

# Personal Motivation and ICT Skills Training

Jobs for people with disabilities in Poland

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## Evidence Narratives at the Center for Information & Society

This paper is part of a project at the Center for Information and Society to broaden and deepen our understanding of the impact of Information and Communication Technologies and Development (ICTD).

Our intention is to choose examples of ICTD implementations carefully and to write about them in such a way that each one, individually, illustrates important aspects of the featured settings and so that, taken together, the examples describe and reveal larger themes about core aspects of ICTD. It is our hope that by being systematic at every stage in the research process we are able to expedite the accumulation of credible and accessible information about the impact of ICTD on individuals and communities.

The ICTD field is filled with success stories extolling the benefits of access to Information Technology. As these often rhetorically powerful and memorable stories describe what can be achieved under the best of conditions, they may distort our understanding of what is achieved more typically, or may fail to describe aspects of their settings or strategies that were crucial to success.

Each setting in which ICTD projects are implemented is unique, but our experience is that with careful attention to the idiosyncrasies and commonalities across settings, patterns soon emerge which reveal more general themes about the qualities of settings, people, and programs that make a difference.

While tension may exist between an organization's desire to feature certain cases and the critical researcher's commitment to rigor, we believe that a methodology built on intensive questioning and attention to detail can yield stories that uncover and communicate an accumulation of credible evidence about why individual programs and larger strategies succeed and fail.

By crafting exemplary stories, by developing and disseminating useful methodological tools, and by promoting these techniques among NGO managers and grant makers, CIS aims to shape a research framework that can fulfill the needs of NGOs and donors, with stories that accurately represent realities in underserved communities, accumulating evidence that serves the ends of rigorous analysis while publicizing good work.

This paper is an example and an experiment in this methodological landscape. It is supported in large part by a grant from Microsoft Community Affairs. Direction, guidance and leadership has been provided by Andrew Gordon of the Daniel J. Evans School of Public Affairs at the University of Washington. Joe Sullivan, staff researcher at the Center for Information and Society, is the lead editor for this project.

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In a quiet neighborhood of Warsaw, Danuta stands at the door of the organization where she works as a senior ICT trainer. The first time she entered this very same door, almost ten years ago, she was as a trainee. Since that time she has overcome unemployment, dependency, and lack of motivation and self-esteem. She has made her life more socially and economically productive. Today she helps others that, like herself, felt ill and became disabled after having a career and professional life.

As a trainer for the Foundation Supporting Physically Disabled Mathematicians and IT specialists (FPMiINR, its Polish acronym), Danuta helps disabled people to get back to the employment path. Promoting the values of professionalism, self-respect, and “active minds”, Danuta, together with the other trainers and the FPMiINR staff, work relentlessly to combat the “culture of unemployment.” A culture especially pervasive among older people with disabilities who, for most of their lives, were denied education and work opportunities. Even when they were capable of having a “normal” professional life.

FPMiINR was created in 1990 as an initiative of the Polish Academy of Science to improve the technical IT knowledge of scientists with disabilities. As the initiative matured, the Foundation realized that the demand in the labor market for scientists was high; it broadened the scope of the program to reach disabled people generally.

Today, the Foundation offers a comprehensive approach to employability, providing psychological and legal counseling, job search assistance, links to employers, ICT training and business development workshops. FPMiINR operates two Warsaw community technology centers (CTCs). Forty regional rural centers are being rolled out in partnership with entities such as the European Union, Microsoft, ECORYS, and the Polish Ministry of Education.



*As a senior ICT trainer, Danuta promotes the values of professionalism, self-respect, and “active minds” to combat prejudice against people with disabilities in the labor market.*

## **Family support and a spark of self-esteem: the right start**

Seventeen years ago, Danuta fell sick to a severe form of rheumatism after she gave birth to her son. During her time as a teacher she also completed a bachelor’s degree in education; working during the week and studying in the weekends at the University of Warsaw. After the diagnosis Danuta lost her job, of 13 years, as a teacher. “The disease is very painful, everything hurts and sometimes the pain makes walking very hard. When I was diagnosed with rheumatism it was a shock for me, it changed everything in my life. I lost motivation. I lost even my self-esteem.”

For four years, Danuta endured the disease without a job. With two-years of maternity leave and vacation time she had accumulated, Danuta provided temporary income for her family. But her dreams of returning to teaching ended when the government ruled that, due to her illness, she couldn’t perform with excellence in her job. “They scratched me for life. The government denied me the opportunity to get back to my job after all those years of experience and devotion... I didn’t know what to do. I felt lost. But I never lost the support of my family. Their support kept my dreams alive.”

According to trainers and beneficiaries at FPMiINR, widespread misperceptions prevail about people with disabilities. In Polish society, they are not considered capable of having an active, professional life.

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*Danuta, on the employment  
implications of her disease*

Overprotective families stymie self-esteem and feed the perception that people with disabilities are incapable of living independently. Employers perceive that people with disabilities can only perform certain tasks, limiting career-path opportunities and leading to low-skilled, low-paid and unrewarding jobs.

Danuta’s family didn’t believe these myths. Through steady, loving support and specialized treatment at a rehabilitation center, Danuta rediscovered herself. “Something happened in the way I perceived myself and what I could accomplish with the new way of life that the disease had brought to me. During my time at the center, the perspective of how I looked at disabled people was totally transformed.”

Previous doctors she had visited gave her no hope for her condition. The opportunity to spend time with other disabled people in a non-hospital environment changed her perceptions about them and herself. “I saw other people who had a very normal function in their life. When I compared myself to other people in the rehabilitation center that suffered from conditions much harder than mine, I realized that I wasn’t in such bad shape. It made me appreciate myself. I felt an outburst of self-esteem, discovering new possibilities for the future with my family and my job.”

The learning experience at the rehabilitation center provided the right ingredients for Danuta to accept her situation, without feeling useless or a burden on her family. “There was a person in a wheel chair with a condition so severe that she couldn’t even eat her soup without assistance. I helped this person eat her food and suddenly I realized that I could help somebody, that I was useful and needed. In this precise moment and after all those years of emotional stress I came to accept my condition and to appreciate myself”. This moment of self-discovery triggered a chain reaction that brought Danuta to the FPMiNR for her first ICT course.

## **Personal Motivation and ICT skills training**

Once Danuta regained self-confidence, she started to look for retraining alternatives, to learn new skills that would allow her to apply for jobs outside the government educational system. When her son started primary school, she became involved in his school activities and education at home. “I got involved with my son, for my son,” she proudly says. His interest in computers inspired Danuta to seek out computer classes. “I felt I needed to learn more about computers. He was so young and knew so much about them compared to me. His interest encouraged me to look for basic courses. Through a friend I heard about the work of FPMiNR and that’s how I got here for my first computer class.”

Coming to FPMiNR opened a new chapter in Danuta’s life. She took several ICT courses before being recruited as a full-time trainer. “As a teacher, I really liked to learn new things. I felt motivated to challenge myself with new knowledge, with new skills. When I finished my courses, the job proposal was a very valued price for my effort. After all those years suffering, I finally realized that I was needed that I could help other people in a situation similar to mine. That could become, hopefully, an inspiration for people who found themselves in a difficult juncture of their lives. People who feel lost and need a spark of hope, just like I did seven years ago.”

Today, Danuta is a senior ICT trainer at FPMiNR. She teaches basic and advanced skills and specialized courses, such as e-skills for civil servants. Her motivation, FPMiNR’s training approach and the

inclusive social environment it promotes were the necessary ingredients for her re-entry into the labor market. "Personal motivation and willingness to accept new challenges are key," she firmly states. "The lectures are hard and we put the responsibility for learning on the trainees. This promotes self-confidence and professionalism. The quality of education here at FPMiINR is very high and the courses are long and intense."

For organizations working with people with disabilities, like the Foundation, the key is to help their beneficiaries find and tap their own motivations. Discovering their potential, recognizing their different learning needs, and envisioning their professional and personal goals can become the most important catalyst to get them back to the employment path. From the employers' perspective this is very appealing; they trust the quality of the training and value the pool of future employees that are highly qualified and ready to pursue a professional path.

The motivation differs for people that didn't have a productive professional life before they acquired their disability. These people have lived under the "culture of unemployment" all their lives. According to Danuta, this subtle but important difference must be taken into account when designing training programs with employability goals.

She says FPMiINR has two general groups of beneficiaries enrolled in the training programs. The first group is the long-term unemployed that are not actively seeking work and rarely finish their courses. For them, training represents a bridge to a social network to inclusion. They meet friends and participate in events. Some of these individuals, Danuta expresses with a sense of disappointment, "are shocked when we push them to the next level, when we challenge them with difficult computer-related tasks.



*Personal motivation and willingness to accept new challenges are key ingredients for employability. FPMiINR training is rigorous. Responsibility for learning lies with trainees to promote self-confidence and professionalism. This class is part of a 140 hour course to prepare for the European Computer Drivers License (ECDL) certification.*

They think that they come here to play with computers. Our trainings are really hard work."

The second group is comprised of people like Danuta, who were professionally successful before losing their job to an illness. For example, Maciej was an art curator in a museum before becoming ill and losing his job. Katarzyna was a classical cello artist. The stories go on and on. They respond differently to challenges; their expectations for the training are very high. "They expect other people to treat them seriously and professionally," an employment counselor explains. "They come here to learn new skills, to find a job or to be able to keep their current jobs." Most trainees at FPMiINR belong to this group. "Our best promotion campaign is the high quality and professionalism of our

beneficiaries. I endorse these values that FPMiINR promotes with pride," says Danuta.

*"The lectures are hard and we put the responsibility for learning on the trainees. This promotes self-confidence and professionalism. The quality of education here at FPMiINR is very high and the courses are long and intense."*

*Danuta, on the importance of rigor, especially for people with disabilities*

*“I don’t want special training or special treatment, I want specialized training that allows me to challenge myself, that inspires me to get to the next level. I don’t want to feel ‘special’ I want to feel specialized.”*

*FPMiNR trainee, on the importance of rigorous, high-quality ICT training*

## Changing perceptions among employers

Changing the employer perceptions is not easy. FPMiNR uses a two-pronged strategy: promoting skills and professionalism among its trainees and actively lobbying employers to change their perceptions and corresponding job opportunities.

FPMiNR actively educates companies about the benefits from hiring qualified employees with disabilities, demonstrating their so-called “disabilities” do not impede their performance. It is not enough to recruit employers, it is also necessary to

change the perception of the types of jobs that people with disabilities can do. As one of the trainees explained, “I don’t want any job, I want a challenging and rewarding one”.

Employer attitudes will not change unless Foundation trainees deliver in the workplace. FPMiNR promotes a culture of professionalism and “active minds,” as one of the counselors described it. The goal is to get people into positions where they can succeed outside their usual boundaries. For many, especially older trainees, it is not uncommon to think that they don’t have the right to work. FPMiNR constantly reminds people of their right to work. The thorough, challenging training programs, such as the European Computer Driver License (ECDL) which is 140 class hours, is imbued with the values of professionalism and having a good, worthwhile job. As one trainee stated, “I don’t want special training or special treatment, I want specialized training that allows me to challenge myself, that inspires me to get to the next level. I don’t want to feel ‘special’ I want to feel specialized.”

FPMiNR is taking this to the next level by developing a network of regional distance learning CTCs, called e-Centrum. This initiative will offer training to the general population. People with disabilities, some of the most experienced foundation trainers, will labor without physical impediment. In this way, actions will fight the misperceptions of what the “disabled” can achieve. Training for the general population will also create new revenue for FPMiNR to subsidize training for people with disabilities.

## Capitalizing on Poland’s economic transformation

Two transformations are crucial to the role of ICT skills in Poland’s labor market: 1) the shrinking industrial and agricultural sectors, accompanied by rapid growth in services, and 2) decreasing unemployment tied to the wave of educated Polish migrants leaving for other EU countries. Justyna Muranowicz, a project manager for Microsoft Community Affairs in Poland, summarized the shift: “bargaining power between employer and employee has changed due to the increasing need for highly-qualified individuals.”



*In Poland today, skilled labor is in short supply. Employers are learning that people with disabilities can fill the gap. Here, jobs from the database are printed and posted at one of FPMiNR’s Warsaw CTCs.*

In this context, ICT skills and a shortage of skilled labor is forcing employers to reconsider their biases. Service sector jobs suit many people with physical disabilities, since they lower requirements for workers to be physically present in an office (e.g. telework, web design, data bases programming).

Qualified employees are in such in demand that employers offer good salaries and benefits to attract skilled labor, including people with disabilities. Although prejudice is still pervasive in the business culture, economic forces are helping change the perceptions of what disabled people can achieve professionally.

Many factors influence the labor market, but there seems to be momentum to increase participation among people with disabilities in Poland and other EU countries. The work of organizations like FPMiNR is helping to take advantage of these transformations. Danuta is one example among many of how ICT training can help people with disabilities become active and productive members of society, a growing information society.

## **AUTHOR**

**Maria Garrido** is a research associate for the Center of Information & Society at the University of Washington. Her research explores the role of information technology in fostering economic development in low-income communities in Latin America, the United States, and Central and Eastern Europe. She has published research on how grassroots organizations make use of information technology as a tool to mobilize civil society and to create networks of solidarity to work towards social change.

Her doctoral dissertation explores the role of social movements' networks and their impact in economic and social development in the context of Latin America. In particular, she draws upon the experiences of the Zapatista Movement in Chiapas, Mexico, to illustrate the way in which the actors that formed the Zapatista solidarity network are collaborating and working together with the movement's members to improve the lives of the indigenous communities in the region. She earned her Bachelor's degree in International Relations at the Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico City, a Masters in International Relations at the University of Chicago, and a Ph.D. in Communications at the University of Washington.