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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](https://www.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

The employment rate for persons with disabilities was 53.3% compared to 82.2% for other persons in 2019, as indicated by the EU-SILC data¹. This is around 2% above the average for the EU27. Hirschberg and Welti note that while the unemployment rate of people with severe disabilities has gone down, they still bear a higher risk of becoming unemployed and of experiencing long-term unemployment².

Furthermore, Hirschberg and Welti conclude that the measures taken by the federal government are insufficient to meet the requirements of Article 27 (concerning work and employment) in the UN Convention on the Rights for Persons with Disabilities³.

Digital Skills

A general survey on digital competences shows that the main dividing line on digital skills remains the age gap. Only 25% of persons above the age of 70 are confident using online services. According to the survey, 87% of the population in general are confident doing research on the internet⁴.

No specific data on the digital skills level of persons with disabilities has been found.

Hirschberg and Welti report that vocational training centres for persons with disabilities have increasingly started to use digital media in their training offerings in recent years, and in that context, training has also been successfully provided to persons with disabilities on how to use digital formats⁵.

Regarding barriers, the same report from Hirschberg and Welti notes that digitalisation is not sufficiently addressed in disability strategies such as the National Action Plan for the Implementation of the CRPD. However, the report provides more information on issues of accessibility and access to digital services and does not discuss strategies for enhancing digital skills for adult persons with disabilities in any detail.

Germany has a national digital strategy to increase digital skills in work and education⁶.

The strategy includes 20 different projects on digital education. Many of these concern increasing digital skills in the educational curricula at different school levels, while others concern high-level research to utilise the potential of AI and other technologies. In addition, there are other programmes at the Länder level. For example, the Nordrhein-Westfalen land is funding a national website where individuals can assess their digital skills and get information on where to find courses to further their skills⁷.

The federal government has a specific funding line, 'Inclusion through digital media in vocational education and training' run by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF), which supports people with disabilities in learning and pursuing a vocational activity in the long term.

An organisation of persons with visual impairments interviewed stated that the unemployment rate for persons with disabilities is higher, even though people with disabilities seeking a job are on average better qualified than jobseekers without disabilities – adding a new perspective to the required level of digital skills. As for the availability of training, both programmes adapted to individual needs and group offerings are available, although the offerings can differ according to the areas covered. A new federal research project, the German government's participation report, aims to provide more information⁸.

The EDF employer survey (n=22) shows that 23% of the employers have specific guidelines for hiring persons with disabilities. These guidelines may focus on the accessibility of the hiring process, ensuring that the interviews are free of bias, or even positively evaluating the value of diversity that a new employee can bring. 29% of the employers seem to be aware of public support systems for the promotion of employment, and most of them use that support. However, the general opinion is that more public support should be provided.

When it comes to digital skills, 71% of the respondents think that the lack of digital skills is hindering the employment of persons with disabilities. Nevertheless, most of them do not seem to put emphasis on closing the gap: even though 75% provide training related to digital skills, no respondent stated with certainty that they would offer training or other solutions focusing on the digital skills of employees with disabilities. Additionally, some employers indicated that employees with disabilities can face extra challenges, as the work is heavily digitised, it is difficult to keep up given the workload and the expected speed, or there is a lack of experience.

Assistive Technologies

According to a survey conducted in the context of a study on the inclusion of persons with disabilities in companies during the digitalisation era, 30% of companies surveyed believe that increased digitalisation will provide new opportunities for persons with disabilities in the workplace. However, according to the same survey, only 20% of companies use digital technologies to support employees with disabilities in their work.

Less than 60% of companies with experience of hiring persons with disabilities report that they have sufficient information about reasonable accommodation (accessible work design – behindertengerechte Arbeitsgestaltung) or the use of assistive technology at work⁹.

A few articles and studies discuss trends in the sense of upcoming and new technologies. Notably, Jochmaring and York report on several pilot projects regarding the use of accessible and assistive technologies to increase the participation of persons with disabilities in the labour market¹⁰. One example is an app that supports people with learning disabilities by breaking down the work into steps and organising the work. Other examples include the use of augmented-reality-based training and AI-supported apps to assist people with disabilities in the workplace.

The national legal support framework offers several different strands of support for assistive technology in the workplace. Individuals can apply to rehabilitation agencies for AT that they can take with them and use in different jobs. Employers can apply for funding from the integration office to support technical aids and workplace accommodation for severely disabled people¹¹.

According to the OPDs interviewed, the legal framework for the provision of assistive technology is very complicated: responsibilities overlap among different institutions (more than one might be responsible for the same service), which can lead to difficulties and disputes over determining responsibility.

In addition, the application and decision process for assistive technologies takes a very long time. This not only hinders the hiring of persons with disabilities, but it can also lead to the employee not “surviving” the probationary period because they are not able to work for the first few months. The fast-paced and constant software development (updates) creates another challenge. On the one hand, they require regular re-training of the user; on the other hand, they can lead to the need to adapt the assistive technology, meaning that the person with

a disability is not able to work for a while. This productivity problem can slow down career advancement.

Another problem OPDs highlighted is the lack of accessibility of the underlying business software (one claims that in Germany there are no offerings for accessible enterprise resource planning systems) and information, which either renders assistive technology useless or requires it to be re-adjusted, leading to further delays in fulfilling work requirements.

The EDF employer survey shows that the support from these agencies is known to and used by a share of the employers. 33% are aware of the public legal framework/programmes supporting the acquisition of assistive technology, and the same proportion of employers is aware of the use of assistive technologies by employees with disabilities. Most of the employers aware of public support used public financing to ensure AT provision, and 25% of the companies even have set policies for the acquisition and use of assistive devices and technologies. The assistive technologies mentioned most often are screen readers, magnifiers and ergonomic peripherals. In relation to the limitations of using assistive technology, respondents mentioned security restrictions and incompatibility, the limited financial possibility to find the best by trying different AT, lack of knowledge, and the cost or time needed for proper set-up.

Reasonable Accommodation

No data is available on how common it is for employers to include reasonable accommodation as an HR procedure.

Furthermore, in a national survey on job satisfaction in 2021, people with disabilities more often reported that they do not receive support from colleagues and managers compared to people without disabilities. They are also less likely to feel that they can contribute their skills at the workplace. This impacts the overall job satisfaction figures of persons with disabilities¹².

There are a few national portals that can help companies with reasonable accommodation: kofa.de and rehadat.de. The REHADAT portal is a web-based resource centre on the integration of persons with disabilities in the workplace that supports reasonable accommodation efforts. The resource centre provides examples of how people with disabilities use AT and accessible technologies in the workplace, and of 'arbeitsgestaltung', that is, work design / reasonable accommodation efforts for different types of professions.

Social Code Book IX includes provisions for reasonable accommodation, including individual adaptation of workplaces, provision of specialist equipment, and adaptive technologies. Funding for the adaptations can take different forms depending on the situation and can come from either accident insurance, long-term care insurance, or the Federal Agency for Employment. There are state subsidies for workplace adaptations, adaptive technologies and personal assistance. However, there is a specific budget set aside for this on an annual basis, and support is available until the annual funds run out. The integration offices around the country are responsible for supporting employers in setting up workplaces and training places for severely disabled people¹³.

A recent report from the European Disability Expertise network notes that the system of support to employers for reasonable accommodation in general is robust but that there is a lack of coordination and cooperation between the different public authorities¹⁴. This creates difficulties in the implementation of the support, especially for small and medium-sized companies.

OPDs underline that the lack of awareness of the abilities of people with disabilities persists among employers, leading to not employing persons with disabilities. A quarter of the companies that are obliged to hire people with disabilities in Germany do not hire a single person with a disability. In the OPDs' view, the compensation companies have to pay for not employing people with disabilities is too small.

OPDs confirmed that there is government funding as well as funding from the Federal Employment Agency or the German Pension Insurance to support people with disabilities in the workplace, but the application procedures are very complicated and lengthy. Furthermore, they do not cover expenses or support for indirect additional expenses, such as the need for higher-performance hardware required by the necessary tools.

While for persons with visual impairments the general problem is the inaccessible software environment, the hard of hearing OPD reported that content and information are often simply not accessible (no captions or speech-to-text provided).

The EDF employer survey shows that the employers link reasonable accommodation in a large part to the provision of assistive technology. However, some also mentioned adjustments to the physical work environment, adjustments to make software accessible, and changes in the workflow to accommodate the colleague with a disability.

16% of the responding employers have a standardised procedure for providing reasonable accommodation, and an additional 21% provide reasonable accommodation on an ad hoc basis. On the recruitment front, 22% of the employers have a policy on the accessibility of recruitment processes, mainly focusing on accessible job postings and ensuring the accessibility of the interviews, which is then complemented by efforts to have interviews free of negative bias and a focus on diversity (see section above on Digital Skills).

As the main limitations for providing reasonable accommodation, employers listed the financial burden of adjusting ICT or the physical environment, as well as the extra efforts needed to rethink the workflow.

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