

Security & safety and disability in business enterprises: training and prevention

The strategy of customized training for a safer workplace

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Analysing the existing literature on this subject a serious gap emerges: ever since the obligation for companies to employ disabled people was introduced in Italy (by Law no. 482/68, later revoked by Law no. 68/99), no studies on the management of these workers' safety have been carried out. In other countries, although research on the same subject is limited and incomplete, the issue seems to draw more attention.

The crucial point in managing workplace safety, with specific reference to our subject, is the lack of a unitary and interdisciplinary approach to both disability and safety. In an ever-changing technological scenario, and with new aspects to safety continuously emerging – such as privacy and security – employers and safety managers are often unprepared to employ a disabled worker due to both organizational and structural problems.

The aims of the research are:

- to identify the critical points in the 'disability-workplace safety' relation;
- to check whether the customization of the training for disabled workers and safety managers is functional to the promotion of workplace safety as applied specifically to disability issues.

This investigation is divided into two different studies.

The first study concentrated in particular on how companies meet their accessibility, information, training, risk assessment and emergency management obligations.

The term 'accessibility' indicates accessibility to the working place (a necessary requirement for safety), to the electronic tools allowing workers to operate autonomously, but also to work itself. The lack of ad hoc integrating measures and policies may lead to severe discrimination. There may be difficulty in accessing work and situations in which employers question, *a priori*, whether the employee will be able to work continuously, without being correctly informed about his or her disability and how current therapies, aids and technologies can contribute to help.

Accessibility, information and training, risk evaluation and emergency management are mandatory by law, according to the Consolidated Act on work safety and to Italian Legislative Decree 196/03.

The tools and procedures provided to employers and safety managers by this law seem difficult to use and apply, given the difficulty the actors in the safety process have in the actual understanding of the risks and potentialities that each disabled worker contributes. The training of safety operators, and especially of safety managers, must also include necessary notions about disability: in case of emergency, for instance, it is important that those assisting disabled workers have notions and information about disabilities, communication strategies, the use of any special

equipment (prostheses, orthoses, aids), medical assistance, etc. It is necessary to provide any specific and additional information about healthcare and safety that disabled workers may need in their work or the tools they use, and provide managers and staff with any specific and additional information they might need to help workers in trouble.

To this end, a quantity-quality survey has been designed and administered to both disabled workers and company managers. The questionnaire, which was the same for employees and managers, catering for the differences in their roles, was divided into 7 macroareas focusing on collecting information on:

1. data about the person answering it;
2. policies on the management of disabled workers;
3. accessibility to IT tools;
4. accessibility to the workplace;
5. information and training;
6. company security and personal data protection;
7. risk evaluation and emergency procedures.

118 questionnaires (filled in by 94 disabled employees and 24 managers) were collected and analysed. Another step in the research included administering 4 semi-structured interviews to disabled workers who contacted us spontaneously for information and made themselves available for further investigations. This allowed us to deal more thoroughly with some issues that emerged from the questionnaires as particularly interesting regarding workplace accessibility, accessibility to the workplace, problems perceived about safety and training on safety provided by the company.

The study highlighted prosecutable deficiencies. To the question whether, during the risk evaluation process, the disabled workers were consulted, 73.6% of employees replied “no”. 27.2% of employees state that in case of an emergency there are no specific staff appointed to report the emergency and assist the disabled workers. 32.6% do not know.

Only 33.3% of managers say they have obtained the necessary consultations with the local fire brigade, police and emergency departments, so as to know whether they must stay at their working station or gather to an assembly point and wait for help.

The issue of the correct management of disabled workers within the context of work safety is not solved by fines, which only discourages compliance with legal obligations or makes it little cost-effective. Complying with the laws is not, however, enough to create the awareness and participation necessary to make work safety a common and shared resource. A cultural change and thorough research on the issues posed by disability and otherness in general – a growing presence in corporations – are needed in order to reach an inclusive conception of safety. The appreciation of diversity must become an integral part of existing policies and managing tools, becoming a daily objective. Involving top managements plays a key role in supporting Diversity Management initiatives and helps creating an inclusive environment. These studies show solution plans based first and foremost on information and training. The questionnaires have shown a great lack of knowledge, both by managers and by disabled workers. It is therefore necessary to spread good practices, laws, procedures and basic documents, both those mandatory by law and the optional ones that are nonetheless useful in learning and organizing work. These are the premises for people to behave according to what is provided by law. As well as more information, it is necessary to activate training initiatives aimed at providing companies with useful tools to effectively apply the practices and procedures needed to meet work safety needs and to protect the company properties, bearing in mind the objective of welcoming disabled people as workers. On the contrary, as the data presented in this research clearly show, changes made to advantage disabled workers in terms of information and training, for example, exclusively relate to the training’s place and time; too few companies work towards offering customized training. Furthermore, only 13% of disabled workers state that specific and additional training is provided on work health and safety for their positions.

The interviewed revealed, in particular, that even when training is provided, the needs required by the disabled are amply neglected. For instance, in one case, one of the interviewees,

being deaf, fears he will not understand what is being said, since doubts on comprehension of spoken texts are constant for the deaf.

The disabled have a right to a work environment guaranteeing their safety, granting them access to their workplace and recreational areas, and enabling them to interact with other workers. An interviewed blind woman complains about non-accessible, labyrinth-like accesses, and not being able to reach the coffee break area and the canteen alone, always having to rely on her co-workers' help and getting frustrated. An accessible workplace, together with the right training, can change the condition of a disabled worker. Introducing a loges pathway or a SESAMONET tool provides the visually impaired with some 'space' and 'movement' they did not previously have. Training must then provide conceptual tools to reset working and daily life.

As regards the second study, a customized training course for 4 disabled workers and 3 safety managers was developed.

A careful company analysis was performed, considering documents such as balance sheets, security policy documents and risk assessment forms, and using tools like semi-structured interviews and entrance tests to identify the training needs. The interviews showed that training needs focused in particular on communication, self-responsibility, risk perception and the spread and sharing of functional behaviours. The training needs highlighted are:

- to improve communication among employees and between employees and managers/people in charge;
- to improve the acquisition of the risk, danger and damage concepts;
- to raise awareness about different responsibilities;
- to improve the spread and sharing of functional behaviours, and specifically: the acquisition of competences in personal data management; security management (e.g. the use of passwords, internet downloads, antiviruses, etc.) and the correct application of prevention measures against professional conditions deriving from the use of computers.

In the implementation phase of the training programme, didactic mediators were actively employed, to be specific:

- Active mediators: direct experience (practical exercises in the classroom and on the workplace);
- Iconic mediators: use of images (in slides, in the training material handed out, by creating 'comic strips' and in workgroups).

The evaluation of the training's results was carried out both *ex post*, using exit tests and semi-structured interviews, and *in itinere*, to monitor and – if necessary – fine-tune the course, by using classroom journals and discussions.

At the beginning we experienced some initial attrition with managers and persons in charge, also due to the lack of a correct approach to the subject of healthcare and safety on the part of the company. By discussing the company's specificities it was possible to start reflecting and actively working to overcome the initial opposition, implementing independent thought. New potentialities may stimulate new ways of being for both companies and individuals. The participants were asked how we could have worked together to meet the needs of employees without forgetting the company's. Active involvement stirred their motivation to learn, so that meetings were not perceived as a boring and useless activity, but as opportunities for a positive change. Moving from the classroom to the working context allowed them to straightforwardly apply what had been taught, to let every participant's daily problems emerge and to find a solution to them. This way of administering training contributed to making workers more responsible, and they developed some deeper awareness of the consequences of their attitudes and understood how to rectify some

erroneous habits. This way it was also possible to reach the objective of spreading and sharing functional behaviours. The end-of-course interviews highlighted deeper reciprocal respect and the will to work together to improve things.

For the mentally disabled worker (Giorgio) in particular, but for all the others too, the customized training allowed focussing on specific objectives. During the course, the use of didactic mediators and especially the power of the images, videos and interactive games allowed the active involvement of Giorgio, who proved he could distinguish between dangerous and correct behaviours. The exit test confirmed these observations. Giorgio managed to correctly match the risk and damage terms with the corresponding images representing risky and damaging situations. He also correctly selected the images representing data treatment. Although he could not define 'password' precisely, he understood that he must not spread or share it with anyone. Due to the short time we had, we had to give up the objective of teaching him some abstract concepts about privacy and security, but we at least tried to train him on the field to use the tools he needs in his job, to guarantee both his and the company's safety.

It was proved that a customized approach is functional to promoting inclusive safety, since it helps bringing together the needs of the disabled and the non-disabled and those of the company, by using flexible contents and adapting times and methods to the individuals' and the company's needs. Out-of-the-classroom activities furthermore favoured the acquisition of the tools necessary to meet the requirements posed by the working context. The solutions we put forward are by no means exhaustive, given the complexity of a situation involving different issues and needing great economic investments and radical interventions at both the legislative and the administrative levels.