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Introduction

This collection of country reports is part of the research on Digital Skills, Accommodation and Technological Assistance for Employment, conducted by the European Disability Forum (EDF) with the support of Google.org.

The aim of the study is to explore the situation of persons with disabilities in the open labour market, focusing in particular on the potential of digital skills training and the use of accessible and assistive technologies to foster inclusion in the workplace.

National experts from each EU Member State (with the exception of Luxembourg) and the UK analysed their respective national contexts. They outline policies and programmes to support reasonable accommodation as a Human Resources (HR) procedure, map trends in the use of accessible and assistive technologies in the workplace, and explain the main limitations experienced by employees with disabilities in acquiring accessible or assistive technology that meets their needs. They also analysed the barriers faced by persons with disabilities related to digital skills and highlight some good practices at national level.

The national reports cover the following countries: the UK, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden. Luxembourg is the only EU Member State that is not part of the study due to not finding a suitable national expert on the topic.

Glossary

Assistive devices: external devices that are designed, made, or adapted to assist a person to perform a particular task. Many people with disabilities depend on assistive devices to enable them to carry out daily activities and participate actively and productively in community or professional life.

Assistive technology: any item, piece of equipment, service or product system including software that is used to increase, maintain, substitute or improve functional capabilities of persons with disabilities or for, alleviation and compensation of impairments, activity limitations or participation restrictions.

Disability allowance: payments that persons with disabilities can receive from the State to cover basic living costs and services.

Discrimination: any distinction, exclusion or restriction on the basis of one or several grounds (sex, race, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, etc.) that damages or nullifies the recognition, enjoyment or exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field, on an equal basis with others.

European Union (EU): a unique economic and political union between 27 European countries, as it stands at the time of publication of this report.

EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC): a regular cross-sectional and longitudinal sample survey by Eurostat that provides data on income, poverty, social exclusion and living conditions in the European Union.

General Comment: a General Comment is a treaty body's interpretation of human rights treaty provisions, thematic issues or its methods of work. General Comments often seek to clarify the reporting duties of State Parties with respect to certain treaty provisions and suggest approaches to implementing those provisions.

Member State(s) (of the EU): the EU currently consists of 27 countries, also called "Member States". Each Member State is party to the founding treaties of the European Union and is therefore subject to the privileges and obligations of membership. Unlike members of most international organisations, the Member States of the EU are subject to binding laws in exchange for their representation within the common legislative and judicial institutions.

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Number of observations (n): indicates the number of employers each national expert managed to interview.

Open labour market: this refers to work in a mainstream or “regular” employment setting, as opposed to a setting that has been created specifically to employ a specific group of employees, such as persons with disabilities.

Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPD): represent the interests of their members with disabilities and have the mandate to advocate for the realisation of their human rights and lobby for the consideration of their interests.

Percentage points: this term expresses the arithmetic difference of two percentages, whereas percent (%) refers to the rate of change. For example, if Country A has an employment rate of 30% and Country B has an employment rate of 60%, Country B’s employment rate is 30 percentage points higher than Country A’s but is also higher by 100%.

Persons with disabilities: individuals who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which, in interaction with various barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.

Reasonable accommodation: the necessary and appropriate modification and adjustments, where needed in a particular case, to ensure to persons with disabilities the enjoyment or exercise on an equal basis with others of all human rights and fundamental freedoms. To be “reasonable”, the accommodation cannot impose a disproportionate or undue burden. Denial of reasonable accommodation is a form of discrimination.

The Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI): an index that the European Commission reports between 2014-2022, monitoring Europe’s overall digital performance and tracks the progress of EU countries in their digital competitiveness.

United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD): an international human rights treaty that reaffirms that all persons with disabilities must enjoy all human rights and fundamental freedoms. The CRPD clarifies that all persons with disabilities have the right to participate in the civil, political, economic, social and cultural life of the community in the same way as anyone else.

National Overview

According to the EU-SILC data, the overall employment rate of persons with disabilities was 44% compared to 77.3% in the general population in 2019. This is 7 percentage points lower than the EU27 average. This gap had been consistent over a period of 10 years (2008-2018). Unemployment rates are also significantly higher than in the general population, with a gap of around 11-12% in recent years¹.

Federal public services have set a target on the recruitment of persons with disabilities of 3%. The target has not been met, in 2020 only 1.22% of public service staff were persons with disabilities².

The regional public services have their own targets: 1% in Flanders, 2.5% in Wallonia and 2% in Brussels. These targets have been met in Flanders (2020) and surpassed in Wallonia (2019)³.

OPDs list various reasons for the lower employment rate of persons with disabilities; like the employers' misconceptions about the capabilities of persons with disabilities, the insufficient availability of job trainings for people with disabilities, the lack of accessibility in various areas at the workplace and in general the lack of diversity and inclusion policies in companies. There are also some general phenomena that have an increased negative effect on the employment rate of persons with disabilities, for example the mismatch between the skills possessed and skills required, and the language barriers resulting from the multilingual landscape in Belgium, which may add an extra layer of complexity for some user groups like people with cognitive or learning disabilities, hard of hearing and deaf etc.

Digital Skills

Data from a 2022 barometer of digital inclusion states that 8% of Belgians claim not to have an internet connection. 4% of Belgians say that disability is one of the reasons that they are not connected to the internet⁴.

According to the Conseil Supérieur National des Personnes Handicapées (CSNPH), 32% of Belgians have weak digital skills and 49% of adults do not have digital contact with public authorities. There is no data on persons with disabilities, specifically, with regards to digital skills. A 2022 CSNPH position paper talks about digitalisation as a potential hindrance for inclusion for those who lack digital skills (a “fracture” or split in society). The position paper also discusses the lack of usability and accessibility of digital interfaces as a potential barrier⁵.

According to van Hoeve, policies and research on digital exclusion have mainly been framed in a perspective of persons having access to digital services or not, with focus being put on vulnerable groups, including persons in poverty, low-skilled persons and the long-term unemployed. Persons with disabilities may overlap with these groups but have not been sufficiently considered on their own⁶.

On the national level, there is a publicly funded programme called “Next Gen Belgium”⁷. One of the five themes of the programme includes projects to increase lifelong learning regarding digital skills with the explicit aim to support labour market demands.

The programme runs from 2022 to 2026. As an example, the French-speaking part of the programme has two aims:

- Promote digital access of vulnerable groups (including persons with disabilities), make sure everyone has the (network) services needed to go online.
- Strengthen digital training. The Wallonian employment agency (FOREM) and vocational training agency (IFAPME) must be more proactive in providing innovative training strategies for job seekers and employees, with a particular focus on vulnerable groups and enterprises.

With a budget of 42 million EUR in the French-speaking part of the country, the project aims to train 3,300 job seekers and 800 employees.

On the Flemish side, there is the “Digiskills Belgium” platform. It is presented as a national platform; however, the platform is only available in Dutch. It is a creation of the Belgian National Coalition of Skills & Jobs and aims to be an “ecosystem” of different initiatives and training on digital skills for all citizens. The platform provides the possibility to search for digital skills courses on various levels, from basic to expert, according to specialisations, target audience/sector (education, ICT, labour force etc.) and the province where the training is provided. Initiatives published on the platform range from information on private organisations providing courses, to Erasmus projects and specific events⁸.

Van Hoeve also reports on programmes in Flanders supporting Digital and Media literacy among vulnerable groups, including persons with disabilities⁹.

OPDs underlined that the training initiatives, when available, are not distributed equally all over Belgium, from a geographical point of view. On the other hand, many of the training programmes are not designed to be relevant in terms of content and are not tailored to the needs of the target audience. They often do not keep pace with the fast evolution of digital technologies, or do not lead to a professional qualification. And, although efforts to make trainings accessible are visible, it is still not happening all over the place. In general, training courses may improve people’s independence, but are not enough to facilitate employment.

The organisation EQLA has a training specifically for persons with visual disabilities to learn coding for work purposes. The training is provided through the project blindcode, in Brussels and Mons. The training is supported by European funds and regional training centres (Bruxelles Formation, FOREM). The training is oriented to persons who want to become web auditors or developers¹⁰.

In general, OPDs noted that it is mainly associations involved with persons with disabilities that provide trainings on basic IT skills and using digital tools, particularly office automation, and solutions are becoming increasingly innovative. These associations might be subsidised by the regional authorities, but there are still too few of them.

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The EDF employer survey (n=20) shows that 40% of the employers provide training programmes for employees, related to digital skills. Most of those employers do not seem to offer training or other solutions focusing specifically on the digital skills of employees with disabilities, although one company responded that they do accommodations if an employee with a disability needs it. At the same time, 32% of the respondents considered that the lack of digital skills is a burden when the company plans on hiring persons with disabilities. Regarding a systematic approach to hiring employees with disabilities, only 20% of the employers responded that they had specific guidelines about hiring persons with disabilities and 26% that they participated in a programme that aimed to improve the employment of persons with disabilities.

Assistive Technologies

On the Flemish side there has been more interest shown in recent years regarding how technology, in general, can be used to support more inclusive workplaces. In 2021, the Dutch knowledge coalition for inclusion and technology (Kennisalliantie Inclusie en Technologie) made an agreement of collaboration with POM Westvlaanderen (West Flanders development agency) and 4Werk to work closer together to raise awareness, share knowledge and pilot new solutions¹¹.

A 2021 report with case studies on “workable work” for persons with work-related disabilities, from SERV, the organization connecting employers’ organisations and trade unions in Flanders, also discusses the potential of new technologies at the workplace. This discussion mainly concerns new innovations and their potential for persons with work-related disabilities – rather than digital skills –, and the use of existing accessible technologies. Examples of technologies discussed in the report include exoskeletons, digital assistants and voice-controlled devices.

The report also cites data from VDAB on the most requested adaptations for workstations and work tools. These include:

- for employees with a visual work disability: magnifiers, extra lighting or blackout, scripting, braille printer, braille display, talking stethoscope, thermometer or scales;
- for hearing-impaired workers: reading-aloud apps, call systems, speech amplification, Bluetooth technology, telephone system adaptations, light-signalling fire alarms;
- for workers with motor disabilities: workstation adaptations for accessibility (ramp, adapted toilet, stair lift...).

The report concludes that the new inclusive technologies do not appear in this overview and are therefore not yet widespread in Flanders¹².

OPDs underlined as a remarkable improvement that many of the new digital devices (computers, smartphones...) are equipped with on-board assistive solutions and native software, although they do not yet cover all user needs. Also, they are of little help when the software used by the companies are not accessible.

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The support framework for accessible and assistive technologies is tightly related to the general framework for reasonable accommodation and anti-discrimination at the workplace. See national-legal policy context on reasonable accommodation below.

There is a lack of data and research on the use of assistive technology in the context of reasonable accommodation. The recent report of the European Disability Experts network on an inclusive labour market in Belgium speaks of workstation adjustments as part of reasonable accommodation but does not mention the provision of accessible and assistive technologies in this context¹³.

As OPDs underline, public assistance services (listed below, under “Reasonable accommodation”, according to region) provide reimbursement of part of the cost of the assistive technology, based on an estimate drawn up in advance. One of the essential conditions is that the equipment must be specific to the disability. The requirement that the employee must have a recognised disability is often criticised because it excludes persons that do not fit within the limits linked to their disability and therefore are not recognised by the regional authorities. And even if an employee is entitled, they may have to use their own equipment for the first few months of employment, because of the time it takes for the public assistance services to issue the grant decision and then to acquire the assistive technology.

OPDs list other systemic limitations to the efficient provision and use of assistive technology. When a new technology enters the market, it can take a long time (sometime even several years) for the authorities to list them as eligible. The administrative support framework also has difficulties keeping pace with the ever-evolving IT environment: business-related software and operating systems need to be regularly updated, which can render the assistive technology incompatible or inefficient. As “authorities only authorise changes of media on condition of a certificate of irreparability, which suppliers refuse as long as the equipment is functional ... to follow the current regulations to the letter, PCs or smartphones that are a little too old would have to be destroyed so that newer equipment could be purchased”. The democratisation of reimbursements, particularly for mainstream technology (for example, a major-brand smartphone) would improve the situation.

The EDF employer survey confirms the results of the above research: 33% of the employers were aware of assistive technology usage by the employees, and 39% were aware of the public framework for providing assistive technology. Only 11% responded that they had their own policies to support the acquisition and use of assistive devices and technologies, and according to one respondent it meant that they supported the employee to get the assistive technology from the public framework. As examples for assistive technology, input devices (switches, keyboards, and pointing devices), screen readers, screen magnifiers, communication programmes, voice recognition, text to speech were mentioned.

Reasonable Accommodation

A survey from Statistics Belgium asked persons with disabilities which form of support would be needed or which form of support they receive in the work they do. The most frequent support needed was adjustment of the type of work done (29% of respondents in work and 66% of the respondents out of work), followed by adjustment of the volume of work (29% of respondents in work and 47% of respondents out of work). Only 7% of persons in work and 16% of people out of work responded that they would need reasonable accommodation.

People with disabilities are furthermore more likely than persons without disabilities to report that they have little or no influence on the content of their work and on their working hours. (63% of persons with disabilities report that they have little influence over their working hours, compared to 54% of the general population)¹⁴.

The OPDs interviewed focus on blind, visually impaired persons and motor impairments. From their perspective, the most common reasonable accommodations are categorised as: the provision of the right equipment (digital adaptations and assistive technology), workplace adaptations (removing physical obstacles, improving markings and arranging the workplace so that it fits the employees' needs), providing accessible information and ensuring flexible working hours or teleworking (to accommodate appointments and personal needs related to disabilities).

OPDs – apart from the hinderances in the national framework – emphasise as relevant limitations for providing reasonable accommodation, internal to the companies, the lack of awareness and knowledge about the needs of the employees with disabilities and about the available supporting technology, as well as the lack of policy, co-ordination and communication within the companies.

Since 1980, integration of persons with disabilities is a responsibility for the Communities (French-, Dutch- and German-speaking). However, employment policy is regionalised. The Dutch-speaking community and the Flemish region overlaps in responsibilities, which is not the case for the French-speaking community, where Brussels and Wallonia have different bodies of governance.

The EU anti-discrimination law was transposed into Belgian law at federal level in the law of 25 February 2003 to combat discrimination.

The federal anti-discrimination legislation gives a right to reasonable

accommodation: material, organizational, immaterial. There are also integration organisations in the regions that provide financial support to employers for employing persons with disabilities. This generally works by providing support for paying the salary of the person up to a certain percentage during a certain period.

Wallonia

The organization AVIQ provides financial support to the adjustment of the workstation (poste de travail) of individual workers. The worker and the employer must submit a jointly signed declaration/request.

The workplace adjustments are covered by AVIQ up to 45% of the costs of the intervention.

Assistive technology is reimbursed on a personal basis. AVIQ publishes a list of different assistive technologies and the maximum amount that is reimbursed for each of them.

Integration: 25% of salary costs paid for one year (AVIQ¹⁵ and Frontaliers Grand Est¹⁶).

Flanders

The regional employment agency VDAB provides support for individuals who need adaptations for work-clothes, work tools or transport to and from work. The request is made to the Flemish Agency for Persons with Disabilities (VAPH), and the employment agency hands out the grant.

VAPH provides reimbursements for assistive technology for daily use, including digital devices. Reimbursement is based on a list of cost references for each type of device.

Persons recognized by VAPH as persons with disabilities can make a claim¹⁷.

Brussels

The organisation responsible for the support to persons with disabilities is PHARE. PHARE publishes a list of assistive technologies that are supported and the maximum amount of reimbursement for each. It is provided on an individual basis, based on a personal claim¹⁸.

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Workplace adjustments are also funded and may include assistive technologies.

OPDs note that even though public authorities provide assistance and reimbursement to the employers, there are various limitations resulting from the administrative framework. Its complexity and relative slowness (together with the often high costs of providing accommodation) disincentivises the employers and therefore seriously hinders the access to employment. The lack of clear guidelines on how to implement the accommodations causes delays in general, and the regionally varying policies and regulations can lead to inconsistencies in the implementation and in the access to facilities.

As for the reality at the employers, the EDF survey shows that standardised HR policy on reasonable accommodation or specific company policy regarding the accessibility of recruitment processes are rare: 16% and 17%, respectively. This, paired with 41% of the companies being aware of the legal framework or public programmes supporting the provision of reasonable accommodation, shows that awareness raising for the provision of reasonable accommodation (and assistive technology) is still needed. As for the accommodations provided, employers mention making certain jobs accessible for persons with disabilities and providing accessible physical environment.

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