Hungary: Job Placement That Works

Hungary's NGOs show that by offering active support, finding work for people with intellectual disabilities is possible.

Note: The following article is one in a series commissioned and published by Transitions Online (TOL) and the Mental Disability Advocacy Project (MDAP), a part of the Open Society Institute's Public Health Programs. Each article addresses the situation in an individual country or region in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, focusing on emerging trends in alternative services and ongoing challenges for the social inclusion of people with mental disabilities.

By Judit Szakacs

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Twenty-four-year-old Monika likes her job. As a kitchen worker at Gondviseles Haza, a day center for the elderly in Budapest, her responsibilities are to wash dishes, lay the tables, and clean the common room.

She is lucky: she is one of fewer than 4,000 people in Hungary who has both an intellectual disability and a job.

According to the 2001 Hungarian census, 577,000 Hungarians have some type of disability—defined by the Central Statistical Office as "someone with a long-standing health problem." Of those 57,000 are people with intellectual disabilities. Official statistics from the Ministry of Labor reveal that only 10 percent of Hungary's intellectually disabled are employed. Working-age hearing-impaired people have a 27 percent employment rate; the visually impaired, 25 percent.

The figures are a stark reminder of the disadvantages people with some form of intellectual disability face when they try to find a job.

Monika's situation is even rarer because she has a job among "healthy" people. Hungarians with intellectual disabilities stand a better chance of finding a job at a sheltered workplace, working among people with some type of impairment or health problem. Work in an integrated environment is almost impossible to find. Monika's success is largely attributable to the support she receives from the Salva Vita Foundation, an NGO that helps people with intellectual disabilities find and retain work.

Salva Vita's "supported employment" program is very personalized and integrated, and is designed for those with mild or moderate intellectual disabilities. It involves getting to know the client—both their abilities and disabilities—then locating a suitable job; persuading an employer to hire the client; training them; and promising to provide support and crisis intervention for the next several years.

Since 1996, Salva Vita has helped over 100 people with intellectual disabilities find jobs as porters, delivery people, warehouse staff, kitchen hands, office assistants, library assistants, animal handlers, cleaners, and gardeners. The success rate is very high (only 1 or 2 percent have dropped out), and some of their placements have been working in integrated workplaces for years.

Salva Vita's record is even more impressive given that it has only 10 full-time staff members. "Three to four new clients approach us every week," says Eva Jasper, the foundation's technical director. Since the support offered is so personalized there is now a waiting list.

Once it places a client in a job, Salva Vita monitors their progress for at least a few years, through phone calls and personal visits to the workplace. "This is something the foundation is really good at," says Tamas Csomo, director of Gondviseles Haza (and Monika's boss). "They only come when they're needed… Since Monika's initial problem-period [at work] is over, they've left her alone."

In many cases, holding down a real job is the first of many successes for Salva Vita's clients. Some have gone on to get secondary-school diplomas, and some have developed relationships. Maté, a Salva Vita client with a job at the Gold Vektor 97 printing press, met his girlfriend at work and has been dating her for three months.

Piroska Gyene, president of the Hungarian Association for Persons with Intellectual Disability, said she wishes there were more groups like Salva Vita. But as an organization, it is a rarity. “At most, an integrated employer can employ a couple of people with intellectual disabilities,” she believes.

Subsidies for Employers

Every large and medium-sized company in Hungary “helps” people with disabilities, either directly or indirectly. By law, people with disabilities (defined by the Central Statistical Office as a condition that diminishes the capacity to work) must make up five percent of the workforce at Hungarian companies with over 20 employees.

However, most firms simply buy their way out of this obligation by making a contribution to the state fund that subsidizes employers who do hire people with disabilities. It's called the “rehabilitation contribution.” For every person with disabilities missing from a company's five percent quota, it has to pay 37,300 HUF (US$173). But that penalty is considered too low to provide real motivation for companies to hire people with disabilities.

Subsidies can convince some firms to open their doors to people with disabilities—though Jasper says most depends on the “potential employer’s sensitivity towards this issue.”

Companies that meet certain requirements (for example: employers with more than 50 employees, 60 percent of whom have a chronic health problem or disability) are eligible to apply for generous state grants.

Although there are some restrictions, companies who employ a worker with a severe disability can qualify for grants of up to 380 percent of the minimum wage (depending on the level of disability and the wage paid to person with disabilities). That can amount to as much as 200,000 HUF ($913) per month, “an extraordinarily high sum,” says Akos Pordan, director of the Hand in Hand Foundation, one of the largest NGOs representing the interests of people with mental or multiple disabilities.

"But the more the state gives, the more it requires," he adds. "The company has to produce sales to match the size of its grant. That’s a huge paradox: the more disabled its employees, the more the company has to produce.”

As a result, companies that receive these special grants usually segregate their staff; they’ll create one division with their most productive employees, “while the rest strip cables or dismantle balls,” Pordan says.

Gyene agrees: “People with disabilities are often not given work, or do only pseudo-jobs, such as tearing sponges into pieces [to fill pillows]. If you and I were to do that, day and night for a month, we could still not produce enough to get the minimum wage.” Such rote, menial, unskilled jobs also seem to contradict the primary goal of encouraging companies to hire disabled workers: to assist in the workers’ rehabilitation.

A Garden That Nurtures People

There are, though, sheltered workplaces that appear to fulfil their task of rehabilitation excellently. Civitan Club is one.

It's a beautiful, sunny, cold autumn day, in the hilly part of Budapest. A brilliantly colored forest shelters the last piece of land on a long street; a neat plot, with potted plants arranged around the gate. This is the home of Civitan Club, a garden/greenhouse that employs 21 people with intellectual disabilities.

This nonprofit club is also a rehabilitation day-care center; besides garden work, members of its small community participate in activities like arts and crafts, swimming, and basketball. A speech therapist, communications expert, and special-education teacher are also on staff.

Civitan Club was founded in 1996, when a group of parents of children with intellectual disabilities realized that once the children’s years of special education ended, they would have nowhere to go. “There was not even a day-care center, let alone the promise of employment,” says Katalin Nagy, Civitan’s president.

One of these parents lived noticed the neglected, weed-clogged, and rubbish-filled garden at the end of her street. The Hungarian army owned it, but after a year of lobbying, the parents finally won permission to take it over. The Civitan garden was born.

“The neighbors initially eyed us suspiciously," Nagy remembers. "It took a good three years for them to accept us. But last spring, there were days when eight cars were parked out here. They all came to buy our plants and flowers. Also, when they saw how neatly we cleaned up this place, [some of our clients] were given a landscaping job in a family garden." When other people in the neighborhood saw how well Civitan did on that first job, more offers followed.

“I had a job before, which was good,” says Peter, one of the Civitan group. “But this is better, because here I’m with friends.” Most of those in the group have moderate intellectual disabilities, and are in their 20s and 30s. Peter used to assemble plastic caps for medicine bottles in a sheltered workplace, until he was laid off. At Civitan, he cleans the garden, waters the plants, and does the weeding.

While he prefers cleaning—“because you don’t have to work like a dog”—other members like running the wheelbarrow, composting, or hoeing. “It’s important that they see the results and know that it’s their work," says Robert Bartholomew, an English gardener who works on the staff. "Just like when someone working with nuts and bolts in a factory can see the whole car at the end."

Bartholomew ended up here after falling in love with a Hungarian girl in Britain. He learned Hungarian, but apparently has had some influence on Civitan’s members; when they were told that TOL is published in English, they said their farewells in English.

Although the garden's growing season is over, the greenhouse still has a row of spiderworts and chrysanthemums from All Saints’ Day. “We’ve chosen tough plants, so that even clumsy hands can grow them," Nagy says. "And the big market gardens in the neighborhood don’t consider us their rivals, so they told us all the tips and tricks of the trade." As a result, the garden produces quality plants that could be sold in any florist’s shop. Nagy proudly notes that the windows of the local town hall are filled with Civitan’s plants.

Yet Civitan faces constant financial difficulties. Since it does not employ 50 people with disabilities, it does not receive the state's special-employer subsidy. Only its employee residential home and catering costs are subsidized. The garden only generates 10 percent of its income. The rest of the costs, half of their total expenses, must be covered from grants and other forms of support. But the uncertain financial situation keeps Civitan's budget planners guessing until the last possible minute.

EU Workplace Changes Ahead

Although Hungarian law grants special privileges to encourage sheltered workplaces to be established, the country’s accession to the EU in May 2004 may signal their decline.

Gabor Kovacs, head of the Occupational Rehabilitation Secretariat at the Ministry of Labor, explains that EU countries take a more integrated approach to employing people with disabilities. “In the European Union, around 40 percent of people of working age with disabilities are employed, and sheltered employment is a lot less common. The time is ripe for a more EU-compatible law to be made [in Hungary].”

Jacint Farkas, a ministerial commissioner for disability affairs at the Equal Opportunities Cabinet Office, confirms this. “Supporting sheltered workplaces is important because integrated work might not be appropriate for everyone. But we believe that those who can, should work in the open labor market."

With Hungary set to join the EU next year, changes in the law are already being drafted, to open the labor market to people with disabilities and to offer better support for integrated workplaces. "We plan to implement the changes in 2005,” Farkas says.

Experts, participants and lobbyists agree that integrated employment offers advantages that segregated, sheltered workplaces cannot, including the opportunity to develop social skills.

How well companies can integrate people with disabilities is, however, a major question for many. Laszlo Koos, the director of Gold Vektor, the print shop that employs Maté, believes people with disabilities “need personal attention; and I’m not sure that a regular company has the time or the will to give this to them.” He says it took up to two years for the two Salva Vita clients to settle into their jobs.

It is a view that some care providers share. Hand in Hand's Pordan argues that “integration can only be carried out through supported employment. It doesn’t work if companies just hire people with disabilities. The support is

very important.” And that kind of support is expensive. Gyene, of the Hungarian Association of People with Intellectual Disability, puts it this way: “Salva Vita is not made for mass-production."

But those whom Salva Vita does manage to help, find that their lives have changed for the better—in small ways as well as big. “On my name day, the people who eat here and my colleagues called me into the common room," recalls Monika. "It was a surprise. They sang to me, and they gave me flowers and chocolate. That I really liked.”

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About Transitions Online (TOL):
TOL is a nonprofit Internet magazine and media development organization dedicated to using Internet technologies to help strengthen the professionalism, independence, and impact of the media in post-communist Central and Eastern Europe, the Balkans, and the former Soviet Union. Based in Prague and with branch offices in Moscow, Sarajevo, and London, TOL produces timely, original news and analysis, covering all 28 countries in the post-communist region through its network of local journalists and editors. Visit TOL’s website at www.tol.cz for more information.

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The Mental Disability Advocacy Program (MDAP) is a part of the Open Society Institute’s Public Health Programs. MDAP supports projects that seek to address the massive over-institutionalization, lack of community-based services, and general exclusion from society of people with mental disabilities throughout Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Since 1995, MDAP has been supporting the development of community-based alternative services to facilitate the reintegration of people with mental disabilities into the community, as well as supporting the development of services to prevent institutionalization in the first place.