

The visually impaired and their social integration in the field of work

Franco Lisi*

Istituto dei Ciechi di Milano, Via Vivaio 7, 20100 Milano (MI), Italy

Abstract. The path toward integration in the world of work: from early education to professional training. The Milan Institute of the Blind carries out vocational training for the visually impaired (about 60 cases over the last 5 years) and cooperates with important companies that ask for ever increasing levels of professionalism of their visually impaired employees. To point out how methodology used to encourage social integration of the visually impaired proves to be beneficial. Methods: The methodology adopted by the specialised staff of the Institute aims at teaching the visually impaired, both at the Institute and on site, how to use computer and testing the acquired skills periodically. The visually impaired people who follow the vocational courses become successfully integrated in the world of work since they have acquired basic and specific knowledge of their job. The results underline that only a highly specialised centre offering scientific support can train IT by never disregarding any of the problems visually impaired people may encounter, thus enabling them to fully integrate in the world of work. © 2005 Published by Elsevier B.V.

Keywords: Macular degeneration; Reading; Visual rehabilitation; Training

1. Content

The Milan Institute of the Blind is an entity that is also a resource center, for empowering, updating the existing professions through the use of computer technology that has developed over the past 20 years in the areas of scientific and psychopedagogical (in our case “tiflopedagogical”) areas of technical advances. In addition, the institute is the resource center which provides accessibility of new professions available to the

* Tel.: +39 2 77226335.

E-mail address: franco.lisi@jistciechmilano.it.

blind, as well as everything which responds to the needs of the blind on the levels of education, training, and personal autonomy.

Where is the Institution? We are located at Via Vivaio 7, 20122 Milan, Italy. We can be reached by telephone at 39 0277226 or on line at www.istciechimilano.it. The Milan Institute of the Blind has always been known as a service center whose fundamental principle is: to integrate the visually impaired into the educational, training, professional and social levels.

In education, we have established:

- A tiflopedagogical counseling service to provide support to teachers and educators that work with the visually impaired in public schools. The same service provides counseling and technology to the students using personal computers.
- A center that provides appropriate educational materials to be used in the scholastic road for the various ages and disciplines.
- A transcription center which contains books transcribed in Braille and in enlarged print to provide the visually impaired with the same scholastic texts as used in the classroom.

For the family, we provided an educational support service, especially for the formulative years of childhood, in order to make appropriate choices to obtain personal independence and self-reliance.

In the area of advanced technology, an information center has been developed. This center tests technological innovations, and determines how to use them competently. These services are available to students, teachers, university level students, employees, and to the individual user.

In the technology sector, service is focused on the research and development of teaching methodology involving innovations in computer technology. The aim of this service is to enable the development of training and the advancement of new professional opportunities for the blind.

In the area of employment, the Milan Institute of the Blind provides training and professional courses in the use of the central line telephone system and a course on becoming a telephone information operator as entry-level employment into the workplace.

The successful use of graphic interface and the internet by partially visually impaired individuals is noteworthy because just a few years ago such use was unimaginable in the educational world, in the workplace, and in the area of personal relationships.

Today, through technology, the visually impaired can communicate easily with their classmates, their teachers, their colleagues at work, clients and friends, thanks to the constant innovations in computer hardware and software, and development of software specifically for the blind.

Therefore time is ripe for the teachers of the European Community to come together to share and discuss the various teaching methodologies for the blind. In coming together, the teachers will share and design teaching or professional training models that would promote quality, professionalism and efficiency in education.

For a deeper understanding of the problems of professional training in technology to the blind and visually impaired, let us examine the topic of training in the workplace.

In Italy, the law provides the instrument for employment of the disabled. New employment opportunities materialized. Professional training for the blind in the area of technology has become an indispensable element in achieving equal employment opportunities for the blind and visually impaired. It can be argued that access to knowledge through technology is the great equalizer that may reduce poverty among the disabled.

It is often said that it is not how much information one possesses but the means by which the information is gathered that is important. Today it is even more important to affirm the principle that the process of training a blind or visually impaired person must be considered in the acquisition of valuable competence in the world of advanced technology.

There is a new challenge to European computer technology: to be the champion in providing professional training to the blind and visually handicap in the use of advanced technology; to set the standard for the international community in the advancement of equal employment opportunities; and to provide guidance to other countries in the area of professional training to the disabled.

There are two important and fundamental issues to consider: 1) what to teach and 2) how to do it. These questions ask for an immediate response. In the search for the answers to these two complex questions, all of us in the workplace are called upon to debate, to confront, and to bring to the table our experience.

We are in an era of globalization; we are in an era in which a person works in a society that must account to a global economy. We are in a society in which knowledge and the ability to use new technology are irrefutable imperatives, and the access to these is the inalienable right of every citizen. The field of employment specialization is near and the need to provide education to the blind on the use of the computer is particularly strong.

To provide professional training not only means to provide highly qualified instructors and to provide the necessary hardware and software, it also means to provide the know-how to adapt with maximum flexibility the realization of the ultimate goal of the training course, which is to meet the multiple needs of an ever demanding labor market.

Government has an interest in providing funding and support given the multitude of advantages derived from the utilization of new technology by the disabled. Social integration, in particular in the work place, for the blind and visually impaired is a reachable goal and may be reached in the foreseeable future. In fact, the existence of equal opportunity in employment laws such as Italian Law 68 of 12 March 1999, introduced the important concepts relative to the integration of the disabled into the labor market. The use, therefore, by the visually impaired of the personal computer in the work place no doubt favors their placement in new and non-traditional professional employment contexts that were previously precluded to them due to inaccessibility and inadequacy of facilities.

Next I would like to address briefly three points in Italian Law 68 that deserve particular attention.

- The disabled person is the focus of Law 68. This law speaks of a “person” in general; that is, a “disabled person” towards whom we must not limit ourselves by simply addressing his needs but also to create meaningful educational and training opportunities that would open the doors to equal access to employment.

- The second aspect: “specific placement”. The law presents another change. From the new discipline, according to this view, emerges two points: “placement” and “integration.” “Placement” is the physical act of putting someone in a job. As an example, I take the person, put him in the job. It is relatively an easy process, the inserted worker does not need much as he is ready for work. For an employer, the legal duty of employment of the disabled in this situation is satisfied when he simply provides a position for the disabled candidate. Integration however means an adaptation and a strong synergy between the parties.
- We have in one hand the requirements of the disabled person and in the other, the requirements of the job. Therefore, we have two aspects to consider; that of the person and that of the workplace. To address these two aspects, the Law authorizes the establishment of career guidance. Career guidance provides the knowledge of the particular job skills and job expectations to the disabled person. The assignment is to provide to the disabled person knowledge to be able to work side by side with coworkers and also to create a motivation to work.
- The last aspect is the individualization of the components that must work together for the achievement of affirmative and positive results. Central to the employment is the local health departments, but above all what is more important under the law is the relationship between the public governmental agencies and the labor market, and institutions specialized in specific education.

Therefore, the collaboration by all the parties is indispensable. A serious project of upgrading professional skills of the blind and visually impaired workers is necessary. They must be competitive in today’s labor market and they must be able to retain their employment in an ever challenging work environment, which requires technical skills. We therefore must have the cooperation of professional associations, such as the Association of the Blind; full cooperation in the world of politics, cooperation by trade unions, educators, and employers.

Arguably, Law 68 will turn the saying “effective use of resources” into reality. This means a restructuring of existing hiring policies, a different way of using resources, as well as a rethinking of professional training methodologies. In doing so, we must also rethink about the existing employment retraining programs for the disabled, in particular, the blind and visually impaired; outdated programs where the disabled ran the risk of being left behind in terms of being “computer literate” and sophisticated.

You might ask yourselves at this point, how is the affirmative action of Law 68 to be applied?

As I stated previously Italian Law 68 is an affirmative action law that provides equal opportunities in employment for the disabled. In Italy, the law has gradually but steadily been implemented in the workplace. The Servizio Per L’Occupazione dei Disabili della Provincia di Milano (the Employment Services for the Disabled in the Region of Milan) has become fully operational. The process of integrating the disabled into the labor market will involve thousands of disabled workers who are currently unemployed or underemployed.

Law 68/99 is changing the philosophy of compulsory placement. The term, “compulsory placement” and its manifestations are abrogated by this new law, which

we believe is intended to substitute and to expand its meaning to apply to employment. We are assisting active participation in three principal actors:

- the disabled
- the employers
- the relevant public agencies.

Recently in Italy, we have created a list of the names of disabled persons who are seeking work. The Region of Milan proceeded to create a data bank containing the social–psychological profiles, physical limitations, education level, and job skill levels of nearly five thousand disabled persons who are available for employment. In addition, there is an additional data bank containing a list of available jobs. The two lists were developed with the intention to match, by way of a special software program, the qualified disabled persons to the offers of employment. The software functions to match only those job skills with the appropriate job. For example, a disabled person with language translating skills would not be matched with a position as a lawyer in a bank.

Unfortunately, 61% of the available jobs seek skills that only 32% of the disabled persons listed in the data banks possess. For this reason, the main obstacle to the integration of the disabled into the work place is not the physical limitations they possessed, but instead the limitation of their knowledge, in one phrase, the lack of training. If they remain on the list of people seeking employment, it is generally because they lack the necessary educational background, the training required, and knowledge of technical skills. Accordingly, there is a need of intervention by a strong third party to bring the disabled person and potential employer together. This third party is an expert in evaluating the skills required by the disabled person to become more employable.

In closing, the aim of the institutions, such as the Milan Institute of the Blind, of the above programs, and Law 68/99, is also to assist the disabled toward real integration into the labor market by providing them with the necessary training or re-training in technical skills; and above all, to create an understanding on the part of the employers that the disabled have real contributions to make on the workplace.