can take place in a simulated working environment. However, for these training experiences to lead to employment they have to be underpinned by comprehensive support and training plans. Good relationships and regular communication between employer and organisation implementing the learning model are important (cf. LED NLN Testing Report).

According to the testing results of the activities within the LED project, the users appreciated very much the fact of working in a real working environment for some days per week, for the majority of the users it was three days per week; the mix with in-centre training gave them motivation and energy. Most employers involved found that the best mix would be three days per week in the working environment and two days per week for in-centre based training (cf. LED NLN Testing Report).

The vocational training of this learning model should have the following features:

- being more oriented to **practice** than to theory, as this increases the effectiveness in terms of users' motivation and employment opportunities
- cover general **work-based** skills, including practical training for job issues like work endurance, team-working skills, environment tolerance, resilience (above all dealing with the effects of a traumatic event), organising own tasks, basics of entrepreneurial thinking, self-help approaches
- cover **specific** skills: mainly with reference to the specific vocational area and vocational profile selected.

The work-related skills for which guidance had been provided in previous phase of personal and vocational guidance (e.g. team work, dealing with tasks and deadlines, managing job-related stress) shall gain a strong empirical dimension during the vocational training: the skills shall be practically applied in the working environment. Vocational training should address the “stumbling blocks” that constitute barriers to employment for people with disabilities. For example, according to employers one of the main stumbling blocks to employment emerged from the testing LED findings, was a lack of general work skills like time keeping, attitude and ability to work with others (cf. LED NLN Testing Report).

To improve the future integration perspectives of the users, the **vocational attainments** should refer to mainstream and **recognised** qualifications. Employers involved in the testing activities of the project also indicated that they require a minimum standard of education and qualifications in people they employ, so an element of accreditation in the training model would also be important (cf. LED NLN Testing Report). In the case that certifications are foreseen, it is important to fix an appropriate duration of this phase, so that the disabled users have enough time to successfully complete the certification required, thus making them more employable; an example would be a duration of one and a half year for this phase, as mentioned by users involved in the testing activities in Ireland (cf. LED NLN Testing Report).

As previously mentioned, the activities in the transition environment/enterprise should include a mix of **learning, training and working processes**. The **balance** of training and of working **hours** should be decided on the basis of both the users' **individual characteristics** and on the basis of the transition environment/enterprise's **product(s)/service(s)**. Also other **organisational decisions** should meet both the **individual needs** and the **productive needs**.

3.4.6 Job placement

The job placement phase represents the ideal outcome of the learning/training process. It can be seen as a result of all services and activities connected to vocational rehabilitation that are necessary to include people with disabilities in working processes (cf. LED URI Testing Report).

According to the following typology employment for people with disabilities, there are various options for a job placement:

- **regular employment in the mainstream labour market**
- **supported employment**; it foresees, within regular employment, on-the-job training and professional/technical support according to the needs of the person with disability
- **public works**; it consists e.g. in job creation by state/public actors in order to enhance the employment and working integration of socially disadvantaged people (not only disabled)
- **special centres/sheltered workshops**; they are common employment options for disabled people outside the mainstream labour market, often with different country-related names and definitions
- **social cooperatives**; they often offer job opportunities to disabled or disadvantaged people, frequently in the manufacturing sector; they are sometimes non-profit organisations or perform low-profit activities
- **self-employment**; for people with a severe degree of disability, this option is hardly practicable.

Generally, the phase of job placement is composed of two elements, i.e. **finding a job** and **job coaching**. Finding a job requires that the abilities and qualifications of the user are properly matched with the general, vocational and logistical features of the employer and of the specific job/workplace according to a detailed job analysis, including an analysis of the worksite and of the company culture.

If more than one person with a disability is starting a job with the same employer after completing their learning/training pathway with the same vocational area and profile, in some circumstances it is possible also to perform the job placement in a group (cf. LED URI Testing Report).

Job coaching is here the process of providing support to the person with a disability in the new workplace in a **proactive** and **empowering** way. It should be directed at the **person with disability**, at the **employer** and also at the **co-workers** in the new working environment, fostering acceptance at the workplace. It is important to explain that only one task at a time should be delegated to the new disabled employees and that they may need regular, short work breaks (European Union 2011: 11).

If possible, already before the disabled user starts a new job at the workplace, an **adaptation** and **redesign** of the **workplace** should be taken into consideration basing on the disabled person's needs, mainly with regard to introducing **assistive technologies and equipment** and/or psycho-social environmental arrangements. Important supports for orientation may be for example task flow charts, task cards and to-do-lists (European Union of Supported Employment 2010: 100).

Although the job placement represents the final stage of this path, an on-going **after-placement monitoring and/or support** should take place. Aftercare is relevant even due to the risk of relapses and as a crisis prevention/intervention measure. It should be provided on a needs basis, i.e. when necessary and when the support available in the company is insufficient to meet the employee needs (European Union of Supported Employment 2010: 93). At least for three months after the job placement, support and assistance shall be provided to the disabled person and to the employer, guaranteeing an effective information flow as well. The work performance of the person at the workplace shall be accurately evaluated also in this context, in addition to proposing solutions in case of problems (cf. LED URI Testing Report).

The problem of organisations in providing after-placement support is usually a financial one. External funding solutions may be taken into consideration to address this. When support is not provided formally, **follow-up** monitoring after the completion of the learning pathway is in any case strongly recommended. The disabled person and the employer should keep in touch with the transition environment/enterprise after the user has completed the learning/training process.

If no job placement has been possible yet, the transition environment/enterprise should at least facilitate the users at the end of their pathway to companies in the mainstream labour market with short working

opportunities or further training courses/opportunities. In this context, cooperation with public and private service providers would help guarantee training and working opportunities to people with disabilities. The option of finding further options shall be addressed specifically if, **one year after** the end of the learning/training pathway, the former users have not accessed the labour market yet. In this case they shall be introduced to **other transition environments/enterprises**, so that they can try **further vocational areas and work experiences**, increasing their skills. This shall help them enter the mainstream labour market later, in a different sector and vocational profile than the first they had envisaged.

3.5 Operational aspects for transition environments

3.5.1 Empirical framework and flexibility

After the presentation of the learning model's core elements in the previous parts, the present chapter deals with additional **operational questions** that can be helpful when an organisation, implementing the learning model, is delineating the transition environment and/or is founding a transition enterprise.

Flexibility, implying **dynamic** processes and **adaptation** to external constraints/intervening factors, is a key feature for the planning and implementation of the learning model. Although implementing the model requires specific organisational arrangements, structured schedules and the reference to a vocational area, a **flexible framework** should remain with regard to:

- timing
- specific contents of the modules
- specific job placement.

This learning model proposes a flexible framework instead of a fixed one also for the following reasons:

- adapting the training and the process to the specific requirements of the **vocational area**
- adapting the learning modules to the specific **potential** and to the **defined needs** and characteristics of each user
- modulating the **pace** of the various learning steps (or "learning stations"), when necessary
- **adapting** the provision of training, above all in the vocational training phase, to the work environments of **enterprises** and to **labour market trends**, above all at a local level.

3.5.2 Promoting the rights of people with disabilities

Old approaches towards people with disabilities mainly aimed at assisting and protecting them and/or, in the framework of passive labour market policies, at merely maintaining income. Innovative approaches **involve** them and **promote** their **rights**, enabling them to **participate actively**. This also represents a step further in the **fight against the exclusion and the discrimination** of people with disabilities. Increasing the **degree of self-determination** of their life is also important with regard to the rights of the people with disabilities. Summarising, it is essential to involve the people with disabilities actively and enhancing mainly following rights of people with disabilities:

- education
- consultation
- participation and co-participation
- self-determination.

3.5.3 Facing double/multiple exclusion risk(s)

Disability is a severe risk factor with regard to the **risk of social exclusion and discrimination** of both minors and adults people. Moreover, the "accumulation" of additional factors is likely to worsen this risk, such as:

- **socio-economic disadvantage**
- **educational level** of the family/caregivers
- **residence area**
- **age**
- **migration background**; migrants with disabilities may present a particularly difficult situation. Besides their congenital or acquired impairments, they may suffer from additional problematic conditions, e.g. being illiterate, not knowing the country's language or not being used to the Latin alphabet

- **gender**; carrying out measures targeted to disabled women is particularly important, as women with disabilities may have a multiple disadvantage and experience exclusion due to both their gender and their disability (UN 2006); it is possible to offer special sessions/additional learning hours regarding women's issues or to deal with socialisation questions which are more frequent for women than for men.
- **expectations** of the family/caregivers.

In order to tackle this double or **multiple exclusion/discrimination risk and the higher risk of violence, abuse and/or maltreatment**, the history and the life environment of every user with a disability should be taken into account. Trainers implementing the learning model should consider that some of the users, due to double or multiple social exclusion risk, may present further special needs and require more assistance during the job search.

At a higher policy level, integrating social policies for different target groups in transversal areas/programmes would be a future scenario to face multiple discrimination risk and to deal with the disability topic also within other social policy programmes and measures.

4 Guidelines for trainers, managers and operators - validated version

4.1 Introduction to the guidelines

Along with the learning model for people with disabilities, one of the main outputs of the LED project was the production of **guidelines for the professionals** (trainers, coordinators, technical staff, etc.) dealing with disabled users. The document works as a vade-mecum for the implementation and management of the learning approach designed by the project, including relevant methodological and didactic indications. It contains, amongst others, indications about social, transition and working environment, users' differentiation and motivation, personalisation of the training process, required knowledge and expertise of the different professionals, matching of users' needs with training/working requirements, networking with enterprises and further parts involved, monitoring and assessments.

In addition to the learning model, the four VET centres implementing the LED approach received a draft version of the guidelines. The document was afterwards evaluated by each centre through a series of workshops (training sessions) targeted to the professionals engaged in the project: this made possible to test the guidelines and gather suggestions on how to improve them.

The following paragraphs show a slightly shortened version of the final validated version of the guidelines for trainers⁸.

4.2 General framework

The new transition environment must have strongly operational and productive characteristics, in order to enable its **self-sustainability**. Already in the first planning phase it is necessary to take the actual needs of the working system into consideration, bearing in mind that the relation between employer and disabled employee is a compromise, which allows a positive impact and mutual promotion, and that a transition enterprise is by implication more fragile with regards to productivity and competitiveness: this can be dealt by an **adequate system** of social, political, union and economic **networks** for starting up and support the transition enterprise itself.

The economic area identified must be connected to a sector existing in the **local territory**, so as to develop activities that can create actual job places for newly trained disabled people. At the same time, this facilitates their daily transfers to the workplace, something that is normally much more difficult for them than for non-disabled people.

⁸ The complete original version of the validated guidelines for trainers is available on the attached CD-ROM as well as at www.europe-projectled.eu/documents.html.

Finally, reaching a **transition** from the work/training environment is necessary; times and modalities must be person-centred, but a *sine die* permanence is to be avoided, as it would pervert the nature of the system.

Training and job environment/enterprise

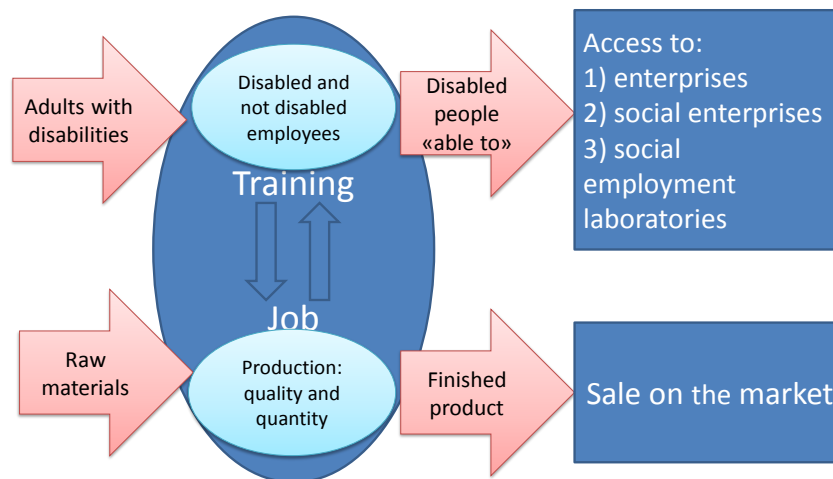


Figure 2 - Training and job environment/enterprise

4.3 Productive enterprises' environment and social system

Stereotypes and prejudices towards people with disabilities are still widespread, as they are often perceived as “not productive” and given a secondary role. Employers are usually not aware of the resources and opportunities offered by the working integration of a person with disabilities, seeing limitations rather than potential. Both employees and employers are often intimidated and uncomfortable when interacting with disabled people, because they have not been accustomed to dealing with them; an **experience** close to a person with disabilities is usually enough to produce a **change in their attitude**, though.

The following items should be therefore implemented:

- advocacy processes within economic and work environments;
- awareness improvement on how to welcome and manage disabled people in the work environment;
- brief, informative meetings on disability for the future colleagues of disabled employees;
- on-going assistance to employers after the end of the program;
- indicators to measure the integration level of disabled people within the working environment;
- planning review in case of new problems or worsening of existing situations.

4.3.1 Local networks with the enterprises and parts involved

Understanding the extent of the possible aid and collaboration networks is a vital step, as well as understanding which limitations must be placed in order to avoid useless or damaging rivalries.

It is important to involve:

- entrepreneurship and trade associations
- trade unions
- public support network in its technical (health and social care) and political articulations
- disabled people's associations

- technical organisations qualified on labour law and occupational psychology
- families, also as jointly liable figures with regards to entrepreneurial risk

It is moreover necessary to improve the cooperation of the different parts involved in the employment of people.

Creating new opportunities to widen the debate on disability is important too, by means of the following actions:

- involvement of universities for suggesting feasibility studies with regards to welcoming environments
- involvement of universities with specific competences to carry out financial studies (e.g. financial feasibility)
- involvement of associations and trade representatives to promote the social acknowledgement of “virtuous” companies
- social and political actions to promote the candidacy of people with disabilities for public offices, so as to contribute to the creation of new, common occupational strategies linked to mainstream strategies
- support and promotion of awareness campaigns and predisposition of incentivising means to implement long-lived measures in schools of various levels, in order to make children and youngsters aware that disability does not necessarily mean disadvantage.

One of the most frequent problems is the discontinuity in supporting integration policies: without the **right motivation** and the **ethical boost** linked to the mission, institutions alone are not very effective.

4.3.2 General actions

4.3.2.1 Involvement of unions

Lobbying activities should also be directed to **unions**, which should broaden the scope of their priorities to include the representation of people with disabilities, especially with reference to employment contracts. Disabled workers need flexible but at the same time protective employment contexts, specifically targeting integration in labour market. A well-proportioned salary, correlated to the actual productivity of the worker, could be a good arrangement when hiring a person with disabilities.

4.3.2.2 Involvement of families, voluntary and advocacy organisations

Families and **third sector organisations** should be involved in terms of self-commitment as investors, managers and evaluators within boards of directors. The creation of **support organisations** is necessary to contribute financially to the balance of institutions for disabled people and make them less welfare-dependent. In this way, instead of simply being recipients of welfare, people with disabilities can become actors in society, expressing their skills, producing goods or supplying services and training themselves.

4.3.3 Analysis of the local labour market and job demand

Training must be structured so as to create the highest possible degree of **professionalism** with regards to a **specific area**; training people with disabilities “able to” reach a specific goal increases the final chances of successful work integration.

The main points to be analysed are:

- Job demand
- Demand of services for companies
- Goods demand

- Market's needs
- General tendencies
- Specific sectors connected to the geographical area

4.3.3.1 Integration in the open labour market: job promotion, creation and development of new enterprises

Companies which have never had a direct experience with disabled people often have troubles in fully understanding what their real competences are; agreements such as **fixed-term contracts** can help them to evaluate their working skills in relation to the job position for which they are applying. A strong **collaboration** between social enterprises (already integration-oriented) and "ordinary" enterprises may also be necessary in order to create new models and positive synergies, favouring the transition of people with disabilities towards ordinary enterprises and vice versa.

Outsourcing of services, creation of **new lines of business**, enhancement of **synergies** among companies within the same field of action, definition of **transition strategies** for disabled employees towards "ordinary" employment (outside social enterprises) are all factors that can increase the productivity and decrease the reliance on grant aids of social enterprises.

4.4 Identifying the characteristics of target groups and setting up the environment

In order to create the new training/working environments foreseen, the **possible niches** that both satisfy disabled people's needs and are economically and financially sustainable must be spotted.

According to the type of activities chosen, the corresponding specific vocational areas should be identified, always keeping in mind the necessary multidisciplinary elements of the training team.

Developing **modular systems** is necessary to satisfy both the wide range of educational needs and the latest tendencies of the labour market, because modules can be adapted to the potential and the pace of every user, enabling a gradual access to learning.

Jobs that are mostly commonly done by **women** should be included in vocational areas too, in order to respond to the greater difficulties they meet in looking for employment.

The training environment must find a **good balance between work and training activities**. At least 4 operative phases should be foreseen:

Initial training; this first phase introduces people to the environment and is carried out both within the work environment and in special areas.

- getting familiar with the environment and its people, becoming at ease enough to concentrate on learning
- ensuring the minimum criteria for workers' health and safety with regards to possible hazards
- basic specific technical knowledge

Actual training

- working in the production area, initially with continuous assistance
- working phase with assistance from a distance

Consolidation of autonomous training and working

- carrying out tasks following specific instructions and final evaluation
- occasions to learn how to manage time and work autonomously
- experiences of teaching to other users

Establishment of the vocational goals reached and peer teaching

- initial phase of peer teaching simulations in a non-productive environment

- consolidation in operational contexts
- full production and tutoring activity

4.4.1 Working team's features

The training/working enterprise's staff must cover a **wide range of competences**, that should include:

- management and administrative skills
- sector technical and operational skills
- educational skills (disability-oriented)
- relational skills (management of complex groups)
- skills connected to the specific needs of every kind of disabilities that are going to be welcomed in the environment
- skills in managing social networks
- skills connected to psychological support and building life projects

Educational skills should in any case represent a generalised foregone element.

The necessary professionals can be gathered into **four typologies**:

Managers: besides ordinary business management skills, they should also have skills related to the management of the training sector and of complex social networks.

Team leaders: with technical skills but also able to deal with complex groups (e.g. composed of non-disabled employees, disabled employees, trainees, job trainers and so on).

Trainers and tutors: with a remarkable flexibility, as they deal with different training environments (classrooms, transition enterprises, external companies, etc.); they are also the most appropriate to keep in touch with families, caregivers, voluntary and support associations.

Disabled and non-disabled operators: besides having technical skills, they must be able to welcome users and to maintain a situation of permanent peer education in a mutual support dimension.

4.4.2 Participants and users profiling

The evaluation of the possible users to include into the training pathways should start from the **objective employment situation**: the local economic context may lead towards vocational fields which are not suitable for specific kinds of disabilities. The contribution of experts in labour market analysis and forecasts is essential in order to define vocational goals, suitable both to the users' characteristics and skills and to the actual market needs.

4.4.2.1 The holistic approach

In order to avoid disappointment or rejection when participants are put in front of actual job tasks, disabled users' personal backgrounds and the support of their families and caregivers must always be taken into account. In particular, people with severe disabilities need a greater support and training interventions that cover all aspects of their life. In any way, training activities always should target work integration and then broaden out to reach social and personal self-sustainability goals as well.

4.4.2.2 Personal profiling

The personal vocational goal will be defined on the basis of the **actual opportunities** offered by the local labour market and of the employers' needs.

In order to carry out a correct evaluation, the following elements are to be taken into consideration:

- needs assessment, in relation to the user's personal background
- skills assessment, by referring to I.C.F. indicators (see following paragraph)
- assessment of the user's compatibility with the transition enterprise
- personal expectations and preferences
- interviews with family members or closest caregivers
- coordination with social services to offer appropriate services.

4.4.2.3 The I.C.F. model (International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health)

The **environment** is a decisive factor when defying disability and can act either like a barrier or a facilitator. Within the I.C.F. model, the concept of disability is seen as a discrepancy between environmental requirements and individual performances. Disability is not intended here as something static and unchangeable, but as something susceptible to significant changes thanks to specific interventions on the context. The I.C.F. model proposes and strengthens the holistic approach to the person, integrating social and health aspects⁹.

The I.C.F. model language is highly standardised, allowing communication on health and disability throughout the world and among different sciences and disciplines.

4.4.2.4 Evaluation outcomes and integration project

Given that the final judgement about the inclusion of the disabled person into the training pathway could also be negative, the outcome of the evaluation process should be a **training/working integration project** in a specific transition enterprise that reports:

- main goals to be achieved (e.g. reliability, practical solutions, self-management, basic social relations)
- intermediate goals in relation to working autonomy (e.g. technical skills, adaptation, productive capacity, endurance)
- monitoring indicators to evaluate the user's professional advancement
- monitoring indicators to evaluate the user's social and relational integration advancement, compared to his/her willingness
- long-term goals concerning the user's life project (e.g. job-oriented attitude, ability to adapt to employers' needs, peer teaching skills).

4.5 How to structure the transition environment

4.5.1 Transition enterprises as a learning and work environment

In dealing with disabled people's integration into the workplace, it appears that they are usually employed in either too demanding or, on the contrary, too low-qualified activities. The excessively rigid structures of the companies, in addition, lead often to a lack of disabled-friendly workplaces. Lack of flexibility can also be detected within training institutions, whose training programmes do not cope with the actual skills required by the labour market. The transition enterprise, both learning and work environment, should be capable of handling such complexity and structural inflexibility. It must foresee a **well-balanced alternation** of pure learning hours, predominant in the initial phase, and working hours which should progressively become the central focus of the process.

⁹ La valutazione funzionale delle capacità residue: stato dell'arte. D. Orlandini A. Amoresano
http://www.inail.it/Portale/appmanager/portale/desktop?_nfpb=true&_pageLabel=PAGE_MEDICINA

4.5.2 Transition or internal hiring

A situation that must be avoided is the user's permanence in the pathway in a sort of eternal training condition. Even if allowing a certain degree of flexibility on timetables and deadlines, two possible options must be reached: **hiring or transition** (towards labour market, sheltered environments or waiting for new employment opportunities).

4.5.3 Monitoring and evaluation

An overall **monitoring/evaluation system** should become a stable element in the new training/work environment, allowing a constant adaptation to users' and market's needs. A distinction must be made between process monitoring and outcomes monitoring.

Depending on the data to be verified, monitoring should be carried out regularly and continuously (e.g. professionals' processes and outcomes), at the beginning, halfway, at the end of the project (e.g. users' and caregivers' processes, outcomes and satisfaction level), annually (e.g. local stakeholders' and entrepreneurs associations' outcomes and satisfaction level), once and repeated if necessary (e.g. reception environments' outcomes and satisfaction level).

Follow up monitoring must be scheduled after one and three years from the placement, so as to collect percentage data regarding success/failure in integrating in the labour market.

During the monitoring phases, attention should be paid to supplying the **necessary support** so that users can express their opinion and suggestions.

Assessments will be carried out using the following methods:

- direct interviews using questionnaires
- focus groups
- collecting statistical data concerning specific issues.

4.5.3.1 Initial phase: setting up the social network

The first step concerns the **search for possible partners, institutions and associations** that are to be involved. What has to be verified is the effective success in building up a network and the number of quality contacts that the proposer group has managed to create.

4.5.3.2 Processes monitoring

The indicators used to assess the learning processes of people with disabilities must concern the following aspects:

- **Attendance / frequency**
- **Participation:** does the programme allow an active participation of people with disabilities? Attention must be paid to the number of active, autonomous and spontaneous interventions of each user and to the number interventions upon request
- **User centeredness:** are disabled users really in the centre of the process? A brief questionnaire can be used, with questions both to users and to caregivers
- **Social interaction:** according to the different remarks of operators, a first draft of sociogram should be created, so as to find appropriate incentives aimed at the socio-relational recovering of satellite figures. The effectiveness of these incentives is then monitored and a new sociogram is created
- **Users performance and professional advancement**
- Users and caregivers **satisfaction level:** a simple questionnaire with both open and multiple choice questions should be distributed at the beginning, halfway, at the end of the program and one year after its end

- Evaluation of the **social integration** of people with disabilities within the transition/working environment.

4.5.3.3 Production monitoring

Besides normal monitoring on the production/supply of services offered to employees, a **comparative table** should be created: productive capacity is evaluated according to the quality and quantity of the following three categories:

Table 1 - Productive capacity: comparison

PRODUCTIVE CAPACITY	Disabled employees		Non-disabled employees		Trainees		Average	
Deadlines	Quality	Quantity	Quality	Quantity	Quality	Quantity	Quality	Quantity
Hourly								
Weekly								
Monthly								

A similar table should be drawn up to monitor attendance/absences.

These data allow a comparative analysis of the productive capacity achieved and therefore a more correct presentation on the labour market.

4.5.3.4 System monitoring

Efficiency

The relation between **actually achieved goals** and **initial expectations** should be evaluated. This implies taking care of identifying from the beginning what data is going to be measured.

Another relevant indication comes from linking achieved goals with resources used (time and money): the ratio should show an improvement in terms of training, carried out on-the-job, and in terms of costs, which should decrease since a part of them is compensated by the goods and services production.

Effectiveness

Trainers and team leaders must be able to establish whether the **general goals** of the learning/training programme have been achieved or not. These data are to be compared to the exit outcomes, that is to say:

- the percentage of people who find an appropriate occupation (in enterprises, social enterprises, socio-occupational workshops)
- feedback coming from these three possible environments where ex-users have transited and regarding their integration
- feedback coming from follow-up monitoring.

Reports and summarising tables (with final indications on the outcomes and on indicators and parameters used) should be put into a **database**, so that it is possible to evaluate variations of the overall activity in the long run.

4.6 Staff training and management

Problem solving skills, as an individual and group characteristic, are fundamental in order to personalise projects for users. Cooperation in solving problems also has a driving effect on the self-perception of the group as a “capable group”.

4.6.1 Business and social management

The relational and operational complexity of the system requires a particular **attentive management**; therefore, managerial skills must be acquired in order to deal with the creation of different groups with different degrees of well-being.

Managers and coordinators should be trained on:

- long-term planning
- internal administration management
- defining strategies that are competitive on the market
- human resources management
- creation of operative groups
- communication systems.

4.6.2 Trainers and team leaders

Trainers should possess both **technical** and **educational** skills and basic element of entrepreneurial attitude. Considering the special context of a transition enterprise, the trainer should always keep the final goal of the work integration into perspective.

At the same time, team leaders should integrate their technical and specific skills concerning the production area with basic elements of the training processes. They also need indications on theoretical and relational training, including how to manage work groups. Trainers and users work together in a group of operators whose responsibility is given to team leaders; this is the figure who will maintain the working relationship with users, even in their autonomy phases, and will be in charge of monitoring improvements and reliability, as well as of reporting to assessors and trainers about possible problems, in order to find a solution.

A **common training** will be developed for educators, trainers and team leaders, concerning:

- technical contents on goods production and services to supply
- specific work activities relating to a particular productive sector
- management of a group also with extremely diverse kind of participants
- basic principles of the educational modalities implemented by the enterprise
- use of the environments where work is simulated
- how to approach disabilities, both generally and referring to specific situations
- appropriate communication strategies
- empowerment of disabled workers
- social sciences and basic elements of psychology.

4.6.3 Non-disabled and disabled employees

The whole group of employees, both with and without disabilities, will be informed about the transition environment’s mission and on the working procedures implemented in the production as well as in the training area. It is important that these informative sessions are addressed to the whole group, putting the necessary stress on the different, personal needs of both disabled and non-disabled people.

4.7 Learning contents

Training models are usually not flexible enough to cope with the different needs of people with disabilities, as they are generally developed on the idea of people that are ready to work.

The first element of **flexibility** should concern possible learning approaches and how to improve means and opportunities through:

- specific instruments and aids within the transition environment
- facilitation in accessing technical aids according to the type of disability
- facilitation in accessing training contents in relation to motor, sensorial and mental disabilities.

Internal barriers such as frustration, loss of self-esteem or deterioration of self-image, are often present in the disabled users at the beginning of their training pathways, if expectations on the workplace are not met: they must be overcome and this should be an integral part of the learning process.

4.7.1 Life project

The following elements must be stimulated in order to encourage one's personal advancement as a capable employee:

- possibility of self-determination (overcoming motor, mental and sensory disabilities)
- management of disability (specific interventions)
- improvement of social relationships (different types of free time activities)
- ability to handle daily activities (implementation of Activities of Daily Living and home automation programmes)
- improvement of self-esteem and ability to put oneself forward for the labour market
- self-consciousness, self-confidence and confidence in other people
- development of life autonomies
- ability to define appropriate goals, considering personal preferences and limitations.

Within the company, **social abilities** such as politeness, tolerance, conflict management, coping strategies in interpersonal relationships, resilience and endurance, must be used, as well as **technical abilities** like functions and abilities for that specific productive area, ability to follow operational sequences, precision and availability to repeat, cross-disciplinary skills (e.g. standing work pace and pressure), ICT and specific aids and supports mastering.

4.7.2 Monitoring and evaluation of the training processes and pathway

The final evaluation of the learning phase will include a precise definition of the person's ability to handle workloads and the consequent strain, expressed through a person's **wellbeing/work ratio**. The most relevant points from the employer's point of view are:

- production skills
- impact in the relational system
- degree of personal autonomy inside and outside the workplace
- capacity to maintain work commitment in time
- specific health care needs.

Elements that can indicate the person's **employability level** (to be evaluated both during the programme and at the end of it) are: motivation to work, autonomy, respect of the rules and relational skills, knowledge and personal profiling.

4.8 Mentoring towards and during the transition process

The work placement of people with disabilities may take a long time and in many cases some of the person's weaknesses can remain. The presence of long-term supports becomes therefore essential. Moreover, as the final aim of transition projects is disabled people's work placements, its implementation requires that employers feel that they have adequate support.

4.8.1 Adaptation of the company

During the internship, the company tutor must verify the functionality of the organisation in terms of **environmental functionality** (e.g. suitable living spaces, personalised workplaces, flexible working time, transfer to and from work), **technical functionality** (e.g. orientation towards constant updates, well-defined and appropriated work tasks, safety) and **relations** (e.g. reference persons, internal tutor, communication between managers and trade unions' representatives).

4.8.2 Adaptation to the company and life project

Tutors need to verify the correct start of the user's life project and the involvement of caregivers and/or support associations. Important issues to verify are for example the ability to functionally handle daily rhythms and economic resources, the absence of travelling difficulties, the families engagement modalities regarding job opportunities, the activation of support networks according to the specific job opportunity.

4.8.3 Support to the company

Giving assistance to the company implies training the staff members, who usually do not possess the necessary knowledge and experience to offer a suitable support to people with disabilities.

In order to cope with possible problems arising with the placement, **protection for the company** should be foreseen as well, such as the possibility to return to a service in case of relapses of people with mental health problems, or to re-locate the person, even within the same company, if his/her conditions worsen.

4.9 Attitude and approach

Taking care of who takes care of others is an important base to build a welcoming and warm environment in human terms. The mission and the way contents are handled and delivered must be shared: a strong **teamwork**, a good **circulation of the news** among operators, **common attitudes** and **awareness** of the different projects evolution, are all essential conditions. All activities have to be carried out by qualified staff and each user must be able to rely on continuous support.

Direct involvement of disabled people and their families in management and development activities is another important issue; their participation in defining the contents and methods of learning and guidance activities should be encouraged. Further aspects to be enhanced are the **caregivers' view** and the **involvement of solidarity networks** in the training centres' activities.

The involvement of **former users** as mentors or helpers, who have achieved good results, is also a useful strategy to boost the disabled users' motivation, self-consciousness and active citizenship.

4.9.1 User-centred approach: nothing about us without us

The disabled user's own idea of what he/she wants to do within a training/work experience must be respected. Before formalising a person's admittance to the centre, some **meetings** with him/her are necessary in order to get to know each other and draw up a pre-project to be evaluated afterwards.

Elements to be included and evaluated in the pre-project are:

- general project's goal
- necessary requirements
- complementary goals (functional to the main ones)
- intermediate goals (with approximate deadlines)
- initial estimate of the learning programme (with an approximate index of contents)
- list of professional commitments taken on by the staff
- commitments taken on by the user
- necessary time needed to reach the definitive project form.

4.9.2 Evaluation of skills (I.C.F.) and training needs functional to the achievement of the goals

The final version of the personalised project should include **objectives**, **deadlines** and **actions** that are functional to the achievement of the intermediate goals.

This approach requires a **constant communication** between users and trainers, thus allowing an actual **co-planning** and **sharing** of the overall training pathway.

4.9.3 Voluntary work and caregivers

Voluntary workers and caregivers are offered additional training specifically centred on learning contents, methods and approaches addressed at different kinds of disability. Families involved in counselling, training, transition and work processes are offered specific activities, too.

5 Report on testing activities

5.1 Introduction to the national reports and following comparative report

After the partner chose and discussed the parts of the learning model they wanted to concentrate on, the new learning approach was tested with their disabled users as pilot experience by implementing the learning model's parts chosen within their standard activity, so as to test its effectiveness and gather possible suggestions on how to improve it. A total of 106 users with different kinds of disabilities were involved among the four partners CS-ODC, NLN, TCF and URI.

A questionnaire was distributed at the end of the activities to each disabled user, to evaluate opinions and satisfaction levels. Each partner compared the current results with those coming from previous groups of users, taken as control groups; if this option was not available, the current situation could be compared with the condition preceding the beginning of the activities. At the end, the partners had to write a report regarding the main testing activities outputs.

All national reports were eventually compiled within a single report, which gave an overview of all outcomes and suggestions and provided indications on how to improve the learning model; this, in turn, was useful to validate and give a European character to the learning model for disabled users. The present document is a shorter version of the national testing reports comparison¹⁰.

¹⁰ The full version of the comparative report can be found on the attached CD-ROM as well as at www.europe-projectled.eu/documents.html.

5.2 Methodological notes

Each partner chose different parts of the learning model to test, on the basis of their different characteristics (know-how, experience, competences, types of disability of their users, operating environment, etc.). The four national reports were therefore quite heterogeneous in terms of contents and results: as a consequence, a comparison, in the strict sense of the term, was possible only for those aspects that turned out to be really in common. Centre-specific issues are reported in this document as well, still trying to highlight – where possible – common considerations.

5.3 Parts of the learning model chosen for testing

Only the parts of the learning model that could be actually implemented in their own typical activities, or whose implementation would have improved and/or helped assessing or validating their current activities, were selected by the partners. As a result, some parts are common to two or at most three centres, others have been tested by single partners exclusively: nevertheless, within a defined area there are often cross-references to elements belonging to other areas and merged together.

The parts that have been chosen and tested by at least two centres are reported in the table below.

Table 2 - Parts of the learning model in common

CS-ODC	NLN	TCF	URI
Group activities		Group activities	
People with disabilities as “experts”		People with disabilities as “experts”	
Peer support and mentoring		Peer support and mentoring	
	Personal guidance and training	Personal guidance and training	
	Career and vocational guidance	Career and vocational guidance	Career and vocational guidance
	Job placement (*)	Job placement	Job placement
	Enterprises’ perspective of disability	Enterprises’ perspective of disability	Enterprises’ perspective of disability

(*) NLN: “Job matching”

The further parts of the learning model that have been chosen by single partners uniquely are reported in the following table, sorted by centre.

Table 3 - Parts of the learning model chosen by single partners exclusively

CS-ODC	NLN	TCF
Interdisciplinarity and trainers’ approach	Personal and vocational profiling	Equipment and aid tools
Examples of didactic methods	Vocational training (*)	
Simplification	User-centred approach	
Monitoring and assessment		

(*) NLN: “Alternation between training and working”

5.4 Specific organisational aspects

Due to the different parts of the learning model chosen for testing, the four centres used different methodologies to carry out their testing activities. The main specific organisational and methodological remarks are reported briefly below.

➤ CS-ODC

- Period of testing: March – July 2013
- Disabled users involved: 40 (23 male, 17 female), average age of 42
- Kinds of disabilities: acquired (traumatic brain injuries and ictus the most)

Parts tested

Group activities: group discussions on a shared subject, mainly linked to disability issues, to improve communication capacities through dialogue and exchange of ideas.

People with disabilities as “experts” and “learning by teaching”: disabled users received support from people affected by mental disorders (“social facilitators”), who could transform the own experience into a resource for still suffering people.

Peer support and mentoring: constant encouragement towards mutual support and mentoring among users; development of a sociogram to highlight relationship dynamics within the group.

Interdisciplinarity and trainers’ approach: engagement of many professionals with different specific competences to assess the benefit of their cooperation within the same project.

Simplification and simulation of working tasks and environment: splitting of typical work procedures into their basic parts within a simulated company’s office, to enable each user to adequately train through practical experience.

Monitoring and assessment: continuative, periodical monitoring process throughout the training pathway, to improve monitoring and assessment measures within the organisation.

➤ NLN

- Period of testing: February – August 2013
- Disabled users involved: 25 (13 male, 12 female), average age of 37
- Kinds of disabilities: physical, sensorial, mental health, learning and autism fields, others

Parts tested

Personal guidance and training / Career and vocational guidance: individual training plans as results of strong cooperation among employers, learners and instructors.

Job matching: definition of vocational area fitting both users’ needs/wishes and actual jobs availability.

Enterprises’ perspective of disability (NLN: “Analysis and monitoring of local background”): survey-based interview to 35 local employers, to take into account their needs/views and the local labour market features and help the centre make informed decisions based on the future outlook.

Personal and vocational profiling: users’ assessment, skills sampling and profiling, focusing on individual users’ background, experience, interests, strengths and perceived needs, especially at the beginning but also at various stages of the programme.

Vocational training (NLN: “Alternation between training and working”): calibration to three days work-based and two days centre-based training, to increase the training effectiveness in terms of learners’ motivation and employment opportunities.

User-centred approach: design of an individual training plan for each and use of the Work Star (visual instrument for various assessments concerning users and training paths), to develop user-tailored programmes, even though within a general set structure.

➤ **TCF**

- Period of testing: April – mid-July 2013
- Disabled users involved: 20 (7 male, 13 female), the majority in the range of 20 to 29 years
- Kinds of disabilities: congenital disabilities and acquired disability (stroke, cerebral palsy, epilepsy, hydrocephalus, brain tumour, restricted mobility, brain injury/sight loss and other congenital disorders)

Parts tested

Peer support and mentoring: engagement of users with excellent experience and good level of independence as inspirational role models and source of peer support for other disabled people.

Personal guidance and training (including elements of “Group activities”, “People with disabilities as ‘experts’ and ‘learning by teaching’”, “Job placement” and “Equipment and aid tools”): introduction of new elements, among others visit of local community facilities, use of the Internet, driving theory support class, use of smart technology, telephone techniques class, more project and group work.

Career and vocational guidance (including elements of “Group activities” and “Job placement”): organisation of regular short employability courses, including employability-related issues, group discussions, visits to employers, assessment of general work aptitudes.

Enterprises’ perspective of disability: establishment of a more co-ordinated approach to engaging with employers: quarterly regional meetings of employment staff, internal shared electronic folder of employer contacts (to avoid duplications), engagement of specific staff members as “sector’s specialists” and of a person from the business world who provides expert advice and guidance in relation to engagement with employers.

➤ **URI**

- Period of testing: March – July 2013
- Disabled users involved: 21 (8 male, 13 female), average age of 35
- Kinds of disabilities: acquired disabilities (more frequent) and congenital ones

Parts tested

Career and vocational guidance: improvement of the centre’s vocational training by different means, e.g. internal workshops on job application methodologies, role plays, everyday-life simulations, on-line searches for job offers.

Job placement: training within an adapted work environment, in normal work conditions, under staff’s supervision and regular monitoring, for achieving more effective and possibly long-lasting results.

Enterprises’ perspective of disability: increase of employers’ awareness and facilitation in accessing information regarding disability through employers’ awareness analysis, employers network expansion, meetings and seminars for employers, printing of newsletters and brochures, summary and compendium of relevant employment legislation through the creation of a dedicated additional webpage on the URI’s web-site.

5.5 Common partners' considerations

Although the four partners tested different learning model's parts using different methodologies, their final reports contain some common – or at least recurring – considerations. They are reported below divided into positive and problematic/difficult aspects (these latter, where possible, integrated with suggestions)¹¹.

5.5.1 Positive aspects

Centres' self-reflection and improvement

All four centres have taken advantage of the implementation of the learning model for re-examining their own services. It was an opportunity to reflect on their effectiveness and, consequently, to improve this by possibly highlighting deficiencies and reviewing and/or extending their activities and methodologies.

Impact on users

The disabled users involved have been generally very positively affected by their participation in the testing activities. Even if it was normally not possible to demonstrate an effective increase of the users' employment chances (mainly due to a too short testing phase – see below), the approach has proven to be successful in fostering and improving users' self-confidence, knowledge, awareness, independence, communications and work skills, motivation, ability to focus on setting goals and general satisfaction. In these regards, the model has been validated as an effective best practice framework, able to support concretely and facilitate the transition to work.

Mutual advantage from the centre-employers direct relationship

Apart from CS-ODC, where the testing areas chosen did not include a direct involvement of employers, all other centres have seen good results from networking with employers while taking into account their actual needs and perspectives. Such activities enabled the partners to develop a good understanding of what different kinds of employers are looking for and therefore to make informed decisions on how to plan and develop their training paths. This, in turn, was appreciated by employers, who value the fact that they can count on employees coming from targeted training experiences and equipped with the basic skills they specifically need. Moreover, the centres found useful the improved communication with the employers, who, at the same time, appreciated the monitoring and support offered by the former.

5.5.2 Problematic/difficult aspects and room for improvement

Operational constraints and too short time

All partners agreed that an in-depth evaluation of the new approach was not possible because of the reduced time scale within which such measures were to be made during the activities of the LED-project, which of course had a limited duration: training processes in general, but also the implementation of the learning model itself – in the form it was conceived –, usually last longer and so the outcomes, though significant, can only be considered as partial data. Another related issue is the partners' constraints in terms of time and number of professionals available in their centres (CS-ODC, TCF) for carrying out the testing: this was also a reason for the impossibility of parallel control groups.

Real prospect of integration into the mainstream labour market

Many users of one VET centre were a less positive about their effective ability to find a job from participation in the programme, than about e.g. their ability to find further training, build confidence and esteem and increase motivation (TCF). The integration into mainstream labour market is furthermore a hard objective particularly for those with severe disabilities (CS-ODC). Some negative feedback from

¹¹ Partners' specific further considerations can be found in chapter 6.3 of the full testing reports comparison, available on the attached CD-ROM as well as at www.europe-projectled.eu/documents.html.

employers (and also from some users) was collected in relation to the lack of skills such as time keeping, attitude and ability to work/relate with others: a minimum standard of education and qualifications is required; users need perhaps more personal inputs rather than work based training (NLN). A way of improvement could be to dedicate more time to training proper life and personal ways of behaviour, also starting from every-day life situations not strictly related to the world of work.

Format and presentation of the model

The draft version of the model, on which the four centres based their testing, contained a great deal of detail and content and could lead to some confusion and misunderstanding. Both format and presentation of the document had to be improved, making a clearer and more pragmatic separation of contents and better focusing on the core elements which would be considered fundamental to best practice.

5.6 Questionnaires results¹²

At the end of the testing phase, all partners distributed a questionnaire to each disabled user who took part to their activities, to take into consideration the point of view of those whom the LED project is mainly targeted to. The assessment by the users helped the project partners evaluate the effectiveness of the activities and their relevance towards the project goals and represented a key element for the validation of the project outputs.

The overall **results** of the questionnaires are **positive**. Many users had a **very positive perception** about the help offered by the activities in improving their **motivation and self-confidence** as well as their **social and communication skills**, and this corresponds to the professionals' expectations¹³. **Peer mentoring activities, simulations of everyday situations, group works and training with non-disabled people** are further areas that were found as very useful in developing their skills and self-confidence.

78% of users rated the activities as **not too difficult** (within the range from "not difficult at all" to "normal"), the remaining part as slightly difficult, with a minority of only 3% that considered them very difficult.

The sum of users' answers "not at all" and "partially" to the questions about how much the activities would have **improved** their skills, job chances and general attitude, was generally quite low and always surpassed by the positive answers "well" and "very well" grouped together. A slightly lower variance was registered with regard to the perceived help in **getting a job in the general labour market**, although the percentage of positive answers is still higher.

Finally, the general impact of the project appears to be quite positive regarding **users' fulfilled expectations** and very positive considering the fact that practically the totality of the participants would **recommend** other future users to take part in these activities.

5.7 Final considerations

All four partners involved in the testing phase were able to **successfully carry out the activities** with their users in the way they had planned. The **different specificities** of each centre and the different testing areas consequently selected, made contents and results of the four partners' reports much diversified and quite difficult to compare within a single, homogeneous discussion. However, besides both common and partners' specific considerations, also some specific methodologies used by the partners could be taken as **examples of good practice**, e.g. the simulated office with segmented procedures of CS-ODC; the visual

¹² A detailed report showing the percentages of each answer can be found in chapter 6.4 of the full testing reports comparison.

¹³ Cf. report "Operators' evaluation of the learning model and guidelines for trainers", available on the attached CD-ROM as well as at www.europe-projectled.eu/documents.html.

Work Star of NLN; the shared electronic folder of employer contacts of TCF; the employers' dedicated webpage with all information about disability of URI.

All in all, the testing phase showed that, although there is still some room for improvement and even if the time available for testing was often too short for in-depth evaluations, **the first outcomes of the testing phase involving people with disabilities were generally very positive** at different levels and all partners confirmed that the LED learning model has proven to be a **valid and effective best practice framework**.

6 Conclusions

In the EU-project "Learning Environment of Disabled Users" the project consortium has developed, tested and validated a European, comprehensive and transferable learning model, which aims at supporting disabled people's transition to employment and social integration.

As resulted from the testing activities of the LED project as well as from the survey taken among trainers and professionals, the dimensions of the learning model are consistent with the project goals and most of them have been evaluated positively ("well" and "very well") by the **users** involved, who feel they have improved their social, communication and working skills, as well as their motivation, self-confidence, knowledge, independence and awareness of their limits and potentialities. The implementation of the European learning model produced general positive effects not only at users, but also at centres and even at employers level, both in terms of improvements and satisfaction: **centres** had a chance to re-examine their own activities, identifying deficiencies and ways of improvement; **employers** were satisfied with the support offered by the centres in aligning the training with their real needs and in relieving them from dedicating too much of their time to users' integration.

All four partners engaged in the testing phase carried out the related activities successfully and with great commitment: the considerations and suggestions coming from their staff members and from their disabled users – but also from the stakeholders they managed to involve – were very valuable to revise and improve the first version of the learning model. The different specificities of each centre, together with the different parts of the learning model consequently selected as testing areas, were an **added value** that greatly enriched the availability of data to draw from. Besides common or similar opinions and outcomes, single centre-specific considerations were taken into account as well, as they often offered good matter for reflection and were good points of departure for further discussion and improvement of the approach: in fact, some specific methodologies used by the partners can be taken as **examples of good practice** also from other centres dealing with disability issues, as confirmation of the highly positive value that **international cooperation** can have.

Fostering disabled people's ability to formulate and defend their rights and preferences, the learning model is oriented to **empowerment** as a principle in order to favour transition to the labour market. Empowerment gives importance to encouraging them to make their own career choices and participating in the design of a work project (cf. European Union 2011: 38). A user's work project is also connected to the user's life project and is relevant also for the user's social integration.

The core idea of this model is increasing the employability of adults with disabilities in transition environments/transition enterprises, i.e. environments preparing the disabled users to a job in the labour market. In this context, people with disabilities will receive the opportunity to foster their **personal autonomy**, develop **skills** and learn to carry out **tasks** related to a work profile in a specific vocational area. The work-based element of the learning model, a key aspect for transition environments, has proven to be important and successful in the testing activities. In fact, the transition environment shall ideally act as a "bridge" between the disabled users and the labour market. It is important that the users are integrated in a working environment during their pathway, e.g. in a simulated environment like a practice firm, or in a real working environment for training such a real company. Furthermore, the chance to operate new working tools and use ICT can be very valuable for the training of the users.

Various learning/training forms will be deployed by the trainers in the transition environment according to the European learning model. Among them, the following have a central role:

- **personalised, user-centred** learning/training
- **interactive and cooperative** learning/training, including group activities, communication exercises and peer mentoring/peer support activities
- **inclusion-oriented learning/training**, i.e. together with non-disabled people
- **experiential** learning/training, enabling users to learn “in situations”, thus with a strong practical focus and learning from the consequences of their actions towards people and towards objects.

Although transition to work is the main target of these pathways, the intermediate goals actually involve people's life projects. Therefore, the economic and entrepreneurial reality of the local area must always be merged with a person's life project, by means of training elements acting as connection/mediation between the two levels. This is why the whole learning model bases on a **holistic approach**, which considers the person as a whole and also pays great attention to multiple-risk situations deriving from disability and further negative elements. In this regard, an essential role is played by the strengthening of relations within families and associations networks, that should be integral part of the approach as well.

The **scenario** to which the learning model orients is a **mid-long term** one: the integration for people with disabilities should not represent just a short-term placement, but a sustainable integration scenario in which it is possible to secure and retain suitable employment. As also emerged in the stakeholders' feedback in the project, adults with disabilities sometimes manage to get some form of employment after following traditional training pathways, though they often have to interrupt and start over again. A suitable preparation for the workplace and for enterprises is important; improving learning/training processes for disabled users and making the processes more enterprise-oriented will contribute to giving disabled users a broader and more sustainable perspective for their future. The mainstream labour market still represents the ideal prospect of the process, even if a complex one (cf. UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, art. 27).

Briefly, one of the most important specificities of the LED project is the combination of **labour market-orientation** and **inclusion/social integration**. Social integration is pursued and fostered, among others, by the focus on social and communication skills throughout the whole learning and training pathway. The transition to the labour market after vocational education and training can be seen as complementary to the inclusion of people with disabilities, which is the perspective of enabling them to participation in life situations with non-disabled people. In this way there can be a world which is accessible not only from a logistical and architectural point of view, but also from a social point of view.

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8 List of abbreviations

CDS	Centro Ricerche Documentazione e Studi, Ferrara, Italy
Cf.	Compare

CS-ODC	Centro Studi Opera Don Calabria, Verona/Ferrara, Italy
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
EU	European Union
e.g.	exempli gratia
i.e.	id est
ICF	International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IRS	University Rehabilitation Institute, Ljubljana, Slovenia
KU	Katholische Universität Eichstätt-Ingolstadt, Germany
LED	“Learning Environment for Disabled Users” Project
NLN	National Learning Network, Dublin, Eire
PES	Public Employment Services
TCF	Cedar Foundation, Belfast, UK
UN	United Nations
VET	Vocational Education and Training
WHO	World Health Organization

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