

# WORKING WITH A VOP (FLEMISH SUPPORT ALLOWANCE)

*Author(s): Bram Roosens, Rik Huys, Mieke Van Gramberen and Geert Van Hootegem*

## 1. Abstract

The Flemish Support Allowance, or VOP, is a contribution towards the costs of hiring people with an occupational disability, the costs of support and of reduced productivity. The VOP aims at increasing participation in employment of people with an occupational disability, not only by providing them work, but also by keeping them employed. The 'workability' of the job plays an important role in this context, as is confirmed, for instance, by the figures from the workability monitor, which show that better workable jobs are an incentive for employees to keep working.

The workability monitor also shows that people who experience hindrance in their daily activities from a disability, a long-term physical complaint or a long-term illness, also experience difficulties with respect to workable work. The figures give rise to the assumption that many employees with a VOP have poorly workable jobs, and that this forms an additional obstacle in increasing the employment rate of people with an occupational disability. Providing better insight into the workability of jobs of VOP employees and the determinants of that workability was one of the main objectives of this study into 'working with a VOP'. Furthermore, it examined how the VOP is being applied in practice and the consequences thereof for the employment of people with an occupational disability.

One of the main findings of this study is that the workability of VOP employees largely corresponds to the workability of the general population of wage earners. The same goes for the underlying risk indicators. Autonomy is the only area where the situation of VOP employees can be labelled as considerably more problematic. Then again, for 'people experiencing a hindrance' - as it is described in the workability monitor -, the workability of the jobs of VOP employees appears to be considerably better.

The survey results further raise questions about the effectiveness of the VOP in its current format. The large majority of employees has no knowledge of the VOP, or does not experience any benefits from it. This leads to the assumption that in many cases, the allowance is not being used to support the employment. And if there is any impact from the VOP, the employees involved find that it is used to further facilitate their current employment - not to support their recruitment.

Only one in ten VOP employees reports having a substantial influence in application of the VOP. So not only have the majority no say in their job, they don't have a say with respect to the VOP in support of their employment either. A personal employment budget (PGB Labour) could help to solve the complaints of this group.

### **Key words:**

People with an occupational disability, disadvantaged groups, activation, labour market, workability

## 2. Objectives

Providing a better insight into the workability of the jobs of VOP employees and the determinants of that workability was one of the main objectives of this study. Furthermore, the research examined how the VOP is being applied in practice and the consequences thereof for the employment of people with an occupational disability. More specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

- "How workable is the work of people with an occupational disability in a job that receives a VOP?"
- "Do workability and adaptations vary according to personal characteristics, such as age, gender, level of education, nature of the disability, etc., the nature of the job and company characteristics?"
- "Have material or immaterial adaptations been implemented at the workplace to make the job more workable for the person involved and which additional expectations and suggestions does the latter have in this respect?"

## Clarification of key concepts

The Flemish workability monitor was initiated by the SERV, the consultative body of the Flemish employer and employee unions. In order to outline the evolution of workability, the Foundation for Innovation & Labour developed a measuring tool for monitoring the policy agreements on improvement of the quality of work made under the Vilvoorde Pact. Since 2004, the same Foundation has been conducting a survey among 20,000 wage earners every three years, and since 2007 they have added a similar survey among 6,000 self-employed entrepreneurs. The purpose of the survey is to calculate the percentage of working people with a high-quality job. In consultation with academia and experts of the social partners and with the Government of Flanders, the following four aspects of quality of work were defined as relevant for the workability monitor: psychological fatigue; pleasure in work; learning opportunities and balance between private life and work. In that context, the 'workability rate' is that part of Flemish employees with a high-quality job as regards those four aspects. More information can be found on the website [www.werkbaarwerk.be](http://www.werkbaarwerk.be).

## 3. Methods and data

The first phase entailed data collection from a survey among people who work with a VOP. In a second phase, ten participants in the survey were selected for an additional in-depth interview.

### 3.1 Survey

A mail survey was conducted among a sample of employees whose employers receive a VOP. The sample consisted of 1,196 respondents from the entire population of 7,175 employees who are subject to a VOP. Of that sample, 1,163 people received a questionnaire, and 616 of them filled it out accurately and returned it to the research team - a response ratio of 53%.

In first instance, the written questionnaire included the workability indicators, i.e. psychological fatigue, pleasure in work, learning opportunities, and the risk indicators, i.e. work pressure, task variation, autonomy, emotional stress and support from management, from the workability monitor. In addition, it asked a number of questions about the application of the VOP in the organisation and the consequences for the employment of the VOP employees involved.

### 3.2 In-depth interviews

Ten persons with an occupational disability, who are employed under a Flemish Support Allowance, or VOP, and who took part in the survey were interviewed in the course of June and July 2010. They were selected in order to ensure optimum reflection of the vast diversity among people employed under VOP. The interviews were held at the workplace of the person involved based on the idea that this would enhance the understanding of what working under a VOP is really like on the one hand, and that it would add to better input from the people with an occupational disability on the other.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1 Characteristics of VOP employees

Compared to the general population of wage earners and the wage earners who experience a hindrance - as shown by the workability monitor VOP employees share a few outspoken characteristics.

- the majority of them are male;
- they are very young;
- they are low-skilled;
- their disabilities vary greatly;
- many of them work as low-skilled or semi-skilled workers;
- most of them work in SMEs;
- not many of them work in the public service sector.

This shows that in certain aspects, VOP employees differ considerably from the general population of wage earners, but also from the wage earners who experience a hindrance from a disability. This is not entirely surprising. The classification as a 'person experiencing a hindrance' in the workability monitor occurs on the basis of a self-definition and focuses on physical hindrance. By contrast, this study involves the administrative recognition as a person with a disability who qualifies for VOP.

#### **4.2 Differences in workability compared with the general population of wage earners**

The answers to the questionnaire show that for the vast majority of the VOP employees, the three measured workability indicators psychological fatigue, pleasure in work and learning opportunities, don't pose any problems: for almost 8 out of 10 respondents, the current job offers sufficient learning opportunities; close to 7 out of ten don't experience signs of psychological fatigue, and 85% of the employees find pleasure in their work.

In the areas 'learning opportunities' and 'psychological fatigue', the study did not find a statistically significant difference between VOP employees and the general working population from the workability monitor. With respect to *learning opportunities*, 22.2% of the VOP employees are in a problematic situation, and 8.2% in an acutely problematic situation. For the general population of working people these figures were 19.9% and 7.3%, respectively.

With respect to *psychological fatigue*, the situation is not problematic for 68.5% of VOP employees, problematic for 31.5% of them and acutely problematic for 10.2%. The corresponding figures for the general working population were 71.2%, 28.8% and 9.7%, respectively.

The research did show a statistically significant difference with the general working population from the workability monitor with respect to *pleasure in work*. At 18.1%, the representation in the problematic group of workers from the general population is significantly higher than the 14.9% from people working under VOP.

The determinants of the workability bottlenecks consistently show significant differences between VOP employees and the general population of wage earners, but the nature of the differences varies. For risk-indicators such as support from the management, work pressure and notably, *emotional stress*, significantly less VOP employees belong to the problematic group. This indicates that VOP employees experience relatively little work stress from tasks that include contacts, e.g. client relations.

For other risk indicators, however, VOP employees show a higher score. Compared to the general population, a larger number of VOP employees fall into the problematic group where task variety is concerned, and more particularly with respect to *autonomy*. They lack controlling options to solve work-related problems and have little influence on how their work is organised.

The extensive differences as regards these risk indicators between VOP employees and the general wage-earning population has a partly neutralising effect on the workability indicators. Although all risk indicators show significant differences between the two groups, this does not apply to the workability indicators. This is understandable when we consider the contrary nature of the effects.

#### **4.3 Differences in workability compared to employees suffering hindrance from a disability**

The group of wage earners suffering hindrance from a disability included in the workability monitor, systematically shows a more problematic score for all the workability indicators and all the risk indicators than the general wage-earning population. Within that group, the score for those suffering severe hindrance is again worse than for those suffering limited hindrance. Given the fact that the scores of the VOP employees are close to those of the general working population, VOP employees take a much smaller share in the problematic group than the people suffering hindrance from a disability. VOP employees only compare to the group of people who suffer hindrance from a disability in everyday life in terms of autonomy, which also represents the former group's worst score.

The wide variety of results on workability and its determinants between people suffering hindrance and VOP employees indicates that we are dealing with two different groups. The definition of both groups differs greatly and they also have highly dissimilar characteristics. VOP employees are very young, whereas people suffering hindrance from a disability often belong to the higher age groups. This raises the assumption that the 'hindrance' reported for people suffering hindrance included in the workability monitor, is largely the result of the low workability of the jobs. The long-term exposure to risk indicators, i.e. work pressure, task variation, autonomy, emotional stress and support from the management, during the entire career leads to a low level of workability and ultimately, also to hindrance in everyday life. In this context, hindrance is a dependent variable of the quality of work. By contrast, many VOP employees suffer a congenital or acquired disability upon entry to the labour market. Here, the hindrance as a result of the disability constitutes an independent variable, leading to a predominantly allocative question, namely: are these people capable of taking on the jobs available in the labour market?

The above, however, may not lead to the conclusion that workability is not an issue for VOP employers. On the contrary: for these people to accept available jobs, the latter must offer an adequate degree of workability. The relatively positive scores relating to workability among VOP employees thus indicate that for these people, good workability is a necessary precondition to carry out the job. In other words: jobs with a low workability offer VOP employees limited opportunities.

#### **4.4 Role and impact of the VOP in the workplace**

Perhaps the most striking conclusion with respect to the Flemish Support Allowance, or VOP, is its limited impact in the workplace. The vast majority of the respondents don't know that their employer receives a VOP, they have no idea what the VOP is being used for, or they indicate that in any case, the VOP is not or hardly being used for support of their employment. Those who were able to provide an indication of the use of the VOP predominantly pointed at forms of assistance or guidance at work. Other measures involve reduced working hours, the assignment of specific tasks or adaptation of the working environment.

Given the large number of employees who do not know what the VOP is being used for, the low level of input of the workers involved in its application is not surprising. 78% indicate complete non-involvement in how the VOP is being used for their employment. Almost one in ten respondents has an active involvement and only one in one hundred has the power to make independent decisions in this respect.

Almost half of all respondents cannot provide an answer to questions about the impact of the VOP or its possible termination on their employment, and those who can provide an answer point first of all to the role of the VOP in their continued employment, rather than a support during their recruitment. Almost two in three respondents who give their thoughts on the matter, say they fear for their jobs should the VOP be terminated. Also, many respondents are pessimistic about their chances of finding other work should they lose their current job. Half of them think that the chance of finding another job is small or non-existent.

## 5. Conclusions and policy implications

### 5.1 Recommendations

VOP employees' workability is largely similar to that of the general wage-earning population. That also applies to the underlying risk indicators. Only in the area of autonomy can the situation of VOP employees be labelled as more problematic. It is therefore recommended to arrange the jobs of VOP employees in such a way that they have sufficient control options to autonomously deal with problems that arise on the job. Of course the adjustments regarding work organisation that are required in this respect must be realised by employers and are largely out of the Government's reach. The latter can, however, give the employees involved a greater influence with respect to the VOP. A first step in this context is to provide adequate information to VOP employees. The current reform of the VOP is an excellent opportunity to inform all the workers involved of the VOP their employer receives on their behalf.

#### 5.1.1 Effectiveness of the VOP

The study results raise doubts about the effectiveness of the VOP in its present format. The large majority of employees apparently have no knowledge of the VOP or do not experience any benefits from it. This leads to the assumption that in many cases, the allowance is not being used to support the employment. The survey further shows that VOP employees mainly see the effect of the VOP in facilitating continuation of their current employment, not in support of their recruitment. This does not correspond with the current reasoning with respect to the degressive nature of the allowance.

Over recent years, the VOP has become available to a growing number of groups in an effort to considerably increase their employment rate in the short term. In an attempt to keep the budget within limits at the same time, the allocated sums are being reduced or their terms restricted. The result is an ever decreasing impact of the VOP in the workplace. Recent figures on employment rate among people with an occupational disability indicate that increased resources do not result in an improvement of that rate. It would therefore be more effective to use the available resources for employment of employees with a real need for support.

Effective use of the resources also requires better adjustment of the allocated budget to the real need for support of the person involved. At present, allocation of the VOP and the height of the allowance are based on a number of criteria that bear no relationship with this need for support. A better indicator is required: one that not merely involves administrative criteria such as place of employment, wage and seniority. This could also resolve the diversity in administrative categories that apply to the actual allowances, such as allowances for support or reduced productivity, for home-work travel, and for adaptation of the workplace. In practice all these involve one complete package that must facilitate continued employment of the person with an occupational disability.

#### 5.1.2 Application of the VOP

While the government may be unable to directly intervene in the work organisation of companies to solve the main risk indicator of VOP employees, being the lack of autonomy, it can most certainly take measures to grant VOP employees more responsibility in the application of the VOP. The survey data clearly show that they currently have almost no influence. Only one in ten VOP employees reports having a substantial influence in application of the VOP. So not only have the majority no say in their job, they don't have a say with respect to the VOP in support of their employment either. The interviews, remarks at the bottom of the questionnaire and reactions received by phone displayed frustration and even anger among a large group of the VOP employees about their lack of influence in the application of the VOP and their inability to force the employer to use the VOP for support of their employment.

A personal employment budget (PGB Labour) could help to address these complaints. Already in 2001, a proposal for a Flemish Parliament Act was submitted to the Flemish Parliament to introduce a personal budget as a means to charge the costs of aid with respect to integration into the labour process. This measure could make an important contribution in eliminating the current lack of autonomy, which emerged as the most important risk in employment of the current VOP employees. Because this measure puts implementation of the support in the hands of the people involved, it also better responds to their hugely diverse needs for support. It is obviously not possible to implement the allocation of a PGB Labour for everyone at the same time, nor is it desirable. It offers an alternative for the current regulation to those who wish to embrace it. The first step should consist of an experiment with a limited number of

participants. In that context, the indication must be independent from the choice made by the person involved in favour of the current regulation as opposed to budget-funded labour support in the experiment. Many inspiring examples for implementation of such an experiment can already be found in other countries.

A subsequent study could examine these forms of PGB Labour and learn from them so as to set up a PGB Labour in Flanders and make more effective use of the available resources.

*Full reference of study report*

**Roosens, B., Huys, R., Van Gramberen, M., & Van Hootehem, G. (2010). *Werken met een VOP*. Leuven: Centre for Sociological Research (CeSO).**

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