EQUAL WAM WORK PLACEMENT PROGRAMME 2005 – 2007

workplace attitudes to graduates with disabilities: findings & recommendations

contents

"...it is still rare to work with a person with a disability and there is no reason why graduates with disabilities shouldn't be in the workforce..."

(WAM Manager)

A The Context

Throughout the EU Ireland's economic success over the last 20 years is much envied. We succeeded in producing one of the most buoyant economies not only in Europe but worldwide. It is a major achievement and one worth taking the time to celebrate. However predicting our economic fate over the forthcoming 20 years is less certain. What is unquestionable 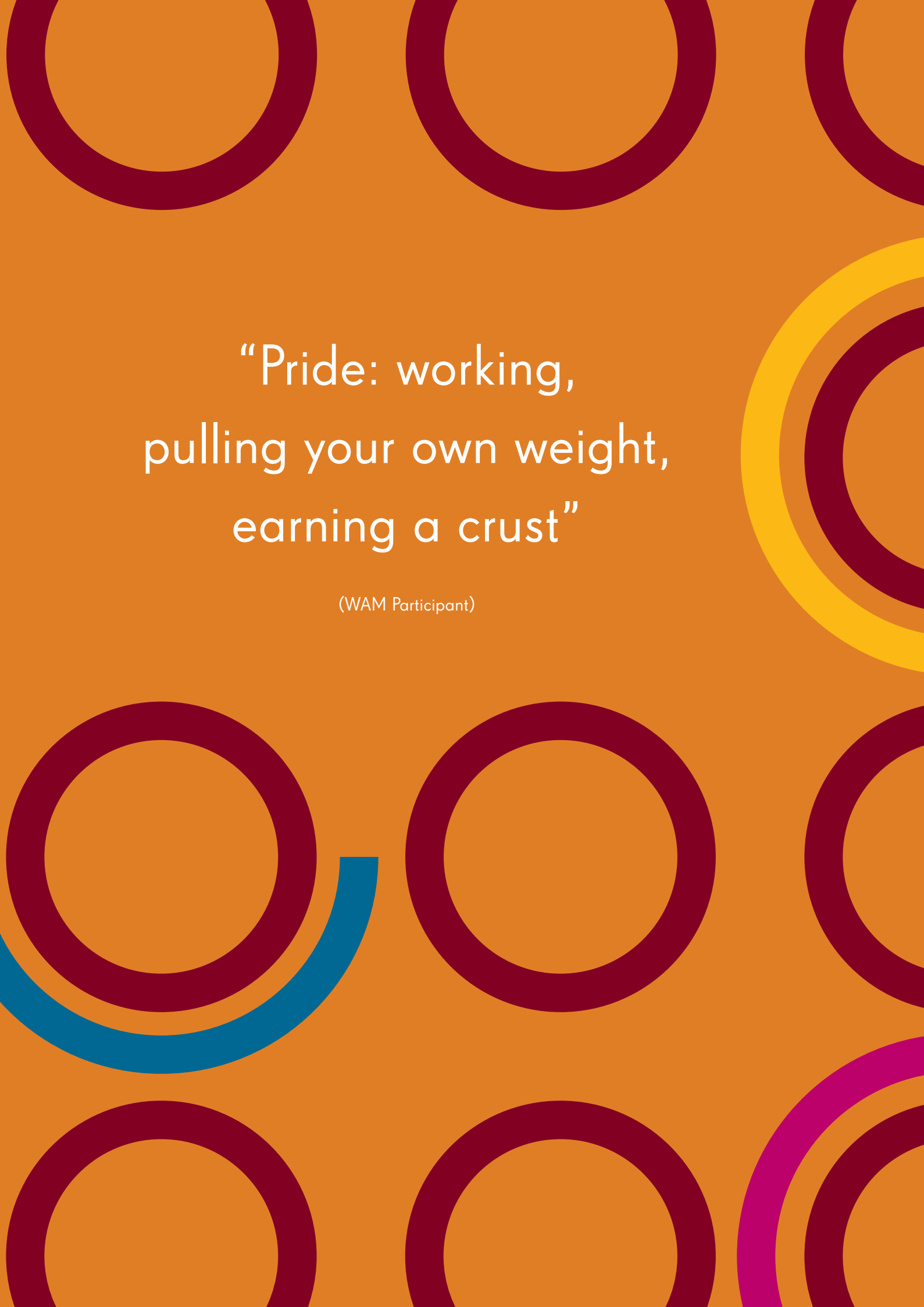is that to ensure our future economic growth and success the business community is going to have to re-think the way it does business today. A buoyant economy needs a continuous flow of workers and here there is genuine cause for concern. Large proportions of the 1980's and 1990's saw continuous declines in birth rates in Ireland. While current rates indicate steady increases, these are nowhere near previous birth rate highs. The impact of these decelerating birth rates is only becoming evident now. This year alone the numbers sitting the 2007 Leaving Certificate Examination were at a two decade low. While it has also been estimated that by 2015, some 40% of workers will be aged 45 or older. Under-utilising a qualified and willing pool of ability during such periods seems entirely irrational, yet current research and statistics still point to the persistence of environmental and attitudinal barriers obstructing the path to employment for people with disabilities. These declining birth rates and an aging workforce are factors that the business community have no choice but to grapple with now and promoting the added value that graduates with disabilities can contribute to the Irish workplace is what the Willing, Able Mentoring (WAM) project is essentially all about.

Willing Able Mentoring (WAM), an EU EQUAL funded project, is a concept which has been pioneered by AHEAD (the Association of Higher Education Access and Disability). It is aimed at creating effective and reciprocal learning partnerships between employers and graduates with disabilities – who represent a continuously growing pool of talent. In terms of education the number of students with disabilities now going through third level education and graduating with honours continues to increase. In 2005/06 twenty-two higher education institutions in Ireland identified a total of 3,608 students with disabilities, of which 3,330 were undergraduates (AHEAD 2006). This represents a 156% rise in the number of students with disabilities from 98/99, when the figure was 1,410, and a 264% rise from 93/94, when the figure was 990. Trends indicate that this figure will steadily increase over the coming years as some 5,859 students with disabilities were accommodated in the Leaving Cert this year (2007), representing approximately 12% of the total population taking the exams. Also, according to the 2006 Census, there were 50,857 people aged over 15 with a third level qualification and a disability in Ireland. On the other hand, in relation to the Irish employment context, the National Disability Authority has asserted; 'People with disabilities are two and a half times less likely to have a job than non-disabled

people' (NDA 2005:3). Thus, while educational opportunities for students with disabilities continue to report progress, this impact does not appear to have been replicated in the employment market.

WAM exists to explore the sort of barriers, conscious and unconscious, that prevent graduates with disabilities from participating fully in the workforce. However, the benefits of employing disabled people do not begin and end with the employees themselves – employers can benefit from tapping into the expertise of this growing group of highly educated and willing graduates who have remained up to now relatively under-utilized.
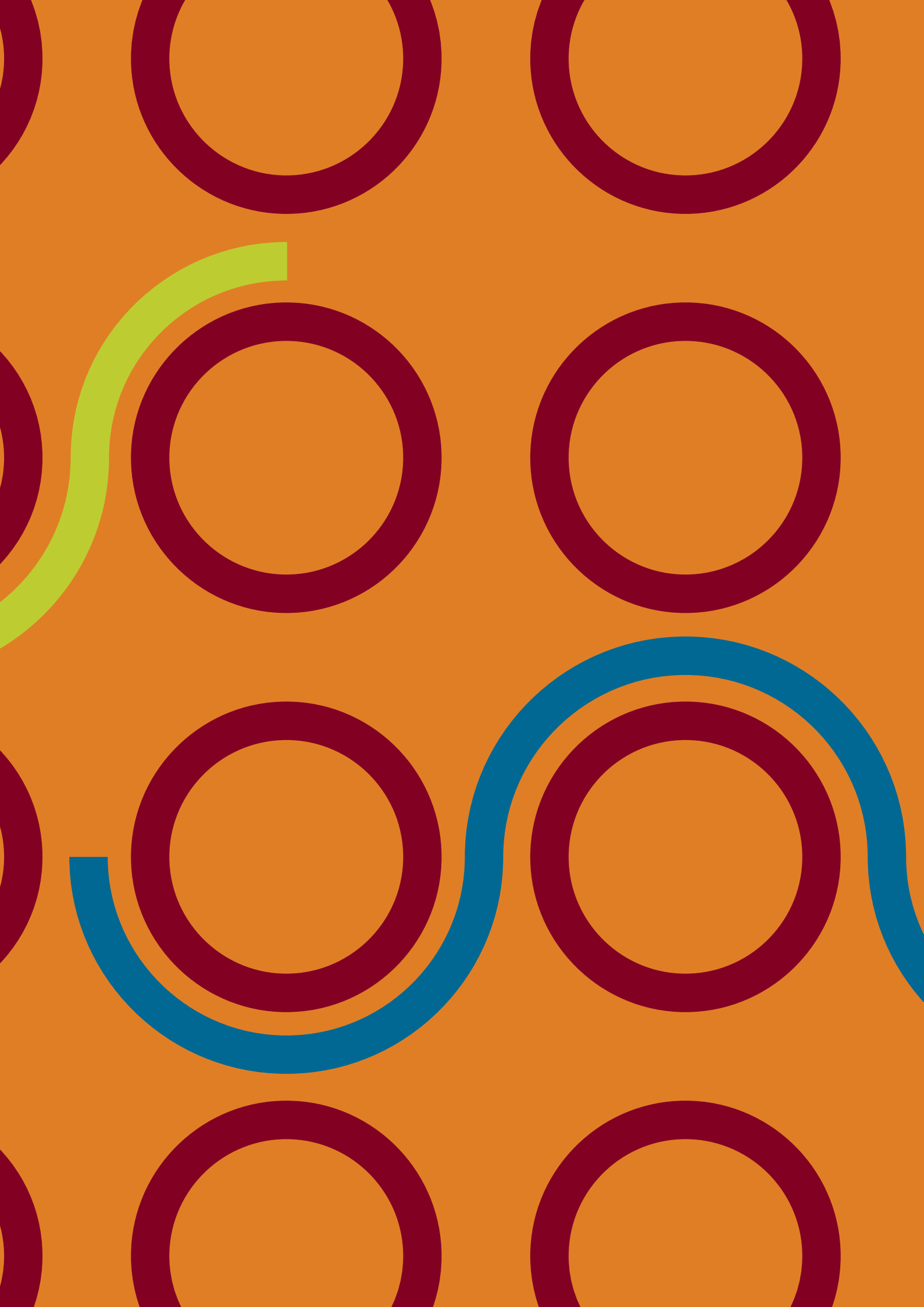
"Pride: working,
pulling your own weight,
earning a crust"

(WAM Participant)

B

The Project

Many organisations are committed to hiring people with disabilities, and many people with a disability are looking for employment, yet for some reason they do not seem to come together. The WAM Project is an EU EQUAL funded initiative seeking to identify and challenge the barriers facing graduates with disabilities entering employment. One of the primary functions of the WAM project is to capture the nature of this 'reason' – to identify the major barriers, real or perceived, to the inclusion of graduates with disabilities in the mainstream Irish workforce in an era which stresses the importance and significance of equality and diversity.

It is, in essence, a pilot project which is conducted through the mechanism of structured mentored work placements. This approach offers benefits for both participating graduates with disabilities and employers. Graduates with disabilities get to avail of much needed mainstream work experience in real jobs in real companies. While employers get the opportunity to trial and review their policies and procedures with an equality/diversity hat on. The real strength of this approach is the ability to learn from the collective experience so that it can crystallize and disseminate a message to employers, disabled jobseekers and policy makers; a message that barriers to mainstream employment can be overcome.

WAM (2005 – 2007) created a dynamic partnership between major recruitment players in the Irish labour market; IBM, Bank of Ireland, Savills Hamilton Osborne King, The Civil Service, FÁS, Irish Life & Permanent, and others including GET AHEAD, National Learning Network, DCU, Access Ability, and The Aisling Foundation. Fostering the creation of a more inclusive labour market in Ireland is at the heart of WAM and is in line with the EU Strategy on employment which seeks to establish an inclusive labour market throughout the whole of the EU. In line with the EQUAL funding structure WAM also took part in a thematic network of similar projects based in Ireland in order to share learning and disseminate information while the project also maintained a transnational partnership with similarly relevant projects in Italy, Holland and Poland.

The concept of mentoring is central to WAM. The WAM Mentoring model sets out to maximize potential through a smoother and quicker integration into workplace culture. Research informs us that many people leave organizations because they feel they do not 'fit in' rather than an inability to do the job. WAM mentoring sets out to address this potential issue through the reduction of the possibility of social exclusion. Mentors get the opportunity to meet their mentees (participants) during training before the actual work placement commences. So from day one, mentees have an immediate in-house connection. Some mentors may have never worked with a person with a disability before and may not come in contact with a person with a

disability in their everyday lives. Thus, participating in WAM mentoring, while it improves communication skills, simultaneously provides disability awareness through direct contact. Mentoring equally promotes the concept of a friendly, inclusive workplace environment and, as an extra layer of learning and knowledge transfer, offers benefits to the organization, mentor and mentee.

At its core the main aims of the project were to foster attitudinal change, to raise awareness and create a deeper understanding of the barriers faced in the labour market by graduates with disabilities and to lay the foundation for in-house mainstream inclusive practices and policies that will guarantee wider access and sustainability for all graduates with disabilities.

"...it gives managers the opportunity to see what graduates with disabilities can do and gives graduates with disabilities the opportunity to get work experience & confidence..."

(WAM Participant)

C The Process

(1) KEY ELEMENTS OF A WAM PLACEMENT
Providing Support to Employers: 'Walking the Line'

1) Network of Employers: Company Buy-in

It was necessary, from the beginning of the project, to secure company buy-in at senior management level for without it, selling the idea of WAM to line management would have been very difficult, if not impossible. This buy-in enabled WAM to utilise in-house staff resources for the purposes of project actions and evaluation.

2) Incentives to work: Taking up a WAM Placement

For those in receipt of welfare payments, medical cards and/or travel passes, securing agreements whereby the status of such benefits remained unchanged for the duration of the placement proved a good incentive to work. Against the backdrop of poor recruitment patterns of graduates with disabilities and weak if not non-existent incentives to enter the labour market, fear of loss of such entitlements is of major concern to people with disabilities.

3) Recruitment and Selection:
   Competencies, Job Specs and Needs Assessments

The 6 month placements on offer within the WAM Project were real jobs within real companies and therefore required standard recruitment procedures as they pertained to each of the employer organisations involved. In total WAM received 156 applications over the two rounds of placements (2006 and 2007) which, following CV screening by each employer's HR, resulted in just under 100 interviews and consequently 47 placed candidates. Core aspects of this recruitment and selection process included;

> ### (i) Competency Based Approach – Use of language
>
> This approach assisted employers to focus on required ability and not disability in drawing up job specifications and interviewing. Inherent in this process was an exercise in understanding the key role language plays in advertising and recruiting. Words such as 'dynamic' or 'energetic' can create certain perceptions for potential applicants which can result in them regarding the post as 'not for me'. Disability proofing key documents was an important exercise at this stage of the process.

(ii) Good job-skills match – Considering work environments

The most successful placements were those where job specifications were well defined and the environment in which the jobs functioned well understood. The more detailed the job specification from the initial recruitment stages, the more potential to choose the most appropriate candidate based solely on competencies. In order for this to occur job specs must take into account the physical and social environment in which core tasks of the job must take place.

(iii) Needs Assessment – Making an informed decision

Following the recruitment process, a needs assessment was conducted on each WAM participant to identify, what, if any, supports or accommodations were required for the WAM candidate to do their particular job. An independent needs assessor was brought in to conduct the assessments and the final assessment was agreed by the participant, consultant and manager. Again the importance of a detailed job spec became evident at this point also. This assessment also drew attention to any potential health and safety issues.

4) The WAM Mentoring Model: A Template for Inclusion

Mentoring is fundamental to the WAM approach and key to its success. The WAM mentoring model sets out to enhance skill development and the overall work experience of the graduate while increasing the speed and effectiveness of social integration into the world of work. Every placed candidate received the support of an in-house mentor for the duration of their placement. Mentoring contracts which outlined goals for both mentor and mentee were drawn up and signed by both parties in order to provide a structure for the relationship. Becoming a WAM mentor required;

- Being a company employee for more than one year.
- Volunteering to take on the role.
  and
- Not being the mentee's direct line manager.

Mentoring proved to be an extremely useful tool with 97% of all involved finding the WAM mentoring process to be beneficial and worthy of wider application. Mentoring seemed to function well as an extra layer of learning and knowledge transfer.

5) Training: Management of Disability

Prior to the commencement of placements, training was provided to participating managers, mentors and mentees on disability awareness, the WAM Project itself, what the mentoring process means for managers and mentors and work ethics.

6) Issues Arising: Walking the line

The positive experience of manager's engagement in the project is down to the fact that WAM provided a constant support structure to all involved, but in particular to line managers whenever an issue arose. Managers were never alone and knowing support was to hand if required, went some way to demystifying any fears around the management of disability.

7) Closure: Prepare graduates to move on

All participants were prepped for future job seeking when placements were approaching their close through group mentoring sessions on specific topics such as positive action planning and what is required to move on in the current Irish labour market.

(II) WAM PARTICIPANT PROFILE

The following is a profile breakdown of the participants who were successfully placed on the WAM Project during 2006 and 2007.

47 Placements in Total:

Civil Sector 60%	Public Sector 8%	Private Sector 32%

Disability Profile

Physical Impairment 32%	Specific Learning Difficulties 13%
Visual Impairment 23%	Hearing Impairment 9%
Mental Health Difficulties 23%	

Education Profile

Degree 54%	Higher Diploma 6%
Post Graduate 21%	Diploma 4%
Cert/FETAC L5 15%	

Age Profile

18–25 43%	45–54 6%
26–34 36%	54+ 4%
35–44 11%	

Accommodations made:

45% of participants on the WAM Project received accommodations which ranged from assistive technology to accessibility audits to travel arrangements. Assistive technology (62%) was the most common (Kurzweil, JAWS).

(III) SUCCESSFUL OUTCOMES

All of the participants that completed their placements (100%) found them to be a positive experience.

On completing their 6 month WAM placement **49%** (22) of the participants entered into a further source of employment.

95% of managers stated that they would employ a graduate with a disability again.

94% of managers felt that mentoring had something to offer the workplace in general.

97% of all involved (managers, mentors and mentees) found the mentoring process beneficial.

77% of managers felt either they or their staff had learned from the WAM experience.

74% of mentors had never fulfilled a mentoring role before.
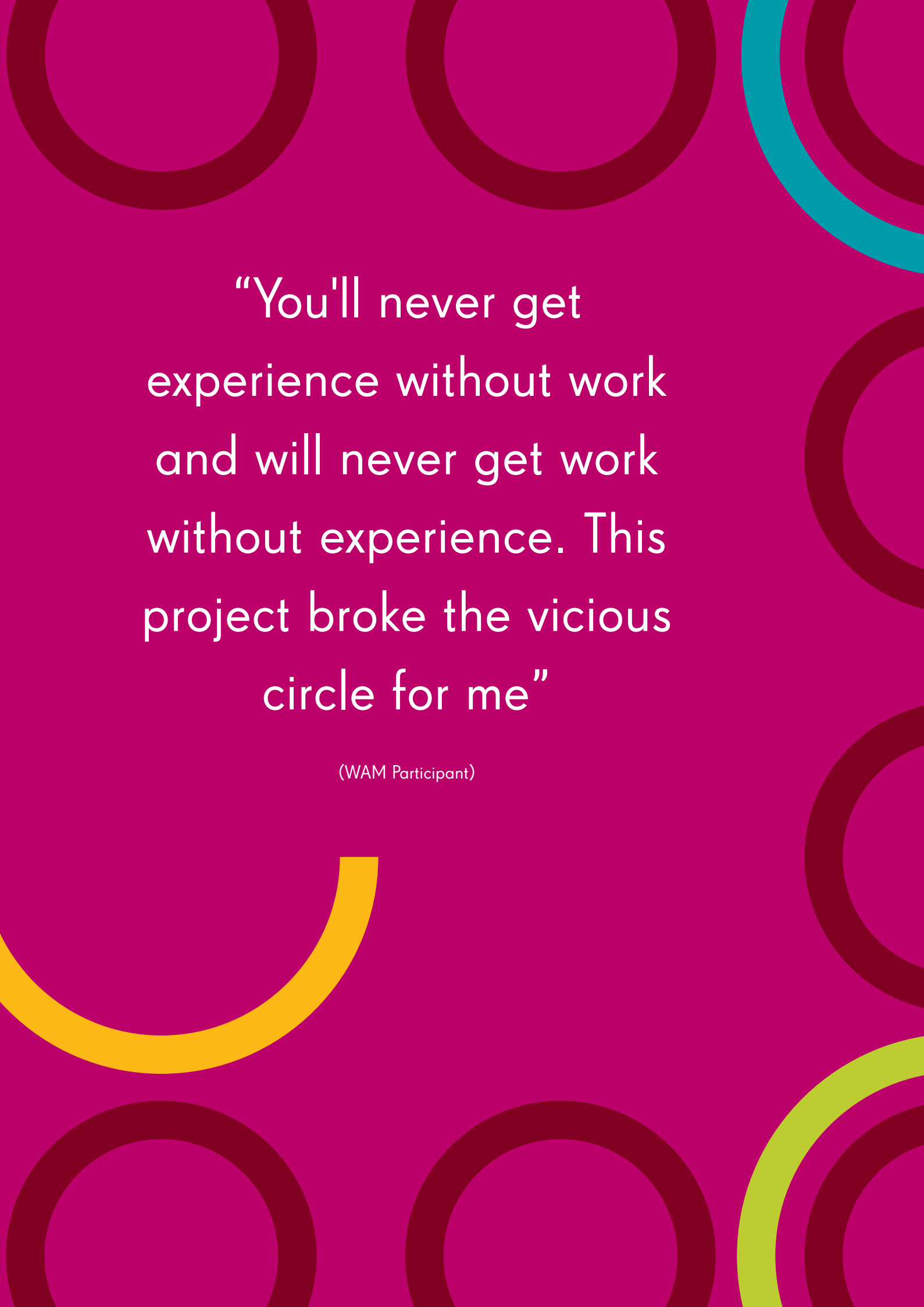
67% of managers stated that they did not encounter any difficulties in their role within WAM. Of those that did the majority were not in relation to the operation of the placement but factors such as; the placement being too short, allocating work and paperwork. However one or two of the more significant difficulties related to the graduate's work etiquette and the problems associated with non-disclosure.

83% of mentors did not encounter any difficulties in their role. Of those that did, again these related to minor issues such as time and sometimes a blurring of the line between manager and mentor.

The use of work placements has proved successful in relation to 3 specific aspects;
- Facilitating work experience for graduates with disabilities.
- Disseminating disability awareness through direct contact and thus potentially breaking down attitudinal barriers.
- Employers found the mentored work placements a very effective method of integrating graduates with disabilities into the mainstream workplace.
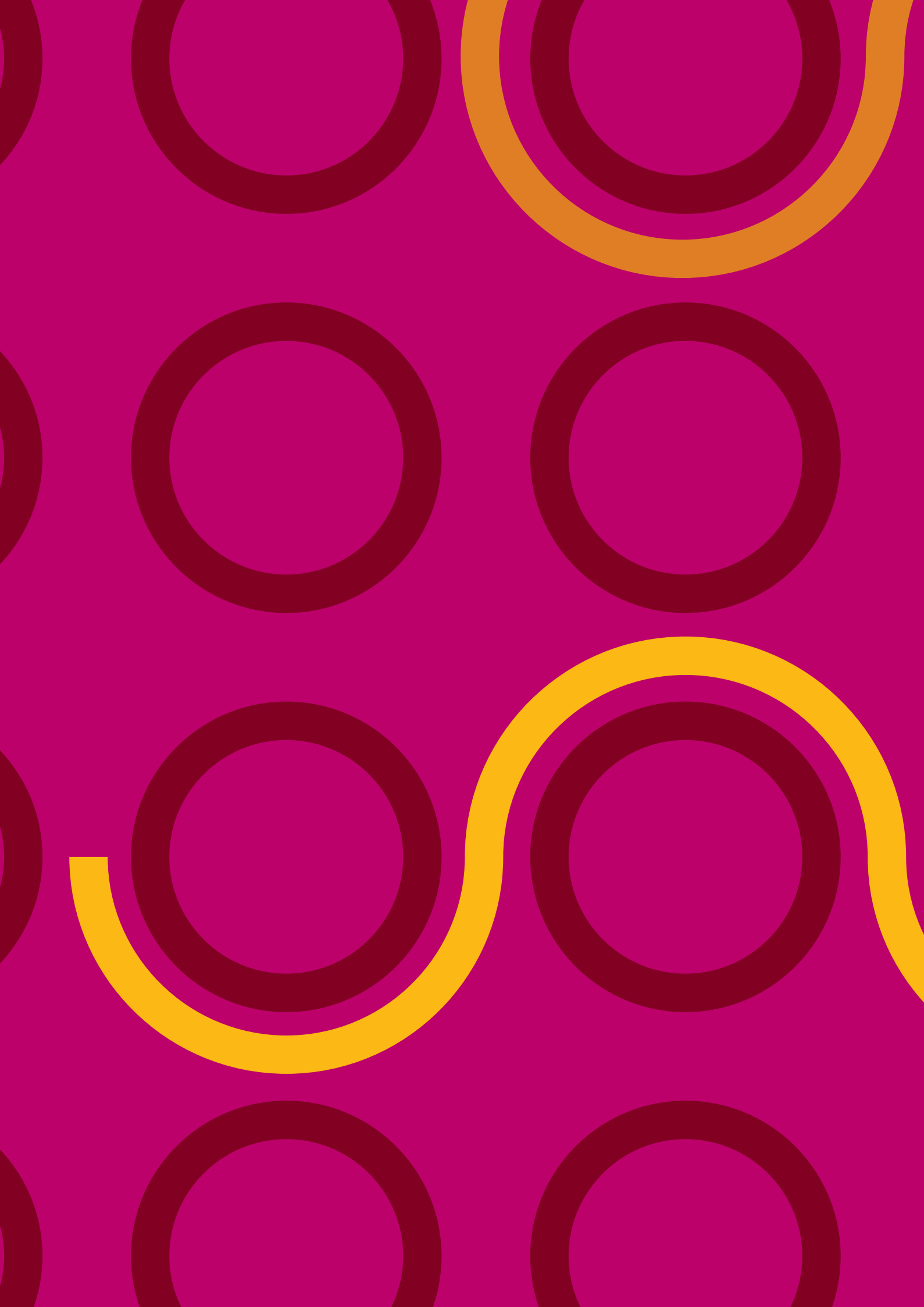
"You'll never get experience without work and will never get work without experience. This project broke the vicious circle for me"

(WAM Participant)

D The Findings

While the sample of participants involved in the project is relatively small, the strength of the WAM project lies in the fact that these findings are based on the experience of graduates with disabilities in real jobs in real companies, rather than based on other studies or literature review findings. This gave the project a certain edge as it was rooted in the reality of everyday work. It is very heartening to state that in rolling out the project the WAM team were not confronted by any one insurmountable wall or barrier in relation to the employment prospects of graduates with disabilities, but rather, WAM identified a series of gaps and issues that, when combined, almost seemed to represent an obstacle course of disincentives. The following are some of the major findings from the WAM Project (2005-2007).

Potential for Inclusion

The most striking outcome from the WAM Project is the great potential it demonstrated for the inclusion of graduates with disabilities in the mainstream Irish workforce. Adapting practices that are sensible and achievable and putting in place solutions or adopting new methods to recruitment and selection, this project has demonstrated that a valued, talented and, more importantly, under-utilized pool of potential workers is available to the business community. A prime example being that 49% of those who completed their placement attained a further source of mainstream employment. 50% of these secured employment as a direct result of their placement, 18% immediately gained employment elsewhere while the other 32% went on to pass civil service open competition exams.

Employer Concerns

Employers concerns regarding the recruitment of graduates with disabilities can form one of the major attitudinal barriers to the recruitment of this pool of talent. Fear of some form of reprisal if they 'get it wrong' when recruiting or employing a graduate with a disability, is very real. This fear is particularly evident where the position of a graduate with a disability may not be working out due to continual performance issues. Key concerns and apprehensions amongst employers include;

- Legislation – what if I get it wrong?
- Lack of knowledge of disability and its management
- Maintaining productivity levels
- Asking the required – and appropriate – questions at interview
- Health & safety obligations

The Power of Perceptions

One of the more striking elements of the research process was the number of occasions that the comment 'I think we/I got lucky with [WAM Participant]'. At the origin of these comments are inherent expectations about what to expect when the term disability is used (usually resulting in the image of a wheelchair accessible sign). In fact during training participating managers and mentors were asked what enters their heads when the word disability is mentioned and not surprisingly the majority thought 'wheelchair'. These perceptions and expectations which rely on stereotype (particularly regarding mental health issues) can quickly turn to fears if you are a manager and feel that there is a lack of information about the disability. Thus there is a tendency to focus on the 'disability' rather than the 'ability' of an applicant and consequently, the thrust of the approach to recruitment and selection tends to be negative. This can result in graduates with disabilities having to work harder during recruitment to overcome this unnecessary attitudinal hurdle in order to prove they are suitable for the post.

The WAM Project found that one of the most effective methods of breaking down attitudes, perceptions and therefore stereotypes is direct contact.

Recruitment & Selection

WAM highlighted for employers the importance of well thought-out job advertisements and detailed job specifications. Employers often stated that graduates with disabilities did not apply for positions in their respective companies. These organisations were not conscious of the fact that the application of certain words in recruitment campaigns could potentially have the opposite than intended effect by putting off, rather than attracting, graduates with disabilities from submitting an application. As part of the project, WAM disability proofed all relevant recruitment and selection documents. The use of words such as 'pressure' or 'rapidly' in relation to core tasks were deemed, at times, excessive as they often hold connotations that can impact on the perception of the type of job on offer and the type of candidate required.

WAM cannot emphasise enough the importance of the role a well defined job specification plays in finding the best job/person match. Identifying core competencies and being aware of the work environment are crucial aspects in the selection process. The importance of the work environment as a function of job specification was often underestimated. The ideal job-skills match takes into consideration not only educational attainment and previous work experience but the nature of everyday tasks. The kind of things we take for granted can often be

overlooked but such oversights can effect the end decision of who gets the job. In addition, having adequate company policies and practices in place and strictly adhering to their application in all situations are key building blocks to best practice and go a long way to removing the sense of fear that many managers have when it comes to the management of disability in the workplace.

A key piece of learning for WAM was in noting that when specific job specs and core competencies are outlined efficiently and properly (taking in the full working environment of a particular job) and internal health and safety policies outlined and adhered to, the term disability should simply disappear.

An important point to remember is; the **more** thought-out and detailed the job spec, the **more** potential there is to choose the **most** appropriate candidate and put in place the **most** suitable accommodations. The following case study illustrates this very point.

CASE STUDY A

A Business graduate, who is deaf secured a 6 month mentored work placement within a company. This proved to be the candidate's first experience of the mainstream work environment. In gaining this placement the candidate had passed a full recruitment process and met all the skills required by management to fulfil the role. The candidate stated at interview that Irish sign language is their first and most comfortable language rather than English. However, it transpired that the particular work environment had a strong reliance on verbal communication for the routine exchange of information and also included the utilisation of terms that are specific to the sphere of corporate actions. This posed considerable difficulties for the candidate who found lip-reading very strenuous.

Whilst the co-workers attempted to send more emails and write down a lot of information for the person, the manager noted that because the turnover of work was so fást some coworkers would do tasks for the candidate rather than explain them. On the spot verbal communication took up a significant part of this job. A sign language interpreter was provided for large meetings, but was not available on a more consistent basis due to a shortage in sign language interpreter resources. Eventually it was agreed by all parties involved that the candidate would be moved to another area of the organisation where quick, verbal communication was not a central feature, as the organisation appreciated the work being done and did not want to lose a talented and enthusiastic employee. The manager in question gained considerable learning about the work environment and core competencies that are required in order to fulfil this particular role and actually stated that this will be taken into account for all future recruitment. This experience provided great learning for both the company and candidate involved which is one of the most prominent aims of the WAM

Project. Considering that this was the candidates first work experience in the mainstream labour market, it proved to be very informative; '...it's given me a greater understanding of my future... I can picture my future better...'. The candidate went on to secure a permanent position in the company.

A Support Mechanism for Employers and Graduates with Disabilities

The Third Level Sector has gone a long way over the last 15 years to support students with disabilities make the transition from second level to third level education. The numbers speak for themselves; today the figure stands at over 3,600 students with disabilities in third level which represents a 264% rise in numbers since 1994. When a student with a disability enters college there is a framework of support in place that can be called on to assist them to play to their strengths. When that student exits college to enter the world of work, she/he is virtually on their own. This transition from college to work can be a daunting prospect for graduates with disabilities. Unlike education, in the world of work who, what or where you can turn to for advice and support is unclear.

This point is equally significant for employers who often need practical advice and relevant training and awareness in order to be prepared to employ graduates with disabilities. Knowing that there was an external support they could call and rely on in the event of an issue arising was a significant benefit for employers (and managers) and acted as an incentive to participate in the project. All of the employers involved in the WAM Project have stated that having that external support there in case anything arose was of huge importance to them. In fact during WAM's evaluation of placements in 2007, 88% of managers and mentors interviewed (30) felt that employers did lack support or a source of advice when it came to the recruitment and employment of people with disabilities. The following comments from managers and mentors serve to illustrate this view;

> 'I would find that [a lack of support] from my previous experience where there was immediate urgent need and there was no such thing as saying come back to me in 10 minutes... where there is immediate need, there is still no support.'

> 'It's the fears that managers or employers have to get over... They need someone to explain the legislation and point out that it means this and that and you need to record this form of data or information if you re going to make certain decisions... the practical stuff needs explanation...'

> '...it's the fear of the unknown and not being able to deal with the issue... having that source of advice does have a knock-on effect... it is always nice to have someone with experience to talk to.'

Loss of Welfare Rights – A Disincentive to Work

Loss of welfare rights is a big issue for graduates with disabilities taking up employment. Examples within the project serve to illustrate the point that, in its

current format, the benefits system creates cases where the choice is often one between full-time work without benefits or disability benefits and temporary, intermittent work. From the project's experience, there is a general perception that employment seems to have a negative impact on welfare rights and consequently incentives to work for graduates with disabilities. Graduates have to factor in the potential additional costs of having a disability and current research indicates that many people with disabilities' experiences of access to work is one based on, at best, work of a temporary and/or part-time nature. Uncertainty and the threat of loss of welfare rights surround the whole area of work, perpetuating a sense of fear and the feeling that the current system offers little or no incentives to work. The WAM experience has been one which would support Ronayne and Tyrrell's assertion that;

'The policy response to the employment of people with disabilities in Ireland has been and continues to be predominantly socially focused (i.e. income support) rather than employment focused (i.e. provision of supports to enter, maintain and re-enter employment). That policy stance needs to change' (2005:83).

Disclosure – A Complex Picture

For the purpose of this project the term 'disclosure of disability' refers to the act of telling or disclosing the exact nature of one's disability. A person with a disability is not legally obliged to disclose and has the right to decide if and when to do so. The need for graduates with disabilities to fully disclose their disability on seeking employment generated much discussion throughout the project. There are no clear guidelines on whether or when to disclose one's disability. This is particularly relevant for those with hidden disabilities while for others where the disability is self evident, non-disclosure is not an option. In general participating employers favoured disclosure. Whereas there was a general consensus among participating graduates that, given the choice, they would only disclose if they had to. Disability is so interlinked to their sense of identify that some hold a fear of rejection and prejudice upon disclosure while others object to having to supply information they feel is personal to them.

Employers will quickly respond that they have obligations to all staff that they must fulfil. They too have legal obligations. Furthermore, how can they be expected to provide appropriate supports/accommodations, handle health and safety and other work related issues when there is no disclosure? How can they be expected to deal with what they do not know?

The WAM pilot project found the relationship between disability and employment to be a complex one. There is a need to recognise both sides of the disclosure issue in order to understand the divergence of opinions. There is little doubt that when accessing the mainstream labour market disclosure represents different problems for different disabilities, e.g. wheelchair users as oppose to, for example, those with mental health issues. The nature of the disability seems to shape the approach to disclosure. For example, just over one quarter of participants on the WAM project chose not to disclose during their placement period. A closer examination reveals

that 82% of those who did not disclose have what might be termed hidden or nonvisible disabilities (i.e. a disability which may not display any physical attributes such as dyslexia or depression).The project had to walk the line between employers feeling that WAM participants had to be treated slightly different to other workers and WAM participants who wanted to be seen to be the same as everyone else. Yet disclosure is the gateway to providing the appropriate support or accommodation which enables the person to effectively carry out the tasks of their job. The right approach is crucial.

The approach pursued by WAM was to work with participating employers around the 'need to know' and what an employer needs to know should be identified and defined by a thorough job specification. This includes the relevant work environment and, where they exist, health and safety issues. Thus outlining what exactly is needed to perform the tasks of the job adequately and safely. The key to understanding disclosure is to identify the most useful information to ascertain whether and to what extent a disability impacts on the core tasks of a specific job. Knowing the title of a disability is of itself limited. WAM equally advocates that graduates with disabilities must also carry the responsibility for their decisions to disclose or not, particularly as this pertains to the acquirement of suitable accommodations in the workplace.

Accommodations/Grants – How far will I get without them?

From the WAM Project's experience the issues associated with providing accommodations to facilitate the employment of people with disabilities revolved around time **NOT** money. It must be noted at this point that only 45% of WAM participants required a form of reasonable accommodation. The most common accommodation used during the project was assistive technology/equipment (62% of those that required an accommodation) which employers seemed to have no problem in sourcing once they became easily versed in the most appropriate type or format for the person in question. However, considering the diverse range of disabilities involved on the project, WAM had to fund other accommodations that were required but were not considered either necessary or essential such as;

- Transport arrangements.
- The use of sign language interpreters.
- Medical appointments involving the use of annual leave.

Not surprisingly, **equity of accommodation** arose as an important issue during the project. The law recognises the concept of 'reasonable accommodation' and the State provides a national grants system to encourage employers to recruit people with disabilities. However the range of grants available falls short of meeting the requirements of the diversity of disability attempting to access the labour market. The gap begs the question of what is understood in the first place as an 'accommodation' and secondly what is accepted as 'reasonable'. Another case study may further explore this issue.

CASE STUDY B

A graduate with cystic fibrosis went through a full recruitment process including CV screening, interviewing and a needs assessment in order to gain a 6-month work placement within a company. This placement actually proved to be the candidate's first experience of the mainstream work environment.

Initially the candidate felt comfortable with requiring no accommodations and was happy to travel an indirect route (use of public transport and a 30 minute walk in total) to and from work. However as the placement commenced, it became clear to the candidate that the combination of negotiating public transport and the efforts of a full working day were going to take their toll on the candidate's general well-being. The candidate's condition meant that they didn't have the physical capabilities to make the journey everyday. Even though the candidate matched the initial job specification and was able to handle a full day's work, their condition meant that a lot of energy was utilised just getting to and from work. Consequently the candidate couldn't keep pace with workloads due to the exertion required using public transport and therefore was always trying to play catch-up in terms of getting on top of tasks and deadlines. Due primarily to a combination of being constantly active and tired, it also emerged that the candidate had become slightly careless with medication requirements.

Since travel is not covered under the current system of workplace grants and accommodations to assist people with disabilities enter mainstream work – a taxi to and from work was provided for the duration of the placement to make it possible for the candidate to fulfil their role. This development allowed the candidate to keep on top of their workload as it reduced the energy and stress emerging from the absence of direct transport while the candidate was also able to better manage their health.

Without this form of accommodation (private travel arrangements) in the current Irish labour market, this particular candidate essentially had two choices; maintain the initial work situation using public transport, which could eventually prove damaging to the candidate's health or decide to give up the placement and rely on government assistance until another job (limited by location) was found.

In addition the project noted that when it comes to applying for a national grant, employers are put off by the cumbersome, time consuming process of actually securing a grant or accommodation under the current system. For many employers, even those who decide that the graduate with a disability is the most suitable person for the job, the process and red tape involved in getting an accommodation can be off-putting. Thus from the WAM Project perspective, the 2 most important factors in need of review are (1) equity of accommodation and (2) the time consuming application process involved in securing a grant.

Mentoring

The mentor model put in place for all participants on the WAM project proved to be one of the major successes of the project with 94% of all managers stating that mentoring could have something to offer the workplace in general and 97% of all involved (managers, mentors and participants) claiming that they found the process beneficial. Mentoring appears to be particularly effective in relation to circumstances where an initial level of support is desirable and where flexible working policies may need to be reinforced by some form of person-centred supportive relationship. The National Flexi-work Partnership's (2005) report **Mental Health & Employment: Promoting Social Inclusion in the Workforce** asserts that while formal workplace policies are vital, one of the more eminent needs arising from their research appears to be the '...importance of having available another supportive human being in the organisation whom they could approach'. This point is reinforced by the experience of this project.

'To have a support at work is invaluable... if I don't manage to get a mentor in my next job, I will find that kind of daunting because it helped so much in this placement' (WAM Participant).

Research – A Little Tells a Lot

On an international scale, the research that exists seems to show that graduates with disabilities fare better than people with disabilities in attaining employment, yet not as well as non-disabled graduates. Common perceptions, some of which were expressed by managers participating on the project, seem to think that people with physical disabilities now have fewer barriers to employment when compared to other disability types, with mental health issues being viewed as potentially generating the most concern. Yet research conducted by the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS) (2006) in the UK highlights the fact that it is graduates with hidden disabilities that gain most employment when compared to other disability types. The complex nature of disclosure may play a role here. For example in looking at those who participated in WAM, 82% of those who did not disclose had non-visible disabilities. From an Irish perspective, the dearth of research into the employment of graduates with disabilities means we cannot have a comprehensive picture of the nature of disability and its relationship to employment. Perhaps most importantly, we therefore lose the voice of the graduates themselves in attempting to address the complexity of these issues.

Graduates with Disabilities

Work experience is of crucial importance for graduates with disabilities. For some of the participants on the project, the placement represented their first real job. This relative lack of work experience can impact on the capability of graduates with disabilities in relation to three aspects; to know whether they are work-ready, awareness of proper work ethics and finally, understanding of the implications of decisions made, particularly in relation to disclosure.

"If a company is flexible it can remove irrational obstacles that prevent a person from actually carrying out a job"

(WAM Mentor)

E

The Recommendations

The following recommendations emanating from the experience and evaluation of the WAM Project have been divided into five topical areas; Education, Employment, Policy, Graduates with Disabilities and Research.

(1) EDUCATION

The world of college is very different to the world of work for a graduate with a disability. Of particular importance here is the emphasising of the difference between disability supports that may be available in college compared to the open labour market. Increased information and awareness of the complexity and impact of issues such as disclosure, grants/accommodations available, impact of legislation, benefits etc. are a must for graduates with disabilities BEFORE they attempt to enter the mainstream labour market permanently.

WAM feels that career guidance could go a long way to assist students and graduates with disabilities prepare themselves for the working world. An inclusive and comprehensive careers programme could potentially help bridge the gap that currently exists for some graduates with disabilities accessing mainstream employment.

- When preparing to access the mainstream workplace, graduates with disabilities require specific information, awareness and support. Career guidance could assist in alleviating this potential information gap by bringing home to students and graduates with disabilities the importance and relevance of issues such as disclosure, job spec analysis, available accommodations and legislation.

- In line with the previous recommendation, creating a space/network where shared learning can occur between college disability support offices and career guidance offices may provide a clearer understanding of the particular issues that students and graduates with disabilities need to be aware of.

- Consider incorporating, on a broader scale, strategies such as the INTRA Programme (DCU) where courses and academic studies are integrated and linked with realistic labour market jobs in the practical world of work thus providing a means for students and graduates with disabilities to gain valuable work experience.

- Disability and equality awareness should be incorporated as an integral aspect of courses provided by colleges and institutes of further education. For example courses in business management, HR, architecture or even web design should incorporate training on issues such as inclusive recruitment, equality management or universal design.

(II) EMPLOYMENT
"Knowledge is the antidote to fear" (Ralph Waldo Emerson)

Employers have commented that while they feel there is ample support for people with disabilities in the workplace, there is little support for employers. WAM found that providing employers with a safe and constructive environment to explore and deal with issues arising along with sharing the collective experience with other participating employers and disability related organisations was a very useful tool.

- WAM recommends the use of collective employer learning as an effective source of support. Creating effective communication routes between employers and disability organisations is central to addressing any fears that could eventually act as barriers in relation to the employment of graduates with disabilities.

Attitudes are difficult to change but efforts need to be made to counteract the prevalence of underlying concerns and prevailing perceptions in relation to the employment of graduates with disabilities. All staff involved in Corporate Social Responsibility and HR should be up to speed on current legislation and aware of best practice in relation to the recruitment and selection of people with disabilities. In order to ensure equity, employers' need to make use of every opportunity within their organisations' induction and training strategies to incorporate equality and diversity into company policy and ethics. This should include a strong commitment from top-level management whilst all line managers need to be aware of, and make known to staff, their policy on disability as well as company practices in relation to performance reviews. A thorough understanding of the disclosure issue is of particular importance here.

- WAM recommends that comprehensive Disability Equality Training be undertaken by employer organisations in order to improve awareness levels of staff and reduce underlying perceptions and fears.

(1) Job advertisements that acknowledge and analyse the language used in order to negate any chance of graduates with disabilities misinterpreting core requirements and consequently their suitability for the job.

(2) A job analysis which consists of detailed job specifications that are developed and provided early in the recruitment process with the core skills outlined, making sure to remove any tasks or terms which are not necessarily essential to the job. An important step in identifying core skills is a prior analysis of the environment (physical and task orientated) in which the job will take place. This process of job analysis is hugely significant - the more thought-out and detailed the job spec, the more potential there is to choose the most appropriate candidate.

(3) Following on from the detailed job spec, a competency-based interview which analyses the skills of the applicant in terms of those outlined within the specification while focusing continually on ability rather than disability.

(4) An acknowledgement of the range of alternative qualifications that graduates with disabilities may have due to their different education to employment paths which are Leaving Cert and higher equivalent i.e. FETAC Level 5 is the equivalent of the Leaving Cert under the National Framework of Qualifications.

(5) An interview panel and HR team that have had disability awareness training which has encompassed the diversity of disability, the impact of disclosure and the range of accommodations available.

Smoother and quicker integration into the social sphere of the work environment usually results in the maximising of an employee's potential and productivity at an earlier stage. The WAM mentoring process proved very effective in this respect. Mentoring can also provide the type of man-management that seems to be lacking in a modern workforce which continually relies on task driven productivity. While the recruiting and training of in-house individual mentors has also enabled the filtering through companies of disability awareness through one on one contact with disabled graduates.

- WAM recommends the use of mentoring as a method of integrating graduates with disabilities into the social environment of a workplace and believes, where necessary, it has the potential to be applied to all new recruits.

(III) POLICY – ACKNOWLEDGING THE CONTEXT

Employers repeatedly commented that TIME and NOT money is of the essence for them regarding the provision of supports and accommodations. WAM found that employers can be put off applying for grants by the amount of time and paper work required. Managers are too busy with their day-to-day workload to wade through what they view as a bureaucratic, sluggish system. The procedures involved in

attaining a grant through the current system could essentially be having a negative impact on employer and employee take-up.

- A review of the State's current system for attaining grants/accommodations to assist the employment of people with disabilities may be needed in order to address specific employer concerns which can hinder grant take-up.

Another issue related to the grants system is the apparent mismatch of perceptions regarding the diversity of disabilities and the availability of grants and accommodations. For example, why is it that assistive technology is so readily accepted as a 'reasonable' accommodation yet travel arrangements or the ongoing use of sign language interpreters are questioned. Alternative travel arrangements, access to sign language interpreters (for work purposes) and essential medical visits must be considered as falling into the bracket of reasonable accommodations in order to ensure equity of access to the mainstream labour market for graduates with a diverse range of disabilities. While acknowledging that the current range of grants and accommodations available are beneficial, WAM has found that in relation to a diverse range of disabilities which may require different forms of support, it is not equitable in its current format. Obviously WAM can not advocate that these alternative forms of support be open to all who think they may require them as the costs involved would be a significant sum. However individual applications for particular and alternative forms of support such as travel arrangements could be assessed on an individual needs and benefits basis. A genuinely inclusive approach could result in a pool of willing, able, tax-paying workers entering the mainstream labour market rather than being resigned to long periods of time on benefits. The introduction of alternative supports could surely make the benefits worth the additional costs.

- If we are to genuinely promote the inclusion of graduates with a diverse range of disabilities into the workforce, clarification on what exactly can constitute a reasonable accommodation requires immediate consideration. Of particular significance here is the issue of 'equity of accommodation'.

Incentives to work for graduates with disabilities are weak. Of particular importance here is the potential loss of medical cards and transport subsidies. While acknowledging and commending the supports available for disabled employees under the disability benefit system itself and also the FAS Wage Subsidy Scheme, some form of further flexibility may be required, which takes into account the cost of disability, in order to ensure that graduates with disabilities who represent a skilled, qualified and able resource pool are given sufficient incentive to enter the mainstream labour market. There is little doubt that the disability benefits system assists those who require it, however there is a lack of incentive and flexibility built into the framework which may detach certain graduates with disabilities from the labour market full-time, as the correlating economic sacrifice is too significant under

the current format. As noted during the project findings, the disability benefit system still needs to find more of a balance between a social (income support) focus and an employment orientated focus.

● An analysis of the disability benefit system is well overdue in order to assess the potential impact of providing a good work incentive package to prospective tax paying graduates with disabilities.

According to the Sign Language Interpreting Service, the National Agency for sign language interpretation services in Ireland, there were approximately 44 interpreters on their books in the summer of 2007. From the WAM Project's experience, demand far outweighs supply in relation to the use of sign language interpreters in Ireland and this is something which needs to be addressed in order to enable a particular section of a willing and able pool of under-utilized talent to enter the mainstream Irish workforce.

● There is an urgent need for the increasing in numbers of Sign Language Interpreters nationwide.

(IV) GRADUATES WITH DISABILITIES
"By failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail" (Benjamin Franklin)

● WAM recommends that graduates with disabilities take stock of all the issues that may arise for them when accessing the open labour market in Ireland. Of significant importance is the recognition of the difference between the supports available at third level compared to those in employment and the impact this may have on their ability to perform certain tasks. Being pro-active and responsible are crucial during the transition period between education and employment.

● Graduates with disabilities need to come to terms with their own particular needs in relation to what they may require in the mainstream workplace and need to take charge of finding out the relevant information as it pertains to them. Awareness of the relevant issues means not only being aware of your rights but also the subsequent responsibilities that follow decisions made i.e. non-disclosure, the impact of work on benefits etc.

● Selling unique talents and educational paths are something that graduates with disabilities can develop and use to their advantage in order to gain employment.

(V) RESEARCH

The absence of research on graduates with disabilities and employment makes it difficulty to identify where the real barriers lie. Of particular significance here is the absence of the voice of the graduates with disabilities and employers at the grass root level. In order to comprehensively assess the impact of environmental and attitudinal barriers to the employment prospects of graduates with disabilities, a clearer picture of the actual context is required.

● Research into the employment prospects and current situation of graduates with disabilities in Ireland is required. Studies of significant importance at this point include;

- Data on the first destination of graduates with disabilities at a national level following college or university.

- Figures on the number of graduates with disabilities in the Irish labour market. Current research points to the number of people with disabilities in the workplace and the number of students with disabilities in education, leaving a significant gap in identifying what happens to these students when they become graduates and enter into the mainstream work environment.

- Students and graduates with disabilities experiences of mainstream recruitment processes.

- A comparison of students/graduates with disabilities and employers perceptions and experiences of the disclosure issue.

- A longitudinal study which would follow a small number of students with disabilities across the country for 2 years. This timeframe could take in the student's final year in college as they prepare for exams, enter the labour market and the experience of their first year in the mainstream labour market. Key issues which could be investigated within the transitional period between education and employment include;

  · Educational accommodations (exam accommodations)

  · Use of career guidance (support available)

  · Awareness of certain issues prior to entering the labour market (disclosure, accommodations available in employment, legislation etc.)

  · Experience of the mainstream recruitment process (job advertisements, CV application, disclosure/non-disclosure, interview process etc.)

  · A possible comparison of supports available in education and mainstream employment.

"...The biggest barrier

is perception"

(WAM Manager)

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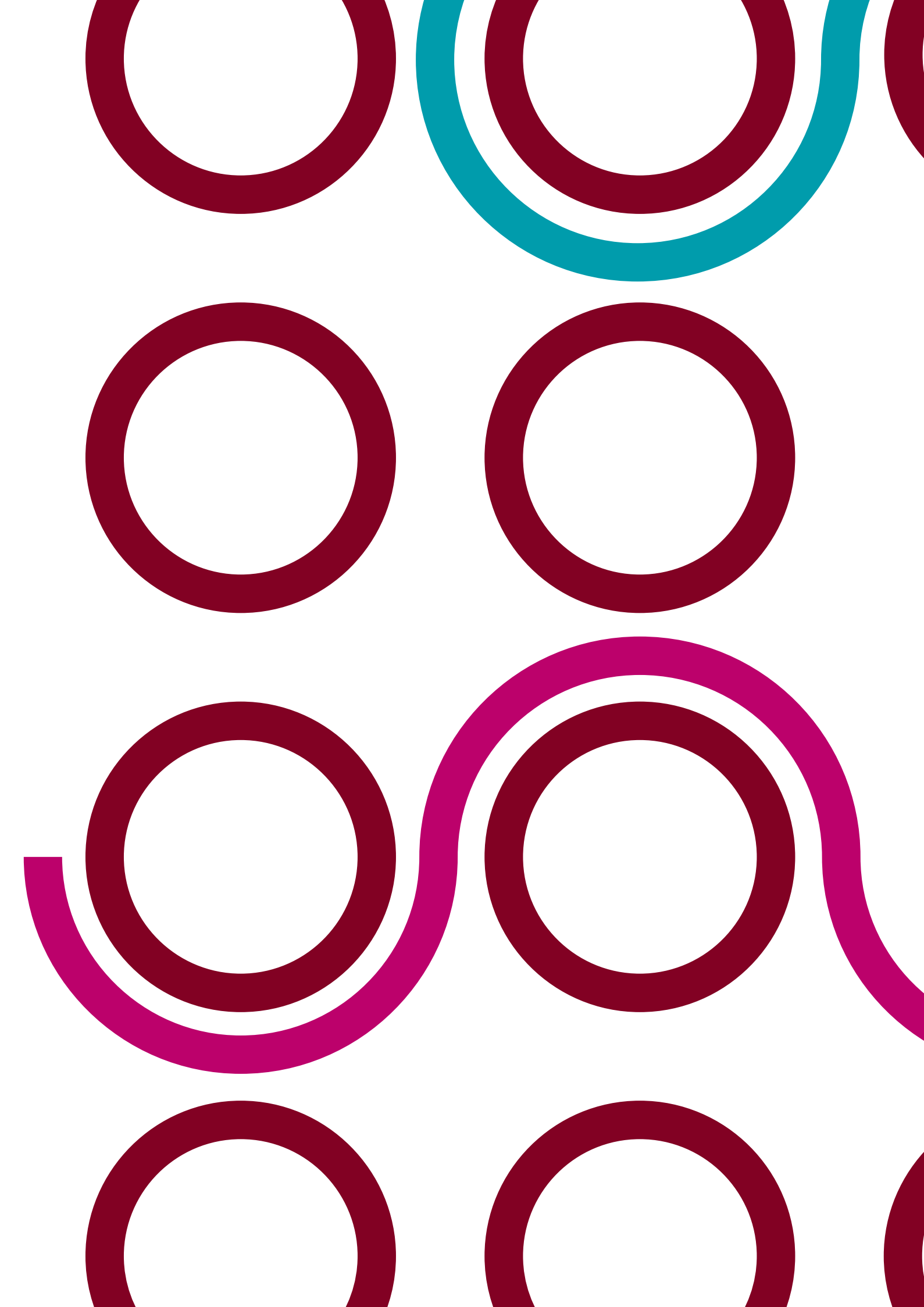
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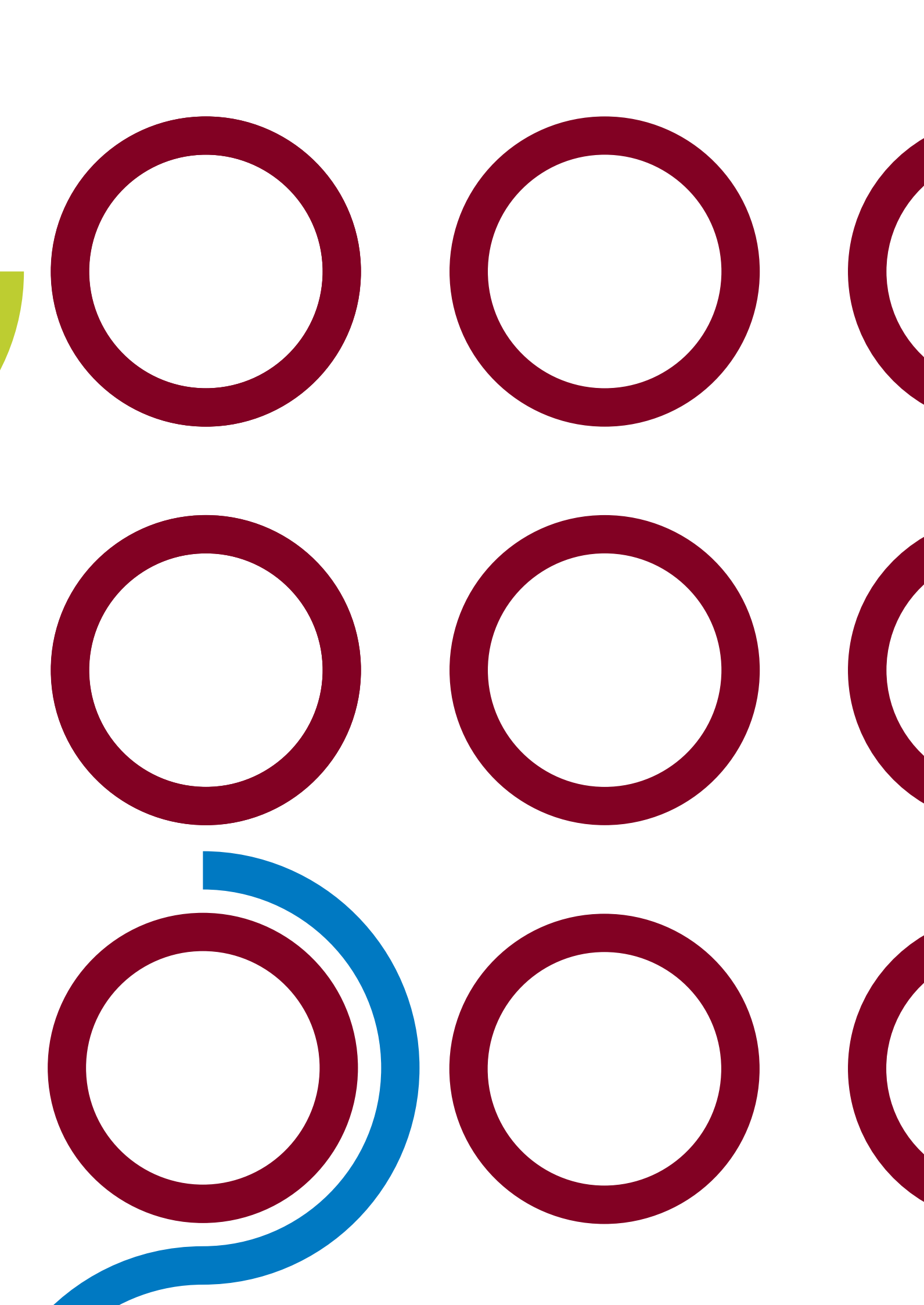
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