Disability in the Workplace: Corporate Strategies in a Discourse Analytical Perspective

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Abstract

Against the background of the UN *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, the paper focuses on disability policies in the workplace, taking into consideration the position of the International Labour Organization (ILO) and of its permanent Secretariat, the International Labour Office. The study is set in the discourse analytical tradition and analyses two documents: the ILO *Disability Inclusion Strategy and Action Plan* and the working paper *Disability in the Workplace: Company Practices*. The former outlines general principles and illustrates objectives and strategies of the Agency; the latter is a collection of profiles describing the disability policy of 25 major companies. The investigation combines a qualitative approach with quantitative analysis, to single out relevant language features. In particular, the content structure of the companies' profiles is described and analysed, while the fundamental lexicon of disability issues is examined in context. Special attention is given to the use of narrative and/or argumentation and to companies' policy declarations. By adopting this multi-dimensional approach, it is possible to shed light on the discursive ambiguities of the texts, which overtly adopt the UN Convention principles, but do not systematically and consistently comply with the new paradigm of disability in their communication effort.

Keywords: disabilities, human rights, International Labour Organization, workplace.

1. Introduction

1.1. *Background: disability, the UN Convention and ILO*

The UN *Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities* (CRPD), adopted by the UN Assembly in December 2006 and entered into force in May 2008, is a landmark in the development of disability policies in all sectors of social life (Melish 2007). Conceived as a comprehensive human rights treaty, it has crucially contributed to changing the attitude towards persons with disabilities, from viewing them as passive 'objects' of charity, medical treatment and social protection to considering them active 'subjects' with rights, capable of making decisions for their lives and behaving as full members of society. With a wider scope than any local legislation, the Convention opens with a long Preamble, and in its 50 articles deals both with general principles and specific rights, covering all aspects of personal and social life. Among them, the right to work plays a crucial role.

Art. 27 of the Convention, *Work and Employment*, hinges on *the rights* of persons with disabilities:

> States Parties recognize the right of persons with disabilities to work, on an equal basis with others; this includes the right to the opportunity to gain a living by work freely chosen or accepted in a labour market and work environment that is open, inclusive and accessible to persons with disabilities.

It further binds State Parties to safeguard and promote these rights through appropriate steps, including the following: prohibiting discrimination on the basis of disability; protecting the rights to equal treatment and to trade union participation; ensuring equal access to programmes and training; promoting opportunities for entrepreneurship as well as for employment both in the public sector and in the private sector; ensuring reasonable accommodation in the workplace.

The article features all the key words and concepts of the Convention. Non-discrimination, equality of opportunity, inclusion and accessibility are explicitly mentioned under Art. 3 (*General Principles*), while *discrimination* and *reasonable accommodation* are among the (few) crucial concepts defined in Art. 2 (*Definitions*) of the Convention. The fact that these concepts are given such prominence in the document highlights the pivotal role played by employment in the new paradigm of disability accepted and promoted in the Convention.

One of the most important consequences of the Convention has been the integration of disability policies into the work of all UN agencies and

bodies. This is the case also for the International Labour Organization (ILO), which brings together governments, employers and workers of as many as 187 member States. The organization has a permanent Secretariat, the International Labour Office, which is responsible for its activities through different departments and offices. Within the Conditions of Work and Equality Department, the Gender, Equality, and Diversity Branch (GED) is responsible for promoting equality and respect for diversity in the workplace. Though the main focus of GED is on gender, its mission extends beyond ensuring equal opportunities for men and women. As stated on its web page:

> GED expertise focuses on issues related to equal opportunities and treatment for all women and men in the world of work, and *eliminating discrimination based on* gender, race, ethnicity, indigenous identity and *disability*. [...] GED participates in United Nations inter-agency initiatives that promote gender equality and women's empowerment, as well as *decent work for persons with disabilities*, and the rights of indigenous and tribal peoples. (my emphasis) [1]

The branch is responsible for the publication of the *Disability Inclusion Strategy and Action Plan 2014-2017*, which is a crucial document guiding ILO's effort towards the development of inclusive workplaces.

Moreover, the tripartite structure of ILO (unique for a UN agency) fosters cooperation among the different subjects involved, as demonstrated by the production of an interesting working paper devoted to *Disability in the Workplace: Company Practices*, a product of the joint effort of the Skills and Employability Department of the International Labour Office and of the Bureau for Employers' Activities [2]. This report, which collects the experiences in the field of disability of 25 major companies, is the main object of this research, which, however, also takes into consideration the ILO 2014-17 plan as an exemplary synthesis of the disability policies promoted by the UN agency.

1.2. *Aim and method*

The aim of this research is to describe the main features of ILO's disability discourse as it emerges from the ILO 2014-17 action plan, comparing it on the one hand with the CRPD and, on the other, with the working paper.

[1] http://www.ilo.org/gender/lang--en/index.htm [June 2016].

[2] Within the structure of the Office, the Bureau is responsible for implementing a fruitful relationship with employers' organizations.

This two-pronged comparison will make it possible to verify if and the extent to which the companies involved in the *Disability in the Workplace* project comply with the principles stated in the Convention and in the ILO policy declarations.

To reach this objective, the investigation adopts a discourse analytical approach. It is widely known that Discourse Analysis, in its typical Anglo-Saxon interpretation, is characterized by 'critical' implications (Wodak and Meyer 2001; Fairclough 2003; Wodak and Chilton 2005), but has extended from traditional ideological contexts (racism, gender, politics, etc.) to different genres and modes (Bateman 2009; Garzone and Catenaccio 2009; Renkema 2009). The implications of the relationship between language and social context and the constructive aspect of discourse are more strongly emphasised in the French approach (Charaudeau et Maingueneau 2002; Antelmi 2012; Maingueneau 2014), which, drawing on Foucault's (1969 and 1970) tradition, has also focused on the argumentative and rhetorical features of texts (Amossy 2006).

The discursive approach is particularly effective for the analysis of ideologically-sensitive areas of social life, such as, for example, those pertaining to minority issues, which are usually neglected in mainstream thought, chief among them being disability. The very concept of disability has profoundly evolved in the last few decades[3], but the common attitude towards the issues associated with disability has been only marginally affected by the change. The representation of disability in discourse, in the different social contexts where it emerges, is therefore of special interest for discourse analysis.

This paper will initially (§ 2) focus on how the ILO 2014-17 strategic plan tackles disability issues, and contributes to generating a discursive representation of the phenomenon that can be functional to the ideological perspective overtly promoted by the agency. The core of the analysis is however the working paper containing 25 company profiles (§ 3): the self-presentations will be examined both with regard to their content structure and in respect of the linguistic and argumentative strategies adopted, with special attention paid to the policy statements.

The qualitative analytical approach will be integrated with a quantitative methodology (Stubbs 1996), as corpus linguistics tools have proved to be useful for the purposes of discursive investigation, provided that the results of automatic queries are interpreted in interac-

[3] In this respect, the adoption of ICF (International Classification of Functioning) has played a crucial role to substitute a bio-psycho-social approach for the traditional medical paradigm (see Borgnolo *et al.* 2009).

tion with those emerging from close-reading procedures (Garzone and Santulli 2004; O'Halloran and Coffin 2004; Baker 2006; Degano 2007 and 2012).

2. The ILO Disability Inclusion Strategy

The *Disability Inclusion Strategy and Action Plan 2014-2017* (2015) aims to "guide the ILO's efforts towards becoming an organization that is truly inclusive of women and men with disabilities" (ILO 2015, 1). It singles out six major objectives and, for each of them, presents a series of indicators (baselines) with corresponding targets to be achieved in the two biennia (2014-15 and 2016-17), and suggested activities. This schematic presentation is preceded by an Introduction and a description of guiding principles and strategic goals whose discursive articulation is particularly interesting and amenable to critical investigation.

The document has a significant sub-title, *A Twin-track Approach of Mainstreaming and Disability-specific Actions*, which highlights the need for integrated activities and, at the same time, suggests that inclusion cannot be achieved without a comprehensive policy extending far beyond the scope of measures and projects developed only for persons with disabilities. Actually, the whole document hinges on disability *inclusion*, and emphasises this concept much more than the UN Convention itself.

A small box (page 1 of the Introduction) gives a definition of *disability inclusion*:

> Broadly speaking, disability inclusion refers to promoting and ensuring the participation of people with disabilities in education, training and employment and all aspects of society and providing the necessary support and reasonable accommodation so that they can fully participate. (ILO 2015, 1)

The keyword is *participation*: people with disability have the *right* to participate, and it is necessary to make it possible for them to exercise this right. *Support* and *reasonable accommodation* (one of the crucial concepts defined in the CRPD) are not offered as a compensation for an unfortunate condition, but are functional to guaranteeing equal opportunities. This approach marks a revolution in the history of disability policies. Mere *integration* of persons with disabilities implies that help is needed to compensate for a deficit, and the final aim is to make persons with disabilities as similar as possible to other people. *Inclusion*, on the other hand, is based on respect for difference, and stems from the conviction that all members of a group are different and that individual qualities have to be enhanced

(Ebersold 2005 and 2009; Gardou 2012). As a consequence, any intervention in favour of disadvantaged members of society implies respect for their diversity, and cannot be limited to single, isolated actions but must aim to change the system as a whole. In this respect, the collocation of disability issues within the global ILO policy framework, widely emphasized in the Introduction, exemplarily testifies to the inclusive attitude of the agency.

From a terminological point of view, *inclusion* is a crucial word, which synthesizes the paradigm shift from rehabilitating help to non-discrimination. A quantitative analysis of the plan, carried out with Wordsmith Tools 4.0 (Scott 2004), confirms the key role of *inclusion*: the word ranks 11th, with 58 occurrences (or 1.20%); if we consider also the 4 occurrences of *inclusive* the total rate is 1.28%. This is a very high frequency for a content word, second only to *disability/ies*, which quite expectedly display a frequency of 3.34%. It is interesting to note that in the CRPD there is no definition of inclusion, though it is listed as a general principle; in the Convention, the word is definitely underrepresented: only 6 occurrences (or 0.05%) + 4 occurrences of *inclusive* (0.04%), for a total of 0.09%. *Inclusion* occurs only with reference to specific social contexts (school, work, community life, etc.). In other words, though the concept is implied in the ideological structure of the treaty, it is rarely lexicalized.

As work is one of the most crucial areas for the implementation of inclusive policies, the ILO strategic plan refers to the ideological framework of the Convention and develops its approach, aiming to apply one of its fundamental principles. The close link with the Convention is confirmed throughout the ILO document. The adoption of the Convention is mentioned as a key event, marking the shift to a human-rights based approach, with great emphasis being placed on non-discrimination. Incidentally, it is interesting to note that although the text of the CRPD hardly mentions development and does not explicitly refer to the economic implications of the concept, disability inclusion is presented as "a human rights as well as a development issue" (ILO 2015, 2), in line with the fundamental aims of the UN treaty.

The synergy with the Convention is further confirmed by the guiding principles listed in the opening section of the actual *Disability Inclusion Strategy* (ILO 2015, 5):

1. non-discrimination;
2. equality of opportunity;
3. accessibility;
4. respect for disability as part of human diversity;
5. gender equality;
6. involvement of PWD through their representative organizations.

The first five principles are featured also in Art. 3 of the CRPD, which further includes participation/inclusion, as well as respect for dignity and respect for the evolving capacities of children.

Considering that the whole strategy plan is an inclusion instrument, the ILO document actually adopts 6 out of the 8 fundamental principles indicated in the CRPD, and adds a further element, which is in close relationship with the general principle of representation in the working context. There are no remarkable differences in the wording, apart from the use of the word *gender*. As a matter of fact, in the Convention the principle is listed as "equality between men and women", and the word *gender* has only 6 occurrences, half of them in Art. 16, which is devoted to exploitation, violence and abuse. The use of "men and women" emphasizes the reference to actual people, in opposition to the more abstract notion of gender. The word *gender*, on the other hand, is typical of ILO's language, and in particular of the section within the organization which is responsible for this document, the Gender, Equality and Diversity Branch. However, a more concrete representation can be found also in the text of the strategic plan: despite the adoption of the expression "persons with disabilities" officially recognized as politically correct in the Convention, the phrase "women and men with disabilities" occurs 15 times, sometimes in crucial sentences illustrating the inclusive approach of the document, as in the opening statement describing the aim of the plan, quoted above, and in the following example:

> To achieve fully the ILO's mission of contributing to peace, prosperity and progress by advancing the creation of decent work opportunities for *all women and men*, it is important to effectively and systematically include *women and men* with disabilities. (ILO 2015, 1; my emphasis)

As mentioned above, the ILO strategy "sets out to achieve six distinct, interconnected and mutually complementary results which are supported by effective internal and external communication measures" (ILO 2015, 5). A quick review of the chosen objectives clearly reveals their connection with the UN Convention framework. Both the main contents of the strategy and the means implied for their implementation are inherently inclusive: persons with disabilities have to be taken into account in all ILO's activities; disability issues must be given adequate visibility, and disability awareness must be raised in all contexts, both in mainstream initiatives and through special projects, externally and internally. Partnership with other UN agencies and international organizations is another strategic element, which characterizes the policy of implementation of the Convention in all social and economic sectors.

On the whole, the *Disability Inclusion Strategy and Action Plan* offers a synthetic but complex presentation of ILO disability policy, which is developed in tune with the innovative approach promoted by the CRPD, and consistently adopts its pivotal concepts and fundamental vocabulary. This is however a document outlining the general policy of the Agency and its adoption is no guarantee that the principles included are actually implemented in corporate strategies and actions. It is therefore crucial to investigate how these principles are reflected in companies' attitudes. For this reason, the analysis will now focus on the working paper on company practices, which, being the result of the joint effort of the Skills and Employability Department and the Bureau for Employer's Activities, is an interesting example of both institutional and corporate communication.

3. Disability in the Workplace: Company Practices

3.1. *Methodology and definitions*

The working paper *Disability in the Workplace: Company Practices* (ILO 2010), a compilation of 25 company profiles illustrating corporate disability policies, is an important knowledge sharing initiative of the ILO *Global Business and Disability Network*.

Aiming to identify good practices, the Network produced this report in order to explore the presence of persons with disabilities in the companies, with a view to the business potential of this segment both for the workforce and for the market. As stated in the Introduction: "The business case outlines the benefits of a diverse workforce, inclusive of disabled persons" (ILO 2010, 1). Examining the question in detail, it emerges that there are at least four reasons for focusing on persons with disabilities (PWDs):

1. PWDs make good employees;
2. PWDs are a source of skills and talents;
3. PWDs and their families represent an important market segment;
4. PWDs can contribute to overall diversity in the workplace and enhance a company's image.

The company profiles discuss these aspects, and also reflect the more general issues of non-discrimination and human rights. They are not the result of independent analysis, but can be considered as 'snapshots' of company action based on self-report. The ILO staff wrote the profiles on the basis of information available through company websites and reports, and after consultation with company representatives. Because of this meth-

odological approach, the profiles are not perfectly consistent. There is of course a standard structure to the profiles, but the information offered by each single company is differently organized and reflects an approach which is specific to the company.

Basically, the company profiles contain policy statements and illustrate inclusive practices with three prevailing aims: to attract, retain and accommodate PWDs; to develop products addressing their needs as customers; to support them in the community. Practices mentioned in the Introduction are divided into three groups: those related to the company's internal operation; those aiming for the promotion of recruitment, training and retention of persons with disabilities; and those aimed at external cooperation in order to promote inclusion and reach CSR goals [4].

Not only does the Introduction illustrate these methodological aspects, but it also gives definitions for some crucial expressions used in disability discourse. In the final, interesting paragraph *Language and Definitions* reference is made to the *Code of Practice on Managing Disability in the Workplace* as well as to the UN Convention, to define the very concept of disability as well as *reasonable accommodation* and *universal design*. First of all, it is made clear that the expressions "people with disabilities" and "disabled people" are used interchangeably "reflecting common usage in most parts of the world" (ILO 2010, 3). Actually, the language choice of the Convention was univocally in favour of "persons with disabilities", in accordance with the person-first principle. *Disabled people*, however, is still used and present even in documents issued by the UN. ILO itself, in its *Code of Practice*, defines a "disabled person" as "an individual whose prospects of securing, returning to, retaining and advancing in suitable employment are substantially reduced as a result of a duly recognized physical, sensory, intellectual or mental impairment". According to this definition, quoted in the Introduction, disability is the result of an impairment. The Introduction, however, refers also to the UN Convention, described as "a comprehensive human right Convention for people with disabilities", and reports:

> [...] the Convention recognizes disability as an 'evolving concept', stating that "persons with disabilities *include* those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which *in interaction with various barriers* may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others". (ILO 2010, 3; my emphasis)

This description of disability is profoundly different: on the one hand, it is no definition proper, as the concept of disability cannot be described once

[4] See *infra*, § 3.2.1. A list of all mentioned practices is given in *Table 2*.

and for all, and there is no closed list of persons with disabilities (see the use of the verb *include*); on the other hand, the impairment is not a cause of disability *per se*, but disability is generated *in interaction with* physical, social or cultural barriers, which *hinder* full participation – according to the bio-psycho-social model accepted in the ICF classification. In this respect, the linguistic explanations offered reveal a high level of attention for the most recent evolution of the concept of disability.

For *reasonable accommodation* and *universal design* definitions are offered which quote the UN Convention:

> The term reasonable accommodation, according to the UNCRPD "means necessary and appropriate modification and adjustment not imposing a disproportionate or undue burden, where needed in a particular case, to ensure to persons with disabilities the enjoyment or exercise on an equal basis with others of *all human rights and fundamental freedoms*".
>
> Again according to the UNCRPD, universal design means "the design of products, environments, programmes and services to be usable by all people, to the great extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design. 'Universal design' shall not exclude assistive devices for particular groups of persons with disabilities where this is needed". (ILO 2010, 3; my emphasis).

The reference to *human rights* is crucial, as the effort to create equal opportunities and promote *inclusion* is justified by the extreme importance of the whole question, which is intertwined with essential and primary needs that must be met for all people.

The focus on these concepts, which are fundamental for inclusion in the workplace, confirms that the working paper, and the profiles, are in close connection with the fundamentals of disability policies illustrated with explicit reference to the UN Convention.

3.2. *The profiles*

The bulk of the working paper is represented by the 25 company profiles: in *Table 1*, a list of the companies involved is provided.

The companies belong to various sectors, which can be classified as follows: technology (6), services (5), distribution (4), finance (3), manufacturing (3), telecommunication (3), holding (1). The total revenues indicated for each company vary between a minimum of 0.8 billion USD and a maximum of 122 billion USD, with an average value of ca. 856 b. USD; the total number of employees ranges between 4,000 and 475,000 (average ca. 3.2 million).

Table 1. – List of companies.

• Accor	• IBM	• Sony
• Carrefour	• Kyobo Life Insurance	• Telefónica
• Cisco	• Manpower	• Telenor
• Delta Holding	• Marks & Spencer	• Telstra
• Dow	• Microsoft	• Walgreens
• Ernst & Young	• Mphasis	• Westpac
• Fast Retailing	• Nokia	• Wipro
• Grundfos	• Samsung Electro-Mechanics	
• Honda Motor	• Sodexo	

The profiles are presented in alphabetical order, and each of them opens with the name of the company and immediately gives some information and data about the company as a whole. The profile is then structured in 5 paragraphs: Hiring and retention, Products and services (not relevant for all companies), CSR, Other information, References. In what follows, quantitative data concerning both practices dealt with and word frequencies will be analysed (§ 3.2.1): the former stem from close reading of the texts, aiming to single out which practices mentioned in the Introduction are actually present in each single profile; the latter are obtained automatically (using Wordsmith Tools). The attention will focus on the presentation approach and on policy declarations, and will be conducted within a discourse analytical perspective (§ 3.2.2).

3.2.1. Quantitative data

The texts were analyzed to find whether the practices listed in the Introduction were mentioned. *Table 2* provides a synopsis of the 16 practices and the number of profiles where they are mentioned.

Among the internal action practices, benchmarking is the most common, followed by policy statements (which will be examined in detail, § 3.2.2) and accessibility; awareness training for management and co-workers is also popular and indicative of an inclusive effort. Among the practices related to persons with disabilities, recruitment issues are always present, while training and reasonable accommodation also play a significant role. As for external cooperation, the interaction with bodies and organizations is important for all companies: cooperation is always mentioned at least in one of the two areas singled out in the list (cooperation with governments TU/NGOs and/or cooperation with organizations of persons with disabilities). Networking also scores high (14 out of the 25 companies mention it).

Table 2. – Practices and their occurrence in profiles.

• Policy statements	21
• Benchmarking	25
• Accessibility	22
• Employee disability networks	6
• Awareness training	16
• Recruitment programmes	25
• Training/mentorship etc.	18
• Reasonable accommodation	17
• Allocated human resources	11
• Business with Entrepreneurs WD	4
• Influence on suppliers	11
• Employee volunteering	7
• Cooperation with TU/Gov/NGOs	21
• Cooperation with disability organizations	19
• Accessibility standards and promotion	6
• Participation in networks	14

Furthermore, a close reading of the profiles reveals that special or local programmes are frequently described (20), often in a historical perspective, and publications or spots are sometimes mentioned (7). In the CSR section at least one of the following is mentioned: sponsorship/participation in events, charity. Charity initiatives are mentioned in 20 profiles, sometimes with indication of the sums allocated to projects.

In order to explore the language used, the corpus comprising the texts of all profiles was analyzed with Wordsmith Tools to obtain a frequency list. The most frequent content words are listed in *Table 3*.

Table 3. – List of highest ranking content words.

Rank	Word	Occurrences	%
9	Disabilities	430	1.44
10	People	372	1.25
12	Company	236	0.79
15	Disability	179	0.60
16	Disabled	178	0.60
19	Employees	167	0.56

The prevalence of words clearly connected with the factual aspects of profiles is not surprising. The high frequency of *disabled* is however to be noted, as it reflects the language choice described in the Introduction, and confirms

that the person-first approach recommended by the UN Convention is not consistently adopted. In *Table 4* some relevant content words are listed.

Table 4. – Further content words.

Rank	Word	Occurrences	%
33	Accessibility	89	0.30
60	Accessible	54	0.18
61	Diversity	54	0.18
94	Opportunities	40	0.13
95	Discrimination	39	0.13

The relevance of the concept of *accessibility* in the workplace is confirmed by word frequency; similarly, *diversity* displays a remarkably high rank. In comparison, *opportunities* and *discrimination* are less represented. It is worth examining two more concepts: *inclusion* and *accommodation*.

*Inclus** has a total of 64 occurrences (or 0.21%), followed by 35 (0.12%) for *inclusion* and 29 (0.10%) for *inclusive*. Concordance lines show that *inclusion* occurs 7 times in denominations (programmes, agencies, etc.) and is connected with the concept of diversity a further 8 times. *Inclusive*, on the other hand, occurs 11 times in the phrase *inclusive (working) environment* (and twice in *inclusive workplace*).

*Accommodat** occurs 40 times (0.13%), 10 times (0.03%) as a verb, and 30 (0.10%) as a noun. *Accommodate* is mostly used in connection with the persons as objects of the accommodation effort (accommodate people with disabilities / disabled persons / employees with disabilities). *Accommodation* occurs 8 times in the expression *reasonable accommodation* and 6 times in *workplace (job) accommodation*; three times it is connected with *costs*.

3.2.2. Approach and policy statements

In each profile, the first section, *Hiring and Retention*, generally opens with a policy statement concerning disability (20), while in three cases the statement is related to diversity policies in general[5]. Two companies lack altogether a policy statement; they both explicitly state this circumstance, and their non-discriminating attitude is introduced through a concessive pattern:

[5] However, in one case (Delta Holding) *health* is mentioned, in another (Grundfoss) reference is made to *reduced work capabilities*, and in the third (Sony) to *physical limitation*.

> Kyobo *does not have* a non-discrimination or equal opportunity statement as part of its hiring policy. *However*, when making hiring decisions, the company seeks to find the best-qualified candidates based on their abilities and does not discriminate based on disability or any other characteristic. (ILO 2010, 36; my emphasis)

> SEM *does not have* a non-discrimination statement embedded in its hiring policy. *However*, discrimination against PWD is strictly prohibited throughout the company's employment process. (ILO 2010, 56; my emphasis)

In most profiles, the section is focused on past experience and/or future projects, with frequent reference to local initiatives. About half of the companies emphasize their history, sometime at local level; 13 give precise figures related to their most important projects. The narrative approach is particularly evident in the following examples, characterized by time reference and past tense verb forms:

> IBM's efforts to promote workforce diversity and equal opportunity date back to 1899, when the company hired its first black male employee and three women, well before non-discrimination legislation existed. In 1914, IBM hired its first disabled employee and soon after began to recruit disabled veterans of World War I. Ever since, IBM has introduced many different programmes to create an inclusive workforce. (ILO 2010, 32)

> Telefonica's work in the field of disability started in 1974 when it established the Telefonica Disabled Attention Association (ATAM), an association that promotes the social integration and employment of PWD. (ILO 2010, 65)

> In 2001, Westpac registered its first Disability discrimination Action Plan (DDAP) with the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission [...]. In 2006, Westpac revised the DAAP [...]. It established a mandatory awareness training programme [...]. (ILO 2010, 78)

Arguments in favour of hiring persons with disabilities are used more rarely, sometimes in combination with the narrative approach. Fast Retailing is an interesting example:

> Until early 2001, Fast Retailing was barely meeting the minimum requirement of hiring people with disabilities stipulated by the Japanese employment law and quota system. However the company began receiving reports from UNIQLO's Okinawa store describing *significant improvements in teamwork and customer service* after it had hired disabled persons. UNIQLO' president at the time took note of the situation and decided to expand the number of employees with disabilities by hiring at least one disabled person at each store. (ILO 2010, 23; my emphasis)

The company uses a special version of the 'good employee argument' ('employees with disabilities improve the working environment'), embedding it in the company's history. Telenor also exploits a narrative approach, and introduces the 'skills and talent argument' combined with a 'business argument' ('direct and indirect benefits'):

> In 1996 Telenor acquired April Data, a company that had been running a training programme for PWD. Wanting to test a similar programme under its roof, Telenor Norway launched a version of its own as Telenor Open Mind [...]. Telenor has benefited from its Open Mind programme by mobilizing *untapped human resources, finding motivated and qualified employees and reaping greater economic return* [...]. The social-economic savings consisted of *direct economic benefits* obtained by Telenor from the disabled employee's productivity and *indirect benefits* derived by society [...]. (ILO 2010, 69; my emphasis)

The 'talent argument' is also exploited by Manpower and Dow, while Nokia uses the 'diversity argument':

> The company's [Manpower] mission is to find the best in everyone and put it to work. In doing so, it has tapped into under-utilized and under-represented populations as *valuable talent pools*, particularly persons with disabilities. (ILO 2010, 39; my emphasis)

> [Dow] believes that qualified candidates and PWD are a *unique source of talent* who can deliver substantial value to the company, its customers and its community. (ILO 2010, 17; my emphasis)

> At Nokia *diversity i*s considered a key element of its business success. (ILO 2010, 53; my emphasis)

On the whole, arguments are offered in 8 profiles: *Table 5* summarizes the different arguments used and the way they are introduced.

As mentioned above, 23 profiles quote a policy statement, with two prevailing linguistic patterns: the concept of *discrimination* is exploited in 10 statements, either as a noun (4 times: the company fights / forbids / is free from d.) or as a verb (6: the company *does not* discriminate on the basis of / because of); in 8 cases the expressions *regardless of* (5) or *without regard to* (3) are used to describe the company's attitude towards employees (employees are recruited / treated / offered opportunities ... without regard to ...). Furthermore, 4 statements include a negative structure (*without* being hampered / *un*related to / *not* influenced by / *not* treated unfairly on the grounds of), while only in one case is the policy declaration formulated with an affirmative statement ("the company promotes equal opportunities [...] for all population segments, including [...]"). On the whole, policy

statements overwhelmingly contain a negative structure, implying a wider scenario in which certain actions are still performed, though they must be avoided.

Table 5. – The exploitation of arguments (8 profiles).

Arguments are presented:

- as bare statements (2)
- linked to
  - history of the company (3)
  - history of special programmes (2)
  - company's mission (1)

Arguments used:

- the talent and skills argument (4)
- the good employees argument (3)
- the diversity argument (2)
- the business argument (1)

All these structures introduce a list of conditions, which include disability in 20 cases. The list is mostly closed (15), while in 8 cases it is open, and contains expressions such as *including* / *such as* / *or any other*, etc. The number of conditions mentioned ranges from a minimum of 3 to a maximum of 19 (and in both these cases disability is not mentioned):

> Grundfos' Human Resource Policy states that all employees are treated equally regardless of gender, race and religion to ensure equal opportunities [...]. (ILO 2010, 26)

> [Delta Holding] will not discriminate based on sex, place of birth, language, race, skin color, age, pregnancy, health, nationality, religion, marital status, family ties, sexual choice, political or other beliefs, social origin, property, membership in political organizations, unions or any other personal feature. (ILO 2010, 14)

Disability is the most frequently mentioned condition (20 profiles, two of them specify *physical or mental disability* and one distinguishes *disability or physical impairment*), but three other conditions (*age*, *religion*, and *race*) display an almost as high a frequency (19). *Race* occurs 10 times together with *colour* (while *colour* without *race* occurs only once). *Nationality* (or *national origin*) is mentioned 17 times (and 4 times distinguished from *national origin* or *place of birth*); *ethnic origin* is also frequent (10 times)

and alternates with *ethnic preference / orientation*. *Marital status* scores 10, followed by conditions linked to family situation (7: family ties / pregnancy / parental status etc.). Seven conditions refer to the socio-economic situation (ancestry / property / social origin or status etc.); 6 to political opinion (or political / trade unions membership); *veteran status* is mentioned 6 times, *education* three times, while *language*, *hobbies*, *hours of work*, and *disfigurement* occur only once. The semantic field of gender deserves closer inspection, as the concept is introduced with different words and is very frequently modulated, as shown in *Table 6*.

Table 6. – The semantic field of gender.

gender or *gender identity* (3 both) or *gender status*	18
sexual orientation	12
sex	9
sex choice	1
gender reassignment	1
Concept modulation (13):	
2 elements (tot. 6 profiles)	
5 *gender* or *sex* + *sexual orientation*	
1 *sex* + *sex choice*	
3 elements (tot. 6 profiles)	
4 *gender* + *sexual orientation* + *sex* or *gender status* or *gender identity* or *gender reassignment*	
2 *gender identity* + *sexual orientation* + *sex*	
4 elements (tot. 1 profile)	
1 *gender* + *gender identity* + *sex* + *sexual orientation*	

The fact that all policy declarations refer to gender is no surprise, but it is remarkable that the majority of profiles (13) modulate the concept, with great attention for the distinction between self-perception and social recognition on the one hand, and for physical vs. psychological implications on the other. It lies outside the scope of this research to investigate the nuances of gender representation; it is worth noting, however, that the massive presence of gender-related words and concepts reflects both the focus on personal features (like age, race, etc.) and the importance given to individual choice in the interpretation of those features (as also in the case of nationality / ethnicity).

On the whole, the analysis of the conditions mentioned in the profiles reveals that social roles, opinions and beliefs are the least frequently considered, apart from religion. The emphasis is on the personal characteristics of the individual.

4. Comments and conclusions

This investigation was carried out with the aim to verify if and how the companies' policies presented in the working paper *Disability in the Workplace* reflect the attitude of ILO, as illustrated it its most recent Action Plan. The analysis of the working paper, and in particular of the companies' profiles, indicates that the ILO approach to disability is basically accepted by the companies involved, and the main goals of the policy of the agency are recognized and pursued. Disability is included among the numerous forms of *diversity* that need to be accepted as part of the variation that characterizes human life. Within this 'ecological' framework, it comes as no surprise that companies' policy statements include a wide range of conditions (an average of 9.8), mainly linked to personal characters of the individual. Gender (and its semantic area) is the most systematically represented, in line with the denomination of the ILO branch (GED: Gender, Equality, and Diversity).

The companies' profiles also replicate ILO's focus on inclusion, a fundamental concept in disability policies aiming to implement the principles promoted by the UN Convention. As shown by frequency data, *inclusion* mainly refers to the working environment and is often connected with the idea of diversity. *Accessibility* is another key word and concept, as all practices offering accessibility strongly contribute to the creation of an inclusive environment. *Accommodation* also plays a relevant role, but the expression *reasonable accommodation* is less frequently mentioned, probably because it is a more technical concept, less relevant for the illustration of the strategic positioning of a company towards disability issues. *Discrimination*, which is a fundamental principle for ILO, is comparatively less frequently mentioned in the profiles, and even in policy statements explicit reference to discrimination is not regular.

Despite the wording, however, the statements are all evidently anti-discriminatory: companies mostly use negative structures to declare their intention to *avoid* practices that could create differences, thus implying the persistence of discriminating attitudes in the outside world.

In relation to their attitude towards persons with disabilities, companies give hiring (and training) a prominent role, thus implicitly recognizing the right to work and active participation; however, they also emphasize the importance of charity, which is closely linked to Corporate Social Responsibility.

Arguments in favour of persons with disabilities are rarely exploited, and in general only in connection with past experience and company narrative. This occurs despite the importance attributed to the business case in

the Introduction of the working paper, and suggests that a full recognition of the advantages of disabilities policies is still to come.

In its *Code of Practice*, mentioned in the working paper's Introduction, ILO still proposes a definition of disability based on impairment, with no consideration for environmental barriers. Though the innovative UN Convention approach is also explicitly mentioned, the idea of impairment as the direct cause of disability is often implied in companies' profiles, starting from policy declarations which mention disability together with other conditions mostly reflecting personal characteristics or status (and occasionally refer to *health*, *physical characteristics*, *impairment*). From this perspective, which replicates the traditional medical paradigm, the way society reacts to disability can lead to mere *integration*, implying that it is necessary to help persons with disabilities in their process of adapting to existing contexts, but *inclusion* as a global process in which they play an active role is still excluded. On the other hand, the connection with diversity issues in general can be a symptom of inclusion, as in this respect human rights play a fundamental role and a social paradigm is activated. However, the concept of disability runs the risk of losing its specificity, being introduced on a par with a variety of conditions involving different features and having different implications.

To conclude, the ambition of the UN Convention to include disability in all aspects of social life is difficult to put into practice. The ILO, which is a UN agency, is by no means consistent in adopting the Convention's definitions and language, and its discourse still reflects the ambiguities of an incomplete adhesion to the new disability paradigm. Companies, in their turn, choose the diversity approach, which on the one hand favours the development of inclusive policies, but, on the other, dilutes the concept of disability, depriving it of a crucial feature: the insurgence of incapacity of performing a task *because of* the interaction between the individual and the world around.

Further investigation on more recent texts and involving the analysis of documents directly produced by companies, with special attention for policy declarations accessible on their websites, could provide further evidence to rely on in order to evaluate the attitudes prevailing in the corporate world, thus contributing to describing the discourse of disability in the workplace.

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