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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.

4 The European Disability Forum

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

In the United Kingdom, the employment rate of persons with disabilities remains substantially lower than for persons without disabilities. The latest statistics reveal that the disability employment gap is 29%, with 53.7% of persons with disabilities in employment compared to 82.7% of people without disabilities¹. Only 4.8% of adults with learning disabilities known to Adult Social Care Services are in paid employment². Meanwhile, analysis conducted by the Trades Union Congress shows a 17.2% pay gap between people with and without disabilities, equivalent to £3,700 per year. Notably, the gap is even wider for women with disabilities at 35%³. Negative employer attitudes, concerns around the costs of adjustments, inequalities within the education system, inaccessible recruitment processes, and a lack of awareness of the funding available to assist with additional support are among the reasons cited by Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) as the main obstacles to improving employability in the UK. Some of these barriers are reflected in a YouGov poll undertaken by the National Autistic Society in 2019 amongst senior decision-makers in the private sector, which revealed that 37% of employers believe it costs more to employ an autistic person than it does to employ a person who is not on the autism spectrum, and 27% said they thought an autistic person would be unlikely to fit into their teams⁴.

The Equality Act 2010 provides the framework for anti-discrimination law in England, Scotland, and Wales (in Northern Ireland, the rights of persons with disabilities are protected under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995). It outlines an employer's duty to make reasonable adjustments within the workplace to address barriers faced by persons with disabilities. However, a survey carried out by the disability organisation Scope revealed that only 49% of persons with disabilities were aware of their rights at work⁵. A large number of employability programmes run by OPDs and disability-focused organisations seek to simultaneously ensure that persons with disabilities are aware of their rights whilst also providing personalised support into paid employment and raising awareness amongst employers. The Down's Syndrome Association (DSA) runs Workfit, a supported employment scheme, and they confirm that employers are now approaching them to join the scheme, but it has taken many years of hard work to reach this point. The DSA reports a 92% retention rate for people on the scheme. A growing number of local authorities have their own supported internship and employment programmes and many partner with OPDs such as Action on Disability to provide on-the-job support through job coaches, as well as assistance with job seeking, travel planning, training, and working with employers to raise awareness⁶. In 2022, the Department for Work and Pensions

6 The European Disability Forum

(DWP) committed to investing £7.6 million in the Local Supported Employment Initiative over the next 3 years⁷.

In order to support employers in recruiting and retaining persons with disabilities and creating more inclusive workplaces, the government established the Disability Confident Scheme in 2013. A range of guidance is provided for each of the levels to support employers in meeting their obligations. In 2021, 20,000 employers had signed up to the scheme and 23% of respondents in the EDF UK employer survey mentioned being part of the scheme⁸. During interviews conducted with OPDs, many felt that the scheme isn't robust enough and that employers who have committed to it need to be more accountable by providing evidence of steps taken to become an inclusive employer. The Business Disability Forum highlights that some of the required criteria to meet Levels 2 and 3 are not commitments that employers should be able to choose to adhere to because they are already legal requirements under the Equality Act 2010; therefore, accreditation should not be given for complying with the law⁹. There are currently no mandatory requirements in the UK to report on the number of employees with disabilities within a company. The Disability Employment Charter was established by members from a range of organisations supporting and representing people with disabilities and outlines a list of nine actions that the government can take to address the disability employment gap. One key policy ask includes making it mandatory for all employers with more than 250 employees to report on the number of persons with disabilities they employ and the disability pay gap, in the same way that reporting on the gender pay gap is mandatory.

A number of other government initiatives are in place to close the identified disability employment gap that have a stronger focus on the provision of assistive technology and reasonable accommodations rather than digital skills, which appears to be an area with a less comprehensive approach. The Shaw Trust is one of the providers commissioned by the DWP to deliver the Work and Health Programme, which targets those that face challenges accessing employment, including persons with disabilities, and provides a tailored approach to finding and retaining work. The Shaw Trust also delivers the Intensive Personalised Employment Support Programme contract on behalf of the DWP to support persons with disabilities in accessing employment and provides a holistic approach that offers intensive support via a dedicated support worker to remove barriers to work. Supported internship schemes are also reporting high levels of success. DFN Project Search, a one-year supported internship programme for young people with a learning disability and/or autism, reports that 70% of programme graduates move into paid employment¹⁰.

The Department for Education invested £18 million in 2022 in a three-year Supported Internship programme delivered by the National Development Team for Inclusion, DFN Project Search, and the British Association for Supported Employment to enable 4,500 young adults to access supported internships each year by 2025¹¹. The EDF employer survey revealed that 95% of respondents felt that hiring interns with disabilities would help with hiring employees with disabilities in the future.

Digital Skills

A report on Essential Digital Skills concluded that persons with disabilities are 28% less likely than people without disabilities to have digital skills at the Foundation and Life levels¹². Comparatively, research carried out for the UK Digital Poverty Evidence Review 2022 discovered that persons with disabilities are more likely to experience lower levels of confidence and have fewer digital skills, largely due to challenges around digital design and cost¹³. Many OPDs and disability organisations had limited awareness of digital skills training programmes during interviews and even less awareness of programmes targeting those facing further barriers in accessing the labour market. This was identified as a weaker area in the government's approach to closing the disability employment gap. The House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee recently recommended that the government needs to do more to address digital exclusion and suggested that interventions delivered locally by community hubs are a key path to accessing those who are more digitally excluded. However, locally led organisations often face difficulties accessing government funding schemes designed for larger bodies¹⁴. The OPD Disability Rights UK would like to see more resources available for OPDs to deliver this training locally, whilst the disability organisation Seeability highlighted that much mainstream training provision is often not presented in an accessible format.

There are pockets of good practice run by local organisations. Action on Disability sourced lottery funding during the COVID-19 pandemic to run digital skills training. AbilityNet provides free IT support, and local organisations such as Compaid deliver tailored digital skills training to persons with disabilities. The Good Things Foundation is a UK charity that exists to bridge the digital divide and make digital technology more accessible. One of the ways they seek to achieve this is through Learn My Way, a free online platform designed to build digital skills for those with a low level of skills, and through coordinating the National Digital Inclusion Network, comprised of local organisations providing digital skills support. However, a state-led drive to strengthen the digital skills of persons with disabilities seems to be a missing link in the quest to close the disability employment gap.

The lack of a consistent national approach also applies to the teaching of digital skills within education. Disability Rights UK felt that inequalities within the education system are largely responsible for the lower levels of digital skills among persons with disabilities. This view was echoed by Mencap and the British Association of Supported Employment (BASE), who believe that the

disadvantage begins at school. BASE cited the Oaks Specialist College as an example of how digital skills and assistive technology can be embedded into the curriculum to help persons with disabilities be as independent as possible using their own devices. Blind in Business, an organisation supporting people with visual impairments to access work, also recognised that some specialist and mainstream schools were not using or teaching the latest technologies that could help young people with disabilities when applying for work. They would like to see a national scheme where persons with disabilities could be upskilled on digital skills and assistive technology.

A lack of digital skills inevitably hinders access to opportunities in a society where most recruitment processes commence online. Bridging this digital divide is something The Digital Poverty Alliance aims to do. It is a multi-sector member organisation that seeks to end digital poverty by addressing the causes of digital exclusion. As part of their National Delivery Plan, they will undertake a scoping exercise to identify where digital skills training can help reduce social inequalities¹⁵.

Organisations that provide supported employment schemes, such as The Down's Syndrome Association and Seeability, reported taking a tailored approach to strengthening digital skills that is adapted by job coaches to each individual and dependent on the identified tasks of the job. The Shaw Trust stated that under the Work and Health Scheme, some providers offer their own in-house programmes on upskilling digital skills. Only 32% of respondents in the EDF employer survey believe that a lack of digital skills is an obstacle when their company plans on hiring persons with disabilities, and 45% said their company has training programmes for employers related to digital skills, although the majority of these do not provide any targeted support for employees with disabilities.

Assistive Technologies

In an assessment of Assistive Technology (AT) need and capacity in England, the Global Disability Innovation Hub confirms that there are economic benefits to individuals, the state, and society when people have the necessary AT in place. This enables them to move into work or progress at work, resulting in a high social return on investment¹⁶. However, the report also identified an AT access gap, with 31% of persons with disabilities “not having the assistive products they need to flourish, thrive, or even participate in daily life”¹⁷. Similarly, a report compiled by the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Assistive Technology (APPG AT) recognises that inaccessible technologies and poor digital practices are preventing disabled people from finding and thriving in work. They recommend that the Government appoint a National Assistive Technology Champion to work with persons with disabilities and their representative organisations to develop a framework ensuring access to necessary AT across key life transitions, particularly when moving from education to work and between jobs¹⁸. This view is echoed by the Business Disability Forum, which has proposed a new model entitled ‘Technology for Life’ for providing AT. Under this model, a funded service would provide AT throughout people’s lives, with reassessments when their circumstances change. This would ensure that persons with disabilities always have access to the right support, not only when working or as students. Blind in Business would like to see a scheme where AT is available to all people with disabilities, so jobseekers can have access to the support they need to apply for jobs.

Currently, university students can access financial support for AT through the Disabled Student’s Allowance, but this funding ends upon graduation, meaning that graduates with disabilities may lose access to any AT they need to apply for jobs. They can then apply to the government’s Access to Work scheme to fund AT, but only once they receive a job offer. In 2021, the DWP began a pilot scheme for adjustment passports for students accessing the Disabled Student’s Allowance and transitioning from university into employment to avoid the need for repeated assessments when moving into a new workplace and ease the transition to the Access to Work scheme.

Access to Work (AtW) is a government scheme that aims to support persons with disabilities and people with physical or mental health conditions to access employment by funding solutions to remove barriers within the workplace, including AT. It is available to self-employed people, those in paid employment, and those on apprenticeships and Department for Education supported internships. Several interviewees working with OPDs use AtW themselves and

all said it was a much-valued scheme, but there were areas of implementation that require improvement. Many OPDs felt that there was insufficient awareness of the scheme among both employers and persons with disabilities. A Scope survey revealed that only 40% of persons with disabilities had heard of AtW¹⁹, while only 29% of the EDF employer survey respondents were aware of the legal framework or public programmes supporting the acquisition of AT. SeeAbility felt that there should be mandatory training on AtW for everyone working in recruitment so employers and employees could be more aware of the support available to them to overcome barriers. Some participants in another Scope study felt that the AtW assessors did not always have the expertise to provide the most up-to-date recommendations to meet the needs of a range of impairments²⁰. This view was echoed in interviews with OPDs who believed that some assessors did not have expertise in the latest developments in AT. Disability Rights UK suggested that it might be more beneficial to have recommendations from an independent external assessor.

Another obstacle to the wider use of AT within the workplace cited by all organisations interviewed is the lack of awareness of what AT is available and training on how to use it. Interviewees repeatedly highlighted the need for a central hub where people can access up-to-date information on AT and find reviews from other AT users. It was felt that this would be beneficial to employers as well as to persons with disabilities. To counter the lack of awareness, the APPG AT report recommends that the Government should take further steps to increase employer awareness of digital accessibility and AT and how they can be resourced²¹. The APPG for AT will be conducting an inquiry into the use of technology in Supported Employment in 2023 to explore how outcomes can be improved by mainstreaming that technology²². Meanwhile, the Assistive and Accessible Technology Policy Lab wants to see a scaling up of training on AT for frontline professionals across the public sector so that they have the knowledge to identify solutions to overcoming barriers and can signpost persons with disabilities to appropriate training or equipment²³. In 2021, Microsoft partnered with the DWP to train 26,000 work coaches on how to use Microsoft accessibility tools so they could share this learning with jobseekers and use it to support them during the recruitment process²⁴.

Many OPDs and disability-focused organisations feel that there is an inconsistent approach to using AT in schools and that children should be introduced to AT from a younger age. The APPG AT report also acknowledges that many persons with disabilities are leaving education without the necessary skills to use AT in the workplace and recommends that more guidance and training on AT should be available to those working in the education sector, including careers services.

12 The European Disability Forum

Inequalities in accessing AT were also highlighted between those who had attended university and received an assessment as part of their application for the Disabled Students Allowance and those who never went to university and didn't receive that support or guidance²⁵. Blind in Business representatives felt that the lack of opportunity to get AT support for short-term placements for internships and work experience is a major barrier to building up experience to access paid work.

The Down's Syndrome Association reported that the most common AT used by people who have Down's Syndrome were systems that offer visual cues and help with prompting, planning, and breaking down tasks, such as Brain in Hand and Avail, as well as apps that support independent travel. Other interviewees and survey respondents spoke of the significant improvements in screen magnifiers, screen readers such as JAWS, Supernova, and ClaroRead, and speech-to-text software such as Dragon. Only 29% of respondents to the EDF employer survey were aware of the use of AT by employees with disabilities. Some of the continuing challenges identified around AT are the lack of accessibility of certain websites that cannot be read by screen readers and the incompatibility of some internal IT systems with AT tools.

Several OPDs cited the in-built accessibility features of mainstream software and devices as the greatest recent advancement and recognised the huge potential of Artificial Intelligence (AI) to create more technological improvements in the field of AT. OPDs felt that AI will be able to support persons with disabilities to navigate templates, design CVs, organise calendars, automatically make documents accessible, generate consistent alternative text descriptions, and produce reports to help people who struggle with consolidating lots of information. OPDs also recognised the progress that has been made using AI to help control the home and work environment. Other suggestions for improvement include the wider use of Virtual Reality to develop alternative training methods that are more appropriate for visual learners.

Reasonable Accommodation

Under the Equality Act 2010, employers have a duty to make reasonable adjustments for workers with disabilities or health conditions. These adjustments may include changes to the recruitment process, physical adjustments to the workplace, amending the way tasks are carried out, providing equipment that meets an employee's needs, and offering flexible working conditions, among other adjustments deemed 'reasonable'. However, interviewees highlighted that the clarification of what constitutes 'reasonable' is ambiguous, and employers do not have a clear understanding of what it means for them. This issue was also highlighted by respondents of the employer survey, who believe that the term is open to interpretation and any decision about what is 'reasonable' will be influenced by the views of the deciding team member. Some OPDs felt that the Equality and Human Rights Commission does not have the capacity to monitor abuses of the Equality Act where reasonable accommodations are not being made, and therefore the legal duty is not enforced unless challenged by an individual. There is also currently no timeframe in which adjustments need to be made. The Disability Charter on Employment is calling for a change that will require employers to provide a response to a request for a reasonable adjustment within a two-week timeframe, as well as the creation of a 'one-stop shop' portal that will provide advice to employers, employees, and job seekers with disabilities on employment rights and duties. 77% of the EDF employer survey respondents report that the provision of reasonable accommodations for employees with disabilities is a standardised procedure in their Human Resources policy.

While AtW funds solutions for removing barriers within the workplace, it will not pay for reasonable adjustments that an employer has a legal duty to make to enable someone to do their job. AtW funding can be provided for a range of support options including support workers, equipment, adaptations, and travel support, as well as communication support during interviews. The current grant cap is £66,000 per year. The most recent data on the scheme reveals that 38,620 people received AtW payments in 2021-2022 and the scheme expenditure was £149.9 million for this period. The most common request approved was for a Support Worker (48%) followed by Special Aids and Equipment (35%). The largest group accessing the scheme were those classed as having a 'Mental Health Condition' who represented 24% of total customers²⁶.

14 The European Disability Forum

The gap between starting work and receiving equipment through the AtW scheme can present a challenge as participants in a Scope survey reported it took up to three months to receive equipment after starting work and subsequently persons with disabilities were not able to thrive as soon as they began a new job²⁷. There were several reports during interviews of people receiving job offers which were later rescinded because of the delays in accessing AT under the AtW scheme. A survey conducted by Scope revealed that one of the main reasons cited by persons with disabilities for falling out of work is the challenges they experience in acquiring reasonable adjustments at the time they are needed²⁸. OPDs feel that the AtW delays are more pronounced for people who are already in work and develop a disability, as they prioritise people with new job offers. Another hindering factor for small businesses is that they often don't have funds to pay for support upfront and may be put off by the prospect of waiting to be reimbursed by AtW.

The Business Disability Forum (BDF) recently released the results of The Great Big Workplace Adjustments Survey 2023 in which only 10% of employees with disabilities said it was easy to get the adjustments they needed, while 56% said disability-related barriers were still present in the workplace after adjustments had been made²⁹. The barriers that remained included bullying and harassment, inaccessible shared spaces, difficulties travelling to work, and inaccessible development opportunities³⁰. 24% of participants used assistive technologies as part of their workplace adjustment, and the most common workplace adjustment reported by 47% of respondents was the option to work flexibly, followed by time off for appointments and the use of ergonomic equipment. Flexible working was also reported to be the most common adjustment in the EDF employer survey alongside physical adaptations³¹.

The Down's Syndrome Association shared that employers often have the perception that reasonable adjustments are expensive and complicated. However, for their jobseekers with Down's Syndrome, the most common reasonable accommodations are simple, low or no-cost adjustments such as providing timetables, checklists, and visual cues. The Mencap representative cited flexible working as one of the most common reasonable accommodations as well as the wider availability of free versions of some digital technologies. A longitudinal study carried out by Scope identified key enabling factors that contributed to successful employment. These included a proactive, flexible, and supportive approach to making reasonable adjustments and employers having an understanding attitude and a willingness to adopt practical solutions to any issues faced³². A Health Adjustment Passport has been developed by the Department for Work and Pensions as a record for people with disabilities and

health conditions to help identify what support they need in the workplace. The passport can be used to support AtW applications and to facilitate conversations with employers about extra support.

Recruitment is an area where organisations working on supported employment would like to see more reasonable accommodations being made to accommodate those who find traditional processes such as applications and interviews challenging. BASE reports that some organisations are being more creative and asking for a video résumé or offering work trials instead of interviews. SeeAbility often try to encourage employers to consider a work trial, but when this is not possible, their job coaches can support during interviews by helping to clarify questions and providing prompts when necessary. Requesting interview questions in advance also helps individuals prepare alongside job coaches if necessary, and communication support during interviews can be funded under AtW. Supported employment providers spoke of 'job carving' whereby a more flexible approach is adopted and tasks are customised to meet the needs and skills of an individual employee. They also request an extended training or probationary period. 59% of the EDF employer survey respondents said their company has a policy in place regarding the accessibility of recruitment processes, with adjustments including virtual interviews, video CVs, targeted recruitment channels, and the possibility of requesting support during interviews.

The government published the Transforming Support White Paper in March 2023, which outlines proposals to help more persons with disabilities and health conditions find and remain in work. It includes plans to improve access to Occupational Health services, develop a new information service for employers, provide more investment in employment support, and reforms to the AtW Scheme. A new Disability Action Plan is due to be published in 2023, setting out practical actions that government departments will take to improve the lives of persons with disabilities³³.

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18 The European Disability Forum

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