

HANDICAPPED PERSONS ON THE LABOUR MARKET IN SWEDEN¹

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ABSTRACT. Employers have a responsibility to make meaningful arrangements for employees who are injured in production or who have become handicapped for other reasons. Efforts must be intensified to design workplaces that will permit the performance of more tasks by elderly and handicapped persons. We know that fairly simple measures will sometimes suffice to enable a handicapped person to cope with a job. It will be increasingly important in the future, with respect to the elderly and handicapped, for mechanical engineers and work planners to bear biotechnological aspects in mind.

Introduction

What are the attitudes of companies to handicapped persons as manpower, and what can be done to improve their situation on the labour market? I regard the problems of handicapped persons as one of the most urgent issues of equality in society. Actually, it is more surprising than anything else that the debate on equality on the labour market has so greatly concerned differences of pay and other employment benefits among fully healthy and well-adjusted individuals.

Satisfaction from work should not be reserved for certain categories. To me it is a question of solidarity between all sections of the community to see that also the handicapped experience job satisfaction. So far, so good: it is easy enough to agree on fundamentals. It is in trying to realize the objectives that the difficulties and problems present themselves.

Responsibility of employers

Speaking at the Swedish Government conference in 1968 on the employment of middle-aged and older labour, I pointed out that employers have a

far-reaching responsibility to take meaningful steps towards looking after those who are already employed. To my mind, companies should show the same responsibility towards those who are injured in production or who have become handicapped for other reasons. How long this responsibility can and ought to go can never be exactly specified. However, I shall shortly refer to certain circumstances which limit that responsibility regardless of the positive attitudes of management to the handicapped.

Occupational health services

With respect to the objectives formulated by SAF (the Swedish Employers Confederation) for the employment of handicapped persons, I can express them most simply by referring to the guidelines for occupational health services which were adopted in 1967 by SAF and LO (the Swedish Confederation of Trade Unions). Here we have made a clear commitment to the handicapped, and it is our intention to live up to that commitment. The labour market parties have spelled out an extremely ambitious objective, namely to aim at a programme of occupational health services which extends to all employees. The realization of this objective is currently impeded by the shortage of educational facilities.

The workplace must be adapted to the individual

Many jobs are within the capabilities of those who suffer from some physical or mental shortcoming. In such cases, general work demands excluding handicapped persons should be avoided. It is also urgent that efforts be intensified to design workplaces that will permit the performance of more tasks by elderly and handicapped persons. We know that fairly simple measures

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will sometimes suffice to enable a handicapped person to cope with a job. With respect to the elderly and handicapped, it will be increasingly important in the future for mechanical engineers and work planners to bear biotechnological aspects in mind. The adjustment measures taken by industrial firms on behalf of hard-to-place manpower are described in a report published by the Research Office of the National Labour Market Board in the autumn of 1967 (1). It covered manufacturing establishments employing more than 500 people. According to this study, more than half of the reporting companies had provided retraining programmes and had arranged suitable tasks for physically handicapped persons. Other studies have shown that many large companies have a considerable number of employees whose disabilities are to great that one can flatly speak of unprofitable employment (2).

Maintaining full employment is dependant solely on the responsibility which companies feel for their employees. The average for this category would appear to fall above rather than below 5%. It stands to reason that companies who already have many handicapped persons among their employees have limited opportunities to bring in more such workers from the outside, i.e. from the public employment service. Under the imperatives of Sweden's market economy, companies must necessarily comply with the dictates of earning power. If earning power is threatened, a company obviously becomes less able to provide for employment which has uneconomic implications. Be the intentions of management ever so noble, it cannot disregard this fact. Hence there are given limitations to the extent to which companies can accept members of the so-called "external rehabilitation clientele", i.e. persons who are only partially fit for work and who need a special type of work so that their work capacity can be fairly well used. I should like to quote a statement, contained in the final report of the Central Rehabilitation Committee, which reads as follows: "The division of responsibility between companies and the community at large with respect to the so-called external rehabilitation clientele must be clarified. Ways must be found to provide more effective means for the in-company testing of rehabilitated persons in doubtful cases, with society retaining responsibility for the tested person during a follow-up period in which developments in the

company are followed jointly." In quoting these words, I do not wish to suggest that all employment of handicapped persons is bound to be unprofitable, but a company runs obvious risks when it when it employs persons who belong to the rehabilitation clientele within the public vocational rehabilitation program.

SAF has called the attention of its members to the public allowances available in connection with the hiring of elderly and handicapped persons so as to stimulate companies to employ such persons. Employers who plan to hire handicapped persons may need advice on proper workplace arrangements. Organizations for the handicapped can give some suggestions on the design of premises and work stations.

Increased resources for employment testing and on-the-job training

In recent years an ever increasing share of the efforts under the labour market policy has gone towards helping handicapped persons and other hard-to-place groups. This is a correct and necessary order of priorities. The more that is invested in employment testing and on-the-job training, the greater the opportunities for placing rehabilitation clientele on the open labour market. It will no doubt also be necessary to greatly expand the capacity of sheltered workshops operated by the county councils. A point that should not be overlooked in this connection is what it will mean for the employment of the handicapped to have industrial firms make use of sheltered workshops as subcontractors to a great extent.

Semi-sheltered work

I should now like to say a few words about the programme of semi-sheltered employment. Under the new arrangement which has been in force for the past one-and-a-half years, a fixed government allowance of 5,000 kronor is payable annually for each job. This is an improvement compared with the previous system of compensation per hour worked. The object of this experimental programme is to provide openings for handicapped persons who cannot find jobs on the open market. The Labour Market Board has pointed out that prudence must be observed whenever the question arises of transferring already employed persons to semisheltered work. The basic rules are much too stringent, and actually they discriminate against

those companies which have already shown responsibility towards their handicapped employees. In the long run, finding jobs for handicapped persons or keeping them in jobs is not a problem that can be solved by schematic division-of-work rules. Every individual has to be looked after separately. In practice we have a broad spectrum of situations, ranging from that of the employee who has aged in the service of this company to that of the employee who has been severely injured in a road accident. I wish to emphasize that employers and individual companies feel responsible for the handicapped. That's the way it should be. We view the cooperation that has commenced with the rehabilitation authorities, the Labour Market Administration and the opposite parties as a promising start. We look upon meaningful work as a highly important contribution towards the achievement of life-content.

The need for information and further education

We are all aware that enlightenment is needed on all points. That applies not only to those who are responsible for these activities in companies. It applies also to the working population who are blessed with good health. As long as only physical handicaps are involved, this requirement should cause no particular difficulties as a rule. However, I have been told that the situation is more worrisome for

those who have or have had mental disabilities of different kinds. When such persons look for new jobs, often after they have fully recovered, they encounter distrust and aversion. These attitudes are held not only by supervisors, but also—and in at least equal measure—by the presumptive work-mates. If I have understood the matter correctly, there is room here for an informative campaign of major dimensions. As we know, the treatment of mental illness has made considerable advances in recent years.

By way of conclusion, I should only like to emphasize that we of the management community took an early interest in occupational health services and in the placement of different employee categories with varying qualifications. It is our ambition to continue taking part in the formulation of common efforts in this field.

REFERENCES

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2. SOU (Government Official Investigations) 1965: 57. Stockholm.

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