Chapter 17
Decent Work and Social Inclusion for People with Disability and Vulnerability: From the Soft Skills to the Involvement of the Context

Sara Santilli, Maria Cristina Ginevra, Laura Nota, and Salvatore Soresi

17.1 Introduction

Despite the fact that in the last decades of the twentieth century there has been some upgrading in the employment situation for people with disability, in most countries unemployment, poverty and dependence are common experiences for the overwhelming majority of people with vulnerability (Barnes, 2012). They in fact still encounter greater poverty than people without disability and vulnerability, through different dimensions, as well as lower educational achievement and greater health related costs (MacLachlan, 2014). Additionally, they experience more difficulties in the labor market: they are in fact more likely to be hired for low-skilled jobs, benefit from less training in the workplace, paid less even when they have a regular job and encounter more career obstacles with limited skill development chances (Nota et al., 2015).

The latest economic crisis that has affected the labor market in Western countries, as well as the subsequent increase in the unemployment and under-employment levels, has prominently contributed to intensification of disadvantages of individuals with disability. Indeed, the ILO's Global Employment Trends (International Labour Organization of the United Nations) has highlighted that, compared with the situation before the 2007–2008 crisis, the employment gap, that is the cumulative loss of jobs, is set to rise from 62 million in 2013 to 81 million in 2018 (Zamagni, 2016). In 2014 EUROSTAT reported that people with disability appeared the most affected, with an unemployment rate of 12.1% in the 28 EU countries, 2.5 percentage points more than people without disability.

S. Santilli (✉) · L. Nota · S. Soresi
University of Padova, Padova, Italy

M. C. Ginevra
University of Milano-Bicocca, Milan, Italy

This condition of inequality represents a main goal and challenge in Europe as well as across the world, as decent work and the four pillars of the Decent Work Agenda (employment creation, social protection, rights at work and social dialogue) constitute the goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

In relation to this, the chapter examines the employment difficulties of people with disability as well as vulnerability and emphasizes the importance of decent work for personal well-being. Furthermore, it addresses interventions both at individual and contextual level to promote work inclusion as well as career achievement of individuals with disability and vulnerability.

17.2 The Importance of Decent Work for People with Disability

For a long time the International Labour Organization (2015) has emphasized the importance of individuals with disability obtaining decent and productive work, in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity. Similarly, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), adopted by the UN General Assembly in December 2006, has highlighted for individuals with disability the right to work on an equal basis with others, as well as the right to the opportunity to obtain a living by work freely chosen or accepted in an inclusive and available job market.

Work, as a form of social inclusion for people with disability, is widely supported by the World Health Organization that, thanks to the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (2001), has emphasized social and work participation as a possibility of self-determination in the lives of individuals with disability. Participation is considered as individuals' level of involvement in life situations and takes into account their health, body conditions and functions, activities they can carry out as well as their personal and contextual factors. It refers to stay and operate with a partner, striving toward joint action to achieve shared goals and objectives (World Health Organization, 2001). Participation emphasizes social and work inclusion in community contexts, access to regular contexts and the possibility of being part of the community where the individual lives (Soresi, Nota, & Wehemeyer, 2011).

The International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health gives emphasis to work life for the well-being and quality of life of people with disability, as is true for everyone (Soresi et al., 2011) as well as therefore to the actions needed to develop and design a life of quality (including training, living within the community, hobbies and leisure time, internships, starting and keeping a decent job as well as financial independence).

From this perspective, work not only enables individuals to earn a living but also realize basic human needs such as those for a time structure, collective purpose, social interaction and status, all of which encourage mental health and well-being

(Vornholt, Uitdewilligen, & Nijhuis, 2013). It provides an opportunity to participate in social exchange and confers social status, which can enhance one's own sense of prestige and power. Consequently, work can improve quality of life by increasing psychological well-being, providing income and decreasing the negative health impacts of economic hardship (Soresi et al., 2011).

Furthermore, a model and approach that focuses on work as the instrument to favour well-being of people with and without disability is the *capability approach*, originally proposed by the Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen in the 1980s. It places the issue of people with disability within the larger debate on human development, at the same time complying with the values of freedom, equality, justice and the meaning attributed to life. The approach proposed a novel socio-economic and political way to evaluate as well as consider the personal and professional well-being of individuals (Sen, 2000).

Although the capability approach is not a labor market theory, it can be conceptualized as a theoretical framework to guide thought about how as well as what policies and strategies should be pursued. Indeed, it highlights that individuals should be active participants of their own personal and professional development, not just passive recipients of job placement services concerned with rapid labor market entry in which individuals are stimulated to accept any job offer as soon as possible (Egdell & McQuaid, 2016).

Instead, emphasis should be given to promote the individuals' freedom to choose their career paths (within the societal and labor market restrictions), taking into account their motivation, resources as well as values and transform these into capabilities, defined as the combination of functioning that the individual has or the real opportunity to realize. This could better help guarantee the sustainability of job outcomes, develop individuals' well-being and perhaps help to reduce the likelihood that they go in and out of the labor market (Egdell & McQuaid, 2016).

Despite undoubted agreement on the recognition of the right to employment and decent work for all people, with and without disability, the International Labour Organization (2016) underlines that the gap between the most vulnerable and non-vulnerable brackets of the world population is still considerable and that, in a variety of settings, the right to decent work is a difficult objective to be achieved.

Taking into account the need and importance to promote the conditions for decent work for people with disability, both individual and contextual career interventions are needed. First of all, we believe that career interventions are required at individual level to stimulate the development of abilities, resources and dimensions considered crucial for people with and without disability to cope with the labor market, thus favoring their access to the current labor market. Secondly, it is essential to involve work contexts in order to promote a culture of inclusion and better working conditions for everyone. Below we will focus on these two types of interventions both at individual and contextual level.

17.3 Interventions to Promote a Meaningful Working Life for People with Disability: The Role of Soft Skills

Whereas historically, technical and hard skills were considered the only needed skills for access to the labor market and career employment, the complexity, globalization and rapid technological advancement of today's workplace are showing that these skills are not enough to guarantee job success and keep individuals employed when organizations are cutting staff (Robles, 2012).

In a globalized society and its constantly changing work environment, emphasis is placed on a series of skills useful in facing planned or accidental transitions: ability to recognize opportunities, self-determination, career adaptability, employability, self-efficacy beliefs and ability to integrate all personal changes into life stories in a meaningful way (Guichard, 2015).

In addition, a set of resources, attitudes and skills could possibly help individuals to self-manage their career development, such as openness to diversity and inclusive attitudes, authenticity, defined as the ability of the individual to act in harmony with his/her true essence and self (Harter, 2002), sustainability and social responsibility (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012) as well as a range of life and soft skills. Among these resources we want to focus on soft skills as they can contribute to the work participation of people with disability, leading on from how the World Health Organization (1999) has urged the development of these skills in order to improve the employability of workers as well as their social and work inclusion.

Despite an operational definition of soft skills not yet found in literature and many conceptualizations of soft skills combining skills with other defined concepts, such as values, beliefs, traits and behaviors considered relevant in the job market (Robles, 2012), soft skills are generally conceptualized as a broad range of skills that empower individuals to effectively handle their work contexts, collaborate with colleagues, perform adequately and realize their career goals. Unlike technical skills, that are about an individual's skill set to perform a certain type of work task, soft skills are broadly applicable so that their application is not limited to one's job (Lippman, Ryberg, Carney, & Moore, 2015; Robles, 2012).

Research by Lippman et al. (2015), comparing 172 studies in the last 20 years on soft skills in the workplace, has found five key soft skills. These include: (a) *Social skills*, referring to a set of skills to collaborate with others, including cultural sensitivity, context-appropriate behaviors, ability to act in line with social norms and resolve conflicts; (b) *Higher-order thinking,* including problem-solving, critical thinking and decision-making; (c) *Communication skills,* referring to good expression, transmission, understanding as well as interpretation of knowledge and ideas; (d) *Self-control,* regarding ability to delay gratification, self-control, direct and focus attention as well as regulate feeling and behaviors; and (e) *Positive self-concept*, including self-confidence, self-awareness, self-esteem as well as a sense of well-being and pride.

To assess soft skills, researchers typically use self-report surveys. These are developed eliciting lists of soft skills from important stakeholders in a given domain,

either through surveys, ethnographic methods or interviews, establishing which soft skills are most likely to predict work performance or examining the agreement of different participant groups. Another method for measuring soft skills is to triangulate data with self-reported and peer- or supervisor-reported data in order to compare self- and hetero-perceptions of soft skills (Matteson, Anderson, & Boyden, 2016).

Although further studies are needed to obtain greater construct clarity and develop new methods of collecting data to more effectively identify a demonstration of ability (Matteson et al., 2016), the relevance of soft skills for the job market is sustained by a growing evidence base in the past 20 years (seen in the work of Balcar, 2014; Carnevale & Smith, 2013; Savitz-Romer, Rowan-Kenyon, & Fancsali, 2015).

Lippman et al. (2015) showed that soft skills significantly contribute to individuals' job success in the different stages of workforce engagement. Specifically, they observed that individuals with higher soft skills have an advantage in the job search process because they tend to persist in their job searches even when the process is difficult or prolonged, have larger networks through which to acquire information about employment opportunities and are also likely to manage work interviews well, increasing their possibilities of obtaining the job (Uysal & Pohlmeier, 2011).

Soft skills are even important for keeping a job and especially obtaining job success: Watts and Watts (2008), for example, showed that 85% of professional success depends on soft skills while hard skills contribute only 15%. Additionally, Klaus (2010) observed that technical knowledge constitutes only 25% to long-term job success whereas 75% is represented by soft skills. Lastly, soft skills are crucial to opening a business and/or working for oneself rather than for an employer, especially because initiative, creativity and goal orientation are considered as needed for success in this field (Lippman et al., 2015).

Soft skills are also positively related with a number of relevant constructs for career construction and to cope with frequent career transitions: Rowan-Kenyon, Savitz-Romer, Ott, Swan, and Liu (2017) showed for example that soft skills correlated with career readiness in college students. Additionally, Santilli, Ginevra, Nota, and Soresi (2017), in research involving 206 Italian workers, found that soft skills (such as problem-solving skills, communication skills, collaboration skills) correlated with hope, optimism, time perspective, resilience, work satisfaction and career adaptability, such as a set of individual resources for coping with developmental tasks, participating in working life and adapting to changes of both the job market and job conditions (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012).

Despite the large number of studies on soft skills, few have been conducted with youth and adults with disability, showing that the lack or perception of low soft skills in individuals with disability is one of the main factors in finding and maintaining permanent and paid jobs (Müller & VanGilder, 2014). Individuals with disability often undergo interventions not helpful for soft skills development: attendance of special contexts, high levels of contact with educational or socio-medical staff and low social contacts with peers as well as low quality of training. Consequently, all this seems to reduce the development of social, communicative, problem solving and higher-thinking skills (Lindsay et al., 2014; Nota, Soresi, Ferrari, & Solberg, 2008).

The lack of soft skills also appears associated with great discrimination level in the job market: Lindsay et al. (2014), for example, showed that employers' attitudes in hiring individuals with disability are generally negative, as employers often perceive that individuals with disability have fewer soft skills, especially related to social and communication skills, than other workers.

Overall, soft skills seem to make an individual more advantageous over others in order to have access to decent employment. They in fact may give individuals greater choices and opportunities in the job market that help them to live productive and rewarding lives catering to improve their quality of living experience (Lippman et al., 2015).

Given the importance of soft skills for the job success of individuals with disability, career interventions to promote them should be implemented as soon as possible. Klein, DeRouin, and Salas (2006) suggest formal and informal strategies for training soft skills that could be used also with individuals with disability, such as role-playing, behavior modeling, computer-based simulation, goal setting, coaching and providing feedback.

Among training and programs aimed at enhancing specific soft skills in individuals with disability, we wish to mention the Interpersonal Problem-Solving for Workplace Adaptation Programme (Bonete, Calero, & Fernández-Parra, 2015), aimed at promoting the cognitive process of social problem-solving skills focusing on typical social situations in the workplace. Specifically, the intervention consisted of ten 75 minute sessions, distributed once a week, to groups of four to six individuals with Asperger syndrome. The results showed that participants obtained higher scores at post-training in the social problem-solving task and socialization skills based on reports by parents.

Additionally, the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy (2012) developed the curriculum "Skills to Pay the Bills: Mastering Soft Skills for Workplace Success," focused on promoting six soft skill areas in youths aged 14–21, including those with disabilities: communication, enthusiasm and attitude, teamwork, networking, problem solving and critical thinking as well as professionalism. The curriculum consisted of modular, hands-on, engaging activities developed to get youths thinking about, practicing and debating skills central for career and personal success.

Lastly, Müller and VanGilder (2014) proposed the "SEARCH project" for individuals with disabilities (described in Rutkowski, Daston, Van Kuiken, & Riehle, 2006), proposing a range of intensive, onsite work experiences or internships as well as classroom instructions for a total of 10 months in order to promote the development of key soft skills. The participants spent 1 hour per day in an onsite classroom taking part in a job readiness curriculum and the other 5 h at their respective internship sites. Job coaches were assigned to each participant and provided on the job training and supported participants when needed.

The authors showed at post-test a significant growth overall as well as in a majority of specific entry-level job skills and workplace behaviors. Moreover, 60% of participants were offered permanent jobs within 3 months of the program's conclusion, confirming the relevance of soft skills for success in the labor market for both individuals with and without disability and vulnerability.

17.4   Interventions to Promote Work Inclusion

Taking into account the International Labour Organization (2015) proposal on the efforts needed to guarantee decent work for all individuals, it is important in our view to develop and implement interventions aimed at involving work contexts in order to promote a culture of inclusion. We therefore consider it particularly relevant to involve employers and co-workers which may favour or hinder the work inclusion process of individuals with disability and vulnerability as well as their conditions for decent work.

Accommodating individuals with disability in the workplace does not automatically renders it a welcoming place and is not enough to create a supporting context for different employees (Kossek, Markel, & McHugh, 2003). The question is not about disability and vulnerability itself, as the challenge consists in including and valorizing different employees toward reaching organizational goals (Sabharwal, 2014).

The work inclusion is different from diversity management; the latter represents the first step (or a precursor) toward creating an inclusive workplace by supporting recruitment as well as training for employees with disability and vulnerability (Pless & Maak, 2004). The work inclusion focuses on the removal of career obstacles to empower work performance to all employees and emphasize their personal differences (Mor Barak, 2016). It emphasizes that each worker is unique and has the potential to contribute toward the organizational purposes (Sabharwal, 2014).

As suggested by Bond and Haynes (2014), career practitioners, in collaboration with professionals interested to work inclusion, should provide multileveled interventions, taking into account the factors influencing the effective management of inclusion. A factor refers to the beliefs, stereotypes and attitudes toward workers with disability as well as vulnerability and therefore actions should be undertaken in order to increase an accurate knowledge and awareness about disability in general and specifically about employees with disability who work in the organization.

An increased knowledge about the strengths and skills of employees with disability as well as their values for contributing to the professional activities should be stimulated in employers and co-workers. At the same time, a substantial focus on their deficits should be avoided (Nota et al., 2015). The attention to strengths can also become an opportunity to describe the type of assistance necessary, how to provide it as well as reflect on the benefits of the presence of people with disability and vulnerability for the environment, colleagues and society in general.

Managerial strategies and human resource policies that emphasize interdependence and kindness should be also promoted. Specifically, values for collaboration and kindness could be encouraged in a wide range of ways, such as by establishing strategies that emphasize the need for a shared mission and collective value for the contribution of all employees. These can include stimulating work teams, communicating clearly that discriminatory behavior is not adequate, highlighting the benefits of employees with disability and vulnerability for organizational success (Kochan et al., 2003).

Additionally, according to Tyler and Blader (2013), discretionary cooperation in workplace should be stimulated. It is realized when individuals behave in a cooperative way, independently from the professional role they have or their work tasks. Employers may be supported to act themselves in a cooperative and solidarity informed way, and reinforced to encourage cooperation in their organization.

Cooperative workers are in fact more motivated to offer additional explanation, help and support without any external request as well as share information, thus encouraging development of more supportive workplaces. Moreover, previous research on collaboration in the workplaces showed high levels of work satisfaction for workers and productivity for the organization (Downey, Van der Werff, Thomas, & Plaut, 2015).

Building an inclusive workplace also requires commitment from the employers, who should be trained to recognize the important differences between and values of employees, possibility for employees to impact organizational decisions and respect for their different opinions and perspectives as well as an institution that promotes equitable policies. These policies include, for example, flexible working arrangements, counseling activities for employees who experience inclusion-related problems and appropriate incentives to ensure that inclusion is guaranteed (Schlaepfer, 2014).

17.5   Conclusion

In this chapter we have examined the difficulties that people with disability as well as vulnerability encounter in the emerging working context and underlined the importance that decent and respectable work has in the development and well-being of people with disability. Interventions both at individual and contextual level have been discussed that can favor the work inclusion of people with disability. As regards actions at individual level, we have focused on the importance that soft skills may have in helping people find and keep a job. With regards to contextual interventions we have underlined the need to encourage positive attitudes towards diversity and uniqueness in those that can favor work inclusion.

To conclude, we wish to underline that despite the attention paid to the right to work of people with disability (World of Health Organization, 1999) and efforts made internationally to promote inclusive labor policies (ILO, 2015), the number of individuals with disability and vulnerability excluded from the world of work seems destined to increase (Zamagni, 2016). In relation to such an alarming imbalance of the labor market, the sociologist De Masi (2015) maintains that we need to reverse this trend by restructuring many myths of industrial work, such as speed, competition, unconditional loyalty to work and recovering some life dimensions that we have lost, such as time devoted to relationships and to do our duty as citizens as well as the pleasure to be creative.

The concept of the uniqueness of each individual is becoming increasingly important and so it is particularly important to emphasize the diversity in social and work contexts. The concept of decent work in the twenty-first century should be

focused on individuals' uniqueness, especially for those who seem to be more at risk of being excluded from the world of work, such as persons with disability and vulnerability, by favoring their process of participation and *capacitation* in order to improve their own lives and support their communities (Benenson & Stagg, 2016).

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