

## The European Observatory for Inclusive Employment and the SDGs

### Case study for Fundación ONCE / Spain

#### Increasing skills and employability of workers with disabilities through continuous professional, personal and social support: The case of ILUNION’s Support Units within Special Employment Centres in Spain

##### Introduction and background information

In 2006, the Royal Decree 469 introduced a fundamental change to the labour market system and the approach of employing persons with disabilities in Spain: the so-called “Support Units” were created. Its goal was to increase the “personal and social adjustment measures” in Special Employment Centres (Centros Especiales de Empleo – CEEs) and to improve the overall employment conditions of workers with disabilities. The law stipulated that every CEE in Spain has to now include a Support Unit with trained staff to support the work of the employees with disabilities. It also spells out the specific tasks, composition and financial support of these units (see more detailed information in **Box 1**). CEEs are companies that provide job opportunities for persons with disabilities while competing on the mainstream economic market, selling a variety of products and/or services. While being a competitive economic actor and providing the same salaries to their employees as those in open labour market companies, the main objective of CEEs is labour market integration of persons with disabilities. ILUNION has the mission to provide employment opportunities for persons with disabilities and is part of the ONCE Social Group. From 2007 onwards, it has implemented this change in Spanish law into all of its CEEs and has since then offered a more holistic support to the daily work of its employees with disabilities in CEEs across Spain.

The ONCE Social Group (Grupo Social ONCE) is composed of three organisations: ONCE (Organización Nacional de Ciegos Españoles), the historical national organisation of Spanish blind and partially-sighted people, which allocates part of its proceeds to other groups of persons with disabilities through the ONCE Foundation (Fundación ONCE), and finally ILUNION, as the business branch which operates two types of companies (social enterprises and CEEs). ILUNION is running overall 492 companies across Spain, of which 273 are legally recognised as CEEs. CEEs are required to employ at least 70% of persons with disabilities within their workforce. Of ILUNION’s overall 35,800 employees, 17,485 are persons with disabilities, of which a large majority (87%) work in CEEs. Within ILUNION’s CEEs, persons without disabilities and persons with all types of impairments work together in an inclusive way. Among ILUNION’s 273 CEEs, there are a variety of occupations in different sectors available for employees with disabilities to work in. Also, the size of the companies varies strongly: while some smaller CEEs only employ 20-30 people, there are also several very large operations with up to 1,000 persons. Within each of ILUNION’s CEEs, Support Units are assisting the workforce in their daily tasks.

##### The structure and composition of Support Units

<b>Name</b>	Support Units of Special Employment Centres
<b>Objectives</b>	To provide personal and social adjustment services to workers with disabilities in order to boost their professional career development by increasing their skills and employability, as well as improving the business processes in CEE operations
<b>Activities</b>	Determining and evaluating abilities of workers with disabilities through regular exchange and interviews, establishing individualised support and a close relationship, providing trainings to adjust to production processes and to enhance general skillset, assisting in finding opportunities in the open labour market
<b>Target groups</b>	All employees with disabilities working in CEEs supervised by ILUNION
<b>Timeline</b>	2007 - today
<b>Location</b>	At all CEEs supervised by ILUNION across Spain
<b>Stakeholders</b>	Main implementing organisation: ILUNION Other organisations involved: Public Employment Service

The Support Units are “multi-professional” teams composed of personal care experts from different backgrounds. They are divided into “Support Technicians” and “Support Monitors”. In ILUNION, there are overall 120 Support Technicians and 250 Support Monitors. These Support Unit members usually have a social work, psychological or pedagogical education background. The size of the Support Units depends strongly on the tasks and size of the CEE. The ratio of Support Unit members to workers with disability also depends on the operational tasks required and the degrees of impairments of the employees. The recruitment process is led by the team managers and directors of a CEE in coordination with the Human resources (HR) department of ILUNION. When recruiting a new support unit staff members, special attention is paid to previous experiences in job counselling and personal care to persons with disabilities or other vulnerable groups that suffer from social exclusion. As the Support Units are the main source of information for the management on where adjustments are needed in daily business, they are extremely valuable to the overall functioning of the CEE. Once employed, ILUNION invests in training and upskilling the Support Unit members, who receive ongoing trainings and annual reviews of their performance.

**Box 1: The Royal Decree 469/2006 of 21 April on Support Units**

This Spanish law regulates the units in support of the professional activity in the framework of the services of personal and social adjustment of special employment centres (CEEs). The fundamental idea of support units was already established in 1985 in the Royal Decree 2273 on CEEs, but this had only laid down that CEEs must hire additional staff to support workers with disabilities. The Royal Decree 469/2006 then however officially regulated the mandatory introduction of Support Units within CEEs, defining and specifying them, answering to the need for modernisation and more individual and special adjustment within CEEs. Among other, the law stipulates that CEEs need to be “multi-professional teams” (Article 1), the functions and tasks they have to fulfil and are entrusted with (Article 2), which subsidies shall be used to finance the costs of Support Units (Article 4) and by whom and how many members they shall be composed of (Article 6). It further lays down that the Public Employment Service is entitled to regularly monitor and supervise the work of the Support Units. Since 2007, the law is fully implemented at ILUNION.

**Equipping workers with disabilities with skills for professional and personal life**

All services that the Support Units provide follow a standardised protocol that is laid down in the Royal Decree 469/2006. This includes not only professional, but also “personal and social adjustment services”. These tasks entail assessing the abilities of the workers with disabilities, providing assistance to the worker’s job while promoting an independent way of working, establishing relationships with the social environment of the worker to encourage stability in their professional life. This is also about developing as many training programs as necessary to adapt the workers’ skills particularly in regard to new technologies and production processes, and encouraging them in joining jobs on the open labour market. These different tasks are completed in different phases: it starts when the employee joins the CEE and continues until she or he can work more independently. In this way, the Support Units provide a very holistic assistance to workers, ranging from emotional support, pedagogic and psychological services to dealing with daily operational assistance and ergonomic adjustments for the workplace.



**Picture 1:** The picture shows two Support Unit Members providing a training session for workers with disabilities in an ILUNION facility in Burgos.

Regarding the educational assistance to workers with disabilities, the Support Unit members equip them with an ongoing training schedule, which is reviewed once a year. The trainings are flexible and adjusted to the needs,

skills and preferences of each individual worker and decided on together with the employee, the Support Unit and the team manager. It is the responsibility of Support Units to encourage the employees with disabilities to further develop their skillset, building on their abilities. The Support Units offer trainings for their workers with disabilities both on a regular basis, as well as individually required ad-hoc trainings, especially for new employees. As described above, the tasks of the Support Units also include to provide workers with disabilities with the right tools to access jobs in the open labour market and help them to apply to opening positions. Again, the Support Units hereby follow an individual case-to-case approach, which can include IT trainings, instructions on active job search and the use of social media, support for the development of a CV, preparing for job interviews, and more. Trainings for the improvement of “soft” competences are also offered by Support Units: for instance on independent decision making, appropriate attitude in professional environments and constructive exchange with managers and colleagues. Finally, there are also special trainings provided by the Support Units to persons with additional vulnerabilities, for example persons with psychosocial impairments that require intensified labour search trainings, employees over 45 years of age, or women with disabilities that have experienced gender-based violence.

*“We try to empower the workers with disabilities on an individual basis and build on the capabilities already have.”*

Carolina González Quero, National Responsible of the Support Units of ILUNION Facility Services

To ensure that the right assistance is provided for each individual employee, the workers and Support Units maintain a regular exchange through personal interviews, which take place on a regular basis. The Support Technician of the Unit meets once a week with every employee, in order to provide the opportunity for the worker to express needs or concerns on the daily job activities. Further, in a more standardised way and following an ILUNION-wide protocol, every employee is interviewed when entering the company and then regularly every 3 to 4 months depending on the individual needs. This aims to measure, for instance, the degree of satisfaction in the current activity, the relationship with peers and superiors and the adaptation to the workplace. The process remains even intact during sick leave, to check if workers have family members taking care of them during absence from work.

Through this mix of informal and formal way of feedback, Support Units are able to promote an environment of trust in which the employees are able to express constructive criticism. Many CEEs within ILUNION additionally provide suggestion boxes or yearly satisfaction surveys, in which the workers can voice their opinions about the Support Units. This variety of different feedback formats also enables the Support Units to guarantee the well-functioning of the CEE. They can respond to needs of workers, help them with administrative issues, and make recommendations for their career and skills development. Below are a few examples of anonymised answers that different Support Units have received, which show how the Support Units assist the workers in different ways (source: ILUNION Facility Services, ILUNION Laundry Services Beriáin, ILUNION Laundry Services Tenerife):

*“In my first days in the company I was very nervous, but my Support Technician has helped me to not be scared and to feel supported and protected. It is my first job. I am 44 and I thought I wouldn’t be up to it. It’s very nice to know I can rely on their support whenever I need it.”*

*“I am happy with the service provided by the Support Unit. I suffer a disorganized schizophrenia type that has hindered my access to employment. I’ve been working here for 8 months and I am super-happy, because my Support Technician has made my colleagues aware of my disorder and I don’t feel prejudices. They all help me and know what I’m going through.”*

*“Thanks to the Support Unit I am now doing a sign language interpretation course, so I can communicate with my colleague, who is deaf. I think it’s very useful that the company finances this type of activities to remove communication barriers”.*



**Picture 2:** An ILUNION Support Unit is providing a training on ergonomics and proper posture at work for employees with disabilities.

### Main benefits and challenges of the Support Units

Overall, the introduction of Support Units within CEEs has brought benefits to all parties involved. A key factor for the employees with disabilities is that it led to overall significantly more persons with disabilities being employed in positions with higher qualification requirements than before. While the workers used to be employed in jobs, which required relatively few skills, they can now - through the continuous trainings tailored to their individual needs by the Support Units - engage in more technically challenging and complex tasks. Further, the majority of CEEs report that the self-confidence and pride that the employees have about their work has grown since they receive additional psychosocial support and can communicate their needs more.

*“What really is special is the personalized support that the workers receive. It is tailored to the abilities of each person, instead of looking at their disabilities. It motivates them daily and also improves the overall teamwork. It is something you cannot find in regular work settings.”*

Sandra Camarena, Member of Support Unit at ILUNION Laundry Services Berrián

At the same time, Support Units have also become a key success factor for the business model of ILUNION. They overall led to an improvement of work quality, as the managements of CEEs have a more direct connection to the workforce and can adjust settings of the business operations when the employees and/or Support Units express the need to do so. Vice versa, the workers can understand the situation of the managers and their decisions better. The Support Units act as the link between management and workers and the constant exchange from both sides helps to improve work skills, motivation and ultimately the overall performance of the CEE. This in term has also had a positive impact on the satisfaction of the CEE’s clients and led to new sales opportunities and more income of the CEEs.

*“The Support Unit is the factor that makes the difference and the most important characteristic of a CEE. Without the Support Unit, the CEE is not a CEE. It would just be a company like every else, but less competitive.”*

Laura González, Member of Support Unit at ILUNION Laundry Services Tenerife

The Support Units also have to deal with challenges in their daily work. One of the hardest tasks is to integrate the social mission of the Support Unit with the economic and financial pressure the CEEs are exposed to as they have to remain competitive towards other actors on the market. The CEEs are providing daily products and services for clients that expect a high quality and performance – and the Support Units at the same time still need to cater to the individual needs of every worker. An example is ILUNION’s work for a large multinational client that requires packaging and logistics services, which includes physical work and tight deadlines in a high-pressure environment. The Support Units hereby need to carefully organise their teams’ schedule while respecting their professional and personal requirements. Especially in an environment as this one, the employability of new hires is not always immediate and a lot of training is needed until the workers are ready to perform at the required level. In this regard, many CEEs complain that the grants they receive do not suffice to

cover their personal and social adjustment work with the employees while trying to meet up with the economic objectives of the CEE. For context, the financial aid to Support Units is up to €1,200 per person with disability, which is supposed to cover wage costs of the staff, the design and organisation of trainings, and all equipment required.

*“Most persons with disabilities are fully employable, if they receive sufficient support, training and workplace adaptation. The fact that they are not employed only shows how undervalued and stigmatized they still are in our society.”*

Carolina González Quero, National Responsible of the Support Units of ILUNION Facility Services

A further challenge is that Support Units would like to provide their workers with more opportunities to transition to the open labour market. However, companies on the open labour market still have misconceptions of the working capabilities and skills of persons with disabilities and do not provide sufficient workplaces for them. In overall society in Spain and Europe, persons with disabilities are still marginalised and are not included in most regular open labour market settings. While in Spain recently a greater sensitivity for the subject has been noticeable (for example through accessible infrastructure, non-discriminatory wording, easy-to-read descriptions, more use of screen-readers and pictures), it is still a long way to go to a truly inclusive society. Unfortunately, transition rates from CEEs to open labour market setting do not only depend on CEEs and their Support Units, or the workers themselves, that would often like to move to a job on the open labour market after being well trained by their CEEs. A higher transition rate for workers with disabilities from CEEs into the open labour market is only possible, when mainstream companies reinforce more job opportunities targeted at workers with disabilities and more funding is made available for this.

Drivers and success factors	Challenges and learning points
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Support Units following a standardised protocol for all personal and social adjustment measures, while providing enough flexibility for individualised support depending on each workers’ needs</li> <li>- Daily professional, psychological and emotional assistance that boosts the workers’ skills development and self-confidence</li> <li>- Constant exchange between workers, Support Units and management which allows for early adjustments in case of operational problems or conflicts within teams</li> <li>- Training and education programmes, adjusted to individual requirements and desires of employees for their career development, with special measures for persons that are exposed to additional vulnerabilities</li> <li>- A mixed approach of feedback opportunities, with formal/standardised and informal/ad-hoc approaches</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Balancing the ‘social’ and ‘economic/financial’ aspects of the CEE’s businesses, with high pressure to perform up to quality standards and client expectations while providing individualised assistance to every worker</li> <li>- Competing with regular companies and maintaining businesses while not having enough resources due to insufficient grants for Support Units</li> <li>- Lack of job opportunities on the open labour market for workers from CEEs to transition to after having received continued trainings and upskilling</li> </ul>

**Recommendations to other organisations willing to create or improve their Support Units:**

- Recruit a multi-professional team with different backgrounds and experiences that can provide an integrated vision on personal support of vulnerable groups.
- Raising awareness of and set incentives for clients and potential clients of CEEs as they often have a very rigid perception of the capabilities of workers with disabilities.
- Being able to provide dedicated daily professional and personal assistance, and sufficient training opportunities to the workers with disabilities, is key to success.

**Conclusion and outlook**

Since the introduction of Royal Decree 469/2006 to the labour market, Support Units have added many positive impulses to the lives of countless persons with disabilities across Spain. The employability of workers with disabilities has increased, more education and training has been offered to them, and assistance can be provided

in a much more efficient and individualised way. At the same time, persons with disabilities are still stigmatised and discriminatory attitudes in the open labour market and overall society remain the biggest challenges. On the way towards a more inclusive culture, more overall awareness, more accessible environments and more adjusted workplace settings are needed. Also the legal framework has to be challenged again as the current financial assistance to Support Units and CEEs is not sufficient to cover enough professional, personal and social adjustments for every worker. To increase the awareness of the above-mentioned issues, ILUNION is currently engaging in the project “DIVERSABILITY II”, which is co-financed by the European Social Fund. The goals are to provide more trainings and upgrade the skills of Support Unit members to increase their ability to support workers with disabilities. The project is about expanding and hiring more workers as well as increasing internal and external visibility and recognition of the Support Units work. Finally, the grants received through this project shall also finance parts of the personnel costs as well as advertising of the work of employees with disabilities through brochures and other marketing materials.

## 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 organisation 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 approaches 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.

## Contact

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