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Ireland

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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

According to the most recent Central Statistics Office data (2016), there were approximately 86,200 (or 21.6%) persons with a disability in the labour force¹. Some 30%, or almost 900,000 people of working age, are defined as being economically inactive. Over 100,000 of the inactive cohort are not working due to ill health or disability. Some 33% of people of working age with a disability are in work in Ireland (compared with 66% of people without a disability), and the new Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities 2015-2024 aims to foster increased labour market participation. Speaking with representatives of organisations of people with disabilities, the figure is estimated to be approximately 27% in 2023. According to Eurostat figures, Ireland has the EU's largest disability employment gap of 38.6 percentage points, which is the biggest difference between the employment rates of persons with and without disabilities². Only 15% of women with disabilities are in full-time employment. A decade ago, in 2013, the employment rate of persons with a disability was 28.6%. This fell to 27.4% in 2014. The rate has increased since then and was 29.0% in 2016 (latest available CSO data).

In recent years, Ireland has made efforts to promote inclusive employment opportunities for people with disabilities. AHEAD has published research on data relating to employer attitudes to hiring graduates with disabilities. The research encompassed a nationally representative selection of over 250 private sector enterprises, each employing more than 20 individuals. This research delves into various aspects, including corporate policies on diversity and inclusion, the significance of diversity within the employee demographic, recruitment strategies, provisions for reasonable accommodations, and the presence of disability within the workforce.

For nearly three decades, AHEAD, with the support of the Higher Education Authority, has also been researching the involvement rates of students with disabilities in higher education. There has been consistent growth in the number of students with disabilities pursuing higher education. In 2020/21, students accessing disability support services constituted 6.6% of the total student body from the participating higher education establishments. A comparative study spanning the past twelve years indicates a 268% increase in the number of such students, rising from 4,853 in 2008/09 to 17,866 in 2020/21.

There is legislation to protect the rights of disabled individuals in the workplace, such as the Employment Equality Acts and the Disability Act. The Irish government encourages employers to provide equal employment opportunities

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and reasonable accommodations for persons with disabilities. This includes measures to eliminate discrimination, promote accessibility, and ensure equal treatment during the hiring process. Several organisations in Ireland support individuals with disabilities in finding employment. For example, the Department of Social Protection offers various schemes and initiatives to assist people with disabilities in securing and maintaining employment. The Open Doors Initiative, Enable Ireland, and St. John of Gods are among the organisations that provide vocational training, job placement services, and ongoing support to individuals with disabilities.

Despite the efforts of many NGOs and the government, challenges remain in achieving full inclusion and employment for persons with disabilities in Ireland. Some of the barriers include attitudinal biases, limited accessibility, lack of awareness among employers, and inadequate support services. The job application and employment process are seen by many as the biggest impediment. The OPD representatives consulted for this report highlighted that often the inclusion of “excellent communication skills” in an advertisement for an employment opportunity is a means of prejudicing potential candidates with a disability. The OPD representatives also emphasised the positive impact of a “job coach” in providing support to new employees with disabilities. However, they also raised concerns about the lack of available training for those wanting to act as job coaches. They highlighted the risk associated with the expectation of frontline workers taking on the responsibility associated with the role of a job coach without appropriate training. The government and advocacy groups continue to work towards improving the situation and enhancing employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

Digital Skills

Ensuring accessibility in both further and higher education will help individuals with disabilities pursue their education for extended periods. Fundamental skills training, opportunities for apprenticeships, internships, continued education, and training, as well as higher education access in later life, are crucial pathways that can serve as a powerful link to job opportunities. The National Disability Authority (NDA) provides advice on new strategies and policies relating to skills attainment, including the Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities 2015-2024. As part of this government strategy, the public service employment target for people with disabilities will be increased on a phased basis from 3% to 6%. One of the strategy's six priority areas includes the commitment to "build skills, capacity and independence," although digital skills are not explicitly stated³.

It is difficult to find national data on educational and training levels of persons with disabilities in Ireland relating to digital skills. For the purposes of this report, the researcher consulted the Central Statistics Office (CSO), Department of Education and Skills (DES), National Disability Authority (NDA), and several Irish universities and research institutes for relevant statistical publications or reports on disabilities and digital skills. Organisations focused on digital skills and inclusion, such as Enable Ireland, may provide reports, studies, or resources on the educational levels and barriers faced by persons with disabilities in acquiring digital skills. There are some national programmes and initiatives on lifelong learning opportunities and digital skills available to all citizens, and there are also initiatives available for those with accessibility needs. One such programme is DigiAcademy, an accessible digital skills e-learning platform co-innovated and co-designed within the Digi-ID PLUS study, with and for people with accessibility needs to address this digital literacy and access challenge to ensure better health, well-being, and inclusion outcomes⁴.

The 'Skills to Advance' Programme, run by SOLAS, a national agency of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science of the Government of Ireland, is another national initiative, which offers upskilling and reskilling opportunities to employees in sectors and areas affected by digital transformation⁵. Skills to Advance aims to equip employees with the skills they need to progress in their current role or adapt to the changing labour market. Funding comes from the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science from the National Training Fund. The aim of 'Skills to Advance' is to provide support for vulnerable groups within the Irish

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labour force: those with little or no digital skills, who now find themselves in need of new skills to progress and perform their job to the best of their ability. The programme is delivered by the Education and Training Boards in Ireland. This programme can also be highlighted for its accessibility and flexibility: the training programme for employees is tailored to fit around diverse business hours, needs, and work schedules. It also supports adult education and lifelong learning: employees above the age of 50, who work in lower-skilled job roles experiencing significant changes, are linked to local Education and Training Boards for more tailored guidance.

Employers often prioritise digital competencies and anticipate that candidates will have familiarity with computer software before they are employed. According to the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI), only 20% of enterprises in Ireland offer ICT training, which is in line with the EU average of 20%, as reported by the European Commission in 2021⁶. However, in 2019, some 31% of enterprises were offering ICT training. The majority of respondents (75%) to the EDF employer survey did not believe that a lack of digital skills is a burden when the company plans on hiring persons with a disability. Where respondents reported (25%) that a lack of skills was a burden, they stated that navigating the spectrum of technical supports available to individuals presents challenges, and there appears to be a lack of a centralised national resource or point of contact for such information. For some employers, particularly in education, digital skills were core to the role, and they could not hire candidates if they did not already have the digital skills required to carry out the role.

Assistive Technologies

In recent years, several trends have emerged in the use of accessible and assistive technologies in the workplace. There has been a growing recognition among employers in Ireland about the importance of accessible and assistive technologies in creating an inclusive work environment. Some employers are increasingly implementing these technologies to accommodate employees with disabilities and enhance their productivity and job satisfaction.

Technological advancements have led to the development of more sophisticated and user-friendly assistive technologies. These technologies encompass a wide range of tools such as screen readers, speech recognition software, alternative input devices, and ergonomic equipment, which help individuals with disabilities perform their job tasks effectively.

The rise of mobile and cloud-based technologies has facilitated the use of accessible and assistive technologies in the workplace. These solutions offer flexibility and enable employees to access accommodations from different devices and locations, enhancing their work-life balance and productivity. These technologies can be tailored to meet the specific needs and preferences of individuals with disabilities, ensuring a more inclusive and empowering user experience.

However, despite the availability of assistive technology, barriers to its use remain. A 2016 discussion paper published by Enable Ireland and the Disability Federation of Ireland on Assistive Technology for People with Disabilities and Older People (a second edition of this paper is currently, in 2023, in development) reported that Ireland has an underdeveloped assistive technology infrastructure compared to other countries and that services are fragmented and inconsistent⁷. There is a Community Hub for Assistive Technology (CHAT)⁸, a Community of Practice run by the Disability Federation of Ireland and Enable Ireland to bring together assistive technology users, service providers, makers, and researchers, designed to support shared learning.

OPD representatives stressed the crucial role smartphones can play for adults with intellectual disabilities, especially in addressing challenges related to scheduling and systematic instruction. Collaborations, such as the one with Vodafone, have led to the development of apps designed to aid these individuals in the workplace. The shift from traditional assistive technology to mainstream devices like smartphones offers a plethora of support. However, they also noted that many employers and educational institutions view smartphones merely as entertainment or social devices. They often overlook their potential

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as vital support tools for people with disabilities. This mindset can lead to bans on smartphones, ignoring their significance as communication, education, and support tools.

There is a Workplace Equipment Adaptation Grant (WEAG) for people with a disability who work in the private sector⁹. Employers and self-employed people can apply for the grant towards the cost of adapting the workplace or making it more accessible for staff with disabilities. The grant is provided by the Department of Social Protection. All of the OPDs that I interviewed mentioned this grant, and there was a consensus that there is a lack of awareness of this grant, and consequently, it is underutilised. Respondents to the EDF employer survey listed several assistive technologies and devices used by employees with disabilities. These included screen readers, magnifiers, voice recognition software, and ergonomic equipment (i.e., sit/stand desks, specialised keyboards, and mouse).

Some larger employers are recognising the importance of raising awareness and providing training on accessible and assistive technologies. This includes educating employees about available accommodations, promoting a culture of inclusivity, and providing training on the effective use of these technologies. Two of the OPD representatives who engaged with this report highlighted the Bank of Ireland as an example of a company making very positive changes to support a diverse workforce. In February 2021, Bank of Ireland became the first Irish company to achieve the prestigious 'Disability Smart Standard,' a workplace accreditation recognising the bank's commitment to disability inclusion. Disability Smart Standard is assessed across ten business areas, with Bank of Ireland achieving a 'Bronze' status with a score of 75%. Bank of Ireland was commended for its work with the National Council for the Blind of Ireland (NCBI) in testing the mobile app's accessibility for those with a vision impairment.

Reasonable Accommodation

The Employment Equality Acts 1998-2015 oblige employers to make reasonable accommodation for people with disabilities, requiring them to enable disabled workers to carry out their work on an equal footing with others. Employers in Ireland must make reasonable accommodations to cater to the requirements of employees with disabilities, both existing and prospective. However, as per EU regulations, employers are not mandated to offer special amenities or services if the associated costs are deemed exorbitant or imbalanced. In a 2021 research paper, Buckley and Quinlivan carried out an analysis of Irish law in respect of reasonable accommodation. They argued that the full transformative potential of the reasonable accommodation duty has not yet been achieved in Ireland and identified several reasons for this¹⁰.

In 2019, the Reasonable Accommodation Passport scheme was jointly introduced by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions and IBEC¹¹. This passport system offers a secure, ongoing documentation of challenges encountered by individuals and the mutually agreed-upon accommodations designed to mitigate their effects in the professional environment. The passport serves as an instrument to empower individuals to reach their fullest potential and thereby add value to their personal growth and the organisation's success. The aspiration is for this initiative to act as a catalyst in promoting employment opportunities for people with disabilities and to foster discussions on the topic of reasonable accommodation.

Several respondents to the EDF employer survey referred to the passport system in their responses. The passport system offers secure, real-time documentation of the challenges individuals encounter, along with the agreed-upon accommodations to mitigate their effects in the workplace. This system ensures clarity and consistency regarding the established agreements, eliminating the necessity for reassessments when an employee transitions to a different role or undergoes a change in workplace or managerial supervision. The OPD representatives who were consulted for this report also spoke highly of the passport system.

In the EDF employer study, some 31.6% of the participants indicated that their firm's HR policies have standardised procedures for accommodating employees with disabilities. However, only 10.5% were aware of the public legal framework and/or public programmes supporting the acquisition of assistive technologies for persons with disabilities – either directly, by persons with disabilities themselves, or indirectly through the company/organisation. Of those employers

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who discussed the financial implications of reasonable accommodations, the costs were related to providing equipment or making access to the building possible (e.g., automated doors to allow for wheelchair access).

One of the OPD representatives identified the potential of Artificial Intelligence, specifically ChatGPT, in practices related to reasonable accommodation. Their organisation has recently engaged in a process using ChatGPT, where both men and women have been developing their own comprehensive instructions for digital courses. Through ChatGPT, these instructions are generated in an easy-to-read and plain language format at a speed unparalleled by human capability. The quality of the output has been evaluated by speech and language therapists and has been deemed exceptional.

Many employers are not aware of the financial incentives for hiring individuals with disabilities. All the representatives of the organisations that contributed to this report highlighted the need for an advocacy campaign aimed at educating individuals about the contribution that those with disabilities make to society and the importance of employment for well-being, regardless of whether one has a disability or not. One representative suggested that what is needed is a campaign along the same lines as the very successful 2015 campaign in Ireland for civil marriage equality.

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