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LEAD YOUR WAY

RESEARCH REPORT

SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT & DIGITAL SKILLS DEVELOPMENT FOR THE WORK INCLUSION OF PEOPLE WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES IN EUROPE

LEAD YOUR WAY: Fostering Employment for People with Down syndrome and Intellectual Disabilities through Digital Empowerment

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

AESE	*Asociación Española de Empleo con Apoyo*
AGEFIPH	*Association de gestion du fonds pour l'insertion professionnelle des personnes handicapées* (France)
AI	Artificial Intelligence
ASEE	Association for Supported Employment Europe
B-WISE	Blueprint for Sectoral Cooperation on Skills in WISEs
BASE	British Association for Supported Employment
CEE	*Centros Especiales de Empleo* (Spain)
CRPD	Commission for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Malta)
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
DS	Down Syndrome
DSA	Down Syndrome Association
EASPD	European Association of Service Providers for Persons with Disabilities
EDF	European Disability Forum
ENIL	European Network on Independent Living
EU	European Union
EUSE	European Union of Supported Employment
ID	Intellectual Disability
IPS	Individual Placement and Support
KII	Key Informant Interview
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
LSF	Lino Spiteri Foundation (Malta)
LYW	Lead Your Way
OPD	Organisation of Persons with Disabilities
PES	Public Employment Service
SE	Supported Employment
SEPE	Spanish Public Employment Service
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNCRPD	UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
WEP	Work Experience Placement
WISE	Work Integration Social Enterprise
ZOSI	Institute for Expertise, Professional Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities (Croatia)

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Article 27 of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (UNCRPD) obliges State Parties to uphold the right of persons with disabilities to work on an equal basis with others. This right encompasses the opportunity to **earn a living through freely chosen or accepted employment in a labour market and work environment that is open, inclusive, and accessible** to persons with disabilities.[1]

Notwithstanding, people with disabilities continue to face substantial obstacles in accessing and sustaining paid employment, with youth with disabilities being further marginalised in terms of accessing quality employment and achieving career progression.[2] Despite the EU's ratification of the UNCRPD in 2010, **only half of the 42.8 million working-age individuals with disabilities in the EU were employed** in 2021.[3] Causes include **persistent societal assumptions regarding their capacity to engage in competitive labour markets**,[4] further reinforced by the prevailing neoliberal economic framework and the repercussions of successive global financial crises over the past two decades.

Findings from a research study conducted by the *European Disability Forum* (EDF) and *Google.org*[5] show that persons with disabilities encounter serious barriers starting from the recruitment phase. **Employers report that internal guidelines on hiring people with disabilities, if they exist at all, are typically informal and unwritten**. This lack of structure hinders efforts to ensure accessible hiring practices and weakens the overall recruitment process. Moreover, the study reveals that **just one in four employers participate in initiatives**—public or private—**designed to promote the employment inclusion** of persons with disabilities. **Insufficient awareness, reasonable accommodation, provision of assistive technology, and development of digital skills** exacerbate this situation.[6] The **implementation of reasonable accommodation remains weak** due to employers' lack of awareness about how to provide such accommodations, financial limitations and insufficient support.

Meanwhile, **technology in the workplace holds significant promise** for improving Europe's dismal employment rates among persons with disabilities. However, **without swift action to enhance digital accessibility**—by ensuring assistive technologies are both affordable and easy

[1] UN. 2006. *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*. https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities.html

[2] Freixe, L. & Cheyne, S. (Decent Jobs for Youth) 2022. *Enabling Young Persons with Disabilities: Inclusive Digital Skills Initiatives. Leave no young person behind in the digital age.* https://www.decentjobsforyouth.org/resource-details/Blogs/1104

[3] European Commission - Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion. 2021. *Disability employment package*. https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/eu-employment-policies/disability-employment-package_en

[4] Varkas, M. 2022. 'Sheltered or Supported Employment Options for Secondary Education Students with Disabilities?' *IJASOS - International E-journal of Advances in Social Sciences*, vol. 8(23), p. 479-484. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.18769/ijasos.1142826

[5] Lulli, R., Sinicato, F. & Couceiro Farjas, A.A. (EDF & Google.org) 2024. *Digital Skills, Accommodation and Technological Assistance for Employment: Supporting the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the open labour market.* https://www.edf-feph.org/content/uploads/2024/10/DATA-project-summary-report.pdf

[6] Ídem.

to use, and by equipping individuals with the necessary skills to utilise them—**there is a risk of creating an even more isolating future for this population**.[7]

1.2 Why this Research?

In this context, the *Lead Your Way* (LYW) Project[8] – co-funded by the European Union (EU) – aims to reduce the employment gap experienced by persons with Down Syndrome (DS) and intellectual disabilities (ID) by facilitating their inclusion in the open labour market (OLM) through the application of supported employment techniques and the strategic use of digital tools. In order to achieve this, the LYW project incorporates a research study on supported employment and digital skills for the employability of persons with DS/ID.

This **research thus aims to present a comprehensive and systematic analysis of the current landscape of supported employment activities across Europe, with a focus on the countries making up the project consortium**: Croatia, Greece, Malta, Romania and Spain. The overarching research questions guiding this study are:

- **What is the current employment situation of persons with Down syndrome and intellectual disabilities, and what factors enable or hinder their participation in the open labour market?**
- **How do existing policies, stakeholder practices, and supported employment services influence the inclusion, retention, and career development of persons with DS/ID?**
- **What skills—particularly digital and vocational—and what models of supported employment most effectively improve employment outcomes for persons with DS/ID across the participating countries?**

In parallel, a guide of good practices (published seperately) documents and analyses successful case studies that illustrate the effective inclusion of persons with DS/ID in the labour market. Together, the research report and the guide provide empirical evidence and insights that will serve as a foundation for the conceptualisation, design, and implementation of tools – developed through the LYW project – aimed at facilitating the employment of persons with DS/ID in the OLM.

1.3 Report Structure

Aside from this Introductory Chapter, this report is divided into the following chapters:

[7] Ídem.

[8] https://leadyourwayproject.eu

- Annex IV – Survey Questionnaire

2. Literature Review

This chapter examines the existing body of knowledge on the employment of persons with intellectual disabilities within the European context, exploring both the structural barriers that limit their participation and the policy and practice frameworks designed to promote inclusion. Despite decades of policy development and growing commitments to disability rights across Europe, employment outcomes for persons with intellectual disabilities remain markedly unequal when compared with both the general population and other disability groups. Understanding the persistence of these disparities requires a comprehensive review of the labour market conditions, service models, and legislative mechanisms that shape opportunities for meaningful, sustainable, and fairly remunerated work.

The literature presented in this chapter is organised into five key thematic areas. Section 2.1 outlines the current state of employment of people with intellectual disabilities in Europe, highlighting the significant gaps that persist despite numerous national and EU-level initiatives. Section 2.2 examines sheltered employment and Work Integration Social Enterprises (WISEs), comparing traditional segregated models with more inclusive social-enterprise-based approaches. Section 2.3 explores the main models of personalised employment support—Supported Employment and Individual Placement and Support—which aim to facilitate participation in the open labour market through tailored, person-centred interventions. Section 2.4 analyses the European legal and policy frameworks that govern disability inclusion in employment, including definitions, anti-discrimination measures, and quota systems. Finally, Section 2.5 discusses the growing importance of digital skills for labour market participation, as well as the digital divide that places individuals with intellectual disabilities at heightened risk of exclusion.

Taken together, these sections provide a foundation for understanding the complex interplay of social, economic, and institutional factors influencing employment outcomes for people with intellectual disabilities. This review also identifies key gaps and tensions—such as the reliance on segregated employment models, inconsistent application of reasonable accommodation, and insufficient adaptation of digital technologies.

2.1 The State of Affairs of Employment of People with Intellectual Disabilities in Europe

Less than 10% of people with intellectual disabilities in the EU have a paid job. Compared to approximately 50% of people with disabilities in general and 75% of people without disabilities being employed,[9] this vast disparity makes one pause for thought.

[9] Inclusion Europe. 2023. *Inclusion indicators 2023 : Union of equality? Here's the reality.* https://www.inclusion.eu/inclusion-indicators-report-2023%3A-union-of-equality%3F-here%E2%80%99s-the-reality

Despite various good practices in supporting people with intellectual disabilities to access the open labour market and retain a job with a just wage in several countries around the EU,[10] these initiatives on their own are not enough to bridge the disparity between the employment of people with intellectual disabilities and the rest of society. In 2024, Inclusion Europe found that – from among 31 countries participating in their survey - **in 29 countries across Europe, few or no people with intellectual disabilities were employed in the open labour market**.[11]

People with intellectual disabilities face multiple challenges in finding long-term and sustainable jobs.[12] Further, people with intellectual disabilities **risk being underpaid and are less likely to be promoted**.[13] In 18 EU countries, people with intellectual disabilities can **lose their disability benefits** when they are engaged in paid employment; while in 13 countries across Europe, those working **in sheltered employment earn less than the minimum wage**.[14]

2.2 Sheltered Employment and WISEs

The widespread existence of **sheltered employment across the EU persists**. Sheltered employment typically involves individuals with disabilities being employed predominantly or exclusively alongside other persons with disabilities. The work is usually limited to tasks considered suitable for people with intellectual disabilities, and employment operates within a distinct regulatory framework. As a result, these workers do not enjoy the same employment conditions as those in the open labour market. It should be noted, however, that the type of sheltered employment and workshops differ across Europe, and, while some remain traditional, other workshops are more transitional in nature.[15]

While Article 27 does not explicitly ban sheltered workshops, General Comment No. 8[16] issued by the UN *Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*—along with previous UN recommendations—has adopted an increasingly critical stance toward this model. These interpretations advocate for the **gradual phasing out of sheltered workshops**.[17] In line with this, the *European Network on Independent Living* (ENIL) has recently criticised the **continued use of public funding across the EU for maintaining, constructing, or renovating sheltered**

[10] Inclusion Europe. 2025. *Job first: Examples and ideas for employment and inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities*. https://str.inclusion.eu/62a3b447613cae498a6e43b20.pdf
[11] Inclusion Europe. 2024. *Inclusion indicators 2024 : Rights and inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities in 31 European countries*. https://str.inclusion.eu/17d0cedb3ec6748196eed9f05.pdf
[12] Inclusion Europe. 2021. *Employment. Policies and practices to improve employment of people with intellectual disabilities to work*. https://www.inclusion-europe.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Employment-report-2021.pdf
[13] Inclusion Europe. 2023. *Employment and Social Inclusion*. https://www.inclusion.eu/employment-and-social-inclusion
[14] Inclusion Europe. 2024. *Op.cit*.
[15] Bezzina, L., Zutautaite, J. Belafatti, F. & Paulauskaite, E. (EASPD). 2022. *Fostering Employment through Sheltered Workshops: Reality, Trends and Next Steps*. https://easpd.eu/resources-detail/fostering-employment-through-sheltered-workshops-reality-trends-and-next-steps
[16] UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. 2022. *CRPD/C/GC/8: General comment No. 8 (2022) on the right of persons with disabilities to work and employment*. https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/general-comments-and-recommendations/crpdcgc8-general-comment-no-8-2022-right-persons
[17] Bezzina, L. et al. (EASPD). 2022. *Op.cit*.

workshops, urging instead that such resources be redirected toward inclusive employment initiatives.[18]

In contrast, **sheltered employment within work integration enterprises** offers a more inclusive approach. These settings are still adapted to support workers with disabilities, but they grant full employee status, including entitlement to the minimum wage or collectively bargained compensation. These enterprises aim primarily to support the employment of disabled individuals, often alongside non-disabled staff. When organised as **non-profit social enterprises**, they are known as *Work Integration Social Enterprises* (WISEs).[19] WISEs have strong public support in countries such as Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands and Spain. The B-WISE (*Blueprint for Sectoral Cooperation on Skills in WISEs*) Project[20] identifies **three type of WISEs**:

- **Productive WISEs**. These production-oriented WISEs rely almost entirely on the sale of goods and services in competitive markets, often achieving substantial scale and employing hundreds of people. They operate in diverse sectors such as cleaning, environmental services, construction, and industrial production, frequently integrating advanced technologies and digital tools. WISEs aim to promote the economic autonomy of disadvantaged workers, employing them under standard contracts with the goal of enabling independent living. Approaches vary between retaining workers long-term or transitioning them to other jobs, with the former being more common due to cost considerations. The type of disadvantage addressed depends on each WISE's mission and regulatory context, although competitive pressures sometimes lead to favouring less severely disadvantaged individuals.
- **Social WISEs.** These typically emerge from organisations with a broader welfare mission, supporting disadvantaged groups such as people with disabilities, mental health issues, or those facing social exclusion. Initially focused on therapeutic or symbolic occupational activities, some evolved into productive enterprises capable of generating income and offering real employment opportunities. While some WISEs have become fully productive entities, others retain distinct social characteristics, combining paid employment with symbolic remuneration and supplementary income, often in line with public benefits. Operating in diverse sectors such as catering, agriculture, or retail, WISEs may prioritise inclusive workshop models or choose public-facing roles to challenge stigma and promote integration, supported by structured teams facilitating participation and social transformation.
- **Training WISEs**. Training WISEs originate from organisations initially focused on training vulnerable groups, such people with disabilities, which later incorporated productive activities to provide real work experience. These enterprises sustain themselves partly through selling goods and services, with catering and food production being common sectors. Unlike other WISEs, they place structured, continuous training at the core of their mission, often as a precursor to job placements in mainstream companies. Their aim is to act as a transitional 'bridge' to the regular labour market, with the involvement

[18] ENIL. 2024. *EU state aid for inclusive employment*. https://enil.eu/campaigns/eu-state-aid-for-inclusive-employment

[19] Gareis, K. (Empirica) & Behrend, S. (Sozialhelden e.v) et al (European Commission: Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion). 2025. *Study on alternative employment models for persons with disabilities – Set-up, working conditions and pathways to the open labour market in inclusive enterprises and sheltered workshops – Final report*. https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2767/5824702

[20] https://www.bwiseproject.eu

of beneficiaries typically being short-term, and employment statuses varying between traineeships and temporary contracts.[21]

2.3 Supported Employment and Related Approaches

This section explores the key approaches used to support individuals with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities in accessing and sustaining meaningful employment in the OLM. It outlines the principles and practices of Supported Employment, a long-standing model designed to provide personalised, on-the-job support within the open labour market, as well as Individual Placement and Support, an evidence-based approach tailored specifically for people with mental health conditions. Together, these models illustrate how targeted, person-centred interventions can promote inclusion, enhance skills development, and improve long-term employment outcomes across diverse groups.

2.3.1 The Supported Employment Model

People with intellectual disabilities often have support needs that differ from those of many other disability groups. Although they face the same widespread issues of discrimination, marginalisation, and limited opportunities as other disabled individuals, they also require distinct and specific support when it comes to employment.[22]

Supported employment (SE) has, for decades, provided individualised support to enable persons with significant disabilities to obtain and sustain competitive employment.[23] The *Association for Supported Employment Europe* (ASEE)[24] defines supported employment as "**the provision of support to persons with disabilities or other disadvantaged groups to secure and maintain paid employment in the open labour market**." The Supported Employment model—founded on the belief that **anyone who wants to work can do so with the right support**—was created by the ASEE to help individuals with significant disabilities access employment in the open labour market.[25]

The ASEE toolkit defines five main stages of the SE process, aiming to help individuals with disabilities achieve and maintain meaningful work:

1. **Client Engagement**. Clients are supported in making informed decisions about SE and selecting suitable providers. SE providers must present accessible information and involve key stakeholders (e.g. family, educators) to ensure client-centered planning.
2. **Vocational Profiling.** A collaborative process that identifies the individual's skills, interests, support needs, and career goals. The outcome is a clear action plan guiding the job search and employment pathway.

[21] Marocchi, G. et al (B-WISE Project) 2022. *Report understanding user (digital) skill needs in WISEs.* https://www.bwiseproject.eu/en/results

[22] Inclusion Europe. 2019. *Position Paper on Inclusive Employment*. https://www.inclusion-europe.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/PPInclusiveEmploymentEN.pdf

[23] BASE. *What is Supported Employment?* https://www.base-uk.org/what-supported-employment

[24] Prior to March 2024, ASEE was known as the European Union of Supported Employment (EUSE).

[25] ASEE. *Defining Supported Employment.* https://a4se.eu/about-se/defining-supported-employment

3. **Job Finding**. Uses both formal and informal strategies, including "job carving" to align roles with clients' strengths. While effective for some, especially those with intellectual disabilities, such roles may limit long-term career advancement.
4. **Employer Engagement**. SE providers support employers by promoting the benefits of inclusive hiring, offering disability awareness training, and providing guidance on workplace accommodations and funding options.
5. **On- and Off-the-Job Support**. Individualised support continues beyond placement to help clients integrate, develop, and succeed at work. This includes onboarding, performance management, and workplace inclusion efforts.

    5.1 **Career Development and Progression.** Although not a formal stage, career growth is essential. SE services should encourage lifelong learning and mobility, helping clients access training, set long-term goals, and progress when desired. However, constraints like resource limitations and job market conditions often shift focus to placement and retention. Despite these barriers, fostering soft skills and vocational education boosts confidence, reduces stigma, and promotes independence.

Not all EU Member States fully adhere to the principles of the SE model. This can be attributed to several factors, including:

- **Varied definitions and understandings of economic activity and employment across countries.**

- **The concept of "job readiness" remains contentious**, with some nations requiring individuals with disabilities to be deemed "job ready" before entering the labour market. This often results in people with disabilities spending much of their lives in employment training, which contradicts the SE model's "place-train-maintain" approach, where training is delivered on the job.

- **Work Experience Placements (WEPs) are sometimes not used as a means of progression or as a stepping stone to paid employment.** When implemented effectively, however, WEPs can offer numerous benefits—particularly for those who have never been employed or have been out of the workforce for extended periods. These benefits may include:
    - assisting individuals in identifying job preferences, strengths, and areas for development;
    - providing valuable additions to their CV;
    - offering insight into the realities of the workplace and helping them assess their skills and stamina; and
    - enabling individuals to acquire new skills and enhance existing ones.

- **Inconsistencies in the training provided to SE service staff across the EU.** While some countries offer specific training and qualifications in Supported Employment, others do not. This fragmented training landscape can negatively impact employer engagement and job seeker outcomes, as the ability to effectively support and reflect the job seeker's aspirations often depends heavily on the skill level of SE staff.

- **Insufficient funding for personalised job support.** In numerous countries, the provision of intensive job support is limited and frequently constrained to a specific timeframe:

- The need for support is typically greatest at the beginning of a new job, with a gradual reduction in intensity over time. However, it is vital that ongoing support remains accessible as required, as it plays a significant role in long-term employment sustainability. Without such continued support, individuals may be at risk of losing their jobs.
- Securing long-term funding for job support in the open labour market is often difficult, whereas funding for lifelong support in sheltered workshops tends to be more readily available. Additionally, job support in mainstream employment settings is often limited to crisis intervention, rather than encompassing opportunities for skills development or career advancement.[26]

2.3.2 Individual Placement and Support

When supporting individuals with long-term mental health conditions through employment, the approach is often known as Individual Placement and Support (IPS). Over the past 30 years, IPS has become a well-established, evidence-based model for helping people with serious mental health challenges—such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and major depression—gain and maintain paid employment.

IPS is guided by eight core principles:

1. **Emphasis on competitive employment** as the primary goal
2. **Zero exclusion**, meaning anyone who expresses a desire to work is eligible for services
3. **Respect for individual preferences** throughout the job search and employment process
4. **Rapid job search**, with a focus on helping individuals begin looking for work soon after expressing interest, rather than requiring extensive pre-employment training
5. **Strategic job development**, targeting suitable employment opportunities
6. **Integration of employment and mental health services**, ensuring coordinated support
7. **Personalised benefits counselling**, providing clear, accurate advice on how employment may affect disability benefits and other entitlements
8. **Ongoing, individualised support**, available for as long as needed to help clients retain or advance in their employment.[27]

[26] EUSE. 2010. *European Union of Supported Employment Toolkit.* https://a4se.eu/about-se/supported-employment-toolkit

[27] Drake, R.E. & Bond, G.R. 2023. 'Individual placement and support: History, current status, and future directions.' *Psychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences (PCN) Reports*, 2(3). DOI: 10.1002/pcn5.122

2.4 Legal Frameworks across the EU

2.4.1 The EU Definition of Disadvantaged Workers

European Commission Regulation 651/2014[28] provides an official delineation of *disadvantaged*, *severely disadvantaged*, and *disabled* workers, establishing a shared conceptual basis intended to guide Member States' labour market policies. Despite this, alignment with the EU-level definitions remains limited. With the exception of Estonia, Hungary, and Slovenia, most Member States either apply diverging national definitions or lack such definitions altogether. For instance, Malta and Romania do not formally define "disadvantaged workers," resulting in inconsistent implementation of employment support measures. By contrast, Greece adopts a broader interpretation that extends beyond the EU definition, while Spain applies a narrower categorisation that emphasises specific types of disability.

The absence of clear, harmonised definitions has substantive policy implications. In Romania, for example, the lack of a legally recognised definition contributes to fragmented support mechanisms for persons with disabilities. As a result, interventions often fail to address individual needs or to provide tailored services, thereby undermining the effectiveness of labour market integration strategies.[29] This variation across Member States ultimately weakens the consistency and comparability of EU-level efforts to promote equitable access to employment.

2.4.2 The EU Directive on non-discrimination in employment

Council Directive 2000/78/EC[30] establishes a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation, prohibiting discrimination on several grounds, including disability. A core element of the Directive is the obligation imposed on employers to provide *reasonable accommodation* to employees with disabilities. However, the practical interpretation of this requirement varies considerably. Due to the **absence of a shared understanding of what constitutes reasonable accommodation**, it is difficult to assess whether current practices effectively prevent workplace discrimination against persons with disabilities and support them in performing their jobs.[31]

[28] European Commission. 2014. *Commission Regulation No 651/2014 of 17 June 2014 declaring certain categories of aid compatible with the internal market in application of Articles 107 and 108 of the Treaty Text with EEA relevance*. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2014/651/oj/eng

[29] Galera, G. et al. (B-WISE Project) 2022. *Report on trends and challenges for work integration social enterprises (WISEs) in Europe. Current situation of skills gaps, especially in the digital area*. https://www.bwiseproject.eu/en/results

[30] European Commission. 2000. *Council Directive 2000/78/EC of 27 November 2000 establishing a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation.* https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2000/78/oj/eng

[31] Buchanan, J. and Hammersley, H. (EDF). 2023. *European Human Rights Report Issue 7. The Right to Work: The employment situation of persons with disabilities in Europe.* https://www.edf-feph.org/publications/human-rights-report-2023-the-right-to-work

2.4.3 The EU Disability Strategy

The ***EU Strategy on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030***[32] sets out a comprehensive agenda to improve the social and economic inclusion of persons with disabilities. Within this framework, the ***Disability Employment Package*** provides Member States with practical instruments to support labour market participation. These include:

- a toolkit for enhancing the functioning of Public Employment Services (PES) to improve labour market outcomes for persons with disabilities
- guidelines designed to assist employers in complying with their obligation to provide reasonable accommodation; and
- a catalogue of positive action measures that Member States and employers may adopt to improve recruitment, retention, and workplace accessibility.

The European Commission further encourages Member States to strengthen cooperation among actors in the social economy, identify emerging skills needs—including digital competencies—and invest in assistive technologies. Such measures are intended to facilitate transitions into employment and support inclusive workplaces. [33]

2.4.4 Quota Systems and other policies aimed at disability inclusion in employment

EU Member States have implemented a range of policies aimed at supporting the employment of persons with disabilities, including support for job creation, assistance for individuals with disabilities—both employees and jobseekers—and incentives for employers. Specific initiatives across Member States encompass quota systems, wage subsidies, tax incentives to promote recruitment, support with training costs and reasonable adjustments, as well as personalised assistance. However, the **effectiveness of these measures remains limited**.[34] A 2021 academic study found **little evidence that current policies have significantly improved employment outcomes for people with disabilities**.[35] Likewise, Eurofound notes that, despite various legislative efforts and diversity initiatives, persons with disabilities continue to face reduced opportunities to enter, stay in, or return to the labour market compared to others.[36]

According to Eurofound, 23 EU Member States have implemented quota systems to promote the employment of persons with disabilities, requiring them to make up a minimum percentage—typically between 2% and 5%—of a company's workforce. However, Denmark, Finland, Latvia, and Sweden do not use such systems, opting instead for alternative strategies. In countries

[32] European Commission - Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion. 2021. *Union of equality – Strategy for the rights of persons with disabilities 2021-2030*.https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2767/31633

[33] European Commission - Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion. 2021. *Disability employment package*. https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/eu-employment-policies/disability-employment-package_en

[34] Buchanan, J. & Hammersley, H. (EDF). Op.cit

[35] Van der Zwan, R., & de Beer, P. 2021. 'The disability employment gap in European countries: What is the role of labour market policy?' *Journal of European Social Policy*, 31(4), 473-486.

[36] Patrini, V. & Ahrendt, D. (Eurofound). 2021. *Disability and labour market integration: Policy trends and support in EU Member States*. https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/en/publications/2021/disability-and-labour-market-integration-policy-trends-and-support-eu-member

where quotas are in place, they may apply to both public and private sectors, although some, like parts of Belgium, Cyprus, Estonia, and Ireland, limit this requirement to public employers.

Quotas usually apply to organisations with a minimum number of employees, often set at 25 or 50. Some Member States permit the use of "alternative measures" to fulfil quota obligations, such as purchasing from or outsourcing to enterprises that employ persons with disabilities. While these measures can contribute to employment, they may also reduce direct inclusion in the open labour market. In most countries with quotas, employers that fail to comply must pay a fine, which is typically reinvested into policies supporting employment for persons with disabilities—through wage subsidies, training programmes, or other incentives. However, this is not universally the case. In Romania, for instance, fines are either returned to the state or used to purchase goods made by persons with disabilities. Notably, eight Member States—Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Ireland, Luxembourg, Portugal, and Spain—have no financial penalties for non-compliance. [37]

2.5 Digital Skills in Employment

> *"Persons with disabilities, who already face stigma and other disadvantages when it comes to finding employment, are particularly impacted by the increasing space technology occupies in the world of work. Not only are persons with disabilities less likely to be able to develop the digital skills required by the open labour market, but all too often they are denied existing assistive devices or technologies they require to be able to use digital tools at work."*
>
> Yannis Vardakastanis, EDF President[38]

Over the past two decades, **the rapid integration of digital tools and ICT-based working practices has fundamentally transformed labour markets globally**. This acceleration in technological innovation—an enduring feature of human and societal progress—is reshaping interpersonal interactions, professional environments, and everyday tasks at an unprecedented pace. In response to these shifts, the EU, its Member States, and the UK have intensified digitalisation strategies to bolster global competitiveness. However, these initiatives must be coupled with targeted actions to bridge the growing digital skills divide. **While technological progress offers substantial opportunities for greater labour market inclusion, it simultaneously introduces risks of further marginalisation, particularly for individuals with disabilities**. Access to the benefits of digital innovation remains contingent upon the capacity and resources of individuals and employers to acquire and utilise emerging technologies. Those unable to do so—disproportionately including persons with disabilities—face heightened exclusion. Compounding this issue is the **educational disparity** between persons with disabilities and the general population. Early school leaving is also more prevalent among persons with disabilities, further impeding their labour market participation.[39]

[37] Patrini, V. & Ahrendt, D. (Eurofound). 2021. *Op.cit.*

[38] Lulli, R., Sinicato, F. & Couceiro Farjas, A.A. (EDF & Google.org) 2024. *Digital Skills, Accommodation and Technological Assistance for Employment: Supporting the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the open labour market*. https://www.edf-feph.org/content/uploads/2024/10/DATA-project-summary-report.pdf

[39] Lulli, R., Sinicato, F. & Couceiro Farjas, A.A. (EDF & Google.org) 2024. *Op.cit.*

Despite the established correlation between digital proficiency and employability, there is a notable **absence of disaggregated data at the EU level concerning the digital skills of persons with disabilities**. The 2024 study conducted by EDF and Google.org[40] across EU Member States found that only 52% of employers provide digital skills training, and among those, few adapt such training to accommodate employees with disabilities. While digital competencies rank high among desired qualifications, employers also prioritise soft skills such as motivation, adaptability, and communication. These attributes may be challenging for some individuals with disabilities to demonstrate during conventional recruitment processes, further limiting their employment prospects. A lack of familiarity with candidates with disabilities, combined with persistent stereotypes, often leads employers to confine them to low-skilled or low-tech positions—frequently without evaluating their actual capabilities. This may stem from limited awareness of public funding available for disability-specific training initiatives, or from genuine shortfalls in such funding in certain regions. Importantly, the responsibility for fostering digital inclusion does not rest solely with persons with disabilities. Effective use of assistive technologies necessitates that all employees, irrespective of disability status, are trained in accessibility standards. This includes designing content compatible with screen readers, ensuring keyboard navigability, and applying appropriate visual contrasts for individuals with low vision. Therefore, digital inclusion is a collective responsibility that requires systemic adjustments across all levels of employment and society.

Individuals with intellectual disabilities remain among the most underserved populations in terms of support for gaining and sustaining employment. Although artificial intelligence **(AI) technologies hold significant potential to enhance employment outcomes for persons with disabilities, current systems are not yet fully adapted to meet the needs of individuals with intellectual disabilities**. Ongoing research and development efforts are focused on improving the accessibility of data and input mechanisms; however, these systems continue to rely heavily on users possessing advanced cognitive abilities, which presents a substantial barrier to inclusivity.[41]

3. Research Methodology

This study employed a **mixed-method design**, combining desk research, online surveys, and semi-structured expert interviews to explore the employment situation, policy context, and support mechanisms for people with DS / ID across participating countries.

The methodological framework was guided by the principles of comparability, flexibility, and accessibility, ensuring that data collection could adapt to the specific institutional, linguistic, and logistical contexts of each partner country while maintaining analytical coherence.

3.1 Data Collection

The project methodology unfolded across **four interrelated phases**:

[40] Ídem.

[41] Ídem.

1. **Stakeholder Mapping**. Each national team identified key actors in the field of inclusive and supported employment, including:

    - Academics and researchers
    - Decision-makers and public authorities
    - Employers and employer-facing organisations
    - Supported employment providers
    - Disability non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs)

Selection criteria considered experience, institutional recognition, organisational scale, and representativeness at national or regional levels. Personal or professional networks were also leveraged to facilitate access and engagement.

2. **Desk Research**. Coordinated by the Maltese partner, this phase involved the review of existing data, legislation, and policy frameworks regarding the employment of people with DS/ID in each country. Documents reviewed included:
    - Published reports of pan-European disability organisations such as ASEE, EDF, ENIL, Inclusion Europe and the European Association of Service Providers for Persons with Disabilities (EASPD)
    - Reports and regulations published by the EU and its agencies
    - General Comments of the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
    - Country-level reports and legislation
    - Academic articles published in peer-reviewed journals

3. **Expert Interviews.** The key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted in the five Mediterranean countries - Croatia, Greece, Malta, Romania and Spain – making up the LYW project consortium. Thus, while the literature review emerging from the desk research enabled an overview of the state of affairs of the employment of persons with DS/ID across Europe, together with the legal frameworks governing this area, the interviews allowed for a deeper dive in five countries. Three of the countries studied (Greece, Malta and Spain) are characterised by the Mediterranean (Southern Europe) social welfare model; while Croatia and Romania are characterised by the Central/Eastern European social welfare models. While these categories are not undisputable, they allow for a view of the employment of persons with DS/ID in different welfare states.

    Each consortium partner conducted semi-structured interviews with relevant stakeholders across predefined categories. The questionnaires (see Annex II – Interview Questionnaires) included pre-defined questions which however gave the opportunity to the interviewee to elaborate on aspects they felt were important. Questionnaires were harmonised to ensure cross-country comparability while allowing for contextual adaptations. The interviews covered ten analytical sections:
    1. Labour Market Participation of People with DS/ID
    2. Attitudes, Perceptions & Cultural Factors
    3. Legal and Policy Framework
    4. Employment Challenges & Barriers

5. Employment Supports, Accommodations & Conditions
6. Education, Training & Skill Development
7. Partnerships, Collaboration & Stakeholder Ecosystem
8. Outcomes, Monitoring & Evaluation
9. Best Practices & Success Stories
10. Recommendations & Future Directions.

The original plan was for each consortium partner to carry out a minimum of 10 KIIs with representatives from the following stakeholder categories:

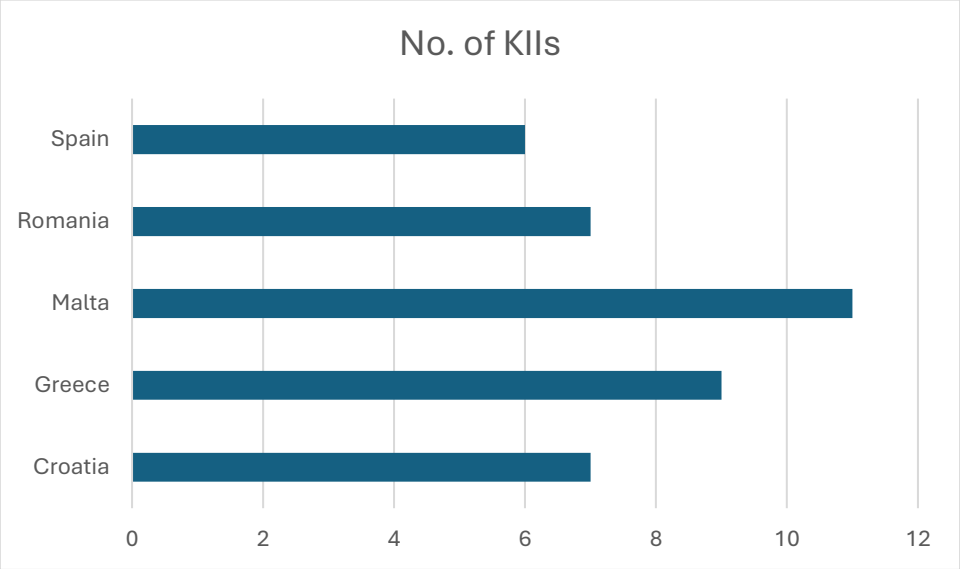
- Academia (1)
- Decision-Makers (1-2)
- Employers (3-4)
- Service providers for persons with disabilities in the employment sector (2)
- OPDs and / or NGOs working with persons with disabilities (2).

While this distribution served as a guiding framework, flexibility was allowed to accommodate local realities, stakeholder structures, and availability. For example:

- **Croatia** successfully conducted seven interviews, including academic, governmental, and employer perspectives, though some sessions were postponed due to stakeholder unavailability.
- **Greece** implemented follow-up verification calls with participants to ensure accuracy, noting that interview length occasionally discouraged participation.
- **Romania** (led by INCOTERA) conducted seven interviews online or via written exchange, with a strong mix of policy, NGO, and academic actors.
- **Malta** secured key informants from the national disability administration but faced non-response from ministerial representatives.
- **Spain** achieved broad representation among academics, supported employment providers, and NGOs, although interviews with public authorities and employers proved challenging due to low response rates.

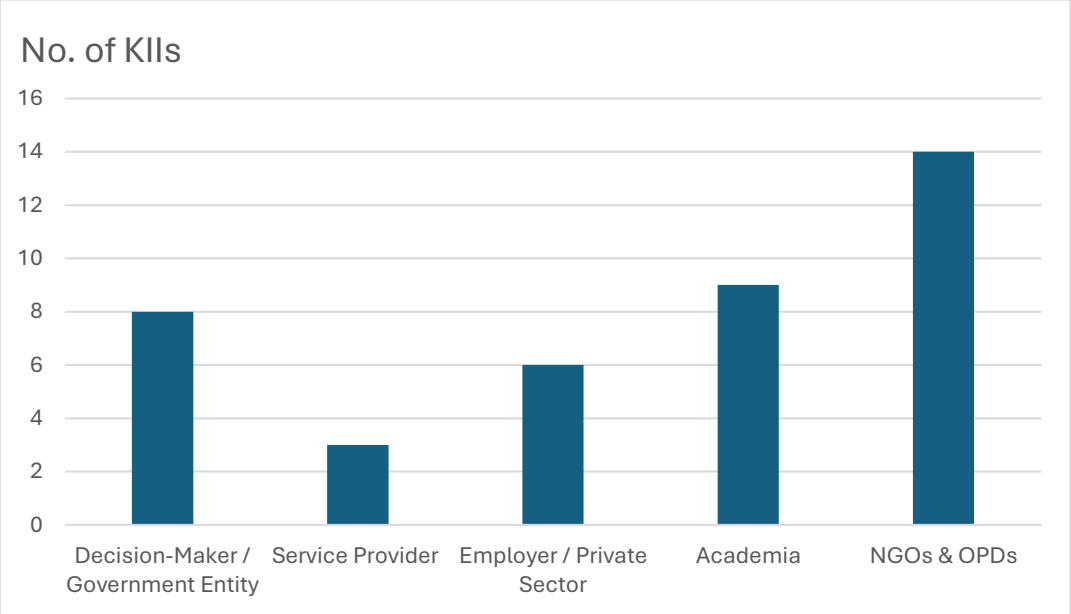
Figure 1 shows the number of interviews held per country.

Figure 1: Number of KIIs per Country



In total, 40 KIIs were conducted between May and November 2025 (see Annex I – List of Stakeholders Consulted). Figure 2 shows the percentage of interviews per stakeholder category, irrespective of the country.

Figure 2: Number of KIIs per Stakeholder Category



Most interviews were carried out via online videoconferencing tools (Zoom, Teams, Google Meet), lasting between 45–75 minutes. Prior to each interview, the interviewer provided the research participant with information on the project in general and the research study in particular, and obtained consent to hold the interview and record it.

Interviews were conducted in each country's official language and subsequently translated to, and summarised in, English, using a common reporting template. Reasonable accommodations were systematically offered, including:

- Simplified or rephrased questions for clarity.
- Options for written or asynchronous participation.
- Flexible scheduling and extended duration where needed.
- Use of plain language and accessible terminology to ensure cognitive inclusivity.

4. **Online Survey**. A survey targeting people of working age with DS or ID was distributed in the five partner countries through associations, family networks, and online communities. The survey was designed to capture the lived experiences of jobseekers and workers with disabilities (see Annex III – Survey Questionnaire for Persons with DS/ID). Respondents were provided with an Easy Read Information Sheet and Consent Form (see Annex IV) and asked to answer questions, also in Easy Read, across the following sections:
   - Personal and Demographic Information
   - Employment Status and Job Characteristics
   - Workplace Support and Barriers
   - Job-Seeking Experiences
   - Ideas and Open Feedback.

3.2 Data Analysis

After the interviews were conducted, transcribed and translated, and the survey data collected, the lead researcher conducted the analysis. This process was guided by the principles of triangulation to ensure the reliability of the collected data. The researcher implemented triangulation through three main steps:

- identifying potential sources of information relevant to each research question;
- utilising each available source to gather evidence addressing the same question; and
- comparing and evaluating data obtained from different sources.

By cross-referencing information from multiple sources, the researcher minimised subjectivity and bias in the interpretation of results. Consequently, triangulation not only facilitated the cross-validation of findings but also provided a more comprehensive understanding of the research questions from various perspectives. In instances where triangulation was not feasible, this was duly noted among the study's limitations (see section 3.3).

To systematically process all data collected during the research phase, the qualitative data analysis software *Dedoose* was employed. This tool enabled the researcher to organise and analyse the data using pre-defined codes aligned with study's research questions (see section 1.2 – Why this Research?). Cross-case analysis was subsequently undertaken to identify converging and divergent findings across countries.

3.3 Ethical Considerations

All participants were informed about the purpose of the research, their right to withdraw at any time, and the confidentiality of their responses. Personal identifiers were removed from summaries, and all national teams adhered to GDPR and ethical guidelines established under the **Lead Your Way** consortium agreement.

3.4 Limitations of the Study and Mitigation

The project faced several common methodological challenges:

- **Variable response rates** across countries, requiring substitution or additional sampling to ensure representativeness. This occurred in both the interview programme and the survey, with the latter resulting in almost 200 responses in Spain due to the partner's vast database and networks and very few responses in other countries (with response numbers as low as 12 and 13 in Malta and Croatia respectively). The low response rate is due to various reasons. In Romania, for example, despite being shared with over 200 stakeholders in the disability community, the survey received few responses. This low engagement stems from historical exclusion, inadequate governmental attention to disability issues, mistrust among individuals with disabilities (driven by the belief that their concerns are ignored), bureaucratic barriers, and limited awareness by people with disabilities of their civic rights and of advocacy.
  Despite the survey responses not being usable in order to generalise or compare findings across countries, the Spanish survey responses were used to develop a case-study taking a deeper dive in the experiences of persons with DS/ID in employment.
- **Limited engagement from decision-makers and employers**, reflecting broader structural barriers to inclusive employment dialogue.
- **Differences in stakeholder ecosystems** necessitating national adaptations in interview targeting and scheduling.
- **Language and accessibility barriers**, mitigated through translation, plain language adaptations, and flexible formats.

Despite these limitations, the collected data provided rich, contextually grounded insights into national frameworks, challenges, and innovative practices supporting the employment inclusion of people with DS and ID.

4. Research Findings by Country

This chapter presents the research findings on the employment of persons with intellectual disabilities and Down Syndrome across five European countries—Croatia, Greece, Malta, Romania, and Spain. Drawing on qualitative data from interviews with academics, employers, government representatives, service providers, and OPDs, the findings illuminate both persistent barriers and emerging facilitators shaping labour market inclusion.

The sections that follow detail each country's experiences, highlighting barriers, facilitators, ongoing initiatives, examples of good practice, and areas for improvement. Together, these findings offer insight into the evolving landscape of disability-inclusive employment in Europe and provide a foundation for identifying transferable lessons and policy recommendations.

4.1 Croatia

Barriers to Persons with Disabilities in Employment

Despite growing awareness of disability rights, significant barriers continue to impede the participation of persons with disabilities—particularly those with intellectual disabilities and Down syndrome—in Croatia's labour market. Interview participants consistently emphasised that **persistent societal prejudice and systemic rigidity** remain key challenges. Employers often lack knowledge on how to provide reasonable accommodation, and, as an academic observed, expect "a fully prepared worker"[42] rather than recognising the need for gradual support and mentoring.

Stakeholders also highlighted that **the legal and institutional framework** remains insufficiently adapted to the principles of supported employment. Although the Law on Professional Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities (2014, revised 2018)[43] introduced incentives and quotas, respondents argued that its implementation remains **bureaucratically complex and oriented toward financial rather than professional support.** The law requires employers with 20 or more employees to ensure that at least 3% of their workforce consists of employees with disabilities. If an employer fails to comply with the prescribed employment quota for persons with disabilities and does not implement legally permitted alternative measures, such as substitute quota arrangements, they are required to pay a monthly financial contribution. This contribution is set at 20% of the minimum gross wage for each unfilled quota position.

Further, In Croatia, the survivors' (family) pension[44] is the primary form of long-term financial security available to persons with Down syndrome, as access to old-age or disability pensions is generally unrealistic due to limited and often interrupted work histories. While lifelong entitlement to a family pension is possible when permanent disability arises before the age of 18 (or 26 if in education), a growing tension has emerged as more persons with Down Syndrome complete secondary education and enter paid employment. Under current pension legislation,

[42] Quotes are paraphrased to ensure flow of text – they are not verbatim quotes.
[43] Official Gazette (Croatia) 157/2013 and 152/2014. *Act on Professional Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities*. http://propisi.hr/print.php?id=7695.
[44] Croatian Parliament. 2025. *Decision on the Proclamation of the Law on Pension Insurance*. https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2025_06_96_1305.html

participation in education and work may jeopardise future eligibility for a family pension, even though these individuals are unlikely to accumulate sufficient pensionable service for an old-age pension or meet the strict criteria for a disability pension. This creates a structural gap in long-term pension protection and highlights the need for either a clear, consistent legal interpretation or legislative reform to ensure social security in line with disability rights principles.

Participants also noted a **lack of continuity in job coaching and workplace assistance**. Professional support is typically time-limited to six months or one year, whereas many persons with intellectual disabilities require ongoing mentoring. Several experts stressed that **this discontinuity undermines sustainable inclusion**, leaving families and NGOs to fill the gaps through volunteer-based support.

Physical and procedural accessibility remains uneven, and **coordination among employment services, rehabilitation centres, and NGOs is fragmented**. One interviewee explained that the **system lacks a person-centered approach** and functions through rigid assessments and testing, often reducing individuals to IQ scores rather than evaluating practical skills and workplace potential. Parents described **psychological assessments as frustrating and misaligned with real-world abilities**, revealing a disconnect between evaluation procedures and inclusion goals. Interviewees also noted the absence of a **comprehensive framework for supported employment**, with the concept still being implemented mainly through Down Syndrome associations' projects rather than statutory services.

Finally, a recurring theme in interviews was **parental overprotectiveness**. Families fear losing disability benefits or social service eligibility if their children enter the labour market, which discourages participation. As an interviewed academic stated, "the system itself produces dependence—by placing all rights under social welfare rather than labour policy."

Facilitators to Persons with Disabilities in Employment

Despite these barriers, Croatia has made gradual progress toward inclusion through both **institutional measures and NGO-driven initiatives**. Interview participants recognised the importance of ZOSI (the Institute for Expertise, Professional Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities)[45], which administers the quota-based employment obligation and provides financial incentives. However, they cautioned that ZOSI's focus remains primarily administrative rather than developmental. Positively, ZOSI introduced new supported employment services, but it will take some time before all the elements are fully implemented and functioning in practice.

Interviewees credited **NGOs and parent associations**—notably the Down Syndrome Associations in Zagreb,[46] Zadar, and Rijeka, and the social cooperative Humana Nova—with pioneering practical models of inclusion. Respondents described how these organisations provide job matching, on-site mentoring, and long-term follow-up, filling the gap left by limited state support. As an interviewed academic highlighted, "inclusion happens because of parents' initiatives, not because of the system,"

[45] https://zosi.hr
[46] http://www.zajednica-down.hr

Cultural change among employers is another emerging facilitator. Several participants noted that **exposure leads to acceptance**—employers who have direct experience with workers with Down syndrome often report high motivation, reliability, and positive workplace effects. As one expert summarised, "attitudes change once the environment gets to know them." Larger international companies, such as Coca-Cola[47], Decathlon[48] DM,[49] Hilton Rijeka[50], Infobip,[51] and Zara[52] were cited as positive examples of inclusive employment cultures that model social responsibility and diversity.

Furthermore, the interviews underscored the growing relevance of **flexible work arrangements**. Experts called for a broader understanding of reasonable accommodation, including the right to work two or three hours per day or several days a week, rather than rigid four-hour minimum contracts. This approach, already present in several EU countries, could increase participation among persons with moderate or severe intellectual disabilities.

Employers in Croatia who hire persons with disabilities may access a range of **public incentives and financial support measures**, such as wage subsidies, co-financing of workplace adaptations, and reimbursement of costs related to professional rehabilitation services. Croatian labour law also allows part-time employment under the same legal framework as full-time work, with proportional labour rights, including pension and social insurance contributions. Persons with Down Syndrome most commonly work part-time, typically around 4 hours per day, which also represents the minimum threshold for employer eligibility for employment subsidies. Employment of at least 20 hours per week (4 hours per day) allows the worker to be counted towards an employer's disability employment quota, provided they are registered in the official disability employment register.

Finally, a **well-functioning national Disability Registry** exists in Croatia, with data being continuously updated. Based on this positive example, interviewees proposed establishing similar registries within the **education system** and the **employment sector**, ideally interconnected ones. Such coordinated databases would enable better monitoring, planning, and alignment between education pathways and employment opportunities for persons with disabilities.

Initiatives for Persons with Disabilities in Employment

Several key initiatives reflect Croatia's evolving landscape of inclusive employment. The **social cooperative Humana Nova[53]** was frequently cited by interviewees as a leading example of sustainable inclusion. It employs more than thirty persons with disabilities, including fifteen with intellectual disabilities, under standard contracts. Respondents highlighted Humana Nova's dual success—combining economic viability with strong social impact—as proof that inclusive business models are feasible.

[47] https://hr.coca-colahellenic.com
[48] www.decathlon.hr
[49] https://www.dm.hr
[50] www.hilton.com/en/hotels/rjkochi-hilton-rijeka-costabella-beach-resort-and-spa
[51] https://www.infobip.com
[52] www.zara.com/hr
[53] https://humananova.org

At the institutional level, ZOSI continues to manage the national employment quota system, distribute financial incentives, and coordinate rehabilitation programs. Yet, participants emphasised that **most innovation occurs through project-based or NGO-led efforts**. Examples include practical independence workshops run by Down Syndrome Associations, weekend programs for youth learning daily living skills, and temporary job placements in partnership with employers.

Interviewees described Croatia's inclusion efforts as **heavily reliant on EU-funded projects, which provide short-term gains but lack sustainability**. One interviewee noted that "everything is based on projects—once the funding ends, the support ends." They called for national funding mechanisms to secure long-term continuation of successful models, particularly job coaching and work assistance.

Emerging proposals include revising pension and benefit schemes to prevent financial disincentives to work, expanding vocational programs across diverse industries, and strengthening employer education on inclusion practices. Participants also emphasised **the need for individualised transition programs** from school to employment, criticising current vocational *assessments as* "inflexible, outdated, and psychologically stressful."

Good Practices

Interview data and existing evidence highlight several **effective models of inclusion** in Croatia. Humana Nova's cooperative structure, which integrates mentorship and personal development into daily operations, was widely praised as a replicable model. Similarly, partnerships between NGOs and public institutions (e.g. the Croatian Employment Service) were identified as key examples of successful cross-sector collaboration, ensuring smoother transitions from education to employment.

Interview participants also referenced **work inclusion programs** in companies such as DM, Franck,[54] and Zvijezda,[55] where employees with DS / ID work under modified conditions with informal mentorship. These examples demonstrate that inclusive employment can enhance workplace culture and productivity, validating international research findings on the benefits of diversity.

Respondents further emphasised the role of **practical independence training**—learning to cook, manage finances, and travel independently—as foundational to employment readiness. One interviewee explained that "financial literacy and social skills are just as important as technical competence." These life-skill initiatives, often led by NGOs, fill a critical gap between education and employment.

Areas for Improvement

While progress is evident, both documentary and interview data underscore the urgent need for **systemic reform**. The most pressing priority is the **development of a national framework for supported employment**, defining institutional responsibilities, funding mechanisms, and standards of practice. Interviewees called for a shift from financial to professional support models, emphasising the need for individualised, continuous assistance.

[54] https://www.franck.eu/hr
[55] https://www.zvijezda.hr

Improved **inter-institutional coordination** is essential among ministries, employment services, and NGOs. Respondents proposed that individualised funding should follow the person, not the institution—reflecting the person-centered approach used in more developed EU systems. Expanding the duration and flexibility of job coaching services was repeatedly mentioned as critical to ensuring retention and advancement.

Vocational education reform emerged as another key area for improvement. Participants described **professional orientation and testing procedures** as "non-adaptive and frustrating," highlighting the need for functional, observation-based assessments that recognise skills rather than deficits. Training for psychologists, educators, and rehabilitation professionals was also deemed insufficient, with interviewees urging the inclusion of disability competence and person-centered planning in university curricula.

Finally, experts emphasised **the need to reconcile social and labour legislation** to eliminate contradictions that currently penalise employment. They proposed revising benefit structures, expanding awareness campaigns to reduce stigma and parental fear, and strengthening data collection on disability employment outcomes.

As one participant concluded, "we have good islands of practice—but no system to connect them." The integration of sustained support, legislative coherence, and employer engagement remains essential for Croatia to achieve genuine, long-term inclusion in the labour market.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while Croatia has taken meaningful steps toward improving employment opportunities for persons with disabilities, particularly through NGO-led initiatives and evolving employer attitudes, systemic barriers continue to limit full inclusion. The current framework remains fragmented, overly bureaucratic, and insufficiently aligned with supported employment principles, leaving families and civil society to provide essential, long-term support. **Sustainable progress will require comprehensive reform—especially in job coaching continuity, benefit policies, vocational assessment, and inter-institutional cooperation—to ensure that inclusion becomes a standardised, well-resourced practice rather than isolated examples of success.**

4.2 Greece

Barriers to Persons with Disabilities in Employment

Across all stakeholder groups—academics, decision-makers, employers, and OPDs—a consistent set of barriers emerges that restricts the full inclusion of persons with DS and ID in the Greek labour market.

One of the most recurrent barriers is **societal prejudice and limited awareness**. While attitudes have improved over time, the perception of persons with DS/ID as "dependent" or "incapable" remains widespread. Employers and society often approach the employment of these individuals as a charitable act rather than a matter of rights and equal opportunity. This cultural legacy of protectionism and pity continues to shape hiring behaviours.

At the institutional level, participants highlighted **weak implementation of existing legal frameworks**. Although Greece has enacted inclusive legislation—such as Law 2643/1998[56] (employment quotas), Law 4443/2016[57] and Law 4488/2017[58] (anti-discrimination and accessibility provisions), and ratified the UNCRPD—their enforcement remains inconsistent. Administrative fragmentation, lack of monitoring, and dependence on short-term EU-funded projects hinder sustainable impact.

Other institutional barriers include the **incompatibility between disability benefits and paid work**, which discourages both individuals and families from seeking employment for fear of losing financial support. Additionally, the lack of structured transition programs from education to employment means that individuals with DS/ID often leave school without practical work skills or pathways to integration.

Employers face limited access to information, counselling, and support services. Many are unaware of financial incentives, supported employment models, or workplace accommodations. This absence of technical and post-hiring support frequently leads to the underutilisation of available schemes and missed opportunities for inclusion.

Finally, digital exclusion is a growing concern. Most interviewees noted **low levels of digital literacy among persons with DS/ID**, which restricts access to modern forms of work and online training opportunities

Facilitators to Persons with Disabilities in Employment

Despite persistent barriers, the interviews reveal key factors that facilitate inclusion. Foremost among these is the **emergence of social enterprises and cooperatives** such as Koinsep[59] and KoiSPE,[60] which offer a supported framework for the employment of people with intellectual disabilities. These organisations bridge the gap between welfare and open labour markets, providing individualised support, vocational training, and meaningful work opportunities.

Employer attitudes play a pivotal role. Where employers have direct experience working with persons with DS/ID, perceptions change dramatically. Both interviewed employers emphasised the strong motivation, teamwork, and attention to detail displayed by their employees with intellectual disabilities. These positive experiences generate internal advocacy for further inclusion and challenge stereotypes among peers.

Supported employment practices, including job coaching, mentoring, and gradual familiarisation, were repeatedly identified as crucial enablers. When employees receive initial guidance from psychologists or occupational therapists, integration outcomes improve

[56] Government Gazette 220/A/28-9-1998 (Greece). *Law 2643/1998: Provision for the employment of special categories of persons and other provisions*. https://www.e-nomothesia.gr/kat-ergasia-koinonike-asphalise/n-2643-1998.html
[57] Government Gazette, Series 1, No. 232 (Greece). *Law No.4443/2016 against discrimination at work and employment.* https://ypergasias.gov.gr/en/labour-relations/individual-employment-relations/equal-treatment-at-work
[58] Government Gazette A' 137/13-09-2017 (Greece). *Law No.4488/2017: State pension arrangements and other insurance provisions, strengthening of employee protection, rights of people with disabilities and other provisions.* https://www.taxheaven.gr/law/4488/2017
[59] https://koinsep-erkyna.gr
[60] https://pokoispe.gr/en

significantly. Employers described these interventions as cost-effective and transformative for both employees and workplace culture.

Awareness-raising campaigns, collaboration with NGOs, and EU-funded initiatives were also mentioned as facilitators. Projects such as Myrtillo Café,[61] COCOMAT's[62] inclusive employment policies, and local supported workshops demonstrate the feasibility of integrating persons with DS/ID into mainstream business environments.

Finally, a gradual cultural shift—particularly among younger generations—towards equality and human rights rather than charity is helping normalise inclusion and participation in the workplace.

Initiatives for Persons with Disabilities in Employment

Several ongoing initiatives across Greece were mentioned as contributing to inclusive employment.

Government initiatives include the *National Action Plan for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, wage subsidy schemes through the Public Employment Service, and the promotion of social and solidarity economy models under Law 4430/2016. However, these are often limited in scale and sustainability.

Concurrently, NGOs and associations such as Down Syndrome Association of Greece[63] and axiZO, implement pre-vocational training, job readiness programs, and supported employment services.

Private sector initiatives are also emerging. Companies like axiZO[64] have adopted inclusive hiring and supported employment frameworks combining professional support, workplace accommodations, and continuous training.

EU-funded projects, such as LEAD YOUR WAY and ERASMUS+ mobility schemes, were cited as instrumental in piloting digital empowerment, enhancing employability, and promoting peer learning across European contexts.

Good Practices

Several examples of good practice can be identified from the interviews:

- **Supported Employment Models** – Integration of job coaches, psychologists, and occupational therapists in the workplace has proven highly effective in both axiZO IKE and Poimenidis and Associates, ensuring sustained employment and workplace inclusion.
- **Social Enterprises** – These entities combine economic activity with social goals, providing accessible work settings and training for people with DS/ID.
- Myrtillo Café and COCOMAT – Frequently mentioned as national reference points, these **businesses exemplify how inclusive employment can align with commercial success and positive public image**

[61] https://myrtillocafe.gr
[62] https://www.cocomattravel.com
[63] https://www.down.gr
[64] https://www.axi-zw.gr

- **Awareness and Education Campaigns** – Collaboration between universities, NGOs, and employers to disseminate information about disability rights, workplace adaptations, and the benefits of inclusion.
- **Holistic Family and Staff Training** – Both employers emphasised training not only for employees with disabilities but also for co-workers and families, cultivating mutual understanding and long-term success.

These examples demonstrate that success depends less on the type of enterprise and more on the presence of structured support, professional guidance, and cultural openness.

Areas for Improvement

Despite promising developments, all respondents agreed that systemic improvements are necessary:

- First, **supported employment must be institutionalised** as an official national service with stable funding, trained professionals, and monitoring mechanisms. Currently, most projects rely on temporary European funding.
- Second, **policy coherence and inter-ministerial coordination** are lacking. Interviewees called for better alignment between employment, education, and welfare systems to avoid benefit loss and to promote smoother school-to-work transitions.
- Third, **employer education and incentives should be enhanced**. Many employers remain unaware of available subsidies or the process for implementing reasonable accommodations. Simplifying procedures and providing consultancy through local employment agencies or chambers of commerce would address this gap.
- Fourth, **digital and vocational training programs for persons with DS/ID must be expanded**, ensuring that individuals are equipped with practical and technological skills relevant to the evolving labour market.
- Finally, **public awareness and media campaigns are crucial** to challenge persistent stereotypes, foster a rights-based discourse, and showcase success stories that normalize inclusive employment practices.

Conclusion

Taken together, the interviews reveal that inclusive employment for persons with Down syndrome and intellectual disabilities in Greece is progressing but remains uneven. Legal frameworks and individual initiatives provide a solid foundation, yet the absence of coordinated policy implementation, systemic support, and cultural transformation continues to limit full participation. The consolidation of supported employment, continuous education, and partnership among government, academia, employers, and civil society emerges as the central pathway toward sustainable inclusion.

4.3 Malta

Barriers to Persons with Disabilities in Employment

Across all interviews, respondents identified persistent structural, attitudinal, and systemic barriers limiting the full participation of persons with DS and ID in the labour market. The most frequently mentioned challenge was the persistence of negative employer attitudes and societal misconceptions regarding the capabilities of individuals with intellectual disabilities. As noted by a government entity representative, many employers "still assume that if people with intellectual impairment are given anything, they should be grateful," reflecting a lingering charity model that undermines their right to fair and equal employment.

Interviewed academics emphasised that inclusion efforts are often tokenistic, shaped by a lingering medical model of disability rather than the social or human rights models endorsed by the UNCRPD. Employers often "agree in principle" with inclusive employment but struggle to translate this into practice, citing uncertainty about how to adapt roles or manage workplace diversity.

From the employer perspective, contractual instability emerged as a key issue. Research participants from both disability NGOs and academia reported recurrent cases where persons with disabilities were dismissed before the end of probation or upon expiry of state-funded incentives. This practice leaves individuals "disillusioned" and undermines their confidence.

Service providers and NGOs highlighted insufficient long-term support as another major barrier. Further, both decision-makers and NGOs noted that job coaches are often assigned only during initial stages of employment, while ongoing mentorship — crucial for job retention — is largely absent. Employers acknowledged that employees with intellectual disabilities require tailored support but indicated that this is unevenly provided.

Education and transition systems were also identified as structural obstacles. According to a disability NGO, post-secondary education "is often not accommodating," and necessary supports tend to "disappear at higher levels." Consequently, many individuals with DS/ID exit education with Level 1 or 2 qualifications, limiting access to career progression.

Finally, segregated employment practices remain prevalent. The government entity representative interviewed criticised the persistence of sheltered employment — often under the guise of training — in certain companies and agencies, noting that "disabled people are paid less, if at all, for the same work." This was corroborated by an interviewed academic, who observed that even within inclusive settings, "persons with disabilities are often placed in separate rooms rather than integrated within the main workforce."

Facilitators to Persons with Disabilities in Employment

Despite these barriers, research participants highlighted a growing network of legislative, institutional, and attitudinal facilitators promoting inclusion. The introduction of Malta's 2% employment quota system was consistently cited as a turning point. Decision-makers and government entities reported a "dramatic increase" in disabled persons' employment following the enforcement of the quota, which was described as a necessary "push" for employers to open opportunities, even if implementation gaps remain.

The supported employment model, primarily delivered by the Lino Spiteri Foundation (LSF),[65] was identified as a key facilitator. LSF's representative described the Foundation's use of the ASEE five-stage supported employment model, offering job coaching, on-the-job mentoring, and tailored training. Employers attested to the value of job coaches, who bridge communication gaps and help ensure successful placements.

Cultural change and increased awareness were also viewed as enabling factors. Academics emphasised that inclusion "is not about fitting the person into the job, but reshaping the job around the person," a concept known as job carving. Several participants noted that younger generations and larger organisations are gradually adopting more inclusive mindsets, viewing diversity as an asset rather than a burden.

Furthermore, corporate social responsibility (CSR) has emerged as a vehicle for inclusion. One employer, for example, described inclusion as part of its "core governance values," with some employees with intellectual disabilities remaining in post for over 16 years. Such long-term retention signals a maturing culture of equality and respect.

Finally, respondents noted that digital engagement and informal skill development are empowering individuals with DS/ID to participate more fully. Ministry for Inclusion[66] officials pointed out that many persons with intellectual disabilities demonstrate "self-taught digital literacy" through social media use, which could serve as a foundation for targeted digital upskilling initiatives.

Initiatives for Persons with Disabilities in Employment

The interviews revealed a range of policy and practice initiatives promoting employment among persons with disabilities. At the national level, the quota system – enforced by the Persons with Disability (Employment) Act[67] - and related government incentives remain central mechanisms. These are complemented by supported employment services provided by LSF, offering both pre-employment training and job maintenance assistance. However at the end of 2024, 48% of the employers required to meet the 2% quota had failed to do so.[68]

Within the NGO sector, the Down Syndrome Association (DSA)[69] operates a Saturday employability programme covering "personal hygiene, interview preparation, and awareness of employment rights." Similarly, the DSA's Friendship Circle[70] provides life skills and job readiness training.

Academia has also played a role in innovation. One academic referenced the *Ċavetta għall-Futur* project,[71] which developed video CVs for people with intellectual disabilities. The Commission

[65] https://linospiterifoundation.org
[66] https://inclusion.gov.mt
[67] Legislation Malta. 1969. *Chapter 210: Persons with Disability (Employment) Act.* https://legislation.mt/eli/cap/210/eng/pdf
[68] Cordina, J.P. (Newsbook Malta). April 2025. *Disability quota for employers widely ignored.* https://newsbook.com.mt/en/disability-quota-for-employers-widely-ignored
[69] http://dsa.org.mt
[70] http://dsa.org.mt/friendship_circle.php
[71] https://www.um.edu.mt/socialwellbeing/disabilitystudies/ourprojects/avettagall-futur

for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) also provides Disability Equality Training[72] for employers, both promoting awareness and inclusion.[73]

Employers themselves have launched internal initiatives. Farsons Brewery[74] integrates persons with DS/ID in departments such as logistics and finance, with HR oversight ensuring appropriate job matching.

However, NGO representatives expressed concern that some initiatives, while well-intentioned, are overly scheme-driven and risk being exploitative if employment terminates once funding ends. Sustained commitment beyond temporary incentives was viewed as essential to genuine inclusion.

Good Practices

Several examples of good practice emerged from the interviews, demonstrating effective inclusion in action.

Farsons Group was repeatedly mentioned for its holistic inclusion policy and long-term employment of persons with DS/ID. Their approach combines structured onboarding, collaboration with LSF, and consistent internal communication.

MaltaPost's[75] integration of supported employment within mainstream roles was also praised, particularly their practice of gradually increasing working hours as confidence and productivity grow.

The Down Syndrome Association's Saturday training programme and CRPD's advocacy for equal pay and rights were identified as best-practice examples of empowerment and systemic change.

The use of job carving, promoted by the interviewed academics, represents an innovative conceptual model where job roles are adapted to individual strengths rather than deficits.

The collaborative model between NGOs, employers, and LSF was also recognised as effective, although it remains inconsistently implemented.

These cases demonstrate that success depends not only on policy compliance but on organisational culture, sustained mentorship, and the recognition of persons with disabilities as capable, valuable contributors.

Areas for Improvement

All participants acknowledged that Malta has made progress but stressed the need for systemic improvement to achieve genuine equality in employment:

- **Sustainable Support Systems**: Several respondents highlighted the need for continuous job coaching and mental health support beyond initial placement.

[72] https://www.crpd.org.mt/services/training

[74] https://www.farsons.com
[75] https://www.maltapost.com

- **Policy Enforcement and Monitoring**: Participants called for stronger monitoring of the quota system to prevent tokenism and misuse; with some suggesting raising non-compliance penalties to incentivise genuine recruitment.
- **Education-to-Employment Transition**: Academics and disability NGOs urged earlier and more effective transition planning, beginning in secondary education.
- **Career Progression and Fair Pay**: Academics emphasised the absence of clear promotion pathways and pay parity, noting that most employment remains "entry-level and repetitive."
- **Employer Training and Awareness**: Employers need more guidance on inclusive practices and job adaptation. As one academic remarked, "If your system does not allow someone to participate, the answer should not be 'you can't' — it should be 'how can I do this differently?'"
- Ultimately, the narrative across all interviews underscores a shared conviction: persons with DS and ID are capable of meaningful, productive work when provided with equitable opportunities, ongoing support, and inclusive environments. Malta's challenge lies not in inventing new schemes, but in embedding existing rights and practices into a consistent, dignified, and sustainable employment framework.

Conclusion

Overall, the findings show that while Malta has made notable progress in promoting the employment of persons with Down syndrome and intellectual disabilities, significant barriers remain. **Negative attitudes, limited ongoing support, and structural inequalities continue to restrict genuine inclusion and career development**. At the same time, positive examples such as supported employment models, job carving, and long-term organisational commitment demonstrate that meaningful participation is both possible and beneficial. Moving forward, the **challenge lies in strengthening enforcement, ensuring sustained support, and embedding inclusive practices across education and employment systems** to create a labour market where persons with disabilities can contribute equally and confidently.

4.4 Romania

Barriers to Employment for Persons with Disabilities

Employment opportunities for people with DS/ID in Romania remain extremely limited. Most are confined to sheltered workshops or temporary NGO-led projects. An academic researcher noted that only a few isolated or informal initiatives exist in the open labour market.

A **major obstacle lies in employer attitudes**. According to government representatives, companies often prefer to pay the legal fines rather than employ a person with a disability. Enforcement of existing laws is weak, and inclusion measures are rarely prioritised.

Persistent stereotypes and stigma continue to affect both workplaces and families. A service provider highlighted that misconceptions about the capabilities of people with intellectual disabilities lead to exclusion from most professional environments. Families sometimes discourage their relatives from seeking employment, considering it too difficult or unachievable, as a disability NGO representative explained.

Although Romania has laws and quotas promoting disability employment, **enforcement is minimal and the legal framework largely advisory**. A service provider observed that the system still lacks clarity and adequate funding for essential support, such as job coaching and workplace accessibility.

Facilitators to Employment

NGOs play a central role in bridging the gap between jobseekers and employers, offering job coaching, advocacy, and mediation. For instance, one NGO service provider described the use of an individual placement and support model, involving personalised job matching, accompaniment, and ongoing coaching until stability is achieved at the workplace.

Peer and community support also play an important role. An interviewed disability NGO representative mentioned that colleagues often provide informal assistance when needed, while family encouragement can help sustain employment once achieved.

Some employers, particularly those collaborating with NGOs or social enterprises, demonstrate openness to inclusion. The NGO service provider noted that employers who work with NGOs tend to become more receptive, while a service provider added that success stories show young people with DS/ID can be valued employees known for their reliability, attention to detail, and enthusiasm.

Current Initiatives

A number of initiatives are being developed to promote inclusion in employment. The government representative for social services described **ongoing initiatives supporting employers to adapt workplaces for people with disabilities**, including monthly incentives and financial aid to sustain employment. **NGOs continue to lead on-the-ground efforts** such as the Down Plus Bucharest Association's[76] volunteer programmes at the *Santhe Tea House*, where young people with DS work as assistant waiters.

The NGO Motivation Romania[77] has piloted EU-funded projects offering long-term job coaching, while the service provider The World of Diversity & Inclusion focuses on training and shared expertise to foster inclusive environments. Both academic and government stakeholders **advocate for pilot projects and structured training programmes tailored for people with DS/ID**.

Good Practices

Several success stories demonstrate that inclusion is achievable when appropriate support is in place. One NGO service provider reported a case of a person with disabilities who maintained employment for 12 years with one company, and after its closure, was successfully placed in another job.

Small-scale initiatives, such as the *Santhe Tea House* and other cafés and bakeries supported by NGOs, provide inspiring examples. Employers who have experienced inclusive hiring first-hand often become advocates for it, recognising—according to a disability NGO representative—that every person brings valuable potential to the workplace.

[76] https://downplusbucuresti.ro
[77] https://motivation.ro/en

Areas for Improvement

Interviewees identified several key areas needing attention:

- **Legislative clarity and enforcement** – policies must shift from recommendations to enforceable obligations.
- **Sustainable funding for supported employment** – a national programme with long-term financial stability is needed. Further, funding from the contributions that the majority of employers still prefer to pay rather than meeting the disability quota should be used for supporting people with disabilities in employment and for adapting work places for disabled people.
- **Employer awareness and incentives** – employers require training and recognition to foster inclusion; as a DSA representative stated, employers must first be convinced and educated.
- **Transition from education to employment** – stronger coordination between schools, vocational programmes, and employers is essential. Relatedly, schooling for children with disabilities needs to be urgently addressed: more than half of the number of children with disabilities in Romania do not attend mainstream schooling. Further, teachers do not have training in working with students with learning difficulties; and support teachers can have up to 12 students with disabilities to support.
- **Data and visibility** – the academic researcher emphasised that the government must first know how many people with DS/ID exist and where they are in order to plan effectively. At present, data collection is limited to the degree of disability and age categories (adults and children). No additional criteria are applied to identify the type of disability or the actual number of persons with disabilities, of whom nearly half remain unregistered. Data collection thus needs to be ameliorated and disaggregated further in order to accurately reflect the scope of disability in Romania, and, consequently, to enable the development of appropriate solutions that address the actual circumstances of individuals with disabilities.

As a service provider summarised, inclusion begins with empathy—understanding and openness towards others.

Conclusion

Despite a developing legal framework and the dedication of NGOs, employment for people with Down syndrome and intellectual disabilities in Romania remains limited and fragile. Lasting progress depends on stronger coordination between government, employers, schools, and civil society, alongside stable funding for supported employment. Building awareness, enforcing inclusion measures, and valuing individual abilities rather than limitations are essential steps towards a labour market where persons with disabilities can participate equally and sustainably.

4.5 Spain

Barriers to Persons with Disabilities in Employment

The interviews and recent data provided by interviewees reveal that people with intellectual disabilities, including those with Down syndrome, continue to face significant barriers in accessing and sustaining employment in Spain. Despite progress in inclusion policies and social

awareness, the employment situation of this group remains fragile. According to the **National Statistics Institute, the employment rate of people with ID in 2023 was 21.9%**, far below that of people without disabilities (52%) and seven points below the average for all people with disabilities.[78] This gap highlights the persistence of **structural barriers** that prevent people with ID from accessing and maintaining quality jobs.

However, one of the problems identified in the interviews was the **lack of accurate data** on employment for people with DS/ID. As the Spanish Public Employment Service (SEPE) representative explained, much of the data is voluntarily declared, which leads to **underreporting** and a distorted picture of the real employment rate. Without reliable data, it becomes difficult to assess policy impact or allocate resources effectively.

Legislative and Funding Frameworks

The **General Law on Disability (LGD)**[79] establishes a **2% hiring quota** in companies with over 50 employees and a **10% quota in the public sector** (2% specifically reserved for people with ID). Despite this, **enforcement remains weak**. As an interviewed academic noted, less than 10% of companies comply directly with the quota, preferring alternative measures such as outsourcing services to the Special Employment Centres (*Centros Especiales de Empleo* – CEEs), or making financial contributions to avoid direct hiring. As the Spanish Association of Supported Employment (AESE)[80] representative explained, this has created a **"structural perversion"** of the quota system, where compliance is more formal than substantive. Further, small and medium-sized enterprises - which make up **99% of the Spanish economy** - are exempt from the quota altogether, leaving large corporations as the main potential employers.

Employment Models: Between Segregation and Inclusion

Spain's employment landscape for people with disabilities is characterised by a **dual system**:

- **Sheltered employment**, primarily through the CEEs, which employ over 200,000 people with disabilities.
- **Employment in the OLM**, with or without support, regulated by **Royal Decree 870/2007** on Supported Employment.

While CEEs have created opportunities, they absorb most public funding, leaving **supported employment** and **open-labour initiatives** underdeveloped. For many families, sheltered employment feels like a safer and more stable option, offering full-time hours and guaranteed wages. However, this model limits professional growth and reinforces segregation from the ordinary labour market.

The interviewed AESE and AURA Fundació[81] representatives emphasised that this imbalance sustains **dependency and exclusion**, despite Spain's obligations under the **UNCRPD** to promote full inclusion. In some regions, such as Castilla-La Mancha, CEEs consume up to **80% of employment budgets**, illustrating how public subsidies have entrenched a segregated model.

[78] Instituto Nacional de Estadistica (INE). 2023.. *Labour market: Employment of Persons with Disabilities* https://www.ine.es/dyngs/INEbase/en/operacion.htm?c=Estadistica_C&cid=1254736055502&idp=1254735976621
[79] Royal Legislative Decree 1/2013 (Spain). *General Law on rights of persons with disabilities and their social inclusion.* https://www.equalitylaw.eu/component/edocman/?task=document.viewdoc&id=1437&Itemid=
[80] https://empleoconapoyo.org
[81] https://aurafundacio.org/en

A more recent development is the rise of **social initiative CEEs**, non-profit centres that seek to bridge protection and inclusion. These centres, often run by NGOs, promote supported transitions to the open labour market, demonstrating that progress is possible when inclusion is built into the model.

Sectors, Contracts, and Working Conditions

In the OLM, most people with ID work in **low-skilled service roles**—cleaning, hospitality, gardening, logistics, or auxiliary administrative tasks. Employment is frequently **temporary, part-time, and low-paid**. A person with ID earns on average **€15,025 per year**, roughly half the salary of the general population. Stable, full-time positions are scarce, and opportunities for professional advancement are limited.

A Down Syndrome association representative noted that **regional disparities in funding** have a direct impact on job quality. Where supported employment programmes are stable and well-financed (such as in Murcia or the Basque Country), outcomes are better and employer collaboration more consistent. In regions with fragmented or short-term funding, however, job stability suffers.

In recent years, families and people with disabilities have increasingly aspired to **public sector employment**, seeking stability and predictable conditions. However, few succeed due to the competitive nature of civil service exams and the **lack of adapted training** to prepare for them.

Attitudinal and Cultural Barriers

Interviewees also emphasised persistent **attitudinal and cultural barriers**. Despite growing visibility of people with disabilities in public life, **prejudices and low expectations** remain common, both within families and workplaces. Overprotection by families, combined with uncertainty from employers, limits opportunities for autonomy and professional development.

In addition, the **digital transformation and automation** of work are creating new types of exclusion. Many traditional entry-level or manual tasks have disappeared or now require digital competencies that workers with ID often lack.

Facilitators to Persons with Disabilities in Employment

Where successful inclusion has occurred, it is often the result of **stable funding, professionalised support services, and long-term partnerships** between associations and employers. Organisations such as **FUNDOWN**[82] and **AURA Fundació** have demonstrated that **structured supported employment pathways**—combining pre-employment training, family engagement, and on-the-job coaching—can achieve high rates of job insertion and retention.

Personalised support is crucial. Job coaches play a key role in preparing candidates and accompanying them through the early stages of employment until full autonomy is achieved. Stable public funding enables organisations to sustain this model over time, ensuring continuity and quality.

Employer engagement also emerged as a decisive factor. Many companies that actively promote inclusion do so not because of legal obligations but because of ethical conviction or personal experience. Within companies, human resources leaders—"**internal champions**"—

[82] https://fundown.org

often turn policy intent into genuine inclusion. Collaboration with NGOs further builds trust and ensures that employers receive the support they need to manage diversity effectively.

Visibility and public recognition of success stories have also been transformative. Seeing people with Down syndrome or other intellectual disabilities in workplaces, on public transport, and in the media has helped **normalise inclusion** and reshape social perceptions more effectively than legal enforcement alone.

Finally, **technology** is increasingly recognised as a potential facilitator—if properly designed and accompanied by training. Digital tools and assistive technologies can support autonomy and task management, and some innovative projects are exploring these possibilities.

Initiatives for Persons with Disabilities in Employment

A range of initiatives exist across the public, private, and civil society sectors. At the national level, the **Spanish Strategy for Active Employment Support (2025–2028)**[83] introduces measures such as inclusion helpdesks and stronger coordination between education and employment services. However, implementation depends heavily on regional governments, leading to **uneven results**.

Associations such as **AESE** have been instrumental in promoting the supported employment model, training professionals, and advising public bodies. Some regional governments, such as the **Basque Country**, have **pioneered funding models that finance not only job placements but also preparatory and outreach work with companies.**

At the organisational level, **FUNDOWN** in Murcia and **AURA Fundació** in Barcelona have become benchmarks for effective supported employment. FUNDOWN integrates social and professional skills training, continuous coaching, and close collaboration with local businesses. AURA has innovated through awareness and mentoring programmes that bring professionals and people with disabilities together in shared learning experiences, while its **"Be Inclusivers"** initiative trains companies using people with disabilities as educators.

Universities are also emerging as **actors of change**. The **Universitat Oberta de Catalunya**[84], for example, has developed tools such as *IncluWork* to measure inclusivity within organisations and offers specialised training for HR professionals on inclusive practices.

Good Practices

Several good practices stand out across these initiatives. The most effective programmes adopt a **holistic approach**, addressing the full employment pathway—from training to job retention. Continuous, individualised support and close cooperation between families, job coaches, and employers ensure that employment is both sustainable and meaningful.

Strong partnerships with companies—built on mutual trust and clear communication—were repeatedly identified as key to success. Many organisations have moved from one-off corporate

[83] Royal Decree 1069/2021. *Spanish Strategy for Active Support to Employment 2021-2024.* https://www.boe.es/diario_boe/txt.php?id=BOE-A-2021-20185
[84] https://www.uoc.edu/en

social responsibility gestures to **long-term collaborations** based on business value and social impact.

An emerging innovation is the **"funding follows the person"** model, proposed by multiple interviewees. This approach allows financial support to follow the worker rather than the institution, empowering individuals to choose where they work and encouraging companies to hire directly in the open labour market.

Innovation in job creation also stands out. **Digitalisation projects** led by AESE and FUNDOWN, where people with intellectual disabilities were employed to scan and archive municipal records, show how new employment niches can emerge when inclusion, local development, and technology intersect.

Finally, good practices include **investment in professional development for staff** and **ongoing evaluation** of programme quality—not just placement numbers, but also user satisfaction, autonomy, and skill growth.

Areas for Improvement

Despite progress, the interviewees agreed on several areas requiring urgent attention:

- **Better data and monitoring** — Disaggregated statistics by type of disability are essential to guide evidence-based policymaking.
- **Updated legislation and funding** — The 2007 Supported Employment Decree is outdated; and public subsidies should prioritise open and supported employment over sheltered models.
- **Stronger enforcement of quotas**, extended to smaller companies.
- **Enhanced education and vocational training**, with a stronger focus on digital and social skills for young people with ID.
- **Increased awareness and cultural change**, encouraging families to shift from protection to empowerment.
- **Stable, long-term funding** to ensure sustainability and quality of supported employment programmes.

As one HR expert summarised, the way forward is to connect inclusion with measurable impact: **visibility, outcomes, and business results**. The more companies see inclusion as a source of value rather than an obligation, the more sustainable employment for persons with disabilities will become.

Case Study: Perspectives of Persons with Down Syndrome & Intellectual Disabilities in Spain

This case study examines the employment experiences of people with DS / ID in Spain, based on the online survey implemented as part of this research project. The findings are drawn from the responses to anonymous survey completed in July 2025 by nearly 200 participants which include people with DS/ID and/or their relatives.

Employment and Barriers

Approximately half of respondents had sought employment, revealing a mixed picture of opportunity and exclusion. The most common obstacle identified was **discrimination from employers**, with **45%** stating that companies are reluctant to hire people with disabilities. A further **13%** reported **insufficient training**, while **15%** said they did not know how to apply for a job. A small proportion mentioned family concerns or logistical issues such as transport and living far from urban areas.

While some participants were already in work, many noted that their employment journey was shaped by dependence on external help and limited awareness of inclusive recruitment practices.

Support in Employment and Job Search

A strong network of associations underpins access to work for this community. **More than three-quarters (76%)** of respondents who received support found it through **non-profit organisations**. Others were assisted by family or social workers. At work, **42%** received support from colleagues, **34%** from a job coach, and **16%** from their supervisor.

This data highlights the importance of structured support and mentoring in promoting sustainable employment. Respondents who reported receiving help were also more likely to describe their work experience positively.

Workplace Inclusion and Adaptation

Over **half of employed participants (54%)** stated that *nothing made their job difficult*, suggesting that when inclusive conditions exist, individuals with intellectual disabilities thrive. However, **around one in ten** cited *negative attitudes* or *lack of adequate support* as major barriers.

Several respondents expressed satisfaction with their work and long-term commitment to their roles, while others emphasised the need for ongoing training and opportunities for career growth. The digital divide remains an issue: only a minority reported using computers or the internet as part of their work.

Policy Awareness and the Role of Organisations

An encouraging **91%** of participants were aware of at least one organisation working to improve employment access for people with Down syndrome and intellectual disabilities. This reflects the strong presence of non-profit advocacy and support services across Spain. Nevertheless, many participants called for *greater visibility of rights, improved access to training*, and *more proactive hiring policies* by public and private employers.

Reflections

The findings reveal a community that is motivated and capable of working but continues to face systemic barriers. Employer prejudice and limited understanding of inclusive employment remain key challenges. Where workplace adaptation and ongoing mentoring are available, job satisfaction and retention improve dramatically. The reliance on associations underscores the central role of the third sector in bridging gaps left by insufficient policy enforcement or corporate commitment. Inclusive employment policies exist in Spain but are often poorly implemented at ground level. The data suggests that more cohesive coordination between employers, training institutions, and disability organisations is needed to translate legal rights into tangible job opportunities.

Conclusion

Overall, the findings highlight both progress and persistent shortcomings in the employment of people with Down syndrome and other intellectual disabilities in Spain. While strong civil society organisations, committed employers, and supported employment models demonstrate that meaningful inclusion is achievable, systemic barriers—weak enforcement of legislation, fragmented funding, cultural prejudices, and limited training pathways—continue to limit access to quality work. The experiences captured through interviews and the survey reveal a clear demand for more reliable data, updated policies, and sustained investment in personalised support. Strengthening coordination between public institutions, employers, and disability organisations will be essential to ensure that inclusion becomes the norm rather than the exception, and that people with DS/ID can participate fully in the labour market with dignity, autonomy, and long-term stability.

5. Comparative Analysis

This chapter synthesises the research findings from Croatia, Greece, Malta, Romania, and Spain, examining cross-national similarities and differences in the employment of persons with Down syndrome (DS) and intellectual disabilities (ID). Although each country operates within distinct historical, legislative, and institutional contexts, the comparative evidence reveals recurring challenges and a shared struggle to translate inclusive principles into sustainable practice. At the same time, promising examples of innovation—driven by NGOs, social enterprises, and forward-looking employers—demonstrate that inclusion is both feasible and beneficial when properly supported.

5.1 Shared Structural and Cultural Barriers

Across all five countries, persons with DS/ID continue to face multiple and intersecting barriers to full labour market participation. These **barriers operate at three interconnected levels: cultural attitudes, institutional systems, and practical implementation**.

Cultural and attitudinal barriers remain the most pervasive. Despite gradual shifts toward rights-based perspectives, societal prejudice and low expectations persist. In Croatia and Greece, interviewees described a lingering "charity mindset," in which employment of persons with disabilities is seen as an act of benevolence rather than an exercise of equal rights. In Malta, employers often endorse inclusion rhetorically but hesitate to adjust job roles or work conditions in practice. Romania's findings revealed that some companies prefer to pay the legal fine rather than employ a person with a disability, while in Spain, family overprotection and low expectations continue to restrict autonomy and career progression.

These attitudes are reinforced by **structural disincentives** embedded in welfare and employment systems. In Croatia, Greece, and Romania, individuals risk losing disability benefits if they enter paid employment, leading many families to prioritise financial security over inclusion. Similar tensions are reported in Malta and Spain, where benefit systems have not been fully harmonised with active labour market measures. This **mismatch between social welfare and employment policy** effectively penalises participation and sustains dependency.

Institutionally, all countries display **fragmented governance** and **bureaucratic complexity**. While **laws promoting employment quotas or anti-discrimination exist**—such as Croatia's Law on Professional Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities, Greece's Law 2643/1998, Malta's and Romania's disability employment quotas, and Spain's General Law on Disability—**implementation is inconsistent and often superficial**. Respondents across countries described legal frameworks as "declarative," focused on compliance rather than empowerment. Administrative procedures are cumbersome, and coordination among ministries, employment services, and NGOs remains limited.

Another common challenge is the **short-term and project-based nature of support services**. Job coaching, workplace adaptation, and transition programmes are usually tied to temporary EU-funded initiatives, creating gaps once funding ends. This discontinuity undermines long-term outcomes, leaving NGOs and families to fill systemic voids through volunteer or informal support.

5.2 Key Facilitators and Emerging Enablers

Despite these enduring challenges, the comparative analysis highlights several shared **facilitators of inclusion** that demonstrate tangible progress.

NGOs, parent associations, and social enterprises play a central role in driving innovation across all countries. Organisations such as Humana Nova in Croatia, Myrtillo Café and axiZO IKE in Greece, the Lino Spiteri Foundation in Malta, Motivation Romania and Down Plus Bucharest in Romania, and AURA Fundació and FUNDOWN in Spain exemplify community-driven approaches that combine vocational training, job matching, and ongoing mentorship. These entities often act as intermediaries between persons with disabilities, employers, and public authorities—effectively operationalising the concept of supported employment in the absence of state structures.

Employer engagement and cultural change are also emerging as decisive enablers. Interviewees across all contexts stressed that employers who have direct experience working with persons with DS/ID often undergo a profound shift in perception. In Croatia and Spain, inclusive employers such as Coca-Cola, DM, and AURA Fundació reported improved workplace morale and productivity. In Greece and Malta, companies like COCOMAT and Farsons serve as models of inclusive corporate culture, while Romanian NGOs have documented similar transformations among small businesses collaborating with social enterprises. These cases demonstrate that visibility and experience are the most powerful antidotes to stigma.

Supported employment models represent another critical facilitator. When implemented with professional coaching, job carving, and gradual familiarisation, these models yield higher retention rates and greater job satisfaction. The Lino Spiteri Foundation in Malta has institutionalised this approach through the EUSE five-stage model, while Spain's AESE and FUNDOWN have professionalised the training of job coaches. In contrast, Croatia, Greece, and Romania rely primarily on NGO-led pilots, highlighting the need for formal recognition and state funding of such services.

Finally, **education and digital competence** are emerging as new domains of inclusion. Several stakeholders, particularly in Greece, Malta, and Spain, pointed to the growing importance of

digital skills and accessible online training. However, without targeted interventions, digital transformation risks deepening exclusion for persons with ID.

5.3 Divergences in Policy Maturity and System Development

While the five countries share many structural features, their **levels of system maturity** vary considerably.

- **Spain** stands out as the most developed context, with comprehensive legislation, well-established supported employment organisations, and significant public investment. However, the dominance of sheltered employment through the *Centros Especiales de Empleo* continues to absorb most resources, limiting transitions into the open labour market.
- **Malta** has made substantial progress through the enforcement of its quota system and the institutionalisation of supported employment via the Lino Spiteri Foundation. Yet, challenges persist regarding career progression, pay equity, and long-term sustainability.
- **Croatia** and **Greece** display similar patterns: both have active civil societies and increasing employer awareness but remain hindered by bureaucratic rigidity, fragmented governance, and short-term project funding.
- **Romania**, while showing encouraging NGO-led initiatives, remains the least developed context. Weak policy enforcement, scarce funding, and minimal state engagement result in limited opportunities for persons with DS/ID, most of whom remain in sheltered or informal settings.

These variations reflect broader differences in political will, resource allocation, and the historical evolution of disability rights within each national context.

5.4 Comparative Themes and Lessons

Several cross-cutting themes emerge from the comparative analysis:

1. **From Protection to Empowerment** – All five countries are in transition from charity-based models toward rights-based and person-centred approaches. However, the pace of this cultural shift varies, and welfare systems often still reinforce dependency rather than empowerment.
2. **Importance of Continuity** – Sustainable inclusion depends on continuous support, not one-off placements. The absence of long-term job coaching and follow-up remains one of the most consistent weaknesses across all contexts.
3. **Intersectoral Collaboration** – Successful inclusion occurs where government agencies, employers, NGOs, and families collaborate effectively. The “islands of good practice” identified in each country demonstrate what is possible when partnerships are coherent and adequately funded.
4. **Role of Employers** – Inclusion thrives when employers become active stakeholders rather than passive recipients of policy. Awareness campaigns, corporate training, and peer-to-peer employer networks are essential tools for scaling good practices.

5. **Data and Evaluation Gaps** – Reliable, disaggregated data on employment outcomes for persons with DS/ID are lacking in every country studied. Without such data, policy monitoring, funding allocation, and impact assessment remain weak.

5.5 Conclusion

Taken together, the comparative findings indicate that Europe's progress toward inclusive employment for persons with Down syndrome and intellectual disabilities remains partial and uneven. Across Croatia, Greece, Malta, Romania, and Spain, similar obstacles persist—stigma, institutional fragmentation, and fragile support systems—but so too does a shared recognition of the transformative potential of inclusion. Where cooperation between state institutions, employers, and civil society is strong, persons with disabilities are thriving as valued contributors in diverse workplaces.

The overarching lesson is clear: inclusion is not achieved through legislation alone but through sustained investment in people, partnerships, and practice. By moving from fragmented, project-based approaches to coherent national frameworks, European countries can transform isolated successes into lasting systems of equality, ensuring that employment becomes not an exception, but a guaranteed right for all.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

6.1 Conclusions

The findings of this study reveal that while progress toward inclusive employment for persons with Down syndrome (DS) and intellectual disabilities (ID) has been made across Europe, the journey toward full equality remains incomplete and uneven. The five countries examined—Croatia, Greece, Malta, Romania, and Spain—share a common aspiration to advance rights-based, person-centred approaches, yet continue to face systemic, cultural, and institutional barriers that hinder the full realisation of Article 27 of the UNCRPD.

Across all contexts, stigma and low expectations persist as the most enduring obstacles. Despite policy frameworks that formally promote equality, many practices continue to reflect a "charity" mindset rather than one of empowerment and equal opportunity. The persistence of benefit systems that penalise employment reinforces dependency and discourages participation in the open labour market.

Institutionally, fragmentation and short-termism remain major weaknesses. Supported employment is too often implemented through project-based initiatives rather than embedded as a sustainable national service. NGOs and social enterprises continue to bridge the gap between policy and practice, but without structural recognition and stable funding, their efforts cannot reach systemic scale

Nevertheless, the research highlights clear evidence of transformative potential. Successful initiatives demonstrate that inclusive employment is both feasible and beneficial when

supported by coordinated partnerships, professional job coaching, and employer engagement.

Furthermore, the emergence of digitalisation offers both opportunities and risks. Technology can empower persons with DS/ID to participate more fully in modern workplaces, but without targeted support and accessible tools, digital transformation risks exacerbating exclusion. Digital inclusion must therefore be treated as a core dimension of supported employment.

Ultimately, the study underscores that inclusion is not achieved through legislation alone, but through continuous investment in people, partnerships, and practice. A shift from fragmented pilot projects toward coherent national frameworks is essential if inclusive employment is to become the norm rather than the exception.

6.2 Recommendations

A. Policy and Governance

Institutionalise Supported Employment: Embed SE within national employment and social policy frameworks, establishing clear standards, certification systems for job coaches, and sustainable funding mechanisms.

Reform Benefit and Incentive Systems: Harmonise welfare and employment policies to remove financial disincentives to work, allowing individuals to retain partial benefits while earning income.

Enhance Inter-Ministerial Coordination: Create formal coordination structures between ministries responsible for labour, education, and social affairs to align transition policies and service delivery.

Strengthen Data Collection and Evaluation: Introduce systematic data gathering disaggregated by disability type, gender, and employment status to inform evidence-based policymaking and monitor progress.

B. Practice and Service Delivery

Ensure Continuity of Support: Guarantee long-term access to job coaching and workplace assistance beyond initial placement, recognising that inclusion is a process, not a one-time event.

Expand and Professionalise SE Providers: Build capacity among NGOs, social enterprises, and PES to deliver quality, standardised SE programmes.

Adopt the "Funding Follows the Person" Model: Allocate resources directly to individuals rather than institutions, empowering persons with DS/ID to choose where and how they receive employment support.

Foster Employer Partnerships: Develop employer networks and peer-to-peer learning platforms to share good practices, reduce stigma, and embed inclusion in business culture.

C. Education and Skills Development

Strengthen School-to-Work Transitions: Introduce vocational and work experience programmes within secondary and post-secondary education, tailored to the capacities and interests of persons with DS/ID.

Promote Digital Inclusion: Integrate digital literacy into SE programmes, ensuring access to assistive technologies and training in accessible digital tools.

Train Professionals and Families: Provide ongoing disability competence training for educators, psychologists, and employers while empowering families to act as facilitators rather than protectors.

D. Awareness and Cultural Change

Promote Rights-Based Awareness Campaigns: Replace charity-oriented narratives with visibility campaigns that highlight the skills, achievements, and economic contributions of persons with DS/ID.

Recognise Inclusive Employers: Establish public awards and certifications for organisations demonstrating leadership in disability employment, encouraging replication of good practices.

Encourage Co-production: Involve persons with DS/ID in the design and evaluation of employment policies and services, ensuring their lived experience informs decision-making.

6.3 Future Directions

To consolidate progress, **the European and national authorities should move toward a coordinated European strategy on supported employment for persons with intellectual disabilities**. This strategy should promote common professional standards, cross-country learning, and the integration of digital innovation as a tool for inclusion.

Sustainable inclusion requires a dual focus—structural reform and cultural transformation. Only through long-term investment, inclusive governance, and collective accountability can Europe ensure that employment becomes a genuine right and reality for persons with Down syndrome and intellectual disabilities.

Annexes

Annex I – List of Stakeholders Consulted

No.	Country	City	Stakeholder Category	Area of Expertise	Role of Interviewee	Date of Interview
1	Croatia		Decision-Maker	Disability	Assistant Director	03.10.2025
2	Croatia		Decision-Maker	Disability	Ombudsperson	05.11.2025
3	Croatia		Employer (Social Cooperative)	Employment of persons with intellectual disabilities	Chief of Human Resources	16.05.2025
4	Croatia	Zagreb	Academia	Education and rehabilitation	Professor	22.10.2025
5	Croatia	Rijeka	NGO / OPD	Down Syndrome	President	25.06.2025
6	Croatia	Zadar	NGO / OPD	Down Syndrome	President	27.06.2025
7	Croatia	Zagreb	NGO / OPD	Down Syndrome	Education and rehabilitation	24.06.2025
8	Greece		Decision-Maker	Disability	Chairperson	23.10.2025
9	Greece	Komotini	Employer	Accounting	President	12.10.2025
10	Greece	Komotini	Employer	Food manufacturing	Manager	01.07.2025
11	Greece	Thessaloniki	Academia		Professor	27.08.2025
12	Greece	Komotini	Academia		Assistant Professor	31.07.2025
13	Greece	Alexandroupoli	Academia	Vocational rehabilitation (Disability)	Postdoctoral Researcher	18.08.2025
14	Greece	Thessaloniki	Academia		Professor	20.08.2025
15	Greece	Komotini	NGO / OPD	Intellectual disability	Director	01.07.2025
16	Greece	Thessaloniki	NGO / OPD	Down Syndrome	Director	18.10.2025
17	Malta	/	Government Entity	Disability	Commissioner	04.07.2025
18	Malta	/	Decision-Maker	Disability	Assistant Director	03.07.2025
19	Malta	/	Service Provider	Employment of persons with disabilities	Chief Executive Officer	19.06.2025

20	Malta	/	Employer	Postal services	Head Human Resources	11.07.2025
21	Malta	/	Employer	Food & beverage manufacturing / distribution	Head Human Resources	04.07.2025
22	Malta	/	Academia	Intellectual disability	Professor	16.06.2025
23	Malta	/	Academia	Disability	Senior Lecturer	18.06.2025
24	Malta	/	NGO / OPD	Mental health	Operations Manager	04.07.2025
25	Malta	/	NGO / OPD	Down Syndrome	President	19.06.2025
26	Malta	/	NGO / OPD	Autism Spectrum Disorders	Public Relations Officer	01.07.2025
27	Malta	/	NGO / OPD	Umbrella organisation (disability)	President	07.07.2025
28	Romania	Bucharest	Decision-Maker	Social Services	Deputy Director General	20.06.2025
29	Romania	Bucharest	Decision-Maker	Investments & European Projects	Director of Communication & International Cooperation	25.05.2025
30	Romania	Bucharest	Service Provider	Employment of persons with disabilities	Co-founder	20.06.2025
31	Romania	Bucharest	Service Provider	Persons with mobility impairments	Coordinator – Work Integration Programme for Persons with Disabilities	03.07.2025
32	Romania	Bucharest	NGO / OPD	Down Syndrome	President	19.09.2025
33	Romania	Bucharest	NGO / OPD	Disability	President	23.07.2025
34	Romania		Academia	Education & employment	Independent Scholar	04.06.2025
35	Spain		Government entity	Employment	Chief Officer – Employment Programmes	12.09.2025
36	Spain		Private sector	People management & development	President	02.10.2025
37	Spain	Catalonia	Academia	Disability, employment & social innovation	Department Chair	30.09.2025
38	Spain	Murcia Region	NGO / OPD	Down Syndrome	General Manager	24.09.2025
39	Spain		NGO / OPD	Supported employment	President	29.09.2025
40	Spain		NGO / OPD	Supported employment	President	17.09.2025

Annex II – Interview Questionnaires

Questionnaire for Academics

Consent

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. The information gathered today will be used only for the purposes of this research being conducted as part of the project *Lead Your Way: Fostering Employment for People with Down syndrome and intellectual disabilities through Digital Empowerment*. The project – funded by Erasmus + - is being led by Down España – Federación Española De Instituciones Para El Sĩndrome de Down, with the research component being led by the Malta Association of Supported Employment (MASE).

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The participant has given their consent to be interviewed: Yes No
The participant has given their consent to be recorded: Yes No

Details

Interviewee	
Name	
Gender	
Contact Information [Email / Phone Number]	
Organisation / University	
Role within Organisation / University	
Interview & Interviewer	
Date:	
Location [City and Country, or Remotely]	
Interviewer	
Interview's Start Time	
Interview's End Time	
Language of the KII	

Questionnaire

Background Information

1. Could you kindly give an overview of your experience / knowledge of:
   - employment policies or disability inclusion
   - persons with Down syndrome and intellectual disabilities in the workplace?

General Perceptions and Attitudes

2. What are the prevailing societal attitudes towards employing people with Down syndrome and intellectual disabilities in your country?

3. Have you observed changes in these attitudes over time?

4. What role do you think culture plays in shaping employment opportunities for people with DS/ID?

Legal and Policy Framework

5. What laws or policies exist in your country to support the employment of people with Down syndrome and intellectual disabilities?
   5.1 How effective are these policies in practice?

6. Are there any legal barriers that hinder employment for individuals with DS and ID?

7. What improvements would you recommend to existing policies?

Employment Opportunities and Challenges

8. What industries or sectors in your country are more open to hiring individuals with Down syndrome and intellectual disabilities?

9. What are the main challenges faced by employers in hiring and retaining these employees?
10. How do workplace accommodations impact the hiring process?

11. Are there successful case studies or best practices you can share?

Role of Employers and Organisations

12. How do businesses perceive the benefits of employing individuals with Down syndrome and intellectual disabilities?

13. What incentives (financial, social, ethical) encourage businesses to employ these individuals?

14. What types of training and support do employers typically provide?

Role of Educational and Vocational Training

15. What role do schools and vocational training centres play in preparing individuals with Down syndrome and intellectual disabilities for employment?

16. Are there effective transition programs from education to employment?

17. What skills and competencies are most valuable for employment?

Government and NGO Support

18. What role does the government play in promoting inclusive employment?

19. Are there NGOs or OPDs actively supporting employment initiatives for people with DS and ID?

20. What additional support could these organisations provide?

Future Directions and Recommendations

21. What strategies can be implemented to improve employment rates for people with Down syndrome and intellectual disabilities?

22. How can academic research contribute to policy changes and better employment outcomes?

23. What are key areas requiring further research on this topic?

Conclusion

24. Is there someone else you think we should speak to?

Questionnaire for Decision-Makers

Consent

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The participant has given their consent to be interviewed: Yes ☐ No ☐
The participant has given their consent to be recorded: Yes ☐ No ☐

Details

Interviewee	
Name	
Gender	
Contact Information [Email / Phone Number]	
Organisation / Ministry	
Role within Organisation / Ministry	
Interview & Interviewer	
Date:	
Location [City and Country, or Remotely]	
Interviewer	
Interview's Start Time	
Interview's End Time	
Language of the KII	

Questionnaire

Labour Market Trends

1. What is the estimated number of people with DS/ID currently employed in the country?

2. What types of employment are they primarily engaged in (sheltered vs. mainstream employment)?

3. Which industries or sectors employ people with DS/ID the most?

4. What is the typical contract duration (temporary, permanent, part-time, full-time)?

5. What career advancement opportunities exist for employees with DS/ID?

6. How would you describe the working conditions for these employees (salary, benefits, job security, etc.)?

7. What are the reported digital literacy levels of employees with DS/ID?
   7.1 Are there specific initiatives aimed at improving their digital literacy skills?

Barriers and Supports in Employment

8. What are the main barriers preventing people with DS/ID from entering or remaining in the labour market?

9. How do employers generally perceive hiring people with DS/ID?

10. Is there sufficient accessibility and reasonable accommodations for people with DS/ID to access and retain employment? Can you give some examples?

11. Is the legislation in your country, if any, sufficient to ensure that persons with DS/ID access and retain employment?
    11.1 If not, what could be improved?

12. Are there government incentives for employers to hire people with DS/ID (e.g., wage subsidies, tax benefits)?
    12.1 If there are, are they effective? How?
    12.1 If there are not, why?

13. What other types of support does the government provide – to employers or other organisations – to enhance the employment of people with DS/ID in the open labour market?

Closing Questions

14. What policy changes, if any, would be necessary to improve labour market inclusion for people with DS/ID?

15. What further research or data collection efforts are needed in this field?

16. What collaborations or partnerships could enhance employment opportunities for people with DS/ID?

17. Is there anyone else you would recommend us talking to?

Questionnaire for Employers

Consent

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Details

Interviewee	
Name	
Gender	
Contact Information	
Organisation	
Role within Organisation	
Organisation	
Type of sector	
No. of Employees	
No. of Employees with Disability	
No. of Employees with DS / ID	
Interview & Interviewer	
Date:	
Location [City and Country, or Remotely]	
Interviewer	
Interview's Start Time	
Interview's End Time	
Language of the KII	

General Employment Overview

1. Can you describe your organisation and the role it plays in providing employment opportunities for persons with disabilities, specifically those with Down Syndrome and Intellectual Disabilities?

2. What types of employment do you typically offer to persons with Down Syndrome and Intellectual Disabilities?
   2.1 Do they work in sheltered employment or in mainstream employment?

   2.2 If they work in mainstream employment, do they receive supported employment services?

   2.3 What factors influence the type of employment you offer them?

3. In your organisation, what sectors or departments do persons with Down Syndrome and Intellectual Disabilities most commonly work in?
   3.1 Are there any trends or common areas where you find they are most successful?

4. What is the typical age range of persons with Down Syndrome and Intellectual Disabilities who work in your company?
   4.1 Does age impact the type of work or roles available to them?

Employment Contract and Experience

5. What is the typical contract duration for persons with Down Syndrome and Intellectual Disabilities employed by your organisation?
   5.1 Are they offered permanent, temporary, or part-time contracts?
   5.2 How do you decide the contract type (e.g. based on individual needs or company policies)?

6. How much work experience do persons with Down Syndrome and Intellectual Disabilities typically have before being employed by your organisation?
   6.1 Do they stay in the same position for an extended period, or is there movement into different roles?

7. What factors influence how long individuals with Down Syndrome and Intellectual Disabilities remain in their roles?

Education and Career Advancement

8. What is the typical level of education of persons with Down Syndrome and Intellectual Disabilities employed in your organisation?
   8.1 How does this affect the type of work they are hired for?

9. Does your organisation offer any specific training, workshops, or support to employees with Down Syndrome and Intellectual Disabilities to help them develop their skills?

   9.1 How do you assess the effectiveness of these programs?

10. Are there career advancement or promotional opportunities available to employees with Down Syndrome and Intellectual Disabilities?

    10.1 Can they move up within the company, or are they typically in static roles?

11. What are the main barriers to career advancement for persons with Down Syndrome and Intellectual Disabilities in your organisation?
    11.1 How do you address or overcome these barriers?

Job Conditions and Support

12. How would you describe the general working conditions (e.g., work environment, hours, tasks) for persons with Down Syndrome and Intellectual Disabilities in your organisation?

    12.1 Are there particular accommodations made to ensure these employees can perform their jobs effectively?

13. What types of support or accommodations are typically provided to persons with Down Syndrome and Intellectual Disabilities on the job (e.g. do you provide job coaching, mentoring, assistive technology, or physical workspace modifications)?

14. How does your organisation manage any specific challenges related to the job conditions or working environment for persons with Down Syndrome and Intellectual Disabilities?

15. How important is digital literacy for the roles held by persons with Down Syndrome and Intellectual Disabilities in your organisation?

    15.1 What level of digital skills is required for most positions, and how do you support employees who need to improve their digital literacy?

Barriers to Employment and Supports

16. What are the most common barriers to employment for persons with Down Syndrome and Intellectual Disabilities in your organisation (e.g. related to attitudes, job requirements, physical environments, or other factors)?

17. How do you address the specific needs of persons with Down Syndrome and Intellectual Disabilities in the recruitment and hiring process?

17.1 Are any special accommodations or adjustments made during interviews, assessments, or onboarding? Is there job carving?

18. What types of on-the-job supports are typically provided to employees with Down Syndrome and Intellectual Disabilities in your organisation?
    18.1 How do you assess the need for these supports and ensure they are effective?

19. Can you share any examples of support systems or accommodations that have helped persons with Down Syndrome and Intellectual Disabilities succeed in their roles?

Employer Attitudes and Awareness

23. How would you describe the general attitudes of employers or managers in your organisation towards persons with Down Syndrome and Intellectual Disabilities?

24. Do you observe any misconceptions or other negative attitudes they may face in the workplace?

25. What actions, if any, has your organisation taken to address potential biases or negative attitudes towards employing persons with intellectual disabilities?

26. How do you promote inclusivity and diversity in your organisation, especially for persons with Down Syndrome and Intellectual Disabilities?

    25.1 Are there any specific training programs, campaigns, or awareness-raising activities you have implemented?

The Role of Organisations supporting Persons with DS / ID and of CSOs

20. Do you collaborate with OPDs or entities working with persons with Down Syndrome and Intellectual Disabilities?

    20.1 If so, what kind of support do they provide to both your organisation and the employees?

21. How have these organisations helped improve the employment experience for persons with Down Syndrome and Intellectual Disabilities in your workplace?

22. Do you think such organisations help in changing employer attitudes and fostering a more inclusive work environment?

    22.1 What role do they play in making employers aware of the value that individuals with intellectual disabilities can bring to the workplace?

Closing Questions

26. What have been the most rewarding experiences your organisation has had in employing persons with Down Syndrome and Intellectual Disabilities?
    26.1 How have they contributed to your workplace or team?

27. What steps do you think other employers could take to improve the employment prospects and experiences for persons with Down Syndrome and Intellectual Disabilities?

28. Are there any changes you would recommend in policies, practices, or supports that would help improve employment conditions for persons with Down Syndrome and Intellectual Disabilities in your organisation or in the country/region in general?

29. Do you have any additional thoughts or recommendations on how to improve the overall labour market participation of persons with Down Syndrome and Intellectual Disabilities?

Questionnaire for OPDs & Disability NGOs

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Date:	
Location [City and Country, or Remotely]	
Interviewer	
Interview's Start Time	
Interview's End Time	
Language of the KII	

Questionnaire

Introduction

1. What is the organisation's mission and main objectives?

2. What is your role within the organisation?

3. How does your organisation support individuals with Down Syndrome (DS) and intellectual disabilities (ID) with regard to employment?

Labour Market Participation of People with DS/ID

4. What trends do you see regarding the employment of individuals with DS/ID?
   4.1 Is it increasing or decreasing? Why?

5. Do you notice a preference for certain types of employment (e.g. sheltered versus mainstream employment)
   5.1 What are the reasons for these preferences?

6. What types of contracts are typically offered to individuals with DS/ID (e.g. permanent, temporary, part-time, internship)?

7. What sectors or industries do individuals with DS/ID most commonly work in?

8. What is the average age at which people with DS/ID typically begin working?

9. What level of education do most individuals with DS/ID have before entering the workforce?
   9.1 Are there any vocational programs or training provided by your organisation?

10. What kind of career advancement opportunities are available to individuals with DS/ID?

11. How would you describe the level of digital literacy among people with DS/ID in the workforce?
    11.1 What is needed to enhance the level of digital literacy among people with DS/ID? Why?

12. Do you know of any best practice examples of persons with DS / ID being employed in the open labour market and advancing in their career?

Barriers and Supports in Employment

13. What are the main barriers (e.g. lack of adequate legislation, lack of accessible infrastructure, employer reluctance) that individuals with DS/ID face in obtaining employment? Why?

14. What types of on-the-job supports (e.g., job coaching, flexible hours, workplace accommodations, mentors) do employers typically provide to individuals with DS/ID? Are these enough?

15. How do disability organisations and NGOs assist individuals with DS/ID in securing and maintaining employment?
    15.1 What specific services or support programs, if any, do you offer?

Supported Employment (SE)

16. How many organisations in your country are operating under the Supported Employment framework?

17. Are there national policies or specific legislation that regulate and promote Supported Employment? If so, can you describe them?

18. How well do employers in your country understand the concept and methodology of Supported Employment?

19. What are the main benefits of Supported Employment for people with DS/ID in terms of labour market inclusion, job retention, and career development?

20. How has Supported Employment influenced the long-term career outcomes of individuals with DS/ID in your experience?

21. What types of resources, supports, or partnerships are critical for the success of SE programs?

Challenges and Recommendations

22. What are the key challenges you face in increasing the employment rates of people with DS/ID?

23. What strategies or policies do you think would improve employment outcomes for people with DS/ID? Are there any specific changes you would recommend to increase their inclusion in the open labour market?

Closing Questions

24. Any final thoughts or insights you would like to share regarding the employment of people with Down Syndrome or intellectual disabilities?

25. Is there anyone else you think I should speak to?

Questionnaire for Supported Employment Service Providers

Consent

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Contact Information [Email / Phone Number]	
Organisation	
Role within Organisation	
Interview & Interviewer	
Date	
Location [City and Country, or Remotely]	
Interviewer	
Interview's Start Time	
Interview's End Time	
Language of the Interview	

Questionnaire

Introduction and Background

1. Could you please introduce yourself and your role in the organisation?
   Kindly tell us about your organisation and what type of supported employment services it provides.

2. Are there other organisations which provide supported employment services in your region / country? If yes, do you collaborate with them and how?
3. Are supported services in your country governed by legislation? If yes, which one(s)?
   3.1 Is the legislation effective? Why?

Services Overview

4. What types of supported employment services do you provide (e.g., job coaching, placement services, training)?

5. Which Supported Employment model (e.g. the EUSE five-stage process), if any, does your organisation use in providing these services?
6. What is the primary population you serve (e.g. age range, types of disabilities)?
7. How many individuals do you currently support in employment?

Employment Services

8. What is your approach to job preparation, placement and career advancement for individuals with Down Syndrome and intellectual disabilities?
9. How do you assess the skills and interests of individuals seeking employment (focus on persons with DS/ID)?
10. How do you support individuals with DS / ID once they are placed in a job (e.g., ongoing coaching, workplace accommodations, career advancement)?
11. What types of employers do you partner with for job placements and how is this partnership established and maintained?

Training and Development

12. What training programs do you offer to prepare individuals with DS / ID for employment?
13. How do you ensure that your training is relevant to the current job market?
14. Do you offer any soft skills training? If so, what does it include?

Outcomes and Evaluation

18. How do you measure the success of your supported employment services?

19. What percentage of individuals with DS / ID you support successfully obtain and maintain employment?
20. Can you share any success stories or testimonials from individuals with DS / ID you have helped?
21. How do you gather feedback from individuals you support regarding your services?
22. What steps do you take to continuously improve your services?

Challenges and Support

23. What are the biggest challenges you face in providing supported employment services to persons with DS / ID?
24. What resources or support do you believe would enhance your services?
25. How do you engage with families and caregivers in the employment process?
26. Do you partner with OPDs or other NGOs working with persons with disabilities? How?

Conclusion

27. Is there anything else you would like to share about your services or experiences in supported employment?
28. Is there anyone else you think I should talk to (e.g. other supported employment service providers; decision-makers)?

Annex III – Survey Questionnaire for Persons with DS/ID

Work and Jobs for People with Down Syndrome and Intellectual Disabilities

Hello! We want to know about your experience with work and jobs. This will help make things better for people with Down syndrome and people with Intellectual Disabilities.

Please answer the questions below. You can ask for help if you need it.

About You

1. How old are you?

☐ Under 18

☐ 18-24

☐ 25-34

☐ 35-44

☐ 45-54

☐ 55+

2. Are you:

☐ A man

☐ A woman

☐ Prefer not to say

3. What is your highest education level?

☐ No school

☐ Primary school

☐ High school

☐ College or university

☐ Other: _____

Your Job

4. Do you have a job?

☐ Yes

☐ No

[questions 5-13 are for respondents who are currently working; those who are not working go straight to question 14]

5. What kind of job do you have?

☐ Regular job in a company

☐ Job in a sheltered workshop

☐ Other: _____

6. How long have you had your job?

☐ Less than 1 year

☐ 1-3 years

☐ 4-6 years

☐ More than 6 years

7. What type of work do you do?

☐ Office work

☐ Cleaning

☐ Working in a shop

☐ Restaurant or café work

☐ Factory work

☐ Other: _____

8. Do you have a work contract?

☐ Yes, a permanent contract

☐ Yes, a short-term contract

☐ No contract

9. Do you like your job?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Not sure

10. Does your job give you chances to grow and learn new things?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Not sure

11. Do you use a computer or the internet at work?

☐ Yes
☐ No

12. Do you find it easy to use the computer and internet at work?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Supports at Work

13. Do you get help at work?

☐ Yes, from my boss

☐ Yes, from my coworkers

☐ Yes, from a personal assistant

☐ Yes, from a job coach

☐ No help

14. What makes work hard for you? (Tick all that apply)

☐ Not enough support

☐ Hard tasks

☐ Unkind people

☐ Other: _____

☐ Nothing, work is easy.

[once this section is finished, go straight to question 19]

[questions 14- 18 are for respondents who are currently not working]

Getting a Job

15. Have you tried to find a job?

☐ Yes

☐ No

16. Did you get help finding a job?

☐ Yes, from my family

☐ Yes, from an association

☐ Yes, from a job coach

☐ Yes, from my personal assistant

☐ Yes, from my social worker

☐ No help

17. What makes it hard to get a job?

☐ No one hires people with disabilities

☐ I don't know how to apply

☐ I do not have job training

☐ Other: _____

18. Do you know any groups that help people with Down syndrome and Intellectual Disabilities get jobs?

☐ Yes

☐ No

[once this section is finished, go straight to question 21]

Your Ideas

19. What would make work better for you?

21. Do you want to say anything else about jobs?

Thank you for your answers!

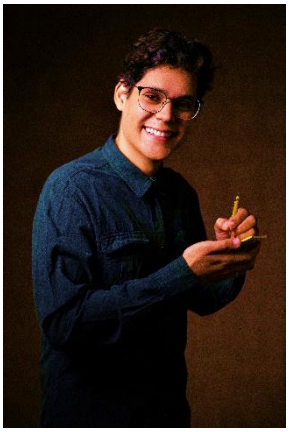
Annex IV – Information Sheet and Consent Form for Survey

Lead Your Way

Research on People with Down Syndrome & Intellectual Disabilities in Jobs

[Insert Date] 2025

Information Sheet



Hello. My name is []. I am doing research on people with down syndrome / intellectual disability and their jobs.

I am doing this research as part of the **Lead Your Way** project with **Down España**.

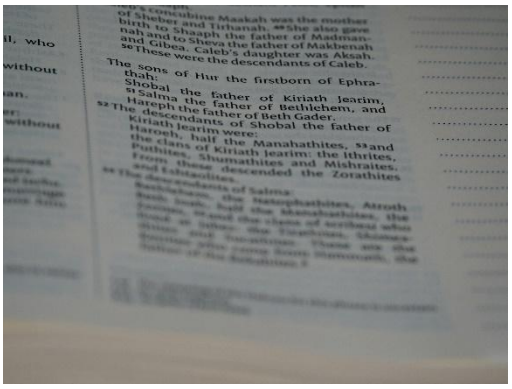
This research will help us to know how supported employment services for persons with Down Syndrome / Intellectual Disabilities in Europe can be improved.

Since you are currently working / looking for a job, you are being asked to fill this survey.

The survey asks questions about your experience.

Your answers will be recorded on our computer.

No one will know your name and your answers will be anonymous.



Once everyone fills in the survey, my colleagues and I will write the findings in a report.

The report will be published.

I will use the information that you give me during the survey only for this research.

You can refuse to fill in this survey.

If you would like to ask me anything, you can call me on [] or email me on []

[Insert Signature]

[Insert Name]

Researcher

Consent Form

After reading the information above, please:

1) tick the boxes below where you agree with the corresponding statement
2) sign at the bottom.

I understand what this research is about and what it will be used for.	
[Name of Researcher] has told me about what he/she will do with my survey answers.	
I understand that [Name of Researcher] will use the information that I give him/her only for this research.	
I understand that I can ask [Name of Researcher] not to use the information that I give him/her.	
I would like my survey answers to remain confidential.	

I would not like my survey answers to remain confidential.	
I understand that if I choose to have my survey answers remain confidential, [Name of Researcher] will not write down my name in the research report, but some people may identify me when reading the report.	
I agree to take part in this research.	
I do not agree to take part in this research.	

Name & Surname of research participant

Signature of research participant

Date