

Working Life for Everyone podcast: Jaana Pakarinen

Interviewer: You are listening to Working Life for Everyone, a podcast where we broaden our horizons about the world of work and discuss the inequalities of the Finnish labour market with people who have dedicated their careers to doing something about them. My name is Jarkko Immonen, and I am one of the career counsellors at the University of Helsinki's Career Services. Today, we are talking about the employment of people with disabilities and related challenges, or ableism in Finnish working life. My guest today is Jaana Pakarinen, Managing Director of the Vates Foundation.

Jaana Pakarinen: Thank you.

Interviewer: According to its website, Vates is an expert organisation established by disability organisations, which promotes the equal employment of people with disabilities and partial disabilities as well as people with long-term illnesses. Its operations include development, advocacy, training, communicating and networking. What does all this mean in practice? What is Vates, and what do you do?

Jaana Pakarinen: As you said, we are an expert organisation. For almost 30 years, we have been trying to improve the chances of people with partial disabilities to find and return to work as well as keep their jobs. In practice, it's about persevering advocacy directed at, for example, legislative drafters and lawmakers to shape our legislation so that there are no obstacles to employment, but rather incentives. This kind of lobbying is targeted at the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, the Ministry of Education and Culture, and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health. This is due to the fact that the responsibility for promoting the employment of people with partial disabilities is shared by several administrative sectors. It requires extensive and smooth collaboration between various sectors and the clarification of shared goals. Progress has been made in this regard, albeit slowly.

The foundation coordinates national employment networks, including a cooperation group of intermediate labour market operators, a development group of employment unit management and a development group of employability coaches. The intermediate labour market is a state between the open labour market and unemployment, subsidised to a degree, where the aim is to transition to the open labour market. I would describe it as a bridge between unemployment and the labour market. Intermediate labour market operators include associations, foundations and registered religious communities that offer subsidised employment and work try-outs. The intermediate labour market can provide hard-to-employ applicants with both sufficient social support and a sustainable livelihood.

The development group of employability coaches shares experiences, for example, in the use and development of methods for subsidised employment. The demand for employability coaches has increased considerably in recent years, creating a real need for this development group's work in the field. The Vates Foundation has solid expertise in just these methods of supported employment. In its time, the foundation has introduced the IPS model to Finland. The letters stand for Individual Placement and Support. The model was developed in the United States. In Finland, we have elaborated on the name: IPS – Sijoita ja valmenna! ('Place and coach!').

Vates's regional activities are one more big issue I wish to highlight. With the help of experts specialised in regional activities, we disseminate knowledge to organisations that promote employment in the various regions of the country. Today, this activity is particularly aimed at inspiring regional operators to collaborate. As unemployment services are transferred to municipalities, municipal trials are piloting a range of operating models to be adopted by municipalities. And when healthcare and social welfare services are transferred

from municipalities to wellbeing services counties, we also need joint arenas in the organisational field to share information and experiences and to plan joint activities in the coming years.

Interviewer: Thank you, a lot of really interesting activities. Let's look at the other side of the coin, so to speak. I think it's no exaggeration to say that, as the managing director of the foundation, you have a fairly broad vantage point on Finnish working life and its pitfalls from the perspective of disability and partial disability. What does ableism look like in today's Finnish working life and labour market? Is there a difference between the public and private sectors, for example?

Jaana Pakarinen: We have come a long way from the situation at the beginning of the last century. In the history books, we can read about the workhouses where the elderly and those with permanent chronic illnesses were placed. In addition to the elderly population, they included just these people with disabilities and partial disabilities. Instead of reaching that far back in time, let's look at the 1970s and 1980s, when, for the most part, people with developmental disabilities were relocated to institutions, care homes outside their home. Those with the mildest developmental disabilities worked in the fields or in the kitchen. But the operating model of the day did not entail directing them to the open labour market, and not even to the intermediate labour market.

In other words, there has been a lot of progress from those times. Such care institutions have been closed, and people with developmental or other disabilities live at home, go to school as usual and pursue further education just like any other young person. Even people with more difficult disabilities live primarily on their own, with support provided when necessary. There are several career paths to a profession available to young people with disabilities. And surveys show that many young people prefer to pursue a profession and a job rather than draw a pension.

If you compare private and public employers, I think that the public sector is largely serving as an example and a pioneer, being the first to take new measures in, among other things, accessibility and recruitment. There may be more opportunities for various positions in the private sector, but less information on how adjustments can be made or what kind of support is available for employing people with disabilities. I believe that with enough knowledge you can also reduce ableism.

Interviewer: In the second episode of this podcast, our guest was Anni Kyröläinen, Secretary General of the Finnish Disability Forum, who a couple of years ago drew up a comprehensive report for the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment on the structural obstacles to the employment of persons with disabilities. She talked about, among other things, how many of these obstacles continue to be linked with a lack of knowledge and discriminatory attitudes among employers and communities – which in turn may be partly caused by just this lack of knowledge. What do you think about this? What root causes maintain discriminatory structures in working life?

Jaana Pakarinen: Often, you hear about the attitudes of employers in this context. Personally, I think that the employment of people with disabilities is also affected by their own attitudes towards work, that is, whether they have enough faith in their own potential. In this, the Finnish education system is of great importance. And the attitudes of those close to people with disabilities greatly affect their motivation for employment. And whether their immediate sphere believes in the possibility of them finding a job and provides them with information and support for their decisions at the right moment.

Interviewer: Activist and specialist Amu Urhonen, who also visited our podcast, recently wrote an opinion piece, together with University Lecturer in Social Law Pauli Rautiainen, in the *Helsingin Sanomat* daily on discrimination against people with disabilities in the labour market. In their piece, they call for legislative

reforms, including the tightening of obligations related to physical and digital accessibility, instead of simply appealing to employers' goodwill and offering them various incentives for recruiting people with disabilities. What do you think of this?

Jaana Pakarinen: I'd say that coercion does not produce very good results. You can also say that accessibility solutions are not always directed solely at people with disabilities or to coerce employers, but that they benefit everyone.

Ramps, which are ubiquitous, are a simple example. I still remember well the times when the construction of such ramps was not at all a given. When someone came by wheelchair to the office, the porter had to separately set up movable ramps for the assistant to push the wheelchair up the steep incline to the lobby. And on your way out you had to be careful not to let the wheelchair slip from your grip and careen away with the passenger on board. Well, these days such accessibility is normal everywhere, and it makes it easier for everyone to move, for example, in public spaces.

Incentives are good to a certain point. For instance, subsidies for arranging working conditions, which can be applied for from TE Services, for carrying out accessibility repairs for workspaces, among other things, are a perfectly good practice. It may be that the workspace was originally designed for a different purpose, and when a new employee needs technical solutions that improve their work due to, for example, a hearing defect or visual impairment, it's good that the employer has the opportunity to fix the situation. The subsidy for arranging working conditions is far too poorly known and, consequently, too rarely used. Once again, it comes down to increasing awareness.

Interviewer: This is a good way to segue into the next perspective. You have had the opportunity to work at Vates for some time, and before that you worked on employment in the municipal sector. Have the attitudes, structures or the position of people with disabilities changed in any way during your career? If so, has there been progress, or has the change been for the worse, or both?

Jaana Pakarinen: A lot remains to be done to level the playing field for people with disabilities compared to those without disabilities in working life. At times, you wonder whether this kind of advocacy has any effect at all when you have to repeat the same things year after year. Time and time again someone says they've never even heard of such a thing.

Of course, there have been a lot of positive structural developments, and many people are genuinely improving the preconditions for employment. However, it may be that the systems, as much as they have been developed, redesigned and made to be more human-like, are not yet quite flexible enough to smooth the path to employment from educational institutions to the open labour market.

Progress has been made, which is naturally promoted by the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities by Finland in 2016. As one major element, the convention includes the promotion of the employment of people with disabilities and the necessary measures. Finland has a regularly updated action plan on the convention, to which government ministries have committed with their own measures. In addition, we have strong legislation that promotes progress, including the Constitution, the Non-Discrimination Act, the Employment Contracts Act, the Occupational Safety and Health Act, and the Occupational Healthcare Act, all of which include passages on the prohibition of discrimination, equality in recruitment, the promotion of occupational wellbeing as well as something that is often overlooked: employees too are responsible for maintaining their fitness for work.

Interviewer: Do people have any typical misconceptions or misunderstandings about people with disabilities in working life, ableism, or physical or digital accessibility? If so, now is the perfect time to rectify them.

Jaana Pakarinen: There are two things I would like to highlight at this point. First of all, research indicates that more than half of people in employment have a defect, disability or illness that affects their fitness for work. These can include nothing more major than migraine, osteoarthritis, impaired hearing, poor vision and so on. Partial disability is not always externally visible, but has to be taken into consideration in your work, making it necessary to consider ways to cope with work duties or how these duties could be adapted to better suit your fitness for work.

And then there are people with disabilities who have a visible feature associated with their disability, such as using a wheelchair, elbow crutches, or a hearing aid, or there is something indicative of a disability or illness in their facial features. Such visible things may have nothing to do with their fitness for work. They can be fully competent, skilled and top-level specialists in their line of work.

Interviewer: Important notions. What does the future of disability inclusion – or conversely ableism – in the workplace look like, for example, in five to ten years? Is there hope for a better tomorrow?

Jaana Pakarinen: Predicting the future is the most difficult form of predicting. Therefore, I'm not going to give a forecast for the next five or ten years. But I hope that the fitness-for-work programme launched by the current Finnish government and its measures will produce good results, and that future decision-makers will take into consideration in their policies people in need of special support in their employment. Even though employers in the public, private and organisational sectors are doing their best, the fact is that, without political support, the bar cannot be kept as high as it should be in these matters with incentives alone.

Interviewer: What would you like to say to our students struggling with discrimination and challenges brought about by work-related and societal ableism in their lives and careers right now?

Jaana Pakarinen: Referring a bit to what was said before, things take place in the very long term. While things do not seem to progress in the present, everything done now can have an effect five years from now. Today's students are future decision-makers, employees and tacklers of new challenges. It takes tenacity to seize upon societally difficult, controversial and slightly different issues, but when you see even minor improvements take place, it is very rewarding. In fact, I urge everyone to challenge themselves to become change-makers of the future, also in this field.

Interviewer: Is there anything else you would like to add before we wrap up this interview?

Jaana Pakarinen: Thank you so much for this opportunity to share my thoughts with you. Thank you and all the best.

Interviewer: A heartfelt thank you, Jaana. It was a pleasure to have you as a guest.

Thank you for listening to Working Life for Everyone. This podcast was brought to you by University of Helsinki Career Services.