

WORKING WELL-BEING AND WORKPLACE INCLUSION: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY INVOLVING PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

Coli Elisa ^a, Rissotto Antonella ^b

^{a,b} Italian National Research Council, Institute of Cognitive Science and Technologies,
Via San Martino della Battaglia 44 Rome, Italy

^a Corresponding author: elisa.coli@istc.cnr.it

Available at <http://www.ssrn.com/link/OIDA-Intl-Journal-Sustainable-Dev.html>

ISSN 1923-6654 (print) ISSN 1923-6662 (online).

Ontario International Development Agency, Canada. © Author et al

Abstract: The reform of mandatory employment in Italy, performed by the national Law 68/99, represented a crucial step not only for the assertion of the right to work for people with disabilities, but also a cultural innovation in the matter of workplace inclusion. Is the Law sufficient to ensure this process? The literature on working inclusion of people with disabilities has focused mainly on accommodation as “technical measures” to be implemented in organizations, and has mainly investigated the point of view of employer and coworkers. Few studies have instead evidenced the importance of social factors in the inclusion process and has involved people with disabilities. The research presented was performed in the National Research Council (CNR), the major public research Agency in Italy. The aim of the study was to investigate how the employees with disabilities perceive their working well-being, identifying those factors that could promote or hinder the workplace inclusion. The study involved 21 employees with different types of disabilities, such as people visually impaired and blind, people with limited mobility and with difficulties in articulation of language, people with mental disease and cognitive delay. 57% of participants were male and 43% were female. 52.4% was in the 41 to 50 age group, 19% was in the 18 to 40 age group and 28.6% was in the 51 to 60 or more age group. As research tools, we used a questionnaire focused on the dimensions of organizational well-being in the CNR and a semi-structured interview. The more critical factors highlighted from employees concern dimensions related to work environment, value, professional development and social usefulness. In particular, people expressed a feeling of worthlessness of their work, reporting stress conditions related to the impossibility of career advancement and to the lightweight workload. A source of stress is related indeed to the non-allocation of tasks or to an allocation of tasks judged below their capabilities. Therefore they perceive a sense of injustice and discrimination, they do not feel valued for their actual skills and abilities. Some of them also refer to the lack of involvement in working group tasks and in decision making. These difficulties sometimes got worse because of the physical location of their offices, such as the work room of the blind telephone operators, labeled by colleagues as “*office of the living dead*”. The workplace inclusion seems to be a rather complex process, in which organizational/managerial factors have an important role, as well as social and environmental ones.

Keywords: disabilities; exploratory study; working well-being; workplace inclusion

INTRODUCTION

The reform of mandatory employment in Italy, performed by the national Law 68/99 [1], represented a crucial step not only for the assertion of the right to work for people with disabilities, but also a cultural innovation in the matter of workplace inclusion. With the introduction of this Law, the number of people with disabilities hired in Italian organizations is gradually increased. So organizations have to deal with the complex issues of the inclusion of these people in the working context. Is the Law sufficient to ensure this process? What factors can promote or hinder the workplace inclusion process?

Literature on working inclusion of people with disabilities has mainly focused on the way in which corporate culture influences the recruitment of people with disabilities. These studies have mostly involved employers, evaluating their opinions, attitudes and behavior towards disability. Results of these studies highlight that negative attitudes of employers towards people with disabilities preclude or make difficult their access to the labor market [2]. The more the employees have a “labeling diagnosis”, the more this is true [3], [4]. In particular, employers are concerned about aspects such as productivity and skills of new employees with disabilities. One of their main concerns is related to the need of substantial resources to supervise the work of these employees [5].

Other concerns are related to security and to working continuity, on which employees demand more reassurance when they must decide if hire people with disabilities [6], [5].

Other studies have focused on accommodation in the workplace as a factor that can promote or hinder the integration of people with disabilities. The Americans with Disabilities Act defines an accommodation as a modification or adjustment of the job, the work environment, or the way the job is performed, aimed at helping a person with disability to perform his task properly [7]. More information on this issue have been given by some authors [8] that have identified five types of accommodation, including worksite changes (such as ramps, elevators, doors, flooring), work station changes (e.g. adjustable desks and tables, lighting), work environment (e.g. noise control, rest areas), job restructuring (e.g. redistribution of tasks, job sharing), work activities modification (such as flexible working hours).

Few studies have addressed the relationship between social factors within organizations and work experiences of people with disabilities. Some of them have investigated the reactions of colleagues to the introduction of accommodations for employees with disabilities [9], [10], [11], highlighting how these reactions can affect the success of the accommodation. Other studies performed in this area [12], [11], have analyzed the influence that attitudes of employers and of colleagues have on the integration of people with disabilities in working context. These studies found that the negative attitudes of supervisors and coworkers influence the socialization of new employees with disabilities. In this way they limit the possibility of employees with disabilities to be fully accepted and to be considered good members of the organization. If employees with disabilities are marginalized, their work performance will be limited, as well as the opportunity to be trained and make a career. The attitudes of employers and colleagues towards workers with disabilities, in turn, can be affected by different factors, such as stereotypes, negative emotions or embarrassment of being in relationship with these people, tension due to communication difficulties, factors of personality, previous contact with people with disabilities.

Overall, literature on working inclusion of people with disabilities has mainly focused on accommodation as “technical measures” to be implemented in organizations, and has mainly investigated the point of view of employer and coworkers. Few studies have instead evidenced the importance of social factors in the inclusion process and has involved people with disabilities.

The research presented was performed in the National Research Council (CNR), the major public research Agency in Italy. 7996 employees work within the CNR, 371 of whom are people with disabilities [13]. A research developed in the CNR [14] has shown that the workplace inclusion of people with disabilities represents a critical aspect for this Agency, in which the management of diversity would seem to be a process not adequately supported. The aim of our study was to investigate how the employees with disabilities perceive their working well-being, identifying those factors that could promote or hinder the workplace inclusion.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study involved 21 employees of the CNR, having different types of disabilities, such as people visually impaired and blind, people with limited mobility and with difficulties in articulation of language, people with mental disease and cognitive delay. 57% of participants were male and 43% were female (Table 1).

Table 1: Participants Gender

Gender	Percentage (%)
Male	57.0
Female	43.0

As shown in Table 2, 52.4% was in the 41 to 50 age group, 19% was in the 18 to 40 age group and 28.6% was in the 51 to 60 or more age group.

Table 2: Participants Age

Age group	Percentage (%)
18-40	19.0
41-50	52.4
51-60	28.6

The educational qualification (see Table 3) is mainly represented by the upper-school (57.1%), followed by middle-school (28.6%) and by degree (14.3%).

Table 3: Participants Educational Qualification

Educational qualification	Percentage (%)
Upper-school	57.1
Middle-school	28.6
Degree	14.3

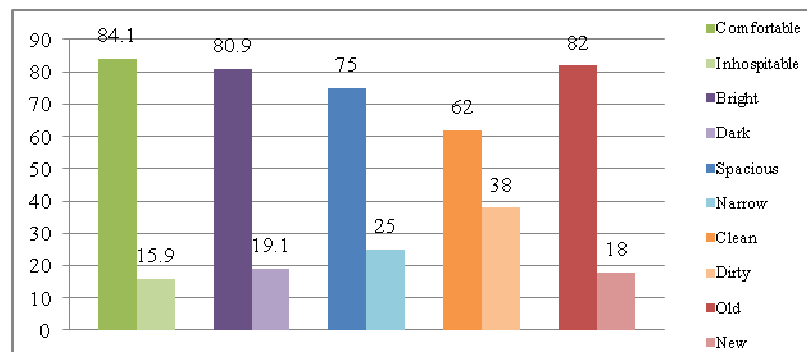
With regard to length of service, 42.9% of employees have a length of service between 1 and 5 years, while with regard to the type of contract, employees are hired primarily with an open-ended contract (95.2%). As research tools, we used a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. The questionnaire was focused on the dimensions of organizational well-being in the CNR, that is: Work environment (physical, organizational and relational environment); Diversity management and equal opportunities; Communication and Knowledge management; Responsibility, value and professional development; Sense of belonging and professional identity. The interview allowed us to in depth analyze some relevant issues emerged from the questionnaire. Data collected with questionnaire were analyzed using quantitative data analysis software SPSS [15], the transcripts of semi-structured interviews were analyzed using qualitative data analysis software NVivo9 [16]. Finally, the data were integrated to have a more complex vision of the phenomenon in question.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Below are shown the main findings with respect to different dimensions of organizational well-being. The extracts of participants' phrases are quoted in italics, between quotation marks. Subsequently, the results will be discussed identifying the main factors that could promote or hinder the working inclusion of employees with disabilities.

Work environment

As shown in Fig. 1, with regard to the work environment meant as a physical environment, among the employees prevails the choice of positive adjectives to describe their working context (e.g. 84,1% speaks about a comfortable environment, 80,9% speaks about a bright environment, 75% speaks about a spacious environment, etc.). An exception is represented by the pair of adjectives old/new, with respect to which prevails a negative connotation of the environment (described as old by 82% of participants).

**Figure 1:** Physical environment

Concerning the work environment meant as organizational environment, the perception seems to be different. 50% of employees says she/he is never ran across situations of rewarding challenges related to work. Among the aspects that mostly contribute to the work-related stress, first of all they indicate the non-allocation of tasks, followed by the lack of information, the uninteresting work, the lack of incentives and so on (see Fig. 2). Employees sometimes attribute the non-allocation of tasks to their lack of ability rather than to a work management able to value the skills of all: *“the problem is not that they don't want to give me the tasks, the problem is that I am not able to do things and consequently they give them to other people because they are more capable. For those who are quicker it is easier...”*.

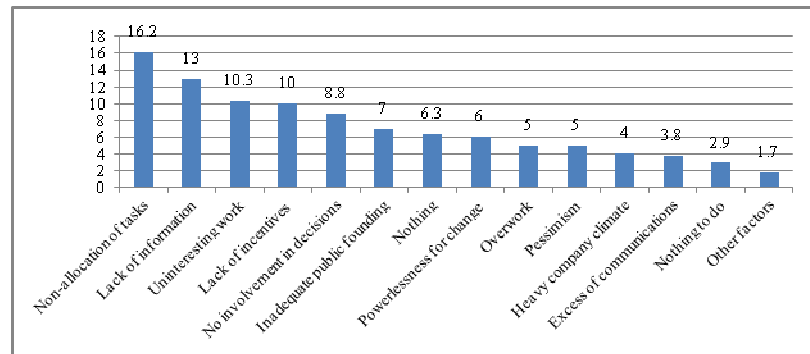


Figure 2: Factors that make employees feel stressed

With regard to the work environment meant as a relational environment, 52.4% of participants says they are highly satisfied with the relationships with their working group colleagues, while 33.3% of participants says they are rather satisfied. The satisfaction decreases when we consider the relationship with their own manager and with colleagues of other offices, with respect to which is highly satisfied respectively 20% and 14.3% of participants, whereas is rather satisfied respectively 50% and 61.9% of participants (see Fig. 3)

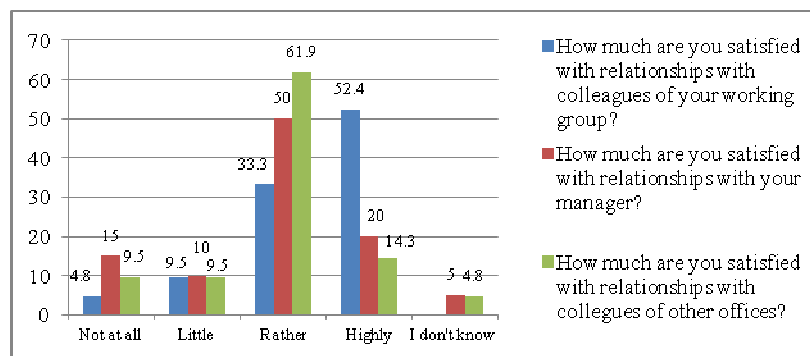


Figure 3: Employees' satisfaction with relationships

Some participants have not any kind of relationship with their manager: *"Unfortunately, we have a manager that is almost never here, I hardly ever see him"; "I have been here since 2008 and I've never talked with a manager, I have never seen a manager...in my opinion manager don't exist here. No decision has ever been made!"*. For some others the relationship changes according if it is a personal or a working relation: *"I have a good relationships from the personal point of view, whereas I have some relationship problems from the working point of view"*.

Some employees feel isolated from the relational perspective *"nobody ever comes in my office, as if I were an infectious person"*, whereas others feel not involved or integrated into the working activities of their group *"I feel down because people in this office sometimes have negative attitudes towards me. For example, they tell me not to talk about the things they do in this office, or they tell me off, or they tell me not to take the initiative"; "since I have difficulties, they told me I can't participate in the meetings, in the conferences, or in the tasks that others are doing ..."*. Also the physical location of the office, such as the one in which are placed the blind telephone operators, located in the basement and away from all other offices, can contribute to promote isolation rather than integration of the employees in the working context: *"They call us the living dead, because we work in a basement and we don't meet anyone"*.

Diversity management and equal opportunities

According to interviewed employees, as shown in Fig. 4, managers give special attention to practical needs and personal problems (rather attention or a lot of attention for 71.4% of participants), whereas they give little attention or no attention to the employees' expectations of professional growth and career (57.2%), to the specific training such as studies, specializations, etc. (52.4%) and to the scientific and professional abilities (52.4%). Therefore, the managers' attention seems to be focused on personal and practical issues rather than on professional ones.

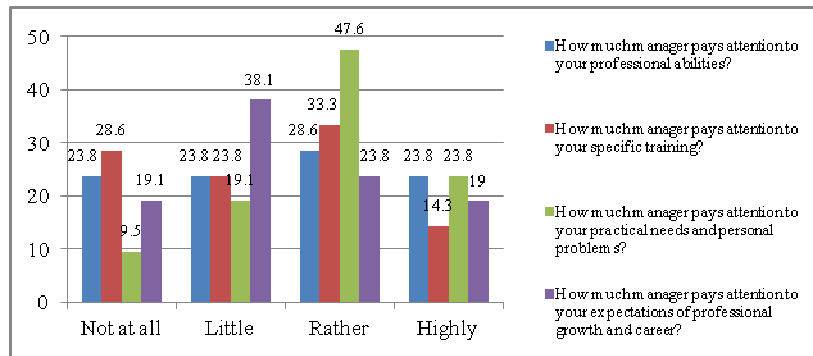


Figure 4: Aspects to which manager pays attention

Concerning the perception of discriminations in the workplace, as shown in Fig. 5, the factors that from the point of view of employees rather or highly contribute to the discrimination are: the health conditions, the physical and mental abilities (19%); the previous training (9.5%); the gender (4.8%). Other factors such as the look, the ethnicity, the religious and geographical origin are not a reason for discrimination (or are a little reason for discrimination).

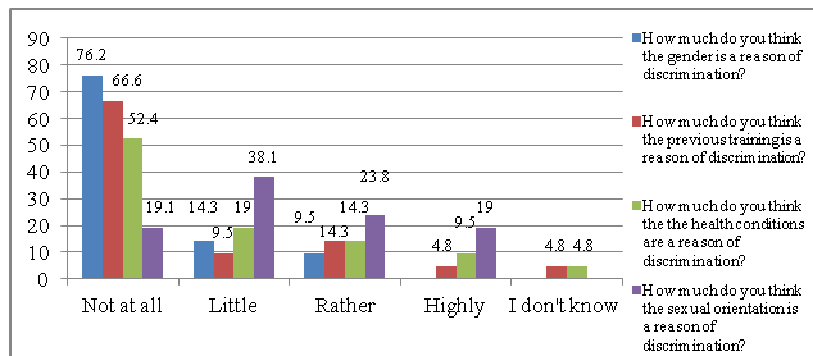


Figure 5: Employees' perception of discriminations in the workplace

Furthermore, some employees argue that discrimination may arise in an hypothetical career path: *“there are no reasons for discriminations, but if we were to advance our careers I think there could be reasons!”*. Other employees attribute to their disease, and therefore to their mental and physical health state, the failure in the allocation of tasks and the consequent lack of work motivation: *“Before my illness I was highly motivated to work, in a few years I had been given many jobs to do, but then with the illness everything has changed...”*.

Regarding the perception of having been victim of injustice in their own work experience, 27.5% of employees says they have been victim of injustice in the allocation of economic incentives, 20% in the allocation of tasks, 20% in a non motivated exclusion by training experiences, 17.5% in the mobbing, 12.5% in the career path and 2.5% in the sexual harassment (see Fig. 6).

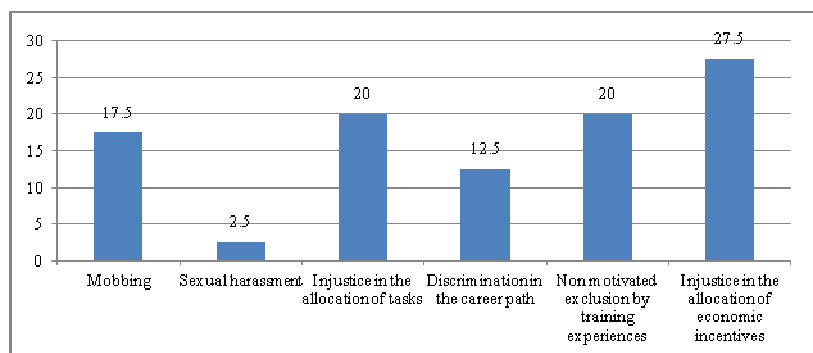


Figure 6: Employees' perception of injustice

Some employees do not believe that the non-allocation of tasks is an injustice, attributing it instead to their lack of abilities *“I don't believe that it is an injustice because if I could do things ... but I am not very able ...”*.

Communication and Knowledge management

With regard to the flow of information, it would seem to be more frequent the exchange of information between colleagues rather than between working groups. The exchange of useful information among colleagues in fact occur often or very often in 57.2% of cases and sometimes in 42.8% of cases. The exchange of useful information among working groups occurs instead often or very often in 35% of cases, sometimes in 25% of cases and never in 30% of cases (see Fig. 7).

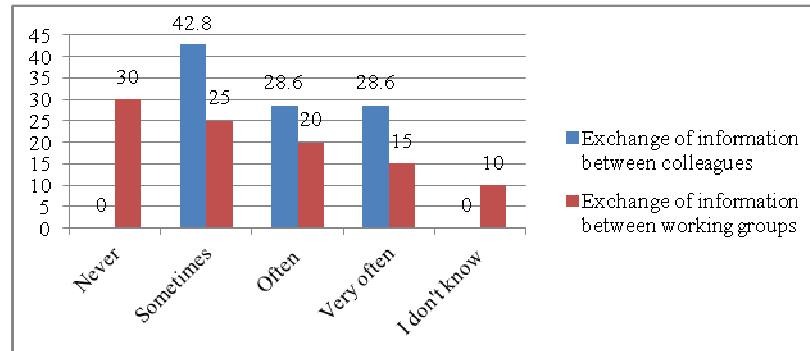


Figure 7: Flow of information

Participants questioned the same concept of working group, saying “*there are no working groups, maybe there are groups of coalition, but they are not working groups.*” Although there is the perception of a rather frequent exchange of information between colleagues, 42.8% of employees says that people who have important information try to keep them for themselves, because the possession of information is considered as a form of power “*he who has power can advance his career in the Agency, therefore keep the information for himself gives more power*”.

Furthermore, 47.6% of participants says there is a top-down management of communications, and 42.9% of employees says they are not involved or are little involved in decisions making affect them. With regard to the integration between scientific and administrative competences, 33.3% of employees thinks that this integration is not fostered or is little fostered, whereas 33.4% thinks that the integration is rather supported or highly supported. In this manner participants describe the relationship between administration employees and researchers: “*The administration employees should work for researchers and be pleased with this collaboration. However, there are administration employees with a brain very tiny who go on with the blinkers, are bureaucrats*”.

Only 55% of participants believes that in their office is given attention to professional growth and knowledge sharing, aspects that are totally missing or partially missing for 40% of the employees (5% of employees did not express its opinion).

Responsibility, value and professional development

Regarding the workload, prevails the perception of a light workload (62%) rather than the perception of a heavy workload (19%). The 19% of employees defines the workload as neither light nor heavy. In particular, between 62% of participants that speaks about a light workload, 23.8% defines it as highly light, 33.4% defines it as rather light and 4.8% defines it as not highly light. Some elements that can cause the lack of satisfaction are: the too light workload, the kind of work and the lack of intrinsic satisfaction (“*If they gave me something more to do, I would use my brains, I would work an hour more*”; “*The workload here is light! Before I was a body shop mechanic, I worked 10 hours a day and I liked it a lot, because you complete the work, you fixed a broken thing and you felt good, you felt satisfied. Here at CNR it's not the same, but they are two different jobs*”), the coherence between tasks and skills (“*Even a child of fifth class of the elementary school, who is a bit smart, could do my job*”).

47.6% of participants says that managers do not pay attention or pay little attention to the desire for professional growth of employees, and 60% of participants says that managers no encourage or little encourage the development of the abilities of their employees.

Employees feel that they are not valued for their actual skills and abilities and that the label of “disabled” would seem to prevail over that of “employee”: “*My only regret is to be not valued for what I am, to don't make my skills available to the Agency, because they don't recognize you the skills, they think that you are a disabled person and you are sick*”.

With regard to the career advancement, 71.5% of participants considers that this process occur with little or no transparency, while 55% believes that it is little equitable or not equitable. Some employees underline the impossibility to have a career: *"I do not have a career, they do not me make the career path!"*.

Sense of belonging and professional identity

Regarding the usefulness of their work to the purpose of their office, 35% of employees considers it useful, remaining 65% says that it is rather useful (50%) or not highly useful (15%). In some cases the lack of usefulness of their work seems to be linked to the changes introduced by new technologies, that make some tasks less necessary: *"I feel not very useful. Once there was so much work, I was a salesman, now with internet and email my work has decreased. It is not that others don't want me, but my job is going to end because of technology"*. Regarding the usefulness of their work to the purpose of their working group, 36.8% considers it highly useful, remaining 63.2% says that it is rather useful (42.1%) or not highly useful (21.1%). With regard to the compatibility of the work with personal commitments, 80.9% of participants thinks that it is rather compatible or highly compatible, also due to the presence of a specific law for people with disabilities *"There are specific law for people with disabilities to which I can access"*.

Regarding the sense of belonging, 70% of employees speaks about a high or highly high sense of belonging, while 30% speaks about a low or a highly low sense of belonging. On the whole, people say they are mostly pleased with their work (47.6% are rather satisfied, 47.6% are highly satisfied and only 4.8% are little satisfied). They sometimes speak about a malaise due to their work, that does not contribute to giving back to the person a specific identity: *"I feel a bit upset because this work does not give me a clear identity"*.

From results of this exploratory study seems that the reform of mandatory employment is not sufficient to ensure the inclusion of employees with disabilities. Referring to the classification of corporate culture proposed by Spataro [17], CNR would seem to place oneself in the culture of differentiation, in which disability is not recognized as a value for the organization. Therefore they do not deal with the involvement and integration of employees with disabilities into working tasks. It seems that the contribution and the point view of these employees are not taken into account, and that they do not try to figure out what are their skills to use them in the best way within the organization. It would seem to be the tacit assumption that the employee with disability is a not very competent person, a burden to be managed rather than a valuable resource. It is no coincidence that to these people are mostly attributed executive roles and tasks under their actual capacity, and that employees with disabilities have difficulty in accessing to career paths and in professional growth.

In addition to these factors, relating to disability management and to organizational environment, relational factors seem to be critical and could have an important role in promoting the inclusion of employees with disabilities. The more problematic relationships seem to be those with manager and colleagues of other offices, but also relationships with coworkers become problematic when they need to integrate the employee with disability in the working activities of the group. Even the physical location of the office is a factor that can facilitate or hinder the process of integration, representing at the same time a clear message about perception and value attributed to disability. Another important factor is represented by the characteristics of the work itself, which should help to provide the individual with a specific identity. This aspect could indirectly contribute to the integration of employees with disabilities in the working context, acting on their self-esteem and on the representation that people have about themselves, about their expertise and their value.

CONCLUSION

The workplace inclusion of people with disabilities seems to be a rather complex process, in which organizational/managerial factors seem to have an important role, as well as social and environmental ones. The workplace inclusion is an interactive process too, which refers not only to the employee with disabilities, but also to coworkers, employer and organization as a whole.

Authors agree with Riches and Green [18], who say that the successful employment of people with disabilities is closely related to the degree to which these people are physically and socially integrated in the workplace. Therefore is very important that every organization pays attention to the integration of their own employees, taking into account the complexity of this process. Organizations capable of supporting the inclusion of people with disabilities are probably more attentive to the management of diversity in general, more able to recognize and enhance the expertise of all employees and to promote positive interpersonal relationships. These factors could be important not only for employees with disabilities, but also for all employees, contributing to improve the welfare and productivity of the entire organization.

The authors recommend further studies in the Agency, in order to involve a larger number of employees with disabilities, and to analyze data also taking into account the different kind of disability. Also the comparison with the point of view of others employees and of employer could be useful. Similar studies could

be developed in analogous contexts, such as research agencies or universities, in order to study the workplace inclusion of people with disabilities in complex organizations and identify best practices in this field.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research was part of the Project “Survey on organizational well-being in the CNR” supported by Italian National Research Council.

REFERENCES

- [1] Parlamento Italiano (1999). *Legge 12 marzo 1999 n. 68. Norme per il diritto al lavoro dei disabili*. Retrieved from Parlamento Italiano website: <http://www.parlamento.it/parlam/leggi/990681.htm>.
- [2] Florian, V. (1981). Objective obstacles in hiring disabled persons: the employers' point of view. *International Journal of Rehabilitation Research*, 4, 167–174.
- [3] Glozier, N. (1998). Workplace Effects of the Stigmatization of Depression. *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, 40 (9), 793–800.
- [4] Brand, R. C. & Clairborn, W. L. (1976). Two studies of comparative stigma: employer attitudes and practices toward rehabilitated convicts, mental and tuberculosis patients. *Community Mental Health*, 12 (2), 168–175.
- [5] Shafer, M. S., Kregel, J., Banks, P. D. & Hill M. L. (1988). What does the boss think? An analysis of employer evaluations of workers with mental retardation. *Research on Developmental Disabilities*, 9 (4), 377–391.
- [6] Marrone, J., Balzell, A. & Gold M. (1995). Employment supports for people with mental illness. *Psychiatric Service*, 46 (7), 707–711.
- [7] Vernon-Oehmke, A. (1994). *Effective Hiring and ADA Compliance*. New York: AMACON.
- [8] Kiernan, W. E. & Schalock, R. L. (1989). *Economics, Industry, and Disability: A Look Ahead*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.
- [9] Cleveland, J. N., Barnes-Farrel, J. L. & Ratz, J. M. (1997). Accommodation in the workplace. *Human Resource Management Review*, 7 (1), 77–107.
- [10] Zuckerman, D. (1993). Reasonable Accommodations for People With Mental Illness Under the ADA. *Mental and Physical Disability Law Reporter*, 17 (3), 311–320.
- [11] Colella, A. (2001). Coworker distributive fairness judgments of the workplace accommodation of employees with disabilities. *Academy of Management Review*, 26, 100–116.
- [12] Colella, A. (1996). Organizational socialization of newcomers with disabilities: A framework for future research. *Research in Personnel and Human Resources Management*, 14, 35–417.
- [13] Ufficio Programmazione Operativa DCSPI (2011). *Il CNR. Risorse umane e finanziarie*. Retrieved from Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche website: http://www.cnr.it/sitocnr/IICNR/Datiestatistiche/Datiestatistiche_file/risorse_umane_finanziarie.pdf.
- [14] Coli, E. & Rissotto, A. (2013). The Pursuit of Organizational Well-Being-an Exploratory Study in a Public Research Agency. *International Journal of Social Science and Humanity*, 3(2), 186–190.
- [15] Di Franco, G. (2010). *L'analisi dei dati con Spss. Guida alla programmazione e alla sintassi dei comandi*. Milano: Franco Angeli.
- [16] Coppola, L. (2011). *NVivo: un programma per l'analisi qualitativa*. Milano: Franco Angeli.
- [17] Spataro, S. E. (2005). Diversity in context: how organizational culture shapes reactions to workers with disabilities and others who are demographically different. *Behavioral Sciences and the Law*, 23, 21–38.
- [18] Riches, V. C. & Green V. A. (2003). Social integration in the workplace for people with disabilities: An Australian perspective. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 19, 127–142.