

## **SOFT SKILLS AS A SIGNIFICANT FACTOR IN EFFECTIVE MANAGEMENT OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES**

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**Abstract:** The professional activity of people with disabilities in the open labour market has been on the rise for more than a dozen years. The population of people with various types of disabilities, holding a disability document for employment purposes, has been growing steadily. For considerations concerning the employment of people with disabilities, it is key to develop not only a disability management strategy, but also the employees' and management's soft skills, which helps to raise individual awareness and introduce efficient solutions in an organisation, adapted to the abilities of people with disabilities.

**Key words:** soft skills, disability, organisation, employment of people with disabilities, disability management

### **Introduction**

People with disabilities entering the labour market are understood as people with a disability degree decision, obtained for employment purposes pursuant to the Act of 27 August 1997 on Vocational and Social Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities, taking up jobs. In 2021, 337,000 people with disabilities worked on the Polish open labour market, employed by 198,400 businesses (LFS Statistics Poland). At the same time, 61,000 people with disabilities were registered as unemployed. The professional activity of people with disabilities in Poland remains low compared to the figures of other EU countries.

### **The concept of skills in literature**

The term “soft skills” covers a group of social abilities determining the development of interpersonal relationships, bonds, and social adaptation. It can be understood as the ability to reach self-actualisation (Zukiewicz 2009, p. 5). In the broad sense, it is understood as an individual's potential to adapt, allowing them to optimally adjust themselves to the situation and the environment, and a potential to transgress where the environment is conducive to change and creative shift of behaviour (Męczkowska 2003, pp. 693-694). The behaviourist perspective defines skills as an aptitude to act through practical or cognitive activities. In this sense, the knowledge and abilities one has are of primary importance, whereas motivation may improve effects of one's efforts. In the transgressive approach, the dominant view is that skills are a sort of deep cognitive structure which integrates an individual's relationships with others. One's actions are effects of a dynamic interpretation arising from the social and cultural context as well as model cultural activities (*ibidem*, p. 695). The concept of skills may also be understood as abilities necessary to influence other people in social situations (Argyle 2001, p. 133). The way in which these abilities are used is determined based not only on knowledge, but on competence and capabilities. Activity skills are understood as initiatory abilities, supporting an individual's mechanisms of conduct (Urbaniak-Zajac 2003, p. 55). A. Kanios (2008, pp. 320-321) divides skill definitions into three groups:

- the scope of the first group covers innate abilities and learned attitudes – it is based on an individual's social and cognitive capabilities;
- the second group concerns assessments and expectations – it is based on emotional and motivational factors;
- the third group involves a comprehensive approach – it comprises abilities, attitudes, knowledge, emotions and motivation.



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The structure of social skills includes cognitive elements (knowledge, ability to assess and understand, empathy), emotional elements (the level and type of emotions, ability to maintain emotional balance), and behavioural elements (specific patterns of behaviours and reactions). The purpose of social skills is not only to influence others, but also to use them efficiently, as related to an individual's experiences (Argyle pp. 134-139). Social skills have a significant role of making activities feel satisfying in difficult and problematic situations (Byra 2008, p. 50). Żukiewicz (2009, pp. 8-9) suggests adopting a social and pedagogical perspective, interpreting skills as an internalised ability to understand processes and activities, the objective of which is joint action, cooperation, joint responsibility, and interdependence. Skills thus conceived are an integral part of interpersonal dependences in social contexts (environments) and situations. For the purpose of this paper, one may assume they are also the basis for the mutual nature of relationships in a work environment, contributing to not only their quality but also an individual's standard of living and professional fulfilment. Optimal social skills allow establishing, sustaining and maintaining an elevated level of social relationships (Byra 2008, p. 48). As they evolve, interpersonal relationships cause the social environment to be immersed in the processes of looking for, discovering and improving values (Ruman 2017, p. 89).

Within the context of management, the concept of skills may refer to the efforts of both the organisation and the individual. For organisations, an important skill is satisfying diverse needs, whereas for individuals, one may talk about decision-making or decision-enforcing skills. Management literature distinguishes between the behavioural and the functional approach. Within the behavioural approach, skills are interpreted as specific and desired behaviours in the work environment. The functional approach accounts for competency, understood as specific persons providing work, performing duties and holding roles (Walkowiak 2007, pp. 17-18). Skills are linked just as well to abilities, talents and capabilities, as they are to education. They may be used to solve problems. Walkowiak (2007, pp. 19-20), in analysing approaches to definitions, pays attention to the components of skills, and suggests they include the employees' knowledge, abilities, personality traits, attitudes and behaviours, the essence of which is efficient and practical action. The interpretation of skill features allows one to notice their unique aspect – variety, constant development, subjectivity and interdependence. Fundamental skill-classifying orientations may include creative, social, and technical orientations. Creative orientation is set towards creative solutions based on self-improvement, self-awareness, training and knowledge. The direction of social orientation is interpersonal factors, such as communication, motivation, team leadership, team building, needs identification, and interpersonal decision-making. In turn, technical orientation is understood as the use of digital technologies and the ability to harness them in education and work. In turn, this provides an environment for an in-depth interpretation of skill potential (qualitatively and quantitatively) on all management levels. Social skills in management seem to be key, as managers directly manage teams of employees and are responsible for leading the organisation (*ibidem*, p. 25).

### **Skills and disability management in an organisation**

The skills management process is dynamic, procedural, and subject to constant changes, which is why one may talk about continuously improving it and striving for balance. Literature on the subject shows that this relationship may consist in skills being totally disparate, balanced, misaligned, as well as undeveloped or excessive. Balanced skills are most beneficial, as they contribute to satisfying needs and fulfilling the standards of management, but with respect to day-to-day situations (Walkowiak 2007, p. 32). In turn, the situational context may favour creative exploration and solutions, and initiate adaptation to changes, attempts to adjust to the situation. New challenges may lead to innovative approaches, interpretations and changes to introducing regulations and solutions adjusted to the needs and expectations of people with disabilities. The entry of people with disabilities on the labour market may, within the framework of this interpretation, be understood as the creation of a new reality based on extensive, multi-directional relationships, cooperation, and understanding.

Disability, as a sort of an impediment to professional adaptation, may be viewed within the personal and the social context. Taking legislation into account, we may distinguish between three degrees of disability for employment purposes – mild, moderate and severe – as well as twelve groups of potential causes of disability (Polish Journal of Laws of 2023, item 100, p. 5, Article 3 & 4; Polish Journal of Laws of 2021 item 857, p. 16, §32). Some of the above involve a highly complex context, and influence the barriers and stereotypes related to professional activation and employment.

Managing disability in a workplace has been defined by the International Labour Organisation as a process designed to facilitate the employment of persons with a disability through any effort to secure and satisfy individual needs, work environment, enterprise needs and legal responsibilities (ILO 2013, p. 4; Uścińska 2015, p. 8). Specific guidance stipulates that a disability management strategy should be linked to a workplace policy at the level of individual feeling of safety through eliminating risk and threats, adjusting the workplace and duties to an individual's abilities, and providing employees with disabilities (also acquired while in employment) with an opportunity of early intervention, rehabilitation, as well as referral to treatment. A mission thus understood should be an integral part of the national social policy, but also of an organisation's success and development strategy. The principle at the heart of a disability management strategy is a policy of equal employment opportunities, including in recruitment and job retention (Giermanowska 2009, p. 86). In her interviews with employers, Giermanowska showed that organisations with a more open policy towards disability understand the meaning of knowledge in breaking social stereotypes and prejudices. They also notice that building an organisation's positive image is related to the employment of people with disabilities (*ibidem*, p. 94). Disability management should be coordinated by persons trained in issues which arise from the specific nature of disability, or by those who keep in contact with specialists. Consultations and systematic assistance to employers at both the national and the international level support and shape the aforementioned strategies. What is also an integral part of a conscious workplace policy, is third-party institutions granting and arranging specialist assistance to employees with disabilities. The way in which the issue of disability is presented and discussed directly translates to the attitude that all employees have towards the understanding of the issues. If employers give rise to and arrange situations which help to acquire reliable and accessible knowledge, this contributes not only to developing a positive approach in employees and management to the issue of disability, but creates mature attitudes. Procedures which concern the employment of people with disabilities should be an inseparable part of human resource management. Investment in human capital is a key element of policies for employing people with disabilities (Chodkowski 2019, p. 123; Lipińska-Grobelny, Wolan-Nowakowska 2017, p. 59). Modern concepts found in the literature on the subject define diversity management as noticing the differences between the employees within the organisation and outside of it. These may depend on individual traits of identity which decide the direction and conduct of socialisation, and the way in which social roles are held. The purpose of this strategy is to prevent discrimination as well as to buttress equal rights and the harnessing of an employee's potential (Mazur-Wierzbička, Wieczorek-Szymańska, Leoński 2022, p. 40). This is not possible without identifying differences between employees based on a solid analysis and knowledge that is free from stereotypes or prejudices. Comprehensive diversity management requires rational, emotional, and operational action.

Research shows that the professional situation of people with disabilities depends on the type and degree of their disability (Kukulak-Dolata, Poliwczak 2015, p. 8; Giermanowska 2016, p. 74). The level of professional activity is highest in people with mild disabilities, and lowest in individuals with severe disabilities. Lacking disability management strategies may result from ambiguous legal regulation, as well as inexistent support for employers and initiatives promoting the employment of this group of employees (Maciejewski, Maciejewska 2017, pp. 109-110; Giermanowska 2016, p. 87; Barczyński 2006, p. 83; Mazur-Mitrowska 2018, p. 88). Legal regulations concerning the employment of people with disabilities should be made more specific, and in particular those provisions which strengthen and reinforce stereotypes and prejudices should be eliminated. What may have a vital role in promoting

a strategy, is an assessment of the system of institutional support provided to employees. Here, certain dilemmas arise, as the support is assessed as complicated, difficult to understand, and dispersed (Rudnicki 2014, p. 52). However, the employers themselves have a direct impact on shaping the policy on the employment of people with disabilities. Their knowledge, attitudes and behaviours with respect to the issue of disability have an effect on the level of employment. Corporate social responsibility is also a prominent issue, contributing to the fulfilment of certain standards concerning relationships with people with disabilities by avoiding discrimination against them in employment and allowing them to grow professionally (Sobczak 2006, p. 120). Barriers which may influence the level of employment of people with disabilities may be mental (fear of employment), qualifications-related, infrastructural and systemic (Giermanowska 2016, p. 91; Wasilewska, Nosal 2016, pp. 151-152, Mazur-Mitrowska 2018, p. 97). Changes in attitudes and awareness, and most of all in the understanding of the issues of disability, seem to be key, because they shape a corporate culture sensitive to the problems of integration and social exclusion. If we are to assume that professional adaptation involves establishing bonds with the employees and the organisation, then it may be harnessed for integration if work is oriented towards corporate objectives. The function of integration sustains the dynamics of the system, because it prevents destabilisation and disintegration – in this sense, it serves the individual and the organisation itself, in particular in terms of building an image and generating financial profit. Fear of employment concerns people with disabilities themselves, but also their colleagues and employers. It may be grounded in social attitudes towards the needs and abilities of people with disabilities, misunderstandings on the part of colleagues and employers, as well as in reluctance to cooperate (Chodkowski 2019, pp. 115, 119). It is worth noting that these factors may be overt and covert, as there is a difference between declaration and practice observed in research (Lizoń-Szłapowska 2012, pp. 293-295). In EU regulations, there has been a change involving not only attitude towards disability of an individual, but also the interpretation of the concept itself. It is currently understood as an impediment, barrier, and a difficulty to and in social functioning.

## Summary

The functioning of people with disabilities on the open labour market evidences complex contexts which require regulation. For over a dozen years, there has been decisive progress made in best practices, but it is worth noting that the human aspect comes first, because it is oriented towards the development of a socially sensitive perception of the issue of disability discussed. It combines, in its own peculiar way, people with disabilities, employees and management; constitutes an area of a social and professional agreement; initiates change. Employers' investments in improving personal skills and those of the organisation – based on not only knowledge, but also behaviours, attitudes, and integration with others, are a starting point for an organisation to succeed. This shows the importance of the attitude towards the issue and its authentic understanding, resulting from a deep personal, intellectual and emotional reflection. In light of the fact that soft skills shape the ability to act jointly and cooperate, one may conclude that they should be a priority in disability management. The diversity we are now experiencing goes beyond the issues of disability and constitutes a challenge, because it creates a social environment which demands attention, reaction, and action. Given the issues of disability, one may state there is no shortcut to skills improvement. This apparent truism allows us to see, however, that working through difficult and ambiguous challenges requires continuous reaction, reflection, action, and problem-solving. This type of skills not only draws and integrates together the employees in an organisation, but also produces an environment which contributes to developing a professional community and responsibility for colleagues. Creative but also reflexive disability management in the social and professional environment allows self-understanding and self-improvement in terms of the personal, professional, and social sphere of all employees. Beneficial practices and solutions may be an inspiration for creative management of diverse human resources.



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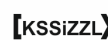
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