

# Managing your own integration



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Current trends in Dutch health and welfare policies aim to make the process of reintegrating people with disabilities into work more "demand-driven", giving individuals more responsibility. But for people with disabilities to be able to

steer their own reintegration, certain skills and knowledge are necessary to make the process a success.

## Empowerment means taking control

The "Vrijbaan" Development Partnership (DP) is trying to replace the more traditional approaches to integration with one that enables people with disabilities to take control of their own integration. It has pioneered a new way to measure the degree of empowerment of disabled people, which can then be used to design the best possible training paths for those furthest from the labour market.

Apart from this tool, the DP has also produced a number of aids to help other bodies develop an empowerment orientation in their work. These include a publication explaining the measuring tool, a handbook to help trainers and coaches develop empowering attitudes, and a manual on empowerment training.

Vrijbaan hopes that other training agencies will be influenced by the initial positive results of its empowerment activities, which have succeeded in increasing the participants' self-confidence and self-image.

Aukje Hendrix from Heerlen had problems walking and also had to overcome the consequences of a minor stroke. She had been an enthusiastic worker in the care sector but now had to find another occupation. After her training she felt that *"I learnt that I am allowed to be the person I am. I'm allowed to make mistakes! This means that I feel much more secure and that has a positive influence on all aspects of life!"*. Peer van Halderen, a 49-year old man with a visual disability, followed the same training course to attempt to get back into a job. He said: *"I thought I had an insight into myself and knew how things worked but the results of some of the training were a real revelation to me."*

## Measuring empowerment to strengthen it

When the project started, there was no common concept of empowerment. So the DP created a structured work programme aimed at defining, measuring and strengthening empowerment.

The partnership had been carefully designed to apply the principle of empowerment. In addition to the four Reintegration Centres that originally proposed the project, the DP comprises a local interest group of people with disabilities and the National Disability Council, which advises central government on disability issues. The final partner is the Centre of Expertise on Disability, which is linked to the University of Maastricht and helps to provide credibility for the DP's outcomes.

The Centre of Expertise on Disability led the DP's scientific approach. It developed a concept of empowerment through research and in-depth interviews with clients and practitioners on motivation and assessment of new needs. The next stage was to create an instrument that could measure an individual's level of attainment based on this definition. The questionnaire developed was applied to over 400 people with disabilities who had either found work or were coming towards the end of their reintegration process.

## Targeted training helps people into work

The last stage was the establishment of a training system to counteract any empowerment "weaknesses" detected. New training modules were developed and have now been followed by over 100 individuals throughout the country. The final project evaluation showed that the vast majority felt more empowered and that they were now in a better position to enter work and to promote their skills and abilities.

Innovation and staff development seem to be inextricably linked in Vrijbaan and this combination has also permeated into the project's transnational partnership. This cross-border cooperation involved the application of Vrijbaan's techniques to a total of 360 people in three other countries, the joint production of a pack of empowerment resources and two sessions for training trainers in empowerment.

The EQUAL project's experience in strengthening empowerment also spurred it on to a new challenge. They con-



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cluded that empowerment training for people with disabilities alone was not enough – it was also necessary to train personnel in creating an empowering environment to help stimulate and strengthen empowerment amongst their clients. A new EQUAL DP called REQUEST has now been selected to carry out this follow-up work. The fact that this new partnership will involve two major social security bodies is an important testimony to the legacy of innovation that Vrijbaan leaves behind in terms of its clear definition of empowerment, an effective instrument to measure it, and high-quality training to improve it.

*A more detailed version and other EQUAL success stories can be found at: [http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment\\_social/equal/activities/search\\_en.cfm](http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social/equal/activities/search_en.cfm)*

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