

## **The European Forum on Disability & Employment**

*Paris, October 2003*

*Report by Dave Parr*



**On Thursday 2nd and Friday 3rd October 2003 around 700 delegates from across Europe met at the Méri­dien Montpar­nasse Hotel in Paris. The event, organised by the French Government organisation for disability and employment issues l'Agefiph<sup>1</sup>, had a thought provoking title; **Employees with disabilities: an asset to the company?****

Wilf Holt and I attended on behalf of Amicus and the Disability Champions project. Bearing in mind that the majority of delegates were managers and HR people this was going to be an interesting event. The conference was very slick and well coordinated in terms of audio/visual presentation, simultaneous translation and accessibility in general. The format was four round table discussions with panel members, chaired by journalist Emmanuelle Bastide, followed by questions and comments from the floor.

This report splits into the four round table titles but much of it relates to company achievements and methodology which I found particularly prevalent to the UK, to trade unions and of course the Disability Champions@Work project.

Opening the conference Monika Queisser from the OECD<sup>2</sup> talked of Europe's ongoing commitment to its 37 million disabled people. She told us that many surveys show that there are few disabled people in the EU who are not economically stable but then went on to say that this was often because of family wealth rather than their own income. She also had concerns about people falling into a benefits trap.

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.agefiph.asso.fr/>

<sup>2</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, see [www.oecd.org](http://www.oecd.org)

With reference to legislative models she spoke of three alternatives:-

- Anti discrimination laws based upon rights, where individuals can seek justice through the court system if those rights are not afforded. Examples of this can be found in our own DDA, the USA and Canada.
- Compulsory employment, where employers are forced to meet a quota of disabled workers or they pay levies. This is the case in many central European countries and was in the UK until 1995. Examples of quotas are:-
  - Italy 7%
  - France 6%
  - Germany 5%
  - Austria 4%
  - Spain 2%
- Voluntary compliance with government funded financial incentives. This is the case in the Scandinavian countries.

In reality, she said, none of these has generated evidence that they are the right way to deliver on behalf of disabled people and that real examples of areas of successes and failures can be found in all three.

### **1- Can construction of Europe provide new solutions to employing people with disabilities?**

The first speaker in this round table was Jesper Moeller, the executive vice-president of ISS Denmark. This is a Scandinavian based multinational. His contribution focuses on cleaning workers employed in Spain. 400 of the 6000 workers are disabled. He said it was important that disabled workers were integrated into mainstream employment and that they were not stigmatized. He said that disabled people had helped play a part in the equality and diversity agenda in Spain especially as there are many racial, national and religious groups amongst the workforce. Employers in Spain can receive money from the National Lottery to help fund adjustments etc.

Jose Abargues of Ford, also in Spain, said they have 652 disabled workers out of 7200 about 9%. These were mainly manufacturing jobs. He admitted that most of these had become disabled since gaining employment. Quizzed about the costs of employing these people he said that only 74% of the disabled workers work at full production rate and that costs were incurred supporting the others. The interesting thing from this employer was that they had set up a database of employees' abilities which cross references with a database of job requirements so people could be offered a range of appropriate work.

Cathy Kopp is the HR Director of Accord Hotels, who own the Ibis group. She said that their employees had been given specialist training in etiquette for

dealing with disabled customers and that 'mystery customers' were used to check specific hotels.

Joël Guilbert represented Auchan, a large supermarket chain. He spoke of the differences in culture, attitudes and expectations for disabled people in the various member countries of the EU. The actual figures of disabled workers in his company are:-

- France 5%
- Italy 7%
- Spain 1%
- Luxemburg 2%

Susan Scott-Parker, from the UK Employer's Forum on Disability<sup>3</sup>, added very little to the debate but used the platform to give her organisation a plug. The Employer's Forum on Disability has 380 affiliated companies that claim to employ 20% of UK employees. She claimed her affiliates had shown a real commitment to disability issues by paying their fees of £12k p/a. When we're talking about concerns such as MacDonald's I can not really agree with her sentiments.

The final speaker on the panel was Wallis Goelen-Vandenbroek from the European Commission unit looking at the integration of disabled people. She stressed the need to look towards the social model and used a nice phrase that I have not heard before; explaining the social model she said "*Disability is caused by a dynamic interaction between a person and their environment*". I'll have to steal that and use it somewhere! She also talked through some of the aspects of the common directive on disability that is transportable to domestic legislation by 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2003. The main theme of this is the concept of 'Reasonable Adjustment' which has clearly been taken from our DDA'95. The interesting thing was that this directive has no opt out for small employers so could this mean the end of our figure of 15 employees?

Chairing, Emmanuelle Bastide asked each of the panel members what they would like to see from a European Directive on disability and employment. Their responses were interesting:-

- ISO certification for social responsibility
- Tax offsets for support
- Simplification of procedures
- Job focused legislation
- Occupational training for workers who become disabled
- Harmonization of legislation
- More encouragement – less punishment

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<sup>3</sup> see <http://www.efd.org.uk>

The questions from the floor were mainly from support organisations keen to get up and plug their work. There was little input from the employers. One employer tried to catch the EU representative out by asking her what percentage of disabled workers they employed. She fielded this well saying that she had one disabled worker in her team of thirteen and that they were looking at accessibility issues around their own recruitment procedures.

## **2- Employing people with disabilities: a sustainable development challenge.**

This discussion was opened by Alain Etchegoyen, a philosopher. He spoke of the perception of disabled people and related to the fact that Europe is enjoying one of its longest periods of peace in history. This was interesting because our previous legislation in the UK was drafted to assist disabled veterans from WWII, and the Americans With Disabilities legislation to support people returning from Vietnam. His point was that there are now less disabled people and that people tend to naturally try to hide differences and abnormalities. He alluded to the stigmatization that almost naturally accompanies quota systems telling a tale of disabled worker supplied by an agency who was rejected by the company as he was not visibly disabled enough to help with their corporate image. One positive tale was a company that, after a three month probationary period, asked its new staff to fill in an 'Astonishment Report'. This starts "*After working for this company I am astonished to find that...*" – these can be either positive or negative. I found this a really novel idea.

Guy Durand is the MD of electrical products company Legrand Normandie. In 1994 they employed 4% of disabled workers; the figure is now 12%. In 1994 the company did not see the 4% figure as a problem and were happy to pay the levy to l'Agefiph for the shortfall below the 6% quota. When Monsieur Durand became MD he set changing this figure as one of his goals. The current figure was achieved by appointing a disability project manager and looking at targeting the recruitment of disabled people to replace natural wastage. He did say something a little unusual that 300 jobs were assessed and adjustments made before the recruitment process started; okay there are some obvious things but where does the individual's requirements fit into this? He said that the result of this was a much improved workplace for everyone and that l'Agefiph had helped where adjustments attracted costs.

Eberhard Mugler is the finance director of ZF Marine Group who manufacture boat spares in Italy. 8.5% of their 1200 workers are disabled. Prior to 2001 the figure was 1.5%. He said that they had achieved this by working closely with the trade unions as part of the employee retention and satisfaction aspect of an EFQM<sup>4</sup> exercise. The most important thing is identifying peoples abilities and actual job requirements he told us.

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<sup>4</sup> European Foundation Quality Model, see [www.efqm.org](http://www.efqm.org)

The French electricity company, EDF, were represented by Jean-Pierre Cerdan. They have only 3.9% disabled workers – short of their quota. These people work in a mix of mainstream jobs and sheltered workshops. He said that some jobs were prohibited for disabled workers due to safety reasons. He blamed the shortfall on the fact that most of their recruits need two years college education and that colleges were not delivering qualified disabled people.

The next company represented was Storebrand, a Norwegian insurance group. Their speaker, Laura Donovan, spoke from a different perspective. Her job is to minimize risks associated with insuring a company. Her main goal is to ensure that Storebrand do not end up footing the bill for an expensive legal claim made by a disabled employee against one of its customers.

The panel members seemed to agree that some kind of rating system for employers making progress on the disability/equality agenda would be welcomed. This fits nicely with discussions the Disability Champions' steering group have had about a system related to the 'two ticks' audit that the Champions carry out.

### **3- Skills and disability.**

This third round table was going to be interesting. We had already heard Electricite de France blame their low percentage of disabled workers on education. What is being done to address this?

Anna Maria Comito is a minister from Italy. Signora Comito had come eager to share a success story with the conference. In Italy all special schools have been abolished. 140,000 disabled children are now educated in mainstream schools. This has helped integration in the workforces because disabled people are used to working with and being around none disabled and vice versa. *“As a result of this programme we now have more than 4000 disabled people in university places”* she boasted.

Marc Secondini from Thales, France welcomed the work that Signora Comito had reported and said that it was because this had not happened in France is job as Integration Manager was very difficult.

Jean-Jacques Quinery of IBM France echoed Monsieur Secondini's comment. He said his main problem was getting people with the right scientific qualifications. He said that IBM organized forums with parents of disabled people with the aim of encouraging their children to take high technology career paths. He claimed IBM were at the forefront of inclusion especially with respect to making their products and IT in general accessible.

The only UK delegate on the platform was Nicola Swan, equalities and diversity director at Barclays Bank. She said that disabled workers were *“good problem*

*solvers, had less absenteeism and made loyal employees*”. I found this somewhat patronizing. What Mrs Swan calls a loyal employee may well be someone stuck in a job with no prospects or no confidence to compete in the wider labour market. She spoke about an ‘experiment’ in Sunderland where Barclays had actively sought to staff up a new call centre with disabled workers through a third party agency. Her report was that one year on that call centre was performing above national average statistics.

Angella Turturro is the head of training at Engineering Italy, an IT consultancy firm. They have 2% disabled workers against a national quota of 7%. The problem they have, similar to IBM’s comments, is finding disabled people with the right qualifications. Engineering Italy advertise jobs in the press and on the internet asking only for disabled applicants in an attempt to meet their quota. Signora Turturro reported good feedback from disabled people who were delighted to see this. Such positive discrimination is legal in Italy.

Philippe deNormandie is a neurosurgeon who treats many people who become disabled following accidents. He said that rehabilitation and retraining should be strategically structured to focus on abilities. He stressed that occupational doctors need to consult with specialists on disability issues as it is such a broad subject.

A survey of 500 workers, 250 from HR departments, revealed that 69% thought that workers who become disabled should be relocated within the company. 5% said they should be laid off. Signora Turturro thought this figure was high; “*It’s very difficult*” she said bringing a ripple of applause from an otherwise quite audience.

Joop Andriolo, HR director of paper manufacturers Sappi in the Netherlands said the 69% figure was very low and should be 100%. Sappi have a programme of health screening looking to prevent people becoming disabled. They have linked this with health and safety looking at reducing accidents. In 1994 there were 44 serious accidents, this year there have been 4. The target for 2005 is 0. This all sounds very laudable until one realizes that Dutch legislation requires employers to pay five years full salary should a worker become disabled, however that disability is caused. This is not quite the burden it sounds as corporate taxes are low as the government has a much reduced benefits bill.

The question and answer session revealed some interesting things. A woman from an organisation that helps construction workers who become disabled said she had difficulty getting people to retrain due to their poor written French skills. There is obviously no basic skills agenda in place in France. I was very surprised by this.

#### **4 – Conditions for a successful strategy for employing people with disabilities: informing and mobilising people to act.**

The final session was the only one to include trade union representatives on the panel. Werner Feldes and Nina Daita were both involved in the Framework project that MSF took part in 2000. The aim of the session was to find out what people had done that had actually worked.

Pierre Blanc, CEO of restaurant chain Frères Blanc opened the debate. They employ 1700 disabled people in 24 outlets across France. This does not meet their 6% quota. He spoke of his role as a CEO being like that of a father with a responsibility for the well being of all his family members. He gave an example of a deaf none speaking employee who had no problems preparing food for a delicatessen counter. He did go on to say it would have been much more difficult if he was required to work with customers.

Sylvia Vico is the HR Director of Benetton France. She is herself disabled following a skiing accident. She got her job with Benetton after becoming disabled but qualified that by saying much of her CV was from before her accident. She described Benetton a bastion of equality and showed a kids fashion catalogue featuring a model on the front cover with Downes Syndrome. She also boasted about the accessibility of Benetton shops.

Claudie Buisson, the MD of our hosts Agefiph, was the next speaker. He spoke of the key role that trade unions and fellow workers have in integration of disabled workers. *"It's not just down to management, Human Resources and the Occupational Health Departments"* he said.

Churchill and Friend are a small UK based disability consultancy firm. Their Director, Simon Minty, was very open about the amount of money his firm makes helping companies comply with the DDA. They have helped to facilitate around 1200 reasonable adjustments. Company turn over last year was €1.5m. Mr Minty said that companies were happy to pay large fees to help retain staff because of the high costs of terminating an employees contract and hiring another person.

Nina Diata of CGIL<sup>5</sup> was the first trade union delegate to speak. She had a stern political message to deliver especially in the light of the election of Silvio Berlusconi. *"Our minister describes Italy as El Dorado – its just not true!"* she said passionately. She said that since the election there were now 6000 less teachers. She also criticized new legislation allowing employers to sell their quota of disabled workers to co-operatives. She spoke of her 21 years in an institution as a child with a disability. It was clear that she did not believe that there was equality of employment opportunity in Italy. *"Its all very well being able to get into Benetton shops but without decent wages we cannot buy anything"* she concluded.

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<sup>5</sup> Italian Trade Union, see <http://www.nidil.cgil.it/>

Werner Feldes of IG Metall<sup>6</sup> said there are now 900,000 disabled people working in Germany. 180,000 in sheltered workshops, the rest in mainstream employment. He felt the trade unions should take some credit for this. IG Metall has 90,000 disabled members. He said that disabled members seem to value their membership more than other members. German legislation passed after the war allows disabled workers in employment in firms with more than five workers the right to set up their own disabled workers works council independent from any other representative group. IG Metall concentrates on retention of its members who become disabled, not because of quotas but because it is the right thing for their members.

Emmanuelle Batiste questioned both Nina and Werner about which was more important to them, hiring of disabled people or retention. I am not really sure where this line of questioning was intended to end up but I was very pleased that our project concentrates on both!

Concluding the conference Emmanuelle asked each panel member what they as the future for disabled workers in the EU, I have deliberately omitted the names/organisations from the list:-

- More young people
- Better qualifications
- Improved retention rates
- A better future with TU involvement
- Improve societies knowledge and understanding
- Change in UK culture
- Companies more prepared to address issues
- Develop legislation
- Training is the key
- A second chance for kids who do not achieve
- Removing the fear factor in self identification
- More skills

Look at these statements and think of them against the aims and objectives of both Amicus and the Disability Champions@Work project and the 10 golden rules. There is an old saying that if there were no such thing as trade unions employers would have to invent them; if Amicus had not invented Disability Champions... it all fits beautifully.

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<sup>6</sup> German trade union, see [www.igmetall.de](http://www.igmetall.de)

Overall an extremely worth while conference. Most of the speakers were there on a mission to say just how good their companies are and how they are committed to social justice. Almost all of them did little to convince me that they were not just concerned with saving money and keeping out of the courts, but if that is what it takes to progress our agenda then clearly things are working. The unfortunate thing is, I guess, that the worst employers would simply not have sent delegates so in some respects people were preaching to a mixture of the converted and those who knew they had to convert.

Apologies for such a verbose report but I think it will provoke some thought and debate amongst our Champions.

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