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Estonia

European Disability Forum



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 latest EU-SILC data (2018), the employment rate of persons with disabilities in Estonia is 64.3%, approximately 13.5 percentage points above the EU average¹. Although the employment rate of persons with disabilities has increased over the years, similar to the general population, the gap in the proportion of people employed compared to the non-disabled employed population has remained steady throughout the years, at 26.4% in 2022².

While poverty has been gradually decreasing, it remains high in certain groups. This includes persons with disabilities, for whom the at-risk-of-poverty rate remained largely stable at 41-43% between 2015 and 2020³.

Due to economic growth and the Work Ability Reform, launched in 2016, labour force participation rates among persons with disabilities reached their highest levels ever in 2021⁴. The long-term trends for persons with disabilities have also been favourable in recent years. The Work Ability Reform has changed attitudes towards people with reduced working ability, while helping them to find and keep jobs. The activity rate of persons with disabilities increased from 63% in 2016 to 68% in 2017.

Estonia has, over the course of recent years, increased both spending on and participation in active labour market policies. However, challenges remain in ensuring sustainable and long-term employment: skills gaps as a result of limited choices in education for persons with disabilities remain a significant obstacle to labour market integration. Positive results also depend on the availability of social services and support for networks at the local level. Beyond this, Estonia still has a considerable wage gap for persons with restricted workability, who receive on average a 25% lower income from work. Furthermore, a successful work placement for a person with a disability does not necessarily mean they will keep their job for a long time, and they still find themselves in a labour market where prejudices against people with reduced work ability and reservations among employers about hiring disabled candidates persist⁵.

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Consultations with Estonian Organisations of Persons with Disabilities, for the purposes of this report, point to the following key obstacles in accessing employment and inclusive practices in the workplace:

- disability-specific factors (the health status of some workers with disabilities is unstable; limitations linked to health may be more serious in the case of a certain special need, e.g. a decrease in motivation in the case of mental health difficulties);
- people's skills and previous training do not meet modern needs;
- environmental factors (inaccessible environment, deficiencies in the education system, lack of customised products and services, awareness and attitudes);
- personal factors (a person does not have the habit of working on a daily basis).

Digital Skills

According to the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) 2018, in Estonia, 56% of the population have at least basic digital skills⁶, while 28% have above-basic digital skills. The percentage of people with at least basic digital skills is higher among employed persons (67.8%) than the unemployed (53.5%), and among those living in urban areas (66%) compared to those in rural ones (56.4%)⁷.

Estonia outperforms other EU Member States in the proportion of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) specialists in employment. 6.2% of Estonia's total workforce are ICT specialists compared to an EU average of 4.5%. It is also the country with the highest percentage of ICT graduates (8.4%) in the EU. The Estonian Digital Agenda 2020 sets out the general objective to "contribute to achieving higher growth, more jobs and increased welfare by creating an environment supporting the use and development of ICT solutions"⁸.

According to the survey results from Estonia collected as part of this study, 78% of employers admitted they do not have specific guidelines for hiring persons with disabilities. Only 13% of the companies surveyed participate in specific programmes aimed at improving the inclusion of persons with disabilities in employment. 48% of the employers were aware of public support systems for the promotion of employment of persons with disabilities. They claimed that, on the whole, the support from public authorities was sufficient, but the application process is difficult, which is why employers often give up and choose not to make use of them. According to the survey results, 48% of the employers thought that the lack of digital skills is a burden when it comes to hiring persons with disabilities. In addition, 74% of the companies claimed to have developed specific training programmes related to digital skills but not focused on employees with disabilities.

The OPDs interviewed reported some free basic computer skills training: for adults (including older people) in vocational education institutions, free education centres, day care centres, and adult training centres, which are financed either by the Ministry of Education and Research. Digital skills development training is also financed by the state budget for unemployment. Computer courses aimed at people with disabilities are, however, not common. There has been so-called project-based training conducted by organisations of persons with disabilities. For example, the Estonian Chamber of Disabled People conducts digital skills development training for persons with disabilities (digital skills and use of e-services).

Assistive Technologies

OPDs highlighted the potential of assistive technology for persons with disabilities. It can add significant flexibility and enable them to perform tasks that they could not do without these technologies or tools. The use of assistive technologies in employment gives a person the opportunity to be independent, to work, and to be efficient and self-directed. The concern is how to make sure these technologies reach people and how to improve awareness of their existence and potential uses.

According to the survey results, 57% of the companies are aware of the use of assistive technologies for employees with disabilities, but 96% do not have specific policies to support the acquisition and use of assistive devices. It is important to consider that 83% of the companies are not aware of the existence of public programmes for procuring assistive technologies.

In Estonia, legal regulations regarding assistive technologies (aids, services, etc.) exist, e.g. the Social Welfare Act and the Regulation on the Allocation of Aids under Favourable Conditions⁹. A regulation regarding remote translation and sign language interpretation services is under development. There is also a regulation in the Labour Market Services and Support Act¹⁰ that concerns the aids necessary for working. Employers can get counselling services from the unemployment fund in addition to job adaptation and work aids. Some measures are aimed directly at the person (an aid for personal use), which are related to the nature of the work duties.

The OPDs emphasised the lack of awareness among persons with disabilities, employers, and various service organisers/providers on how to use these continuously developing technologies. There is a shortage of people who know about the latest technologies and can train others to use them.

Reasonable Accommodation

In Estonia, the Unemployment Insurance Fund offers two main types of services to assist employers in making reasonable accommodations: the provision of work-related technical aids, and financial support for the adaptation of working premises and equipment¹¹.

According to the 2019 study by the Praxis Centre for Policy Studies, the number of cases when these services had been used is relatively small for two main reasons: the co-financing requirements, and the uncertainty on the part of employers as to whether the person with a disability would stay in their role for a longer period.

According to the survey results, 48% of the employers claimed to have reasonable accommodation as a standard procedure. On the other hand, 65% of them do not have policies regarding accessibility during the recruitment process. There are some guides to support employers in hiring persons with disabilities and retaining them in employment. For example, the Estonian Employers' Confederation released a publication called 'All Are Welcome to the Labour Market!' which is a collection of experiences, ideas and recommendations by employers and persons with disabilities¹².

The Estonian Blind Union also published 'Persons with Visual Impairments at Work' which contains first-hand stories about persons with visual impairments who are in active employment¹³.

The Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner published 'The Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Employment', which addresses issues including disability-related stereotypes and hindrances and barriers to employment¹⁴.

The Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund published a guide titled 'Examples of Reasonable Accommodations in the Workplace and Assistive Devices for Persons with Disabilities' which contains a collection of illustrated short stories about persons with disabilities in employment, focusing on the adjustments made to facilitate their employment¹⁵.

Despite the existence of some guidance, employers listed several barriers concerning the provision of reasonable accommodations, such as the lack of financial resources and costs, lack of information, and people's general lack of awareness about what would help the employee cope better.

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