

ESF-project “Bridging severe disabilities @ work”

Duration: from 1/1/2019 to 31/12/2021.

Promotor background

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

We are employing +/- 21.000 people, whereof 17.500 persons with disabilities. About 70% of them has an intellectual disability.

This project consists of a transnational cooperation, whereby Groep Maatwerk collaborates closely with his Finnish partner SOCOM.

During the project, we also share expertises with partners from the Netherlands (Cedris and SBCM), Sweden (Samhall) and Wales (University of Cardiff).

(Project)Challenge/Context

Over the last few years, in Flanders and other countries, the chances of successful employment for people with intellectual disabilities are continuously and incrementally decreasing. It is getting more difficult and complex for people with the highest need for support to “bridge the gap” towards suitable activation through work.

We are witnessing a growing “mismatch” between these people (and the competence and talents they offer) on one side and the range of available employment on the other.

In the light of this mismatch mentioned above, this project will adopt a “human centered approach” instead of starting from the existing (insufficient) options of employment.

At this moment, there are plenty of options to measure and report on an individual’s competence and skills. Each with its own merits and use, and a number of them well adapted and suited for use with people with mental disabilities.

However, empirical instruments measuring the aspirations, values and other psychological traits/needs are barely existing, especially ones tailored for use with

(potential) employees with intellectual disabilities. For these people no valid and reliable instruments are known, in Flanders or elsewhere.

To effectively offer this target group sufficient possibilities to actively participate in the labour market and society as a whole, we need to organise work in such a way that it “fits” individuals needs and aspirations as best we can.

Our aim in this project is to develop a tailored instrument that allows/facilitates the target group to report their wishes and needs pertaining work and activation in a valid and reliable manner

From this perspective we will develop our tool, following the rules & guidelines described in psychometric science.

Therefore we are supported by a panel of Flemish professors in occupational psychology. We also align our progress with the **Finnish South-East University of Applied Sciences and the Finnish institute of Occupational Health.**

Progress made

In order to respect the psychometric rules, we have decided to implement 3 test phases during the project. Each phase consists of a minimum of 350 participants.

- **From literature review to draft questionnaire**

After reviewing relevant (behavioral scientific) literature, we chose to retain the person-environment fit model (Edwards). Although this model was originally developed in a context of stress research, thanks to its fit/misfit perspective it is well suited for our aim. In this model, certain characteristics in the (work)environment need to correspond or “fit” with characteristics of the individual, in order to psychological and physical well-being to occur. A misfit will lead to negative psychological and physical outcomes through stress.

We also interviewed a group of experts (who work daily with the target group in an educational or vocational context) on which factors contribute to successful employment. This was done to complement the findings of our literature review. One of the more important insights gained, was that for the target group, asking what tasks they like to do would not be beneficial, since this was highly depending on context and not very stable through time.

This led to the selection of Work Values as characteristics to be measured. Evidence shows these are more robust to change and stable through time.

Next we selected a number of validated questionnaires on Work VALUES. This resulted in a pre-testing questionnaire.

- Pre-testing questionnaire: Pilot study

We conducted a pre-test of the questionnaire in several small groups. This was done to identify any problems in interpretation & ambiguous wording in used language. Another aim was to exclude or adapt any items which were perceived as threatening, or generally received badly. These pilot groups consisted of: 1) Employees in Custom Work Companies, 2) unemployed jobseekers 3) students in special education. All with intellectual disabilities.

- Training

To assure a standardised method of testing, we developed a manual and corresponding training session for every individual involved in testing the target group.

- Method: 3 phases

The complete process of development consists of 3 phases: 2 phases are used to analyse psychometric properties of the instrument, and a 3rd last phase to collect reliable descriptive information for further analysis.

- Test phase 1: October - November 2019
- Test phase 2: March 2020 -> due to Covid reported to end of 2020
- Test phase 3: May - June 2020 -> due to Covid reported to May 2021
The 3rd phase will also be implemented digitally.
- Validation by academic panel: July 2021
- Final feedback and presentation: September 2021.