



## Employer's Assistant – new value in employing persons with disabilities

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The purpose of this article is to present the initiative of the West Pomeranian Voivodeship in Poland, which is aimed at increasing the professional activity of persons with disabilities. The developed and tested model of the employer's assistant is, in the special pedagogy, a new quality directed towards the labour market. The Employer's Assistant does not deal, in essence, only with a person with a disability, but mainly with the environment of employers to hire persons that suffer from disabilities. In the article, I refer to the assistant of the disabled person as a result of the biopsychosocial model of disability, which creates a great opening to the discussion on various models of assistance. I would like to point out the specific consequences of the lack of employment among people with disabilities. I present the premises of the employer's assistant model and the evaluation of its effectiveness, the main consequence of which is the ability to build social capital of persons with disabilities. By cooperating with many environments, the employer's assistant develops specific social behavioural patterns and becomes a foundation of social activity of persons with disabilities.

**KEY WORDS:** disability, employment, employer's assistant

## Introduction

The issue of the assistantship in the special pedagogy is not a new phenomenon. It remains in relation to the transformations concerning understanding of human disability. Transformations, in which the medical perspective of disability constitutes one of the elements significant for the forecasted psychological and physical restrictions, whereas, the global sphere of development is located in the person's social experiences. Both, experiences of a conscious, institutional character, as well as those gained spontaneously, conditioned with the individual situation of a meeting, feeling and experiencing. The place and role of assistance in the life of persons with disabilities have been sanctioned in Poland with the Ordinance of the Minister of Labour and Social Policy of 10 December 2002 on the classification of professions and specialisations for the use in the labour market and its scope of application<sup>1</sup>. Therein, the assistant of a person with a disability has been indicated. This type of assistantship was described as a special type of service that requires not only an exceptional sensitivity to social problems of persons affected with various deficits, but also implies the necessity to have relevant knowledge and practical skills that allow assisting a person with a disability effectively. The Ordinance is undoubtedly based on the biopsychosocial perspective of disability, which allowed developing the image of persons with disabilities as legitimate members of the society. Persons with diversified potential, socially useful and needed. The introduction of an assistant of a person with a disability to the classification of social assistance professions and thus, activation of the education system at this faculty, at a level of post-secondary school resulted from many overlapping factors<sup>2</sup>. The

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<sup>1</sup> The Ordinance of the Minister of Labour and Social Policy of 10 December 2002 on the classification of professions and specialisations for the use in the labour market and its scope of application. Journal of Laws no. 222 of 20 December 2002, item 1868.

<sup>2</sup> E. Mirewska, *Miejsce asystenta osoby niepełnosprawnej w systemie pomocy społecznej* (*The Place of the Assistant of a Person with a Disability in the Social Assistance Sys-*

most important ones include the conception aimed at reinforcing the broadly understood potential of the social assistance client and rejecting the thesis that financial support is a sufficient factor facilitating the social and professional rehabilitation of environments of persons with disabilities. Thus, the assistant was seen as support for a person with a disability in achieving life independence and reinforcing his or her role in the natural environment<sup>3</sup>. The assistant of a person with a disability plays the role of an observer and messenger between the personal world of the person with a disability and the world of his or her family or social environment.

The idea of the employer's assistant as an innovative support for employing persons with disabilities remains in strong relation with the idea of the Assistant of the Person with a Disability. However, it locates the Person with a Disability in other perspective. Not as a Person only requiring support, but also as a competent employee, to contact with whom the employer has to be prepared and in advance freed from many centuries of stereotypes, fears and, often, equipped with knowledge on disability. This issue is extremely significant, since professional experiences of persons with disabilities are still far from satisfactory. Therefore, in the further part of considerations I will concentrate on the role of work in the lives of persons with disabilities.

## Disability vs work

Human disability cannot be considered without the broadly understood interdisciplinary context. Studies on this area are located in medical, rehabilitation and social research, where integration comes to the fore. A consequence of the interdisciplinary understanding of disability comprises defining it by a certain condition of

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tem), [in:] *Asystent osoby niepełnosprawnej. Nowy zawód i nowa usługa systemu pomocy społecznej (The Assistant of a Person with a Disability. The New Profession and New Service of the Social Assistance System)*, ed. A. Żukiewicz, Impuls, Krakow 2010, p. 21.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem* p. 29.

the individual and not his or her feature. Disability is, in fact, a process which in a diversified, different manner stipulates functioning of a person. It indicates hindrances of such a person in a family, professional, economic and social situation<sup>4</sup>. The multi-context attempt at defining the notion of disability results in applying different criteria significant for including individuals in the groups of such persons in various areas of life and scientific disciplines<sup>5</sup>. The changes result in empowering the person with a disability, who ceases to be perceived only as a life beneficiary, but is predominantly perceived as its customer. In contemporary times, the normalisation, which initiated self-determination and fully empowered persons with disabilities and thus, made them, as far as possible, creators of their own lives, became the main principle. The idea of normalisation allowed leaving categorised professional and political regulations to the benefit of available models of everyday life, *which were as close to the typical circumstances of living in society, as possible*<sup>6</sup>. The World Health Organisation referring to the International Classification of Functioning Disability and Health<sup>7</sup> indicates the social and cultural contexts of human disability. The category of disability has been replaced with activity and the concept of impairment with the category of participation. It has been adopted that a person functions at three levels: biological (structure), individual (scope of

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<sup>4</sup> M.A. Paszkiewicz, M. Garbat, E. Tytyk, *Ocena jakości życia osób niepełnosprawnych na przykładzie realiów województwa lubuskiego (Assessment of the Quality of Life of Persons with Disabilities on the Example of the Reality of the Lubusz Voivodeship)*, [in:] *Ergonomia Niepełnosprawnych – Jakość życia (Ergonomics for Persons with Disabilities – the Quality of Life)*, ed. J. Lewandowski, J. Lecewicz-Bartoszewska, Lodz University of Technology, Lodz 2001, p. 191.

<sup>5</sup> M. Garbat, *Historia niepełnosprawności. Geneza i rozwój rehabilitacji, pomocy technicznych oraz wsparcia osób niepełnosprawnych (The History of Disability. The Genesis and Development of Rehabilitation, Technical Aids and Support for Persons with Disabilities)*, Niae Res, Gdynia 2015, p. 95.

<sup>6</sup> D. Goodly, *Disability, Studies. An interdisciplinary introduction*, Sage, London, 2011, p. 16.

<sup>7</sup> International Classification of Functioning Disability and Health (ICF), World Health Organization, 2001.

obligations) and social (performance of a role in a specific social group)<sup>8</sup>. Thus, applying towards everyone one general concept of disability causes fundamental difficulties, since even removal of all external barriers will not fully remove the person's internal limitations. Therefore, it is assumed that disability should be defined with regard to the possibilities of achieving by the individual his or her own life aims with a consideration of the restricting biological, psychological, social and environmental factors. They do, in fact, limit the activity, participation and relations between a person with a disability and the social and physical environment. Work is one of those areas in which, in particular, persons with disabilities notice limitations. For many years, which is a serious social and economic problem, a very low percentage level of professional activity of persons with disabilities could be observed in Poland, in comparison with other European countries. It is illustrated with the table below.

**Table no. 1.** The employment rate of persons with disabilities in European countries in 2014

No.	Territorial unit	Employment rate in %
1.	Switzerland	68.9
2.	Germany	58.7
3.	Luxemburg	56.7
4.	Sweden	55.5
5.	Latvia	54.2
6.	Estonia	54.0
7.	Austria	53.8
8.	Slovakia	52.0
9.	France	50.4
10.	Italy	49.0

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<sup>8</sup> M. Garbat, *Historia niepełnosprawności. Geneza i rozwój rehabilitacji, pomocy technicznych oraz wsparcia osób niepełnosprawnych (The History of Disability. The Genesis and Development of Rehabilitation, Technical Aids and Support for Persons with Disabilities)*, Niae Res, Gdynia 2015, pp. 99-100.

No.	Territorial unit	Employment rate in %
11.	Denmark	48.7
12.	Island	48.6
13.	Holland	47.7
14.	Portugal	47.0
15.	Great Britain	45.5
16.	Slovenia	45.2
17.	Cyprus	44.1
18.	Romania	41.3
19.	The Czech Republic	39.8
20.	Finland	38.1
21.	Spain	38.1
22.	Belgium	38.0
23.	Poland	37.3
24.	Lithuania	35.7
25.	Hungary	33.6
26.	Bulgaria	32.6
27.	Croatia	28.0
28.	Malta	27.8
29.	Greece	27.5
30.	Ireland	27.0
31.	Turkey	25.4

Source: EU-SILC UDB 2014, ANED GUS: <https://bdl.stat.gov.pl/BDL/dane/podgrup/tablica>, access on: 16.02.2019.

It may undoubtedly be stated that employment of persons with disabilities remains an important issue, which is quite difficult to solve. Therefore, it can be presumed that persons with disabilities are still perceived as weaker, worse and less talented. And, in fact, work is one of the basic human activities, the most important during adulthood, it is a determinant of civilizational development, including development of each person and society in which he or she is growing up. It allows the person to participate in the process-

es of transformation of own environment, transformation of conditions of own life, culture and oneself<sup>9</sup>. It is the type of activity that becomes a social binder as it allows experiencing human integration, it is a source of income and determines the social and professional position of the employee<sup>10</sup>. Work is a conscious activity, which is aimed at satisfying needs by creating goods, it is also the toil of the working person, a burden accompanying physical or mental effort made by the working individual. It is an activity which is characteristic for human nature constituting, at the same time, the right and the obligation. From the perspective of social pedagogy, work of a rehabilitation character is discussed, as work safeguards economic needs of a person with a disability. It significantly improves their disordered functions, allows, by enabling proving their own efficiency and social usefulness, the self-fulfilment, which, in consequence, prevents de-frustration and leads to professional and social integration<sup>11</sup>. The person's intellectual possibilities and his or her life satisfaction increase only when the professional work enables using the individual's abilities, taking responsible decisions, acquiring new skills in all possible spheres<sup>12</sup>. Remaining unemployed by persons who are able to work results in their professional inactivity<sup>13</sup>, passivity, distress and resignation. A lack of work often destroys their own plans, causes financial difficulties and collapse of the time structure. When the schedule is not

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<sup>9</sup> A. Bogaj, *Człowiek w środowisku pracy (A Person in the Work Environment)*, [in:] *Pedagogika pracy (Work Pedagogy)*, S.M. Kwiatkowski, A. Bogaj, B. Baraniak, Wydawnictwo Akademickie i Profesjonalne, Warsaw 2007, p. 23

<sup>10</sup> Z. Wiatrowski, *Podstawy pedagogiki pracy (Work Pedagogy Basics)*, Wydawnictwo Akademii Bydgoskiej, Bydgoszcz 2005, p. 99.

<sup>11</sup> H. Borzyszkowska, *Przygotowanie dzieci niepełnosprawnych do pracy w rodzinie i szkole (Preparing Children with Disabilities to Work in Family and School)*, [in:] *Praca ludzi niepełnosprawnych – zadania pedagoga (Work of Persons with Disabilities – Tasks of a Pedagogue)*, ed. A. Hulek, Zakład Narodowy Imienia Ossolińskich, Wrocław 1985, p. 80.

<sup>12</sup> T. Borkowski, A. Marcinkowski, *Socjologia bezrobocia (Sociology of Unemployment)*, Biblioteka Pracownika Socjalnego, Wydawnictwo Śląsk, Katowice 1999.

<sup>13</sup> K. Mlonek, *Tradycja badań bezrobocia w Polsce – zagadnienia metodologiczne (Tradition of Unemployment Research in Poland – Methodological Issues)*, *Wiadomości Statystyczne* no. 6, 1992, p. 1.

set by working hours, there are difficulties in organising and using time. As a rule, people experience obsessive absorption in the issue of time, amount thereof and impossibility to use it, a feeling that they kill time. It has consequences in emotions and behaviour. When we lose a job, we also lose the possibility of self-expression in authentic activity and thus, the possibility to develop a mature personality.

### **Employer's assistant as innovative employment of persons with disabilities**

I was authorised to touch on and describe this issue by my research interests that I have been developing for years and which focus on the issue of social functioning of adult persons with disabilities. I received the invitation from the organisers of the project described below to actively participate in two conferences devoted to the idea of the employer's assistant. I also had the pleasure to participate in many conversations concerning this idea. I recognised that, admittedly, still as a model of activity at the testing stage, the employer's assistant is a wonderful initiative in the labour market for persons with disabilities. It is also a challenge for education and local governments. The challenge that is worth discussing so that it gains followers.

In April 2017, the local government of the West Pomeranian Voivodeship, within the measure "Region of Equal Opportunities" adopted the implementation of the programme for equal opportunities of persons with disabilities and prevention of their social exclusion, as well as assistance. The initiative was financed with funds received from the budget of the West Pomeranian Voivodeship and testing of the model solution was entrusted to "4C Centrum Ekonomii Społecznej" in Szczecin. Representatives of various groups associating persons with disabilities, representatives of Regional Social Policy Centres, Professional Activity Facilities, other work facilities from Stargard, Goleniów and Gryfino Counties, as well as representatives of the association Stowarzyszenie Czas Przestrzeń

Tożsamość<sup>14</sup> with its registered office in Szczecin, were invited to the cooperation. The aim of the undertaken initiative was to establish the model of supporting persons with disabilities in the labour market and, primarily, increase the rate of employment thereof. A significant factor for performance of this fact comprised the low position of the West Pomeranian Voivodeship in the professional activity of persons with disabilities presented in the table below in comparison with other voivodeships.

**Table no. 2.** The employment rate of persons with disabilities in Polish voivodeships in 2016

No.	Territorial unit	Employment rate (%)
1.	Lubusz	30.9
2.	Pomeranian	28.1
3.	Świętokrzyskie	26.3
4.	Lower Silesian	25.0
5.	Subcarpathian	23.1
6.	Silesian	23.0
7.	Łódź	22.6
8.	Greater Poland	22.5
9.	Kuyavian-Pomeranian	22.0
10.	Warmian-Masurian	21.9
11.	Opole	21.1
12.	Podlaskie	18.5
13.	Masovian	18.1
14.	Lublin	17.7
15.	West Pomeranian	16.5
16.	Lesser Poland	15.6

Source: GUS: <https://bdl.stat.gov.pl/BDL/dane/podgrup/tablica>, access on: 30.03.2019.

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<sup>14</sup> The Association has been actively working for developing civil society and a strong non-governmental sector in the territory of the municipality and city of Szczecin.

Furthermore, for the purposes of the programme studies were conducted<sup>15</sup> among persons with disabilities and employers who have not previously employed persons with disabilities. The aim of the studies was to learn about the conditions of not starting work by the unemployed themselves, as well as the reasons for not employing the unemployed by employers. I believe that the research results undoubtedly encourage further exploration of this area.

Persons with disabilities complained about: *a lack of workplaces adjusted to their physical abilities, having the disability itself and related health condition, which prevents from obtaining any job and the employers' limited awareness of economic and social barriers in employing persons with disabilities*<sup>16</sup>. Whereas, the conclusions drawn up from the research conducted among employers concerned: *the low level of employers' knowledge on the possibilities of employing persons with disabilities; economic factors related to the insufficient level of co-funding establishing work places, as well as the lack of stability of provisions, as well as as complicated and complex administrative procedures*<sup>17</sup>.

Persons with disabilities primarily underlined the difficulty in dealing with barriers, provisions and bureaucracy or simply poor economic incentives offered with employment. Whereas, employers did not have sufficient knowledge on how to employ persons with disabilities and adjust to a vacancy a proper person due to the type of disability. Therefore, the need of searching for a solution that would be a support in employing both interested parties occurred.

In the years 2017–2018 there were thematic conferences and focus meetings with employers in the territory of the West Pomerani-

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<sup>15</sup> Report on the research. *Analiza potrzeb osób niepełnosprawnych w obszarze zawodowym w powiatach tobeskim, drawskim i świdwińskim (The Analysis of the Needs of Persons with Disabilities in the Professional Area in Łobez, Drawsko and Świdwin Counties)*, Fundacja Pasja, Łobez 2016.

<sup>16</sup> A. Bogusławska, B. Karlińska, B. Kotarski, G. Kotwicki, R. Krzewicja, J. Namaczyński, P. Piechocki, J. Piekutowski, A. Skaza, J. Sławczyński, A. Sobolewski, G. Tokarski, *Asystent pracodawcy ds. zatrudniania osób niepełnosprawnych (Employer's Assistant for Employment of Persons with Disabilities)*, Stowarzyszenie Czas i Przestrzeń, Szczecin 2017, p. 12.

<sup>17</sup> Ibidem.

an Voivodeship. The underlying aim was to develop a model of employer's assistant for employment of persons with disabilities, who combining the skills of an assistant of a person with a disability, would be prepared to cooperate with employers so as to increase the effectiveness of activities of entities performing tasks to the benefit of persons with disabilities. In theory, the assistant is to play the role of support for the employer, make him *feel confident on the legal grounds related to the employment of persons with a certificate of disability, as well as in direct contact with the persons with disabilities*<sup>18</sup>. The prepared model of the employer's assistant was developed on the grounds of experiences included in the study "*Guidelines for Providing Services by the Job Coach Set I. A Set of Tools for Recruitment of Job Coaches*"<sup>19</sup>. The model consists of many innovative elements, has an exemplary character and can also be executed on the grounds of other premises. Here, I would like to underline the elements thereof that seem extremely important<sup>20</sup>.

First of all, the employer's assistant cannot be a random person. Due to the innovative and certainly not easy type of work, such a person is expected to be assertive, communicative, highly motivated to work and reliable. The model provides for many trainings for the employer's assistant, which will, among others, equip him or her with knowledge on the characteristics of various human disabili-

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<sup>18</sup> A. Bogusławska, B. Karlińska, B. Kotarski, G. Kotwicki, R. Krzewicja, J. Namaczyński, P. Piechocki, J. Piekutowski, A. Skaza, J. Sławczyński, A. Sobolewski, G. Tokarski, *Asystent pracodawcy ds. zatrudniania osób niepełnosprawnych (Employer's Assistant for Employment of Persons with Disabilities)*, Stowarzyszenie Czas i Przestrzeń, Szczecin 2017, p. 5.

<sup>19</sup> M. Gorący, *Wytyczne dotyczące świadczenia usług przez trenera pracy zestaw I. Zestaw narzędzi do rekrutacji trenerów pracy (Guidelines for Providing Services by the Job Coach Set I. A Set of Tools for Recruitment of Job Coaches)*, Polskie Forum Osób Niepełnosprawnych, Warsaw 2015.

<sup>20</sup> A. Bogusławska, B. Karlińska, B. Kotarski, G. Kotwicki, R. Krzewicja, J. Namaczyński, P. Piechocki, J. Piekutowski, A. Skaza, J. Sławczyński, A. Sobolewski, G. Tokarski, *Asystent pracodawcy ds. zatrudniania osób niepełnosprawnych (Employer's Assistant for Employment of Persons with Disabilities)*, Stowarzyszenie Czas i Przestrzeń, Szczecin 2017, pp. 20-24.

ities, legal solutions concerning employment of persons with disabilities and skills in the scope of interpersonal communication.

Secondly, the model of the employer's assistant indicates various sources of financing its activity. The following are enumerated: county labour office, the State Fund For Rehabilitation of Disabled People, social economy support centres and foundations, and associations providing financial assistance to entities establishing workplaces for persons with disabilities within their own activities or European Union projects.

Thirdly, the model indicates the necessity to provide the employer's assistant with information on persons with disabilities interested in starting work. It refers to the access to resources in institutions, such as: county labour offices, county family assistance centres, social assistance centres, community self-help homes, occupational therapy workshops, professional activity facilities and other institutions and organisations providing assistance to persons with disabilities. The aim of providing the information is to help the employer's assistant in creating a database on persons with disabilities (their interests, preferences, expectations, predispositions, experiences, limitations). Such knowledge will help the assistant to flexibly adjust to the employer's objectives, but will also help in taking care of interests of the person with a disability. We cannot forget the fact that the employer pays the majority of his attention to the achievement of his business objectives. Therefore, the employer's assistant has to work with each employer to establish an individual platform of flexible communication, understanding and cooperation.

Finally, eight stages of proceedings of the employer's assistant are proposed in the model, which fully illustrate his or her competences and the scope of activities.

First stage: selection of the employer – taking into account opinion on the employer in the labour market and experiences in employing persons with disabilities.

Second stage: first contact with the employer – learning about the employer's needs and presenting the catalogue of benefits resulting from employment of a person with a disability.

Third stage: learning about the workplace – the work characteristics and organisation of the workplace, learning about the habits and practices binding in the workplace; preparing the employer and employee environment to mutual cooperation with a person with a disability; selection of the place of work for a person with a disability and analysis of tasks performed thereat.

Fourth stage: training – organisation of trainings for managers, human resources, co-workers in the scope of disability; support in all formal and financial matters related to starting work by a person with a disability.

Fifth stage: selection of candidates for specific jobs – preparing the person with a disability to the characteristics of the workplace; presentation of the employer.

Sixth stage: administrative-financial works – accompanying and assisting the employer in meetings with representatives of institutions financially supporting employment of a person with a disability.

Seventh stage: employment:

- conclusion of an agreement for co-financing employment with the funding institution;
- purchase of necessary equipment for the workplace;
- medical examinations of a person with a disability;
- employment of a person with a disability;
- on-the-job training;
- supporting the person with a disability in establishing relations with the direct superior and other co-workers;
- supervision over safety and work of the person with a disability.

Eighth stage: monitoring and accompanying – various types of support for the person with a disability in maintaining and developing social relations, establishing contacts and cooperating with the family. Appropriately to the situation and needs of the employer or the person with a disability.

The complexity of activities of the employer's assistant is related to significant emotional burden, therefore, supervision has been provided for in the project "the employer's assistant for employ-

ment of persons with disabilities". It has been assumed that there will be the need to, on the one hand, support the assistant in assessment and correction of his or her work and, on the other hand, to strengthen him or her and prevent his or her burnout. Especially the latter is to be supported by the work evaluation of the employer's assistant also planned in the project. It is aimed at answering the questions regarding adequacy, effectiveness and sustainability of undertaken activities. Conducting the evaluation process in the model is entrusted to the institution employing the employer's assistant.

The project of the employer's assistant is very extensive and includes a lot of information that answer key issues regarding the role of the employer's assistant. It presents the rights and obligations of a person with a disability, as well as the rights and obligations of the employer. It was described in details in the publication "Asystent pracodawcy ds. zatrudniania osób niepełnosprawnych. Podręcznik" ("The Employer's Assistant for Employment of Persons with Disabilities. Handbook"), published by Szczecin association "Czas Przestrzeń Tożsamość" in 2017.

## Conclusion

Implementation of this project was summarised at the conference organised in Szczecin on 4 December 2018. Primarily all institutions that had undertaken the task to prepare the assistant for contact with employers and institutions that had benefited from such a service presented themselves at the aforementioned conference. Conclusions drawn up from the conference were unequivocal. Activities of employer's assistants in the tested model were very highly assessed. It was underlined that the employer's assistant illustrates the fact of interpenetration of particular spheres of human life (social, professional), which together with the surrounding formal-legal system, constitute a coherent and inseparable whole. The work of the employer's assistant has a chance of generating not

only economic benefits to employers and disabled employees, but perhaps predominantly take persons with disabilities out of passive forms of support and free not only society, but also such persons themselves from the stereotypes of disability. I find another advantage in promoting the idea of the employer's assistant in developing by them the social capital understood as "(...) *the total of current and potential resources that are due to the individual or a group owing to permanent and more or less institutionalised network of relationships and mutual recognition*"<sup>21</sup>. While cooperating with many environments the employer's assistant develops specific models of social behaviours, becomes a foundation of social activity of persons with disabilities. Whereas, while implementing the principle of subsidiary, influences the quality of life of persons with disabilities. He or she helps them in preventing or solving various social problems and prevents the self-exclusion of persons with disabilities.

Personally, I deeply believe in this idea, since it gives a chance to persons with disabilities who have been professionally and socially inactive for years and who have been only a statistical number in lists of various institutions. Properly organised work of the employer's assistant and monitoring environments of disabled persons allows preventing this often unwanted passiveness. I hope that the idea for the functioning of the employer's assistant's will penetrate our reality and find a permanent place between the sphere of the labour market and institutional support in the scope of the social and professional rehabilitation of persons with disabilities.

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<sup>21</sup> P. Bourdieu, L.J.D. Wacquant, *Zaproszenie do socjologii refleksyjnej (An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology)*, Oficyna Naukowa, Warsaw 2001, pp. 104–105.

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