

# Advance in Psichology and Education

## Continuing education for workers with intellectual disabilities

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### Abstract

Almost 25 years since the LISMI Act first came into force, Spain still fails to regulate the organizations that facilitate integration into working life for people with disabilities. This has a direct impact on access to continuing education for these workers, whose training needs are similar to their coworkers' while additionally requiring specialized knowledge and support in order to acquire relationship strategies and everyday life problem-solving skills to help them achieve inclusion.

**Keywords:** Continuing education. Intellectual disability. Social skills.

Integrated employment of people with intellectual disabilities in mainstream workplaces operates within the principles set forth in Spain's Act for the Social Integration for Persons with Disability (LISMI). One of its priorities is for people with disabilities to gain access to the mainstream employment system; ever since then, Catalonia blazed a trail by implementing projects to provide this sort of service and encourage employment of this group of people.

Although the LISMI act led to a number of implementing rules to encourage company hiring of people with intellectual disabilities, no regulatory activities have been set up for the organizations

monitoring LISMI compliance and working towards integrated employment of people with intellectual disabilities. Such regulation is crucially needed.

Most of these organizations are members of ACTAS (the Catalan Association of Supported Employment); their aim is employment in mainstream workplaces, and their method is «supported employment», used in Catalonia since 1989. ACTAS was set up in 1995 so that its member organizations and staff could have a regular exchange of experience.

Funding for these bodies currently comes from the occupational training budget of the Catalan government's Department of Labor. While these funds help ensure survival, they cannot guarantee sound functioning or continuity of service for three main reasons: first, the source of the funding runs counter to the need for mainstreaming; second, the funding approach fails to take into account the whole-person type of intervention provided by these organizations; third, financial support ends as soon as the focus person is hired. The shortcomings and patchy coverage provided by this system are borne out by each and any of these serious considerations.

It is our view that financial provisions allocated to a project symbolize or embody the underlying views on said project, and therefore influence society's stance regarding a right that has been legally enshrined for 25 years.

We believe that employment has a direct enabling

\* This article is based on a study carried out by the Technical Committee of the ACTAS association, whose members are Sílvia Gascón, Anna Gutiérrez, Mercè Auquer, Teresa Roigé, Iolanda Ruiz, and Raquel Galan.

role for psychological maturity and for personal development defined as the process of acquiring a repertoire of better-adapted behaviors and more normalized ways of interacting with one's environment.

Integration of people with intellectual disabilities in mainstream workplaces is a long and complex process that does not end when an employment contract is signed, but quite the contrary. In fact, this is when the professional facilitator steps in to facilitate inclusion by ensuring the best possible integration process, acting on the business environment and ensuring that the new worker will meet the company's expectations. The professional facilitator is also the contact person for fellow workers and supervisors if any incidents arise with the focus person.

Another of the facilitator's tasks is to ensure that the working environment provides the best possible model of normalcy for the person with a disability. Daily work, and the relationships and demands it entails, will help a person become more social and mature; fellow workers' attitudes play a key role here. The professional facilitator has to guide and encourage understanding and acceptance of the project throughout the new worker's environment. Hence, the support afforded by occupational training courses designed to be completed prior to actual employment can clearly only cover a tiny share of the whole integration process.

ACTAS commissioned a study, led by Fundació Catalana Síndrome de Down and funded by the Consorci de Formació Contínua de Catalunya (Catalan Consortium for Lifelong Training), to assess the training needs of workers with intellectual disabilities in mainstream employment.

This study was carried out by a company called Desenvolupament Comunitari using qualitative methods: semi-structured face-to-face interviews and focus groups.

The following groups were interviewed:

- Professionals: insertion facilitators
- Workers with disabilities
- Co-workers of workers with disabilities
- Relatives of people with intellectual disabilities
- Trade union representatives

## User profile

As we have pointed out, ACTAS represents a significant share of the organizations providing job insertion for people with intellectual disabilities in Catalonia. Almost 2,000 individuals are currently served by its member organizations, with over 1,000 companies enrolled.

The typical client profile for these organizations

devoted to job integration for people with intellectual disabilities is a young man or youth with a psychic impairment working in a low-skilled industrial or service job for a private-sector company.

Eighty per cent of placed persons are less than 30 years old.

Men outnumber women in every age bracket, especially the younger ones. Out of a total of 420, 61% are male and 39% female (Figure 1).

In terms of disability type, 91% have psychic or intellectual impairment and 8.5% have a mental illness (Figure 2).

Most placed persons require intermittent support (50%) or limited support (37.5%).

Clients under placement are mostly in the 16- to 18-year age bracket (38%) followed by the 19-25 bracket. Only one out of seven are older than 30.

By broad categories, there is a predominance of employment in the industrial sector (33%) followed by the service industry (26%) (Figure 3).

Typical job profiles in these companies are low-level or low-skilled: couriers, ancillary staff, workhands, replenishers, and similar jobs. Private-sector companies constitute 73% of all employers (Figure 4).

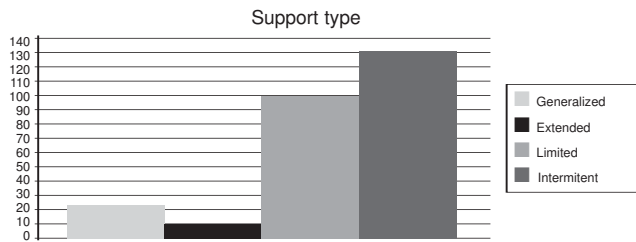
## The need for lifelong training

First, it must be pointed out that people with intellectual disabilities are not catered for in the lifelong training activities organized by companies, social organizations and trade unions, even though their educational level is clearly below average and their jobs are among the lowest-skilled.

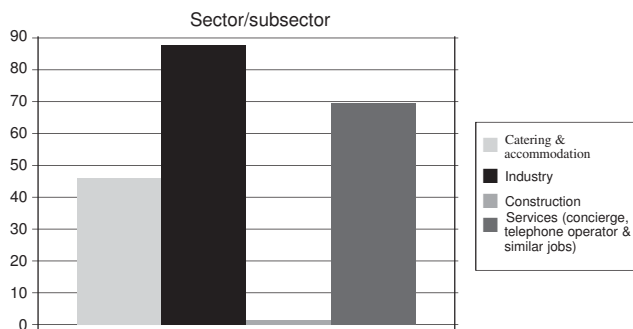
However, occupational training does not by itself ensure suitable job insertion for workers with intellectual disabilities. It serves as a training and support tool in tandem with lifelong education, which should be made available as an essential resource throughout the intellectually impaired worker's working life, for skill maintenance, upskilling, and promotion of workers with



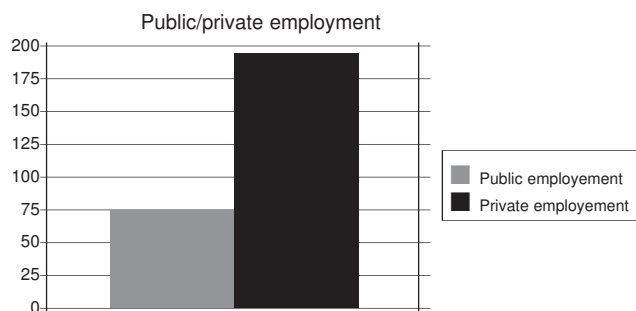
**Figure 1:** Age and gender of clients placed in the mainstream labor market out of a sample of 8 organizations (n = 420).



**Figure 2:** clients placed in the mainstream labor market by support type.



**Figure 3:** clients placed, by major industry.



**Figure 4.** clients placed by company ownership (public vs. private) (n=267).

disabilities.

Beyond the training required for promotion and skill updating in order to stay in line with changing demands (a need shared by all workers), lifelong training is also needed for workers with intellectual disabilities when structural changes or technological innovations are implemented in the workplace, and whenever organizational changes affect the worker's natural support persons (coworkers or supervisors) or alter the skill set acquired during the training process significantly or completely.

Continued support is also needed in other areas, especially the personal and relational spheres, as well as other kinds of knowledge and skills that ensure inclusion in the workplace environment.

Workers with disabilities in mainstream employment have needs similar to those of all other workers in addition to requiring specific kinds of training and support that are substantially or

formally distinct from the requirements of other groups.

Where retraining needs are shared in common or similar, additional professional support may be required. This may be provided outside the workplace or inside it, in order to reinforce new knowledge or skill acquisition in a shared setting with co-workers.

Conversely, knowledge needed to maintain the relational and problem-solving skills mentioned earlier requires regular individual or group tutoring to address needs identified in a professional individual follow-up process.

Hence, different training modes may be suitable for workers with disabilities, and training can appropriately occur in the workplace or outside of it. Some modes are used to upgrade and maintain the skills needed to carry out specific tasks at particular workplaces; others are for more generic, intersectoral skills – cross-cutting skills – which tend to require individually tailored personal support and follow-up plans.

These plans typically involve a broad range of different types of on-and-off support at varying levels of intensity and intervention, but necessarily extending throughout the working lifetime of the worker with a disability, because their aim is an overall improvement of their process of insertion in society and employment, as well as an improvement in every element involved in this process.

We can therefore conclude by concurring with the study's working hypothesis that, in order to preserve the job of a worker with a disability and ensure its value to that worker, there needs to be some follow-up and training support provided by a team of specialists in charge of lifelong education (for employment, personal life and social life). Moreover, the support and specialist monitoring provided by the organizations involved is also a determining factor for employability and a driving force encouraging the hiring of people with intellectual disabilities in mainstream companies.

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## Book selection

– DVD –

MIRTE - © Erasmus MC/ WBM Productions BV, 2006.

MIRTE - © Erasmus MC/ WBM Productions BV, 2006. MIRTE is a DVD sent to us from the Netherlands by a parents' association (Stichting Downsyndroom, Meppel). It is the heart-warming posthumous story of Mirte, a girl with Down syndrome who recently died at the age of fifteen.

It is based on the story of her life from the time of her birth and provides a highly experiential description of the parents' consternation when they learned their daughter's diagnosis and the whole process they had to get through, like so many other parents. The movie is very positive and optimistic; father and mother soon get down to work with their baby following the stages of early stimulation as it was conceived fifteen years ago, including the techniques used to help her learn to crawl and to take

part in family activities and in her environment. Mirte is then seen as an older child, attending an integrated school and relating to other children. There is a constant perception of Mirte as a very joyful child, highly efficient at what she did, and very happy. Aside from her obvious personal merit in achieving this, she was probably helped to a large extent by the hope and trust her parents placed in her.

Unfortunately for Mirte, a disease that had nothing to do with DS cut her life short. This highly emotional story ends with a large crowd of adults and children walking Mirte to her final resting ground in the cemetery, where the children release dozens of colored balloons into the air. This testimony will certainly leave good memories behind for us all, and we would like to use this review to join Mirte's parents and relatives in this new, doubtless painful, stage in their lives.

For further information, please see [www.downsyndroom.nl](http://www.downsyndroom.nl). The video can be viewed at the FCSD library in the original Dutch or in English.

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