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Cyprus

Marina Georgiadou



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 Eurostat, the disability employment gap in Cyprus was 27% in 2021, increasing from 23.5% in 2020¹. The employment gap between people with and without disabilities has widened but there are no specific data to refer to in the Eurostat report and there were no relevant data from the competent authorities. The data from the Annual Report of the Department for Social Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities states that 30 persons with disabilities were employed in the public sector in 2021, 3 persons were given subsidy for the creation and operation of small self-employment units and 3 persons were given subsidy for vocational training². There are no other available data on the employment or unemployment of persons with disabilities³. The risk of poverty or social exclusion for persons with disabilities in 2021, was 29.1%, which is slightly lower than the EU average of 29.7%⁴.

Employment and vocational training are among the priorities of the Cyprus Disability Strategy and the Action Plans but there are no additional measures implemented, such as employers' awareness/education, or funding of accessibility and reasonable adaptations in the workplace. The Recruitment of Persons with Disabilities in the Wider Public Sector Law of 2009 (L.146(I)/2009) refers to a 10% of the vacancies to be filled by persons with disabilities, but this law is not applicable in the private sector⁵. There is also the Appointment of Trained Blind Telephone Operators to the Post of Telephone Operator in the Public Sector (Special Provisions) Law of 1988 (17/1988), which states that blind candidates who are trained telephone operators are given priority to be appointed in a suitable position in the public sector. This law is implemented regardless of any other quota law. The Incentives for the Employment of Persons with Disabilities Scheme, which benefits employers of the private sector, requires employers to commit to a 24-month employment period for a maximum of five employees, whether full-time or part-time, with a maximum budget of €22,360 per year. There are no tax or social security contribution measures available.

According to the Cyprus country reports of the European Disability Expertise, there is still no evidence of the effectiveness of the abovementioned instruments, except for the quota system. In addition, the Recruitment of Persons with Disabilities in the Wider Public Sector Law of 2009 is being criticized as non-beneficial, as its application is linked to a recognised secondary education degree. It has also been criticized for not being applicable in the private sector.

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Interviewed stakeholders reported that two of the main challenges persons with disabilities face while seeking employment are accessibility and attitudes. In terms of accessibility, many companies cannot accommodate the basic accessibility requirements for persons with disabilities, starting from the built environment, such as a ramp or accessible restrooms. It is also important to keep in mind that accessibility of the built environment in public spaces is regulated by Cyprus law and specifically by Regulation 61H – Regulation of Roads and Buildings Law (Reg. 61H)⁶. The second main challenge is the negative attitudes, prejudice and stereotypes about disability, held by the majority of employers. According to the data collected, many employers hold misconceptions about the capacity and productivity of individuals with disabilities, leading to discrimination during hiring processes. This bias prevents qualified candidates from securing successful employment, based merely on their disability. The situation is especially difficult for persons with chronic mental health difficulties, due to being confined to their own homes with not much social interactions. There are quite a few issues that have been mentioned systematically by the representatives of the Organisations representing Persons with Disabilities (OPDs), such as: stigma towards people with disabilities, unwillingness or feelings of frustration when they need to make use of governmental subsidies due to bureaucratic and time-consuming procedures, lack of necessary infrastructure in the workplaces. Lastly, OPDs mentioned that the lack of motivation, as well as low digital and sometimes vocational skills are also issues that inhibit the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the labour market. A new legislation regarding Social Enterprises, the Social Enterprises Law of 2020 (N.207(I)/2020)⁷, refers to enterprises that hire people from the vulnerable groups of the Cyprus community, such as people with disabilities, refugees and former prisoners, among other vulnerable groups. This last development will give a new perspective for the employment of people with disabilities and, it is anticipated to enhance the opening of job positions for persons from vulnerable groups, including persons with disabilities.

Digital Skills

In Cyprus, digital literacy remains low, with only 50.2% of the population having at least basic digital skills, below the EU average of 53,92%⁸. Cyprus adopted the 2021-2025 National Action Plan for Digital Skills to improve digital skills for everyone, including vulnerable groups. While there are no available data on the level of digital literacy of persons with disabilities in Cyprus, OPDs mentioned in their interviews that the percentage of digitally literate persons with disabilities is reasonably lower than that of the general population. The lack of digital skills is one of the main factors behind unemployment for persons with disabilities, and it also results in difficulties to use state-of-the-art assistive technology. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the increase in teleworking could have been a good opportunity for employing persons with disabilities who would be working remotely, but the lack of digital skills was strongly highlighted by the OPD representatives as one of the main reasons of unemployment. The lack of devices, such as computers or smartphones, and the lack of digital literacy were again mentioned as the main barriers that persons with disabilities faced during the pandemic, as they were seeking assistance to access basic public services that were not accepting appointments in person. On the other hand, there are groups of people with disabilities that have digital skills (e.g., young people, people that already use assistive devices) and this can be very beneficial for their participation in everyday occupations (e.g. bank transactions, bill payments, job opportunities). There are no specific training programmes on digital skills for persons with disabilities for the use of mainstream or/and assistive technology, especially regarding access to the labour market, although such programmes are available to other vulnerable groups (e.g., older adults).

In formal education, digital skills are included in the success curricula indicators of the National Curricula under the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports and Youth. In higher and lower secondary education, the curriculum subject of Information Technology is considered to specifically cover digital skills. However, under the digital education policy of the Ministry, digital competences are expected to be integrated across curricula disciplines⁹. Apart from formal education, people with disabilities can enrol in digital skills training programmes that are offered by the Ministry of Education, but these are not specific to or accessible for persons with disabilities. The School for the Blind (Σχολή Τυφλών) provides specialized digital training programmes for adults that are blind or visually impaired, referring to assistive, mainstream and accessible technology¹⁰. These programmes are free of charge and are organized annually by the School for the Blind. This is not the case for other groups of people with disabilities

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and representative organisations. OPDs mentioned that systematic efforts by the government are necessary to create lifelong learning opportunities for persons with disabilities, to help them be more independent in daily life and activities, such as paying a bill online as well as being able to obtain a job; especially in the digital era, when the majority of employers and job positions require at least minimum digital skills. The OPDs also mention that the Cyprus Productivity Centre has launched a series of free training programmes on digital skills development. However, the representatives of OPDs have noted that these programmes disregard disability relevant requirements, and they do not include a disability/accessibility perspective. The Cyprus Productivity Centre is in close cooperation with a few organizations for people with disabilities and they are waiting for the organizations' proposal to develop new programmes that will be focused on persons with disabilities and their needs. There are also occasional schemes and measures by the Ministry of Labour, Welfare and Social Insurance, which may also provide funding for digital skills development, but these are focused on basic computer skills. However, there are not regular or permanent schemes available to persons with disabilities.

Employers tend to expect potential employees to already have basic digital skills. In the EDF survey, some 25% of the companies (n=5) mentioned that they either bear the cost of such training programmes for their employees, including persons with disabilities, or they do this training internally. The majority of the companies (85%, n=17) stated that the lack of digital skills is not a burden when they decide on hiring a person with a disability.

Neither the Department for Social Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities nor the Cyprus Statistical Services could provide data or had available research regarding the barriers that people with disabilities face related to digital skills and whether this affects them in a negative way. However, in terms of research, there are currently several EU co-funded projects in which Cyprus institutions are involved as partners with a specific focus on the use of technology in employment by persons with disabilities. Some recent ones are listed here.

- SIDE – Supporting Innovative Models for Deaf Youth Empowerment Project n. 2016-3-AT02-KA205-001739 (2017-2019): <https://moodle.equalizent.com/>

The project focused on the development of job searching skills through technology and on the use of technology by persons with hearing disabilities. The trends analysed for Cyprus in the use of technologies were mostly on mainstream technologies in the work sectors of graphic design, visual arts, ICT, with accessibility requirements focusing on hearing-loss.

- ENTELIS+ Accessibility skills for a technology enhanced learning in an inclusive society (2020-2022): <https://entelisplus.entelis.net/>

The project focused on digital competence development, a main trend identified by current research activities in the field of accessibility and assistive technology in Cyprus. There seems to be an emphasis on the digital competence development of persons with disabilities in terms of accessibility and assistive technology, in order to effectively use individual assistive technology (AT) as well as accessible mainstream technology in education and employment. Thus, digital competence frameworks for AT and accessibility seem to be the current trend in vocational and in-service training for employees or potential employees with disabilities.

- DIG-i-READY – Digital Readiness of Vocational Educational Institutions in an Inclusive Environment (2022-2024): <https://digi-ready.eu/>

The project focuses on the digital readiness of vocational education and training (VET) institutions to develop and implement innovative approaches and instruments for VET educators and decision makers with a focus on the (digital) educational environment and accessibility for preparing persons with disabilities for the labour market while using assistive and accessible technologies. The trend identified in this project focuses more on digitalisation (as an impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, but not only) and the need to be prepared for digital work environments.

Assistive Technologies

Assistive technologies can be loaned or compensated to persons with disabilities by the Department of Social Inclusion for Persons with Disabilities, under the scheme for the provision of technical means¹¹. The Department provides support for persons with motor, visual, hearing, cognitive, psychiatric and/or communication disabilities. In the OPD interviews all 4 interviewees mentioned that it is very difficult to pursue and get an assistive device. The procedures are lengthy and not always successful, and so, many families decide to bear the cost. There is no national research specifically focusing on trends in the use of accessible and assistive technologies in the workplace. The data from the Annual Report of the Department of Social Inclusion for Persons with Disabilities for 2022¹² mention that 2,017 persons were approved to receive subsidies for various schemes, more specifically, 338 persons were given financial support for the acquisition of a car that meets their needs, with a total cost of €1,365,900; 963 persons were given financial assistance for the acquisition of technical means, instruments and other aids (assistive technology), with a total cost of €1,603,552; and 371 persons had financial assistance for the acquisition of a wheelchair, with a total cost of €1,347,672.

There is also the assistive technology that the Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth provides to pupils with disabilities, but those are property of the Ministry and not the pupil. There is a specialized committee that assess the needs of each pupil for assistive technology in order to improve their participation in the educational system.

The OPDs, on the other hand and regarding the adult population of persons with disabilities, mention that the Department of Social Inclusion for Persons with Disabilities has subsidies only for the acquisition of assistive technology given to individuals. The Department does not provide any training for persons with disabilities on using the device, nor to their employers. All 4 OPD representatives revealed that they do not have a person with a disability, member of their organizations, that needs assistive technology to work in the private sector, and only a few in the public sector. They also mentioned that, although the institutional framework exists both for the EU and the United Nations, to help persons with disabilities in the labour market with the use of assistive technology, it has not been promoted in the legislative framework in Cyprus. They have also mentioned that, due to the fact that Cyprus is a small island and there is no need for large amounts of assistive technology, these devices are very expensive compared to other European countries and the orders will arrive only after a few weeks.

Only one of the twenty companies (5%, n=1) stated that it is aware of the use of assistive technologies by its employees with disabilities. There were statements of not being aware of any schemes for assistive technology, and that the cost of such assistive technologies needed for certain disabilities is high and companies are not willing to pay that amount of money in order to hire a person with a disability. There were three companies (15%) that stated that they have policies implementing support for the acquisition and use of assistive devices and that the support was granted through state subsidies. On the other hand, OPDs mention in their interviews that many employees are obliged to buy their own assistive technologies because the procedures of the relevant authorities are time consuming. They also mentioned several areas how the field of assistive technology can improve: for example, making the applications for funding of an assistive device easier for persons with disabilities to access and making the process less time-consuming. Nevertheless, there is work conducted by the European Disability Expertise (EDE) team for Cyprus that refers to some evidence and relevant research work. The EDE Cyprus Report on the labour market¹³ describes some examples of promising practices in the use of accessible and assistive technologies. In general, it seems that digital competence development for persons with disabilities and the use of assistive technology and accessibility in vocational education and employment are not specifically included in either basic education and/or vocational training¹⁴.

Reasonable Accommodation

The provision for “reasonable accommodations” in Cyprus is outlined in the Persons with Disabilities Law (N.127(I)/2000)¹⁵. According to the Law, the provision depends on financial considerations, whether the implementation is feasible within the available resources and does not excessively burden the employer, as also indicated in the UN CRPD and the relevant ratification law. The Persons with Disabilities Law covers various aspects of workplace accessibility, encompassing workspace, building environment, and other work-related equipment or infrastructure (Article 5).

As argued by the EDE country experts¹⁶, the mention of financial considerations and their proportionate impact on the employer grants them a legal leeway to evade their obligations towards individuals with disabilities¹⁷. It also legitimizes options such as charity and donations, as substitutes for the State’s responsibility (see Article 5(c)72(I)2(d)). This means that even though the law mandates providing reasonable accommodations, the lack of funding schemes to support employers often leads to resorting to charity fundraising to finance such accommodations, including obtaining assistive technology.

The EDE Cyprus Report on the labour market also mentions that the Pancyprian Alliance for Disability expressed its disappointment regarding the practical implementation of the Persons with Disabilities Law, as it failed to fully address the legal obligations of providing reasonable accommodations to potential employees with disabilities¹⁸. This was submitted by the Alliance to the List of Issues by the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, dated February 2017¹⁹. This issue was also brought up by numerous stakeholders during a study visit in November 2019 (European Economic and Social Committee). The Minister of Labour confirmed that no financing scheme for reasonable accommodations at workplaces had been planned, and this remains the status quo. This non-compliance with the EU Social Pillar’s principles, which advocate active support for secure and adaptable employment, has been noted in previous country reports by ANED, the Academic Network of European Disability Experts (European Semester 2018/2019, 2019) and in the report by the European Equality Law Network, which covers non-discrimination issues²⁰.

In the EDF employer survey, 10% of respondents (n=2) stated that their HR policy had reasonable accommodation of employees with disabilities as a standardised procedure, as well as having a policy regarding the accessibility of recruitment processes that range from generic policies such as being an equal

opportunities employer, to more specific policies aiming to meet the person's needs (e.g. providing workspace to accommodate the person with a disability). Only 5% of the employers were aware of the public legal framework and/or public programmes supporting the provision of reasonable accommodation in the workplace, which is very low and suggests that the information regarding those policies is not effectively and efficiently reaching the employers.

Little information is reported in this respect from other governmental bodies. According to the European Committee of Social Rights in their Conclusions for Cyprus²¹, the right of persons with disabilities to effective access in employment through the provision of reasonable accommodation/adjustments is defined in Article 5 of the Persons with Disabilities Law which states that "the principle of equal treatment of persons with disabilities in employment is effectively applied with the provision of reasonable adjustments and for this purpose the employer takes all suitable measures in accordance with the needs presented at a specific situation so that the person can have access to a job, execute or be promoted at the occupation or be trained as long as these measures do not constitute a disproportionate burden on the employer." There are no relevant data, according to the Cyprus Statistical Services and other relevant authorities. No data can be found on public sector relevant websites, in annual reports or European country reports. The Ministry of Labour stated that no scheme to finance reasonable accommodation in the workplace is planned so far, which is in conflict with the principles of the EU Social Pillar (e.g. secure and adaptable employment)²².

The OPDs have mentioned that there are no policies to provide reasonable accommodation at the workplace and no framework regarding the flexibility of working hours and other provisions. They have also mentioned that a relevant number of persons with disabilities that are employed are usually able to work without any reasonable accommodations, and that is why they acquired the job in the first place.

In conclusion, although there is some slow progress on the employment of people with disabilities, it is crucial for the government and private sector to work together to create inclusive policies and practices. Additionally, the low levels of adult learning and weak digital literacy pose challenges to addressing the persistent skills mismatch in the labour market. Despite the limited progress made in recent years, there are still significant barriers that hinder the integration of individuals with disabilities into the labour market. Improving

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employability for people with disabilities in Cyprus requires a multi-faceted approach that includes creating accessible workplaces, combating discriminatory attitudes and providing targeted vocational training programs as well as informing the companies and other employers of the policies in place. There is also the need to provide more incentives for employers to engage them in employing people with disabilities.

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