

The European Observatory for Inclusive Employment and the SDGs

Case study for Groep Maatwerk / Flanders, Belgium

The role of companies employing persons with disabilities as sub-contractors for other companies: the case of WAAK and its “in-house” services

Introduction and background information

In this case study, it will be presented how companies employing significant percentages of persons with disabilities work for their customer companies as “sub-contractors” and set up so-called “work enclaves” within the customer’s facilities. It will show the relationship between the company employing persons with disabilities and the customer company, how new business relationships are installed within settled or new entities, how job coaches guide the daily activities of the workers in facilities and how these collaborations provide benefits for all involved parties.

As an example, we will take a closer look at the activities of WAAK, a social enterprise from Kortrijk in West Flanders, Belgium. WAAK is a member of Groep Maatwerk, the representative from Flanders / Belgium in the Observatory project and the umbrella organisation of “custom work companies” that employ persons with disabilities in Flanders.

WAAK was founded in 1965 and is a social enterprise and a private initiative, with no profit goal. WAAK has regular mainstream economy clients and suppliers, makes profit and losses as regular mainstream companies do, but handles its business-driven decision processes without neglecting its social mission, as it is also stated on its website and code of conduct. As other social enterprises in Belgium, WAAK has to make up its own financing through its own business activities and sales, while also receiving subsidies for each person with disability it employs. The company however has to follow the same rules that apply to all other regular companies on the labour market, with the most important rules hereby applying to health and safety of its workers. They are following ISO standards and the workers are educated and trained according to these standards to ensure that all regulations are complied with.

“To provide our customer with tailor-made solutions through the creation of adapted jobs for our employees with working disabilities. That’s what it is all about.”

Tim Vannieuwenhuysse, General Manager Group WAAK, as mentioned on the [WAAK website](#)

Within Belgium, WAAK is one of the biggest companies in its sector, but it also has an international orientation. One third of the companies’ activities are directed towards export to more than 20 different countries. Overall, WAAK has an annual turnover of around 48 million. The company employs around 2,000 people, of which approximately 1,400 are persons with disabilities. Of these employees, around 70% are persons with cognitive disabilities. Further, WAAK employs around 200 job coaches and instructors that work together with the employees with disabilities, as well as around 200 other production employees, technicians and machine operators. Finally, around 200 staff workers are employed in administrative jobs, the IT or the sales department.

The company has five main business sector activities. Firstly, they work on cable harness assembly, which are supplied to clients who use it for their products, for instance for cars, electronics, or heating and ventilation appliances. HVAC customers also make up the largest share of WAAK’s client base. Secondly, WAAK provides fully integrated work on metal products for clients, for example for specific products such as chariots or fryers. Another area in which WAAK is active is logistics, where they handle packaging of a variety of products. The “WAAK Green and Clean” business division provides greenkeeping services for companies as well for public authorities and municipalities. Lastly, the fifth business division is the “WAAK in-house” branch, which establishes the so-called “work enclaves” at the customer’s own working facilities and performs numerous activities directly on-site. Some of these services include fine-motoric, some other rather rough-motoric activities, depending on the client’s needs and the capabilities of the different employees located at the work enclave. For this, a

heterogeneous matching is needed. This case study will take a closer look at this last business branch and explain how the work enclaves are functioning.

The establishment of “work enclaves” and the cooperation between WAAK as a sub-contractor and the customer company

Name	The social enterprise WAAK and its cooperation with customer companies to set up work enclaves for its employees to work on-site the customer’s facilities
Objectives	Creating employment opportunities in inclusive working environments for employees with disabilities
Activities	Industrial, fine-motoric and rough-motoric tasks for client company’s production processes
Target groups	Employees with disabilities, 70% cognitive disabilities
Timeline	Since 1965
Location	Across Flanders, Belgium
Stakeholders	WAAK, customer companies

The so-called work enclaves in Belgium are inclusive work environments in which a group of workers is dispatched to work on the premises of a client company under the guidance of a job coach. At WAAK, most work enclaves include five to ten employees, and several with up to 25 persons working. One work enclave even includes a 100 workers. Of the total 1,400 employees with disabilities at WAAK, approximately 450 persons, so almost one third, work outside of WAAK’s own facilities. This means either in a work enclave at the customer’s setting or in WAAK’s Green and Clean branch, which is also usually set at a customer’s facility. The employees working in these on-site settings however are still under WAAK’s full responsibility and on WAAK’s payroll.

In the prospect of new customers where potential new work enclaves could be established WAAK is looking explicitly for jobs that match its workforce’s capabilities, focusing strongly on the abilities, and not the disabilities of its employees. Most “sales” activities for work enclaves of WAAK are conducted through personal contact with the customer, in which the work model can be explained thoroughly to ensure a long-term commitment of the client. This takes place at business exhibitions, through calls and networking. A successful strategy is the so-called “copy-paste-strategy”: When a work enclave seems to be functioning well in one industry sector, other companies from the same sector are being contacted to present the work enclave model. An example is the Flemish brewery sector, in which WAAK could establish already several work enclaves at different breweries in its region. The main focus however does not always lay on selling its “product” the workforce, but to guarantee that WAAK’s employees could sustainably and safely be employed at the customer’s site. When looking to establish a new work enclave, WAAK therefore carefully selects the customer company’s settings by certain criteria, the so-called “ABCD” – criteria:

- A. **Adaptable:** WAAK is looking for workplaces that can be adapted to all individual needs of its employees, to ensure that they can safely and correctly perform the required activity to the satisfaction of the customer.
- B. **“Begeleiden”** (To accompany / to guide): The physical presence of the job coach needs to be guaranteed on-site at all times. This is required by Belgian labour law. She or he is essential to ensure safety of the workers and to guarantee a smooth functioning of the operations. The job coach is employed by WAAK and often educated as a social worker or a similar background, as well as experienced in the work with persons from disadvantaged groups. Similar to the “support units” in Spain, also in the Belgian system the job coach supports the employees in all of their daily activities with guidance and advice. The job coach is also described as the “anchor” of the work enclave, as she or he is the main contact point in between the workers and the customer and there to detect problems as early as possible to ensure that the team of workers is safe and healthy and that the business activity is performed to the customer’s satisfaction. In larger work enclaves, several job coaches are sharing the task. The ratio is usually 1-7, with one job coach being responsible for approximately seven employees.
- C. **Communication:** Many companies unfortunately still have prejudices and economically driven hesitations for employing persons with disabilities in their facilities. It is therefore crucial that WAAK has extensive preparation discussions with the companies before establishing a work enclave, to set the right expectations, to raise awareness and to clarify potential issues and questions.
- D. **“Duurzaam”** (Sustainable) : It is very important for WAAK to establish only work enclaves that are set to be installed on the long-term. It shall provide stability for all involved parties, and especially for the employees. Some production facilities are of course dependant on seasonal work, but in general it is expected to provide

long-term employment for the workers. However, in the worst case scenario, the employment contract of a worker does not end should a work enclave be closed again. The employee can simply return to WAAK and be employed in a regular custom work setting again if necessary and wished for.

Once all of these criteria are fulfilled and the customer is committed, WAAK sets up the work enclave at the customer's facilities and installs all necessary equipment for the adaptation of the workplace. WAAK puts a lot of effort in making the employees as satisfied as possible at the workplace and also has a system of "improvement boards", in which employees can sound their needs. In these groups, the employees together with job coaches, representatives of trade unions and management, can decide together what is needed to change and what makes sense economically. Every work enclave is different, as the working conditions depends strongly on the environment, the work task itself, the customer company and other circumstances.

An advantage for the employees with disabilities of working in a work enclave system over a regular employment setting at for example WAAK's own facilities, is the proximity to the customer. According to Mr Tim Vannieuwenhuysse, General Manager of WAAK, the employee "feels the pressure" more, which one the hand makes the employment more difficult and also tends to lead to some employees not being able to work in such a setting. But on the other hand, it can be seen that once an employee starts in a work enclave, she or he develops much faster, grows proud of her or his work and feels as part of a team and a bigger cause. Usually, the employees who work in these settings, do not want to go back to the employment at WAAK's own custom work settings and prefer being deployed at the customer's facilities.

The customer company on the other side has several benefits as well. It can firstly provide a contribution to society by making its workforce more inclusive and supporting persons with disabilities. Further, it can outsource activities for which it does not the capacities to WAAK as a sub-contractor, without actually outsourcing it to a different location and without losing overview and control of the operations.

For WAAK as well, the social mission that is deeply embedded in its roots as described above, is crucial in continuing to find employment opportunities for persons with disabilities in inclusive environments at the customer site, as close to the open labour market as well. Further, also for WAAK as a company, the direct employment of the employees at the customer plays out economically. They are paid hour-by-hour without fixed costs, which also makes calculation and administration much easier.

Finally, for larger society, this type of employment setting brings important benefits. Through the marketing work of WAAK and also Groep Maatwerk, the public sees that persons with disabilities can work everywhere if they received the appropriate support and work in the right environment with the necessary adaptations to the workplace. Work enclaves prove that employees with disabilities can become part of regular open labour market companies and that they can provide a valuable contribution to the economy.

Main success factors and challenges of WAAK's in-house business activities

A strong success driver for the work enclaves is the work of the job coaches, who guide their teams with their extensive experience and liaise directly with the customer in case of problems. They are also one of the convincing arguments when attempting to establish new work enclaves in a customer's existing or newly built setting. However, it is easier to install new work enclaves at larger companies, that may already have experience with inclusive working settings or who simply have more capacities to acquire all necessary facilities and equipment for a new work enclave.

"The easiest sale is with bigger companies, that have a large workforce and more space to come in with a work enclave. When they have experiences of working with different groups within their own workforce, they are more receptive to the daily business in a work enclave."

Tim Vannieuwenhuysse, General Manager Group WAAK

Another success driver for WAAK is that it can act rather freely. It can recruit and hire people based on own and customer demands, and not only to comply with laws. As it acts as a regular company, with business demands and aiming to make more sales, it can choose which markets it would like to explore and can be innovative. This is also why and how the work enclaves were established.

Finally, the success of WAAK’s work model is of course strongly dependent on its workforce. The drive and power with which the employees contribute to their teams within the work enclaves really makes WAAK stand out and achieve customer satisfaction. Employees grow more self-confident when working on-site at the customer and it shows that they are proud of contributing and being part of the customer company’s operations, which makes them feel more included in society as well.

However, the success of the work enclaves was not there from Day 1. Once they are installed and running, they proved to be benefitting all involved parties, as described above. But WAAK also has to deal with several challenges when establishing new work enclaves and to maintain the existing ones. For instance, it is very hard for WAAK to find new business opportunities and to find companies that are willing to start such a new working model in their existing workplace. These fears are usually either motivated by stigma and prejudices to the work of persons with disabilities, or by economic concerns and insufficient capacities. At the same time, the customer company also has to fulfil the ABCD criteria, otherwise WAAK will not agree to cooperate in a work enclave model. Therefore, work enclaves often start very small with just a few workers, and then grow over time when both WAAK and the client are happy with the outcome of the collaboration. Overall, the establishment of a work enclave is a very slow process and depends a lot on relationship building over time.

Drivers and success factors	Challenges and learning points
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Job coaches as anchors and facilitators at client site - Free movement of WAAK as economic actor within the regulatory framework - Employee contribution and growing confidence over time at client site 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - New business opportunities - Slow establishment process and small work enclaves at beginning only - Stigma and prejudices in society

Recommendations to other organisations willing to engage in a similar process

As the process of setting up work enclaves within customer facilities is a long and difficult process, a clear recommendation from WAAK is to start slowly and with bigger client companies first, that have the right capacities. Crucial is also to follow the ABCD criteria to ensure a long-term and sustainable employment for the workforce to achieve a benefitting setting for everyone involved. Further, the balance between the economic goals and the social mission of work enclaves should be maintained at all times, as this is the largest challenge and responsibility at the same time.

“I think it’s important that everybody in our society contributes, in the appropriate way every individual can. The economic situation currently is difficult and a strong workforce is needed. It does not help anyone if a person is at home and feels bad for not being able to contribute. In the work enclaves, our employees can fulfil tasks that are matched to their abilities and can be a part of a team and a production. The work is good for everyone, us as a company, the customer company, the employee and society. We call it a ‘win-win-win-win-situation’.

Tim Vannieuwenhuysse, General Manager Group WAAK

Conclusion

If established in a sustainable way with all necessary criteria fulfilled, a work enclave such as the ones set up by WAAK, can become valuable contributions to the client company’s business operations and overall to a more inclusive labour market and society. The case study shows that in various sectors, employees with disabilities are helping companies to reach their on-site potential and perform activities they would usually have to outsource.

Further, it gives companies the possibility to create a more inclusive environment within their workforce and their facilities. At the same time, for WAAK as a company employing a significant share of workers with disabilities, work enclaves bring an economic advantage and made it possible to provide their employees with more independence and to boost their self-confidence.

About the Observatory

Created in 2018, the European Observatory for Inclusive Employment and Sustainable Development Goals aims to build an EU partnership dealing with the challenges faced by social economy organisations and companies employing a significant percentage of persons with disabilities in Europe, while seizing the opportunities stemming from these. Members include:

National member organisations from Spain, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Sweden and Slovenia	
European network partners	
Observer organisations	

In its first phase of actions over 2018-20, the Observatory aims to analyse how these organisations and companies provide work and employment opportunities to men and women with disabilities and effectively include them into the labour market and society in Europe.

Case study methodology

This case study is part of a series of six - one for each national member organisations of the Observatory. The overall objective is to contribute to better understand how persons with disabilities actually access economic opportunities, while recognising the diverse legal forms and adopted approach towards employment of workers with disabilities taken throughout Europe. The data collection process was qualitative in nature and conducted by Weber Shandwick, acting as the Observatory Secretariat. It consisted of a brief document review and semi-structured interviews with the key contact persons involved. Each case study was drafted by Weber Shandwick and approved by the respective national member organisation before being publicly released.

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