

## **This is how I made it from a sheltered workshop to a real job**

by Monika Rauchberger



### **The time in the sheltered workshop**

I started to work in a workshop in August 1989.

At that time I was 18 years old.

I did different handicrafts:

Embroidering pictures, weaving large and small rugs,  
knitting broken silk stockings together,  
so that they could be woven into carpets.

Also knitting, felting

and painting pictures for the art calendar of our workshop  
were among my tasks.

I also had to do meaningless work.

For example:

Grinding soapstone or wooden blocks for ages,  
drawing something, tearing tissue paper  
or filling out lists on the computer.

But also the work like weaving carpets  
seemed pointless to me  
because nobody wanted to buy the carpets.

There were jobs I didn't like to do,  
like taking the dirty laundry from the workshop to the residential facility  
and bring back the clean laundry.

I was disgusted by the dirty laundry.

There was also work that I would have liked to do.

Useful jobs like office work.

I would have loved to write invitations or announcements  
put address-labels on envelopes, put the letters in the envelopes,  
writing important things on the computer  
or whatever else was needed in an office.

For a while I was allowed to do that, too,  
I worked in the office in the afternoon for a week.  
Then it was another colleague's turn for a week,  
and then it was my turn again.

For me, that was real work.

I finally came to the wood-workshop,  
where they also worked with soapstone.

I didn't like it so much there,  
because there was too little working time  
for the many orders.

In addition, it was very often extremely noisy,  
which was quite exhausting for me.

I could not concentrate very often.

Also, some people with learning difficulties  
simply did what they wanted.

Often we played games during working hours,  
or we went for a walk.

The workshop managers didn't even ask us  
if we wanted to do that at all.

I never understood that.

Working time is not leisure-time.

To play and go for a walk  
we could have stayed at home.

It also bothered me when colleagues slept during working hours.

There was a quiet room for that,  
but some of them just slept next to me.

They still got their pocket money,  
regardless of whether they had worked or slept.

I thought that was unfair.

What really annoyed me was  
that the workshop managers were often not supportive,  
that we were learned something.

I couldn't see at all  
why they didn't make more of an effort  
to find us a real job.

It is important that people with learning difficulties  
work something useful

and also have regular working hours.  
We need the opportunity to earn money in real jobs.  
After a while I really didn't like going to the workshop.  
It was just all too much for me,  
and I didn't have the energy to work there anymore.  
I silently thought  
that I didn't want to work in the workshop.  
I didn't want to work in the workshop for the rest of my life  
because I wouldn't learn anything more.  
I dreamed of working in an office.  
And I dreamed of more money.

### **How I found a real job**

I dreamed of working in an office.  
And dreamed of more money.  
The pocket money I got in the workshop was clearly too little.  
15 years ago I applied for the EU project of  
Independent Living Innsbruck.  
My attendants and my colleagues in the sheltered workshop  
advised me against it.  
They said that I would not make it in a real job.  
They were afraid because they had no idea what I would have to do in  
my new job.  
They didn't believe that I could do a real job with my disability.  
They were concerned that I would not be able to do some jobs on my  
own and that some of the work would take me longer than a day.  
They also asked me what would happen after the three years if the

project no longer existed.

But I wanted to take the risk.

I was convinced that I would definitely be able to do the work.

I had a good feeling.

When I learned that I could start at a real job,  
it was a jump into ice-cold water.

The workshop manager and the entire staff had an  
uneasy feeling about it.

They did not believe that I could work in a real job.

They were afraid because I can't speak clearly and I write slowly on the  
computer.

And they felt that I needed help very often.

I knew from the interview

that I could get help at the new job if I needed it.

It also occurred to me that some of them thought,

I was making a joke.

The workshop manager wanted to have a confirmation  
that I can start at the new job.

I was quite annoyed about that.

They kept asking me if it was really true that

I would get a real job and what I would do

if I couldn't manage the new tasks.

I had to be pretty strong.

I said to them, why wouldn't I be able to do this?

I said to them, in the beginning with a new job

it's always hard.

It takes time to get used to everything.

I said to them, I can learn everything somehow,  
and I have managed to do it all so far,  
even if with a few detours and a lot of effort.

## **The first time at a real workplace**

Then I started to work at Wibs as a peer counselor for people with learning difficulties in an office.

That was in 2002. .

In the beginning it was difficult:

I realized that I was the only one in the project who used a wheelchair.

The other employees could all walk normally.

And on top of that, I also had a hard time speaking.

The staff couldn't understand me without a letter board.

Immediately I got a bad feeling again.

I was worried how this could possibly go well.

Silently, I began to doubt whether they would keep me.

So I tried to do as good a job as possible and ask as little help as possible from the supporters.

Everything was different than in the workshop.

In the beginning, I didn't know how to deal with the new people.

When I needed something, I waited until one of the supporters had time.

They always had to ask me what I actually needed.

I had to explain a lot to them.

I was very afraid that I would get on their nerves and they would want to

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<sup>1</sup> Wibs is a peer-counselling centre for persons with learning difficulties and self-advocates. Wibs is part of the People 1st movement. The pilot project (2002 – 2005) was funded by the European Union. More information (in German) <https://www.wibs-tirol.at/>

get rid of me again

## **My work as project manager**

I am leading the project Wibs for the ninth year together with a support person.

We say: This is a shared project management.

At the beginning it was again a big challenge for me.

Learning all the new things for the shared project management.

I am responsible for the content.

For example:

I divide the work among the individual employees.

Twice a year, I hold a staff meeting with the employees.

Twice a year I write a report in easy to read language.

When a request comes in by mail, then I consider:

Whether we need the job and whether we have time to do it.

Once a year, I write a new application together with the support person in difficult language.

I always think beforehand:

What is important for the new application for Wibs?

Then I write to the support person the ideas.

Now I do the shared project management quite fluently.

I enjoy the work a lot and it is still challenging.

Now I have been employed by Wibs for 15 years.

I have a real job with a decent salary and social security.

If I could no longer work here, I would be unhappy and I would have a bad feeling inside.

I would be afraid that I would not be able to find a real job anymore.

In any case, I would look for a new job in time.

I would like to try out whether I could work well in a new workplace.

I definitely don't want to go back to the sheltered workshop.

I really want to have a real job again and will get support to find one.