

EXPANDED ABSTRACT

Professionals supporting employment: training and accompaniment in Work Integration Enterprises

Aims

In the current context of socio-economic crisis and widespread labour precariousness, Work Integration Enterprises stand out among the active employment policies for their potential to fight against the exclusion of people with social and labour integration difficulties by improving their employability and their quality of life. This article discusses the processes of training and accompaniment in these enterprises within the framework of the research “Educational, accompanying, qualification and personal developmental processes in Work Integration Enterprises: innovating social inclusion through employment,” funded by the Spanish government (EDU2013-45919-R).

WISEs take part in the social economy. Upon the principle of solidarity, they intend to promote training and social inclusion through employment, and they have proved particularly effective in the integration of women and people of migrant origin back into the ordinary labour market. Different social balance reports show the contribution of WISEs both in individual terms as well as in society as a whole. By focusing on people with low levels of employability, WISEs try to improve such levels and they do so by trying to foster employability at the individual level as well as by providing networks of support to improve the contextual dimensions behind it.

The organization of WISEs conceives of two different roles in order to support workers with integration contracts. These are the productive role and the accompanying role, and in some cases, they fall under the same workers, while in certain companies they are held by different workers, known as Production Workers (PTP is its Spanish acronym) and Accompanying Workers (PTA being its Spanish acronym). It is about these two roles that we have written our article, with the aim of identifying where training and accompanying support rely on WISEs and how they are performed within them.

Design/methodology/approach

Our analysis is based on qualitative fieldwork consisting of observation, interviews and assessment of the data obtained in terms of job performance and personal and social development that were carried out over a 3-year period in eight enterprises in Spain.

Our research has a longitudinal research approach, as we intended to follow up the progress in terms of learning, employability and personal and professional autonomy of workers with integration contracts. For the purpose of this article, we have used a sample of eight WISEs in seven regions in Spain, in which we have conducted on-the-job observation of 39 workers with integration contracts, 9 accompanying workers and 18 production workers as a whole. A brief description of each of the companies is given in the article in order to provide understanding of their most relevant contextual and organizational dimensions, while guaranteeing anonymity. This means we observed the work of 39 workers and conducted interviews of 66 workers between 2015 and 2017. We visited one of those companies four times during this period, and all the remaining 7 companies three times. Between one visit and the following one there was a period varying from 7 to 14 months. Companies work in the sectors of recycling, restaurant and catering, industrial laundry and personal care and cleaning services.

We developed our own research tools by designing the procedures to gather information. Our sources were documentation of the companies and files of the integration workers, including their assessment of employability as well as their individualized suggested action plan; non-participant observation of the workplace during a full working day on at least three occasions across three years; semi-structured interviews of integration workers, their accompanying workers and production workers after every observation; questionnaires to measure their employability at individual levels, as well as a questionnaire to assess the ability of the WISE to foster employability at a contextual level.

For the purpose of this article, most information comes from on-the-job observation and interviews; the guideline for observation of accompanying and training practices is provided as an annex to the article. The protocol for observation was prepared and explained in the months prior to the beginning of the fieldwork and was approved by the research ethics committee of the University of Valencia to conduct research with human beings.

In every visit to the companies we conducted observation of two to five integration workers in the company, and we produced an individual report on each of them which entailed information from documentation and interviews with the workers and the corresponding accompanying and production workers. These reports were written by the person in charge of the visit and validated by a second researcher within the team. Before the end of the research, a summary report was submitted to the staff in the WISE to ask for their amendment and validation.

Results

Our analysis shows results in terms of principles, roles and difficulties in the performance of the accompanying role while accomplishing production aims of the companies. This allowed us to identify both organizational and personal variables that show differences in the ways such roles are performed and to what extent they differ from the ideal model set by the handbooks guiding such practices.

First, at the organizational level we have identified a variety of structures within WISEs in terms of the resources made available to support integration workers. Therefore, accompanying practice is not just the result of a pedagogical relation between the integration worker and the production and accompanying workers, but also the effect of the training and labour opportunities that the company allows the integration worker to engage in.

Second, the management of the working team is another key dimension in the performance of accompanying practices, given that coordination is the key to the proper functioning of the companies, where production and accompanying processes rest upon different workers.

Third, relations between accompanying and production workers are a fundamental dimension in the organization of WISEs. This is particularly the case where the accompanying worker is not present in daily working activities.

Therefore, communication and coordination among different roles and workers in the company are even more relevant than the use of specific tools for the purpose of accompanying integration workers.

Limitations and implications

The process of research was altered for several reasons:

On the side of the company, there were delays and last-minute cancelations in visits to the companies, due to production processes; visits had to be adjusted to those moments that the workload allowed for external people to be observing and conducting interviews. In some cases, there was also a delay in facilitating relevant documentation and, in a few cases, the company denied us access to such information.

On the side of the research team, there was a delay in writing some of the visit reports and this caused loss of information across time. Some visits were also delayed due to the inability of the researchers to attend the companies on the suggested dates, and this was so because we prioritised the possibility of having one researcher as the reference for the fieldwork in every company.

Conclusions

Our conclusion points towards the most relevant dimensions that affect the performance of the accompaniment and the way in which the employability of integration workers is promoted.

Most accompanying processes are individualized and they try to serve the demands of each integration worker, which turns out positive in terms of facilitating the process within the WISE, though it becomes a difficulty in terms of transition into the ordinary labour market.

Such personalization practices correspond to the idiosyncrasy of every WISE in devising and using its own assessment and promotion tools, in such a way that ownership is more relevant than standardization of practices. This results in personal styles having a greater impact than agreed-upon procedures on the support of integration workers.

Participation, autonomy, personalization and socialization are dealt with in very different ways even within every single company. Therefore, the complexity of training and accompanying processes increases, which corresponds to the lack of a common initial training background among practitioners.

In those cases where accompanying and production roles lie with different people, which is the case for most of the companies in our sample, close coordination is required and the involvement of the manager of the company is also necessary in order to make accompanying processes effective.

Original value

Our research has focused upon training and accompanying processes in WISEs and it is pioneering in such matter. We have identified the most relevant dimensions that affect the performance of the accompaniment and the way in which the employability of integration workers is promoted. The recording and analysis of the interactions between production and accompanying processes has brought to the forefront discussions on the extent to which WISEs are a kind of company within the social economy with a close eye on training and processes to foster employability of their workers.

KEYWORDS: Social Economy, Social enterprises, Workplace learning, Social integration.