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INCREASING CORPORATE IMAGE BY THE EMPLOYMENT OF DISABLED PEOPLE

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Abstract

Establishing a positive corporate image is a major challenge of modern, dynamic and high technology world. The company's social responsibility is an integral part of this process. The main purpose of this article is to clarify the interrelation between the level of corporate image and the employment of people with disabilities. To achieve the aim of the research a survey has been conducted among 108 Bulgarian companies providing education, finance and accounting services during the period October - December 2019. The research methods used in the article are analysis, synthesis, survey method, graphical methods and summary. The results of the study show that there is a direct correlation between these two processes. The conclusion includes a summary concerning the importance of social corporate policy for building a positive image and competitive advantage of the company.

Keywords

Corporate image – People with disabilities – Disabled people – Social responsibility

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Introduction

Trying to adapt to the dynamic market, growing competition and changing tastes and preferences of the consumers, every company should have a set of competitive advantages. In this way it will increase its efficiency and competitiveness. An important prerequisite is building of an adequate positive corporate image, which in turn is related to the social commitment of the company.

Nowadays many companies are socially oriented and committed to contribute sustainable development by their corporate social responsibility, often expressed in donations, charity events and employment of disabled people. All this contributes to build a positive corporate image and maintain it in the society.

The social efficiency in hiring disabled people is expressed in finding a balance between the pursuit of profit and the direct support of the social status of these groups of people in the organization's daily activity. Increasing company's competitiveness and corporate image are important effects arising from the employment of disabled people. At the same time, the benefits for this group of people are the creation of social sustainability; employment and labor integration; social engagement; improvement of living standards and well-being; increase of labor motivation; qualification and additional training of the employees.

In this regard, the main purpose of the article is to study and analyze the impact of employment of disabled people on the process of building a positive corporate image.

Literature review

Corporate image and social responsibility

In order to be recognized in their actions, the companies must present their image in public. The corporate image represents the image of the company as a set of characteristic positive features built in the mind of the society or a particular social group. Every company has a corporate image, whether it recognizes it or not¹. It is a summary of all positive and negative impressions of the audience about a particular subject². It also hides past situations - how the person reacted before, what it did, how it behaved towards others³. Moreover - it is a commercial product with a certain value, depending not only on the characteristics of the product itself, but on its built image⁴. Special attention is paid to the public image of the organization itself in the unity of its services and products, but in the dominance of the first unit⁵. The corporate image is a key strategic marketing tool⁶.

¹ P. Hutton, *Survey Research for Managers: How to Use Surveys in Management Decision-making* (London: Palgrave, 1990).

² V. Sotirova, *Firmena kultura – parametri i primeri* (Sofia: Tehnicheski universitet, 2010).

³ M. Filipova, "The image of the leaders as formed in the perception of followers", *Entrepreneurship Vol: 1* (2015).

⁴ G. Dimitrova and V. Stanev, "The corporate image as a competitive advantage", *Scientific works of the Union of Scientists in Bulgaria – Plovdiv Vol: 4* (2017). <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/321333096>

⁵ V. Sotirova, *Firmena kultura...*

⁶ V. Kyurova and D. Yaneva, *Research on the impact of the corporate image on the competitiveness of interior design enterprises*, *CBU International Conference Proceedings Vol: 5* (2017).

Building a positive corporate image helps to generate competitive strategic advantages of the company. Therefore, the corporate image is a major strategic goal related to the “cognitive level of knowledge and opinions”⁷. It is used to identify priorities for corporate communications, monitor changes and evaluate the success of corporate communications programmes⁸. The corporate image shows the understanding of external audiences about the organization. Social and political crises are critical in this direction⁹. In this regard, M. Brun notes that the corporate image determines the relationship between the stakeholders and consumers¹⁰. According to P. Hutton, it can be considered at four levels — socio-political and cultural, industry, company and product or brand-image level¹¹.

It becomes clear that the corporate image is a complex entity that is formed in the external environment of the company as a complex interaction of its individuality, identity, reputation and culture. It includes a variety of elements: company parameters and characteristics such as corporate style, culture, values and moral of the management team and employees; company self-presentation and self-expression; communication and dialogue with the audience; interaction with the society; social opinion; social responsibility and corporate identity.

A good corporate image is a valuable asset that accumulates very slowly. It helps in building of the corporate identity¹². In turn, it underlies the social responsibility. According to Ph. Kotler and N. Lee, this is a commitment to improve public welfare through voluntary business practices and the use of corporate resources¹³. At the same time, the strengthening of corporate identity by the set of company culture, ethics and values, helps the entrepreneurs to develop a specific moral position and attitude to the environment¹⁴. In this aspect, beneficial effects may be caused by a number of phenomena occurring on the border between cultures, such as intercultural management¹⁵ and intercultural dialogue¹⁶.

⁷ V. Sotirova, *Firmena cultura...*

⁸ P. Hutton, *Survey Research...*

⁹ R. Krasteva and E. Pantelis, “Bridging relationships between education, refugee crisis and tourism”, *EDULEARN17 Proceedings (2017)*: 261-263.

¹⁰ M. Brun, “Creating a new identity for France Telecom”, in *Corporate and organizational identities: Integrating strategy, marketing, communication, and organizational perspectives*, eds. B. Moingeon and G. Soenen (London: Routledge, 2002), 131-156.

¹¹ P. Hutton, *Survey Research...*

¹² K. Vella and T. Melewar, “Explicating the Relationship between Identity and Culture. A multi-perspective conceptual model”, in *Facets of Corporate Identity, Communication and Reputation*, eds. T. Melewar (New York: Routledge, 2008), 31-32.

¹³ Ph. Kotler and N. Lee, *Corporate Social Responsibility: Doing the Most Good for Your Company and Your Cause*, (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2005), 3.

¹⁴ K. Vella and T. Melewar, “Explicating the Relationship...”

¹⁵ T. Kiryakova-Dineva and M. Hadzhipetrova-Lachova, “Intercultural Management–Main Aspects And Perspectives For The Practice Of International Organizations”, *Entrepreneurship*, Vol: 5 (1) (2017); P. Žukauskas; J. Vveinhardt and R. Andriukaitienė. “The Theoretical Aspect of Management Culture as Part of Organizational Culture. Management Culture and Corporate Social Responsibility (IntechOpen, 2018).

¹⁶ T. Kiryakova-Dineva; M. Hadzhipetrova-Lachova and Y. Chankova, “Intercultural dialogue for education in the Mediterranean region”, *EDULEARN17 Proceedings (2017)*; U. Lundgren; P. Castro and J. Woodin, *Educational Approaches to Internationalization through Intercultural Dialogue: Reflections on Theory and Practice (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019).*

There is “a strong positive correlation between people’s perceptions of a company and pro-corporate supportive behavior”¹⁷. Because people tend to humanize companies, corporate image could include characteristics attributed to humans such as friendly, loving and caring¹⁸. In this regard, an important factor in building an effective corporate image is Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). CSR can have a positive effect on the corporate image when an organization engages not only with its economic development, but also with the support of its employees and their families and with meeting the needs of the society as a whole¹⁹. One aspect of the corporate social responsibility is the fulfillment of the moral principles of the society²⁰. A. Carroll develops CSR Pyramid, which examines four aspects of CSR – economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic responsibilities²¹. The last category of responsibilities include charitable initiatives that aim to meet social norms, ethics and expectations.

As understood from the above, in today's dynamic and fast developing world, the corporate image is a critical component of the companies' management. At the same time it is essential that employees from different groups or individuals to be noticed in this over-informational exchange and be supported in their work activity and corporate environment.

Employment of disabled people

Each company has a variety of personalities - staff with a variety of personal and professional qualities. The set of knowledge, skills, experience and values are only part of the mandatory attributes of the employed, forming the generalized term "company staff"²². At the same time, each company has a different subject of activity, and the employees are recruited according to the positions and their respective functions, rights, duties and responsibilities.

The main problem of disabled people is the lack of prospects and opportunities for resocialization. There is a growing need of developing program activities for people with disabilities²³. In the last few years, via various European projects and programs, the process of supporting companies that employ disabled people has intensified. More organizations are striving to provide a suitable job for a person in a disadvantaged position. Moreover, there are many benefits for both sides. On one hand, businesses use certain goods (lower tax rates, payment of remuneration to specific individuals for a certain period, etc.) and on the other hand, those people have the opportunity to be full citizens and practice their profession.

¹⁷ A. Adeniji; O. Osibanjo; J. Abiodun and E. Oni-Ojo, “Corporate Image: A Strategy for Enhancing Customer Loyalty and Profitability”, *Journal of South African Business Research* Vol: 2015 (2015): 1. Article ID 259483, DOI: 10.5171/2015.259483, <http://www.ibimapublishing.com/journals/JSABR/jsabr.html>

¹⁸ A. Adeniji; O. Osibanjo; J. Abiodun and E. Oni-Ojo, “Corporate Image: ... 3. <http://www.ibimapublishing.com/journals/JSABR/jsabr.html>

¹⁹ Ph. Stoyanov, “Corporate social responsibility and corporate image building”, *Scientific Journal Economics and Finance* Vol: 8 (2017).

²⁰ Ph. Stoyanov, “Corporate social...”

²¹ A. Carroll, “The Pyramid of Corporate Social Responsibility: Toward the moral management of organizational stakeholders”, *Business Horizons* Vol: 34: 4 (1991).

²² V. Vasilev, *Menidzhmant na personala – tendentsii v publichnata administratsia* (Blagoevgrad: Rumi, 2010), 9.

²³ L. Ivanova, “The urgent need to implement the social assistance programs to support people with disabilities”, *Scientific Journal “Economics and Finance”, “Science and Society”* (2017).

Each company seeks to recruit employees who "most closely meet the criteria for job performance"²⁴. Combining individual personality competitive advantages of the employees leads to the overall competitiveness of the company which in turn directly affects its corporate image. According to the goals, strategies and priorities of the company, staff should be hired to influence the results of the activity.

In recent years, several national and European projects and programmes for supporting the employment of disabled people have been operating on the territory of Republic of Bulgaria (National programme for employment and training of people with permanent disabilities²⁵; National programme "Assistants to people with disabilities"²⁶; European projects "Training and employment for the young people" – for unemployed people with permanent disabilities up to 29 years inclusive, and component II of the project "Training and employment" - for unemployed people with permanent disabilities over 29 years²⁷. The financing of both projects is with the support of the European Social Fund of EU Operational Programme "Human Resources Development" (2014-2020)²⁸.

The positive side of the programs and projects is that they finance the salaries of the newly hired employees for a period of one year. A small part of employers leave disadvantaged people at work even after the expiration of the program. However, the future is related to increase the number of companies that employ disabled people. In this way, they feel useful to the society and can be active.

In connection with the achievement of the goal, a survey was conducted among 108 local companies engaged in offering services in the field of education, finance and accounting on the territory of Blagoevgrad district, Bulgaria in the period October - December 2019. For the purposes of the survey, questionnaires were prepared and distributed including online surveys. It should be clarified that the surveyed companies are not social enterprises within the meaning of the national legislation of Republic of Bulgaria²⁹. This report examines only companies that have hired disabled people³⁰ within

²⁴ E. Ribarska and V. Vasilev, Upravljenje na choveshkite resursi v publichnata sfera, (Blagoevgrad: BON, 2007), 98.

²⁵ National programme for employment and training of people with permanent disabilities, extended by Order № RD01-96 of 11.02.2020 of the Minister of Labor and Social Policy of the Republic of Bulgaria, National Employment Agency, Ministry of Employment and Social Policy of the Republic of Bulgaria, <https://www.az.government.bg/pages/nacionalna-programa-zohtu/>, (accessed 26.03.2020).

²⁶ National programme "Assistants for People with Disabilities", National Employment Agency, Ministry of Employment and Social Policy of the Republic of Bulgaria, <https://www.az.government.bg/pages/nacionalna-programa-ahu/> (accessed 26.03.2020).

²⁷ Project " Training and employment", National Employment Agency, Ministry of Employment and Social Policy of the Republic of Bulgaria, <https://www.az.government.bg/pages/procedura-obucheniya-i-zaetost-za-mladite-hora/> (accessed 26.03.2020).

²⁸ Operational Programme "Human Resources Development" 2014-2020, pursuant to Council of Ministers Decision No.792/17.12.2013 and the Rules of Organization of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MLSP), carried out by Directorate General "European Funds, International Programmes and Projects" (DG EFIPP), European Social Fund of European Union, <https://esf.bg/> (accessed 04.04.2020).

²⁹ The Law on the Social and Solidarity Economy, articles 5, 6, 7, 8, State Gazette 91/2.10.2018, came into force on 03.05.2019, <https://lex.bg/bg/laws/ldoc/2137187968> (accessed 04.04.2020).

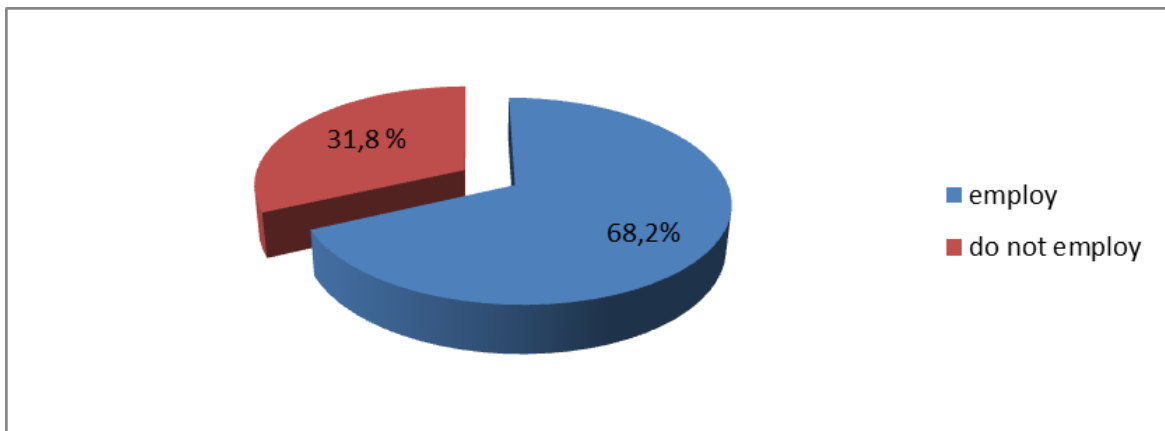
³⁰ The United Nations and Disabled Persons, <https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/enable/dis50y10.htm> (accessed 06.04.2020).

the meaning of The International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF).³¹

Analysis and discussion

The analysis of the survey's results shows that the predominant part of the surveyed companies are micro-enterprises with up to 10 employees (68.2%). 10 to 50 people work in 18.2% of the enterprises, in 13.6% of them - more than 50 people.

It is noteworthy that larger companies are more likely to hire disabled people. More than 2/3 of the surveyed companies employ this group of people. However, the share of those who are not inclined to such action is high.



Source: authors' inquiry survey

Figure 1
Distribution of companies by employment of disabled people

An interesting fact is that such people are hired only by companies with traditions and business experience.

It has been found that the predominant share of the companies employ only one person with disabilities (59.1%). Two disadvantaged people are employed in 9.1% of the enterprises. However, none of the surveyed companies hired more than two people.

To clarify the ways of hiring people with disabilities, it is noteworthy that 41% of the respondent companies employ people via program funded by EU. Unfortunately, only 18.2% of them left the workers on a permanent employment contract in the company after the expiration of the program. 9.1% of all surveyed companies have hired staff from this group without taking advantage of such programs.

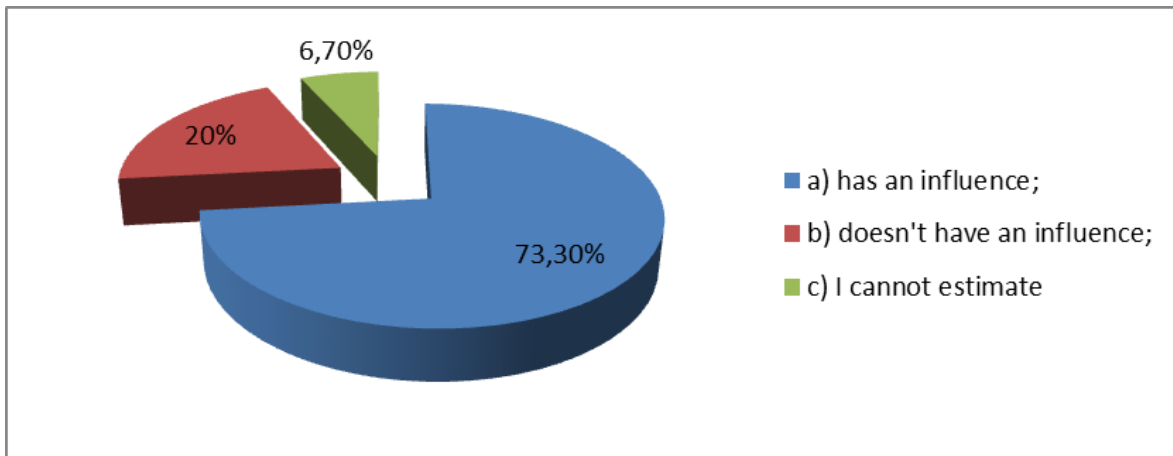
Regarding the extent of the work performance to the tasks and responsibilities assigned to disabled employees, almost all employers are unanimous in the quality and conscientious performance of their duties. 2/3 are categorical, 26.7% have some hesitations and only 6.7% are dissatisfied with their performance.

³¹ The International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) defines disability as an umbrella term for impairments, activity limitations and participation restrictions. (World health Organization, 16 January 2018), <https://www.who.int/en/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/disability-and-health> (accessed 06.04.2020).

Comparing the performance of duties by disabled people and the other employees, the vast majority of surveyed employers (60%) do not find any difference in their work performance. 20% of them mention that these employees handle their tasks more slowly. However, this is understandable due to the physical dysfunction of most of these employees. 13.3% of the respondents answered "rather yes", specifying that disabled people make rare and insignificant mistakes. It is clear from the above that there is no significant difference in the work performance by different staff categories.

From the data presented in Figure 2, it can conclude that there is a direct relationship between the overall process of employment and the work performance of disabled people and the corporate image of the surveyed enterprises.

It is evident that 73.3% of the respondents mention that the employment of disadvantaged people increases the corporate social responsibility, influencing the building and maintaining a positive corporate image of the company. 20% do not find a connection between the two processes and only 6.7% have no opinion on the issue.



Source: authors' inquiry survey

Figure 2
Impact of disabled people employment on the corporate image

The results from the survey indicate that the majority of the surveyed employers (68.2%) would employ disabled people and would recommend other companies to do so. The main reasons are their good work performance and financial relief from the state. 22.7% of the respondents are hesitant, 9.1% are adamant that they would not hire such workers. The reasons are not the doubts regarding their job handling but the bureaucracy that employers will face in the process of hiring such a category of staff.

Conclusions

In view of the results presented above, the following conclusions can be summarized:

- Most of the surveyed companies are socially oriented and have a corporate social responsibility expressed in the employment of disabled people.
- Companies employ mainly one disadvantaged person and very rarely two people.

- A very large part of the surveyed employers are unanimous about the benefits of hiring disabled people - tax relief services; full payment of wages (usually for 12 months) from the national budget and European funds; satisfaction with the realization of their obligations, etc.
- One of the main advantages is the positive impact of employing disabled people on the corporate image.

It can definitely be concluded that the sectors with a high level of employment of people with disabilities are finance, insurance, accounting and auditing, information and telecommunication technologies, etc. The main reason is the fact that in these professions the performance of duties is most often associated with the work in the office and in front of a computer.

In the last few years there has been a tendency to an increasing extent of companies that increase their corporate donations, report socially responsible initiatives, establish corporate social norms as a part of their strategic goals. Employment of disabled people is part of the companies' social policy that aims to build and maintain a positive corporate image.

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