

Fresh wind from Australia carries



Keith Martin
CEO
EPIC, nezisková organizácia

EMPLOYMENT HISTORY

- CEO of EPIC employment service, inc. (1996 - present)
- Paralympic Movement in Australia

EDUCATION

- University of the Sunshine Coast, Queensland, AU
- Harvard University, MA, USA

Could you please describe, briefly, what EPIC is, how it operates, and what services it delivers? Also, why is EPIC present in Europe?

EPIC is a not-for-profit, community-based charity out of Brisbane with a volunteer Board of Management. It has approximately 400 staff based in the Australian states of Queensland and New South Wales, as well as in New Zealand and Slovakia. There are 54 offices – 51 in Australia, two in New Zealand and one in Slovakia. EPIC delivers multiple programs to the disadvantaged in the community including employment services, counseling services, youth services, rehabilitation services, and mentoring services. We have been working with people in Slovakia since 2007 and have been involved with delivering training to the Supported

According to the OECD, the Australian model of employment services is considered to be among the most effective globally. Some of the current EU member states use it already. One of the biggest Australian employment services providers, EPIC Employment Service Inc., opened its first European office in Bratislava almost one year ago. We spoke with Keith Martin, the CEO.

Employment sector in Slovakia, in partnership with the Slovak Government, since this time. Following one such presentation in 2011 and discussion between both governments and other NGOs, we decided to commence operations in Slovakia and share our skills to help build the capacity of local partners here.

What is the labor market situation in Australia? How could you describe the difference between Australian and European employment and job services?

Labor market numbers are significantly different in Australia than Europe. The current unemployment rate in Australia is 5.6%. This varies from region to region and within disadvantaged groups. Significant drops in unemployment rates during the last 15 years were also due to changes in the provision of employment services in a way that allows the introduction of case-based models and tailor-made services for disadvantaged groups. We understand “employment services” to mean comprehensive assistance for job seekers to find an appropriate and meaningful job, and to allow them full participation in community and social life. This model is very strict and not easy

for service providers because in contrast to what I often observe in Europe, it pays for the outcomes and results only. If you, as a service provider, want to survive in this system you must have very good connections to employers and a strong ability to place any client in the open labor market.

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Based on your experience, do disadvantaged groups of the population (such as the socially excluded Roma, people with disabilities, etc) have any chance to be integrated into the regular labor market?

I am sure that all disadvantaged groups can be employed. Our specialty began in the late 1980's focusing on people with a disability. We are now one of the largest employment

service providers for people with disabilities in Australia. We have expanded these skills to incorporate working with all disadvantaged groups, including indigenous people in Australia and Maori in New Zealand. Integration takes time, energy, and resources to do properly but our success levels are high and I believe it is possible for every person to have employment regardless of their situation. Our secret of success in the case of the most disadvantaged and marginalized groups is that we don't focus purely on employment and jobs, but also consider other factors which may affect the job seeker such as housing, health, and social well-being, thus the comprehensive assistance.

There is currently record-high youth unemployment in the EU, where a quarter of people under 25 are out of work. Slovakia is not an exception, with one hundred thousand people under 29 unemployed. Can be something done in this respect?

The whole youth unemployment issue in Europe is very significant. A whole generation will be lost unless major changes are made in policy at the EU and governmental levels. I will not be saying anything new if I mention that better connection between training/school and employment is necessary to achieve significant success in the employment sector. One of the programs that we are particularly proud of, based on EPIC's methodology, is a close cooperation with schools that allow students with substandard academic records to become involved in apprenticeship/traineeship programs with an employer. The difference with Europe is that this apprenticeship

employment services



is part of the final grades at school. This model is not about more money, it is just about better linkages between sectors and better cooperation. There needs to be a change in thinking that is more complex and not contained to a singular strategy. EPIC delivers programs to the youth environment that have had success. I am hopeful these will also be able to be utilized in Europe to make the changes needed.

What has to be done in Slovakia to introduce the job and employment services modeled on the Australian example? Are any legislative or institutional changes needed?

Well, I am not an expert on the Slovak situation, but based

on what I see the Slovak context needs some reworking. The current government is considering some pilots that may produce a new model but they are in very early stages and much more work needs to be done in this regard. In my opinion, the necessity for Slovakia is a case-based model in services provision, allowing plurality in service provisions and payments based on the results.

What are EPIC's goals and what is its strategy in Europe?

There needs to be different thinking, engagement with all stakeholders of the employment process and not just the traditional ones. We want to build capacity in the environments we work in to enable better quality

of service to the community by local providers. EPIC's primary goal in Slovakia and in Europe is transformation of employment services to be more result-oriented and better connected to the labor market. Our immediate strategy is not to provide direct services to clients but to work at the policy level. We have already been invited and have had discussions with governments in the Czech Republic, Macedonia, Croatia, and Montenegro and we have already started discussion with the Slovak government, hopefully there will be more interest. We are more than happy to provide further free-of-charge assistance. Our EPIC service has been proven in many contexts as a solution for employment issues in relation to

disadvantaged groups, disability employment, youth employment, and marginalized groups. We are ready to work with partner employers and to ensure they have the correctly trained staff for the businesses while advocating for the employees that we know will be highly innovative and successful in Europe.

EPIC, non-profit organization

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