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Lithuania

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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 Eurostat, the disability employment gap in Lithuania was 35% in 2022, significantly above the EU27 average of 21.4%¹. There were 146,706 registered persons with disabilities of working age in 2022, and only 44,725 (or 30.5%) were working². In the same year, the number of persons with disabilities registered as unemployed was, on average, 12,111, meaning that a large share of persons with disabilities are economically inactive. The persons with disabilities who are registered as unemployed are predominantly male (52.9% compared to the average of 47.4%); are over 55 years old (52.5% compared to 30%); have obtained vocational education (44.6% compared to 38%); are looking for unqualified jobs (60.5% compared to 40.2%); and are more often long-term unemployed (37.7% compared to 25.2%)³.

Income inequality and poverty remain one of the biggest challenges in Lithuanian social policy, an issue that significantly affects persons with disabilities. To address this, the Government mainly relies on raising social benefits, while measures to increase the number of working people with disabilities remain insufficiently implemented⁴. Interviewed stakeholders report that social services are more focused on care provision and socialisation rather than the development of work-related skills. The situation is especially difficult for persons with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities, as well as older persons and those living in rural areas. Various systematic issues are at play: negative or paternalistic attitudes towards persons with disabilities, lack of public infrastructure and adapted workplaces, employers' unwillingness to make use of government subsidies due to bureaucratic procedures, as well as lack of motivation and digital skills among persons with disabilities. Nevertheless, in recent years, there have been some positive initiatives to promote employment in the open labour market, including policy efforts to provide reasonable accommodation and non-profit sector-led programmes to improve the digital skills of persons with disabilities.

Digital Skills

Lithuania positions itself below the EU average in terms of digital skills – in 2021, 48.84% of individuals had basic or above basic overall digital skills, compared to the EU average of 53.92%⁵. While there is no statistical data on the level of digital skills of persons with disabilities in Lithuania, OPDs tend to rate them as generally low. The lack of digital skills is seen as one of the main factors behind the low employment levels of persons with disabilities. While the increase in teleworking brought by COVID-19 is often seen as a potential factor to improve the situation of persons with disabilities in the labour market, Lithuanian service providers also notice a negative effect. The switch to online work/services highlighted that many persons with disabilities and/or persons from other vulnerable groups (Roma people, refugees, people with addiction issues, etc.) lack computer literacy or even access to necessary devices such as computers or smartphones to participate in remote training or job interviews⁶. At the same time, OPDs note that the situation is not uniform among different groups of persons with disabilities – for example, young people tend to be highly tech-savvy.

Digital skills are often learnt as part of formal education; however, in Lithuania, persons with disabilities tend to have lower educational attainment than those without disabilities. Although the number of students with disabilities in vocational schools increased in 2022-23, standing at 1,440, the vocational education programmes offered to persons with disabilities are mostly aimed at teaching professions that are not primarily related to digital skills (such as cook, car mechanic, construction worker, tailor, cleaner, etc.). Meanwhile, the numbers of students with disabilities in colleges and universities remain low (109 and 218 respectively).

Apart from formal education, unemployed persons with disabilities can also enrol in professional rehabilitation programmes, some of which are related to digital skills – for example, Valakupiai Rehabilitation Centre offers 2.5-month-long courses on web design. Non-governmental organisations sometimes organise project-based training on digital skills and computer literacy (for persons with disabilities in particular, or the general population)⁷. However, a representative of the Lithuanian Disability Forum (LDF) notes that persons with disabilities are not particularly keen to register for such courses due to low motivation levels and lack of self-esteem.

Blind and visually impaired persons have relatively good opportunities to improve their digital skills and learn how to use assistive technology. Children and youth can acquire these skills at the Lithuanian Education Centre for the Blind and Visually Impaired, whereas adults can undertake social rehabilitation courses. These courses are free of charge and are organised annually by organisations selected by the Department for the Affairs of Disabled under the Ministry of Social Security and Labour. For example, between 2021 and 2022, the social rehabilitation services were organised by the Lithuanian Union of the Blind and Visually Impaired. The 30-day courses included communication skills development via smartphone apps (TalkBack), screen readers (NVDA) and digital audio player devices (Victor Reader)⁸. The Union also organises informal IT camps where blind and visually impaired people can share knowledge and learn from their peers. However, the representative of the Union believes that more systematic efforts by the state are needed to create lifelong learning opportunities, since currently people can benefit from social rehabilitation services only once, which limits their opportunities to update knowledge.

Employers tend to value digital skills and expect potential employees to already have some experience with computer programmes before hiring them. Overall, the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) shows that only 9% of enterprises in Lithuania provide ICT training, compared to the EU average of 20%⁹. In the EDF employer survey, some 35% of respondents (n=26) stated that they develop employee training programmes on digital skills, but with no particular focus on persons with disabilities. Some 31% of Lithuanian employers believed that the lack of digital skills is a burden when planning to hire persons with disabilities. Some of the employers stated that persons with disabilities often do not match their requirements. For example, one company shared that they participate in a job-shadowing initiative called DUOday, organised by SOPA (a non-governmental social employment agency), but the agency struggles to match the company with someone who has enough computer and English language skills to be considered for hiring.

Assistive Technologies

Assistive technologies can be issued or compensated directly to persons with disabilities by the Centre of Technical Aid for Disabled People under the Ministry of Social Security and Labour. The Centre provides support for persons that have mobility, visual, hearing, and/or communication disabilities. Alongside various disability-specific assistive technologies, persons with visual impairments or hearing disabilities can be reimbursed for purchasing computers, smartphones, or smartwatches every few years. OPDs mention several issues regarding the Centre's services. Firstly, the purchase of computers or smartphones is not compensated for persons with other types of disabilities (e.g., physical), although they often lack access to digital devices. Secondly, access to state-of-the-art technologies is not always possible, since the Centre needs to assess each item or software before approving it for compensation. This is often a lengthy and not necessarily successful process; hence some persons/families decide to purchase these technologies from their own pocket. Thirdly, persons with psychosocial disabilities are seen as not needing assistive technologies, although they could make use of apps that help to cope with mental health crises and anxiety. Lastly, OPDs note that there is a lack of training opportunities to maximise the use of assistive technologies, which would be especially relevant for individuals who must learn to adapt to newly acquired disabilities such as blindness.

Persons with disabilities can also acquire support for assistive technologies indirectly through their employer. Employers who are planning to hire a person with a disability are eligible for a subsidy of up to €26,000 (in 2023) to establish or adapt the workplace. This type of support is regulated by the Law on Employment¹⁰. Employers can get reimbursed for up to 80% of the costs of purchasing, installing, and adapting technical aids and work equipment (machines, tools) that the employee with a disability directly needs to perform work functions. The Public Employment Service or the social employment agency SOPA can consult the employers on what kind of adaptations would address the employee's needs best. However, if the employer uses this subsidy, they must commit to retaining the adapted workplace for at least three years. This condition, coupled with bureaucratic procedures, makes workplace adaptation quite unattractive for employers: only 27 new workplace adaptation projects were funded in 2022¹¹. This was also reflected in the EDF employer survey: only 12% of respondents (n=26) were aware of the use of assistive technologies by employees with disabilities. The most common technologies

mentioned by the respondents were screen adaptations for blind and visually impaired employees (hardware and software), ergonomic furniture, hearing technologies, and screen readers (such as Job Access with Speech). The main limitation of these technologies mentioned by surveyed respondents was their cost. Some 15% of companies/organisations had policies for the acquisition and use of assistive devices and technologies; only 8% were aware of related legal frameworks and public support programmes: indeed, among the companies/organisations that have a policy, most reported that they tend to cover the cost of the purchase of assistive technological devices and software from their own budget.

Lithuanian OPDs mentioned several areas where the field of assistive technologies could improve. Currently, one of the biggest obstacles is the localisation of tools: for example, there is a lack of high-quality speech recognition technologies adapted for the Lithuanian language, especially for persons with speech impairments; voice assistants for blind and visually impaired persons are not always available in Lithuanian. Lastly, persons with mobility impairments would benefit from better-adapted keyboards and computer mice.

Reasonable Accommodation

In the EDF employer survey, 12% of respondents (n=26) stated that their company's Human Resources policy had reasonable accommodation of employees with disabilities as a standardised procedure; 15% have a company policy regarding the accessibility of recruitment processes, which range from generic policies that stipulate that the company is an equal opportunities employer to more defined and standardised hiring procedures to meet candidates' needs.

In terms of the most common forms of accommodation provided, a qualitative coding of surveyed employers reveals that 36% of them do not provide any form of accommodation; 19% guarantee physical access to the company's facilities; an equal percentage allow persons with disabilities to work from home as a form of accommodation, while 23% address individual needs on a case-by-case basis (with or without predefined company policies). Financing was seen as one of the main obstacles to the provision of reasonable accommodation. Only 12% of surveyed employers were aware of the legal framework and public programmes supporting its provision.

Among surveyed employers who elaborated on the issue of financial burdens in reasonable accommodation (n=19), 42% recognised that the provision of accommodation measures would have minimal or no costs at all; 32% point to the adaptation of facilities to ensure accessibility as the main burden, and 21% point to the purchase of adapted hardware and software. However, no clear consensus among surveyed employers emerged regarding what constitutes a "disproportionate burden": while excessive costs were sometimes mentioned, obstacles related to the perception of persons with disabilities, or the need to dramatically alter the organisation's procedures to accommodate different ways of working, also emerged during the coding of survey answers.

The Labour Code requires employers to provide reasonable accommodation to persons with disabilities if this does not place a disproportionate burden on the employer. There is a lack of clear instructions in national legislation as to the exact definition of what constitutes reasonable accommodation and when the burden for the employer becomes disproportionate. No clear mechanism is provided in the national law for the enforcement of the duty to provide reasonable accommodation; therefore, the courts address this issue on a case-by-case basis. OPDs believe that this grey zone in the legislation may discourage some persons with disabilities from seeking justice.

Despite the ambiguity of reasonable accommodation in the legislation, there are some recommendation-type guidelines for employers. In 2020, the Office of the Equal Opportunities Ombudsperson, together with the Human Rights Monitoring Institute, produced a guide on Reasonable Accommodation for Persons with Disabilities – how to implement it in the workplace. The Office of the Equal Opportunities Ombudsperson also introduced a free assessment tool called the Equal Opportunity Ruler¹². Based on surveys among employees and employers, the tool assesses the situation in an organisation and provides recommendations on how to ensure equal opportunities in practice¹³.

The Law on Employment allows employers to apply for reasonable accommodation support via the Public Employment Service. The support may be delivered in several forms:

- Wage subsidies: To compensate for the lower productivity levels of persons with disabilities. For persons with up to 25% of working capacity, the wage subsidy is paid indefinitely and makes up 75% of the wage; for persons with 30-40% of working capacity, the wage subsidy is paid for up to 36 months (60% of the wage); for persons with 45-55% of working capacity – up to six months (50% of the wage). In 2022, 15,785 jobs were subsidised (please note that this includes not only persons with disabilities but also, e.g., refugees)¹⁴.
- Subsidies for workplace adaptation: This may consist of purchasing technical assistance devices or tools (as discussed in the section above) and adapting the premises according to the needs of the employee with a disability (removing physical barriers in the workplace). The employer must commit to retaining the adapted workplace for three years to keep the subsidy; moreover, the employer must own the premises to adapt them, but many employers are tenants. These conditions make the workplace adaptation subsidies unpopular among employers (only 27 projects were funded in 2022)¹⁵.
- Subsidies for work assistants: For employees with disabilities, to help them perform their job functions. Persons with disabilities that are eligible for this assistance can be supported for up to 50% of their working hours. The subsidy for the employer to compensate for the working time of the assistant (another employee within the organisation) makes up 62% of the hourly minimum wage. There is no statistical data on its usage yet. According to OPDs, this type of support is especially relevant for persons with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities.

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Assisted employment services: To assist jobseekers with disabilities who already have a job offer with preparing the necessary documents, understanding the conditions of the job contract, as well as maintaining the job position and negotiating with the employer. The assigned case manager consults the employer on how the workplace could be adapted for the new employee. This type of support is offered free of charge for the first 12 months of the job contract and can be delivered either by the Public Employment Service or their partners (non-governmental organisations such as SOPA or public institutions such as the Valakupiai Rehabilitation Centre).

Interviewed OPD representatives depict a generally negative picture, listing several additional practical factors that restrict the provision of reasonable accommodation, even as the legal provisions themselves are of acceptable quality. Firstly, persons with disabilities are not actively applying for jobs in the open labour market due to the lack of educational attainment, motivation, and self-esteem. Therefore, for many employers, the question of reasonable accommodation does not even arise. Secondly, there is a lack of specialists who could guide employers to provide reasonable accommodation, mostly due to unattractive wages and working conditions in the public service sector. Thirdly, employers face restrictions that make the hiring of persons with disabilities inconvenient (such as the need to give a two times longer notice period if they want to fire an employee with a disability, longer holiday periods, etc.); both employers and persons with disabilities have to interact with numerous intermediaries and auditing mechanisms to gain access to funding. The situation is especially difficult for persons with intellectual disabilities: OPDs representing them note that while technical tools are useful to enable alternative communication (visual tools, easy-to-read programmes), accommodating their needs unavoidably requires significant human resources, such as mentors or assistants in the workplace, and many employers are not ready to dedicate such resources.

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