

ENSURING A SMOOTH RE-ENTRY: INTRO_DM

It is one thing to guarantee health and safety standards at work, yet quite another to deal with the longer-term consequences of accidents and health problems that do happen – especially in terms of having an established legal framework and specific company policies to promote the reintegration of the affected employees.

Yet with nearly one person out of five aged between 15 and 64 years in Belgium reporting a long-standing health problem (LSHP) or disability^[1], there is a compelling case for focusing attention upon this issue. This is exactly what the EQUAL *Introduction in Disability Management (Intro_DM)* project aims to do. Against a backdrop of growing global pressures, competition and tightening social budgets, *Intro_DM* is devising and testing ways of reducing exclusion from the labour market due to LSHP - disability making the project unique, innovative and timely.

In Belgium, disability and chronic illnesses are identified as key factors contributing to unemployment and exclusion from the labour market. The rate of employment among those reporting disability or LSHP is 42%, compared to a figure of 61% for those with no disability or LSHP^[2]. Furthermore, for the people with LSHP or disabilities the incentives to enter the labour market may be further reduced by a number of benefit traps^[3]. The net result is increasing long-term unemployment rates amongst this key target group - and mounting expenses for social security programmes. The Belgian government is currently undertaking consultations on a new law establishing a legal framework for 'stimulatory professional reintegration' to counteract this trend. The objective of this new legislation is clear, what is lacking at the moment are concrete action plans.

"*This is a momentum for change,*" said Marthe Verjans-Prevent, the Project coordinator of Intro_DM: "*The Partnership is proposing proactive and practical solutions for filling the gap within the Belgian employment policy.*" Intro_DM focuses in particular on optimising Disability Management policies and practices within businesses to ensure successful reintegration and long-term employment for employees with LSHP and disabilities; it is also developing innovative support structures for specific reintegration pathways and to help make employers aware of their role in the reintegration process.



Optimising Disability Management policies and practices

The final aim of the partnership is the formulation of recommendations in the above listed fields on the basis of the experiences and results of national and transnational work at the following levels: governments, employers, trade unions and important intermediaries^[4].

PREPARING FOR REINTEGRATION

One of the major issues in terms of ensuring reintegration is that the Belgian employee is usually solely responsible for managing his or her return to labour market. This leaves potentially vulnerable people in a completely new situation, requiring specific knowledge concerning the complex array of different actors and supporting measures that may be of use in the process of rehabilitation and reintegration. Unfortunately, most of the time neither the (ex-)employee nor the (ex-)employer (if involved), know where to go for help, or what assistance they are entitled to during the process of reintegration. Furthermore, most of the assistance is being asked for when it is already too late for swift and proactive reintegration solutions. More often than not, the lack of coordination between different actors involved in the reintegration process has already resulted in missed possibilities, lost skills, long-term unemployment and exclusion.

To address and improve this situation the *Intro_DM* partnership is developing two new job profiles to support reintegration in the Belgian workplace: the Disability Manager (DM) for implementing and overseeing Disability Management policy within companies, and the Disability

Case Manager (DCM) to offer individual support within the reintegration process. Each of the partnership 'lead partners' already have the relevant experience required to develop these new roles - [Prevent](#), a Belgian multidisciplinary institute working on the prevention of occupational risks by promoting quality in working conditions and improvements in work organisation, is a specialist providing support, advice and information to companies, institutions and other social actors, while [UCBO](#)- University Ghent, a vocational training and coaching centre for people with disabilities, has an extensive record of assisting individuals with the integration process through individual coaching and training.

In October 2006, the project started the first Disability training program and the courses have recently produced their first graduates: 9 DMs and 17 DCMs. One of these graduates, Lieve Caers, a Human Resources Manager in the Antwerp region working for the Flemish Public Employment Service (VDAB) says of the training: "*Disability is one of the issues of our interest and so is the absenteeism in our organisation. This training will help us to manage it. It is important and interesting to see how we can do something about it, as it offers us useful tips and structures that we can transpose in our organisations.*" Marthe Verjans confirms this problem, "*It is a significant problem in Belgium that there is no proactive and systematic approach in terms of reintegration within companies. Human Resources Managers' focus ends with dealing with absenteeism. Actions towards reintegration are only ad hoc. However, establishing the rules for dealing with absenteeism is the first step towards structures for reintegration.*"

Romain van de Maele, another DM training participant working at IGO Leuven elaborated on this point: "*The training has offered me useful tools on how to preserve the employee level of involvement through structures that make the absenteeism harder.*" He also reported that he has learned how to align the interests of Human Resources and Line Managers - creating win-win situations between the employee and the employer. The Line managers are often not trained to see the situation from the HR point of view, but rather focus on immediate requirement to deliver. They thus may hastily disqualify an employee with disability or LSHP as unfit for the job without considering the particular skills this employee may bring to the company, if the "disabling" factors like inaccessible working space and the deprecating attitudes of other workers are removed. The practical examples provided by the instructors from such companies as Volvo, provided the training participants with particular recipes in managing Disability and should also help them to assume the role of DMs by steering the introduction and implementation of a reintegration policy within their businesses.

The training provided to the DCMs was similarly successful. DCMs were offered a training package with the relevant tools and knowledge, which will enable them to support employees returning to the workplace. The DCM coordinates the reintegration process among the different parties involved and informs individuals of the available support services and relevant legislation. The plan is that throughout the life of the project (November '05 – November '07) the DCMs will also monitor and analyse 50 reintegration cases to refine the methodology to be put into practice, seeking to discover the best possible reintegration processes, which could then serve as a model for others.

UNITED IN INNOVATION

The strength of the *Intro_DM* partnership rests on the specific experience of the wide range of organisations united by EQUAL and the interesting synergies provided by these mutually enriching relationships. Aside from the two lead organisations mentioned above, the partnership includes the social partners - two Trade Unions ([ABVV](#) and [ACV](#)), and the [Belgian Federation of Enterprises](#) – and organisations with specific knowledge within the field of (re-)integration, such as: [Arbeids Consulting Team Desiron](#), who have pioneered science-based approaches to the reintegration of employees after occupational accidents; [Jobcentrum West-Vlaanderen](#), who focus on the sustainable integration of job seekers with a disability through training and personal job coaching; and, [Job & Co](#), a company established to assist minority groups (such as migrants, disabled people, long-time unemployed, low-skilled workers, etc.) with integration into the labour market. This unusual and innovative mix of organisations with specific areas of expertise has helped the partnership to spark ideas and synergies, which will undoubtedly lead to innovation in this area of work.

DM and DCM training program

Marthe Verjans is clear about the benefits of the partnership, and in particular the involvement of the social partners: "*We have a strong Partnership, but also in a sense a challenging Partnership*



because we involve employers' organisations and trade unions, which represent the interests of their members. The good thing is that once the social partners approve the project idea, we can count on their full support. Their criticism is good as we know that we may be developing a good policy on the paper, but without their support, it would not be effective."

The fact of having such a wide range of involved in the partnership also ensures that project activities are designed so as to be relevant to different target groups: employers, employees and intermediaries. For them, the partnership has developed a number of products: a website (www.introdm.be), conferences, info-sheets, posters,... (e.g. a website, conferences, info-sheets, posters) to raise awareness to reintegration and employment of disabled people and individuals with LSHP and work capacity loss.

A further interesting aspect of the partnership is the commitment shown by the private sector. Cera, one of the private sector firms involved in the partnership, funds 20% of the project. The Coordinator for the Cera social projects, Heidi Loos explained why her company had chosen to support Intro_DM: *"The project was well structured. It hit the centre of the social themes, like combating social exclusion and promoting full participation in society through policy related initiatives, relevant for Cera and had a very well established partnership."* Besides Cera, also public institutions, three Belgian regions ([Limburg](#), Flemish Brabant and [East Flanders](#)) and the Flemish government provide the rest of the funds.

A FOCUS ON EMPLOYERS

The engagement of private sector employers is vital and has a positive influence on the focus of the activities of *Intro_DM* in terms of their awareness raising work with employers concerning their role and responsibilities in the reintegration process. So far the Belgian policy has predominantly focused on the provision of individual assistance to people with disability or LSHP; employers have been held responsible for health and safety related conditions at work, but - unlike in some other European Member States where employees and employers work together in managing the consequences of an accident or illness - Belgian employers are only obliged to pay maximal one month of wage after the start of absence period.

The focus of the *Intro_DM* partners is therefore on involving employers right from the start of the re-integration process. Judy Morsa, the project's Transnational Coordinator from UCBO explains: *"We would like to intervene at the beginning of the 'problem' - when the long-term absence occurs. This could be some three months after the employee has left the company, when it becomes clear that this is a long-standing health problem and the person needs assistance to get back to their former job"*

The representative of Jobcentrum West-Vlaanderen, Mario Verzele furthers this point, claiming that the present employment policies actually exclude the possibility - and thus the advantages - of timely, proactive and constant employment assistance. *"Under Belgian legislation we can only intervene in helping the unemployed. Intro_DM is therefore a useful project, a missing link, because within it we can work with proactive reintegration management."* *"Such timely and proactive interventions assist the employer and employee to ensure that the reintegration process takes place as quickly as possible with minimum social and financial consequences to all the actors involved"*, adds Huget Desiron, the manager of ACT Desiron.

The partnership therefore works to build on the social responsibility of employers, and address the lack of information they face regarding the existing support; as Judy Morsa puts it: *"A lot of employers are very motivated to get their employees back at work. But they have no structures or support to do so."* Most of the time the employers are not prepared for the situation of (re)employing a person with reduced working capacity. The partnership wants to reinforce the links of the different actors concerned (employee, employer, doctors, insurances, public administration representatives, etc.) during the rehabilitation process to improve their readiness for the reintegration. In difficult cases the employer would be encouraged to contact the DM, who could give an objective advice on the necessary adaptation of workplace, as well as the policy and structures required to create a win-win situation for employee and the employer. In this

adaptation process, the role of the DM would be impartial and crucial in reconciling the financial interests and the needs of the different actors involved.

FROM PRACTICE TO POLICY

Currently *Intro_DM* is roughly half way through with the implementation of its activities (planned for July 2005 – April 2008). In the remaining period, *Intro_DM* will focus on assisting the DMs with the establishment of the reintegration policy within the diverse institutions and companies they represent, while the DCMs will start coaching and accompanying individual employees.

In addition, the DCMs from the Partnership (UCBO, Job&Co, Jobcentrum West-Vlaanderen and ACT) and the graduates of the DCM training will analyse and follow up at least 50 concrete reintegration cases. The sample of individual cases for analysis will be constituted through cooperation with public health care insurances, which have records on long term unemployed that may require assistance. The interim progress on this work will be discussed in a six-day follow-up meeting in which the results, experiences and reflections will be shared through focus groups. The researchers from UCBO-University Gent and Prevent will then establish and analyse the cooperation structures between different actors involved in the reintegration process to verify whether the DM and DCM methodology has proved to be efficient and find out how the process could be further rationalised. This research is expected to yield the first results by the beginning of 2008.

Drawing on this pool of grass-roots practice as well as the results and insights generated through the Partnership working, *Intro_DM* (in the period November 2007 – April 2008) will formulate policy messages and recommendations on effective "Disability management" policy for supporting job retention and reintegration in Belgium. The results of the project will be further mainstreamed to European policy makers through the international partnership [RETAIN](#), working on the development of a joint competency framework for the role of the intermediaries in the integration, reintegration and retention of disabled employees and people with LSHP. The journey from concrete Disability Management practices to policy solutions is only just beginning!

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[1] Wetenschappelijk Instituut Volksgezondheid, Gezondheidsenquête 2001. Available online on the Eurostat [website](#).

[2] Employment in Europe 2005: Chapter 5. The economically inactive population in the EU: Out of the labour force or potential labour supply? *A perspective from the EU Labour Force Survey*. Available online on DG Employment [website](#).

[3] In 2004 Flanders Social and Economic Council (SERV) developed recommendations for the Flemish Minister of Employment, which identified 20 benefit traps in the different systems of payments (after work injury, labour related sickness, or not-work related sickness / injury) for people with LSHP or disabilities as reasons why they may not return to work and prefer to stay inactive.

[4] *Intro_DM* Managing Disability at Work. Project information EFC "Introduction in Disability Management." 24 November 2006