

# Practical and policy recommendations for the EU institutions and the national governments of EU member states to foster the employment of blind, partially sighted and disabled adults (version 2017)

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## Introduction

With our paper we would like to address the issue of a high rate of unemployed blind and partially sighted adults within the EU in particular and unemployment of disabled persons in general. This issue has already been addressed by the European commission and its attached EU institutions in several ways, notably by launching the European disability strategy 2010 – 2020 with one of its key priorities, to reduce the unemployment rate of disabled EU citizens. Further by the adoption of the Council Directive 2000/78/EC of 27 November 2000 establishing a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation.

We are very grateful for the strong commitment of the EU in this regard and acknowledge and appreciate its various efforts, ranging from policy implementation, establishing EU financial schemes (European Structural fund) to invest in accessible vocational training and employment opportunities, to awareness raising about the implementation of article 27 on employment of the UN convention on the Rights of persons with disabilities (UNCRPD), including the vital participation of EU wide acting organizations of persons with disabilities to promote and exchange of good practices in the Disability High Level Group (DHLG) and other high- ranking meetings/conferences of the EU institutions.



Nevertheless we believe that the following recommendations might be of value for you, since they are reflecting the personal views of blind and partially sighted young adults from Italy, Belgium and Germany.

Further this paper takes account of the working experiences of disability related organizations residing in these countries and active in the areas of vocational training, promotion of employment and offering counselling and career guidance for blind and partially sighted young adults.

This paper is the result of the Erasmus+ project VIP awareness raising on unemployment (KA2 - Cooperation for Innovation and the Exchange of Good Practices Strategic Partnerships for youth) subsidized by the European Commission. The main goals of the project are:

- to raise awareness among employers about the skills and potentials of blind and partially sighted young adults,
- to inform the public about innovative job opportunities for our target group,
- to enable young adults to acquire intercultural, social, organizational and other job related competencies to increase their chances for an active participation in the labour market,
- to address national governments and EU institutions to sensitize them for the particular challenges which blind and partially sighted young adults are facing, while trying to get access to the job market.

To achieve our goals we were carrying out and still pursuing the following activities:

- Creation and performance of awareness raising workshops for employers in collaboration with blind and partially sighted employed and unemployed young adults, to illustrate on a very practical level the living situation with its attached challenges and positive potentials of our target group. As well as implications for employers, if they decide to hire a disabled person.
- Draft of an awareness raising brochure, which aims at sensitizing and encouraging European employers to employ blind and partially sighted persons, by reflecting on various aspects like misconceptions about the capability of blind and partially sighted persons, effects of blindness and partial sight in the performance of daily activities and job related tasks, the provision and help of assistive devices in vocational settings complemented by testimonials of successfully employed disabled persons.
- Development of national media tools like podcasts, websites and radio documentaries, to urge national governments and communities to pay particular attention to the reduction of unemployment and coherent poverty of our target group,
- Performance of three months lasting mobility trainings for youth workers, to discover than foreign working environment and investigate and exchange about divergences and similarities about working conditions and causes for unemployment concerning blind and partially sighted young adults,
- Draft of policy and practical recommendations for national governments and EU institutions to contribute to the success of the implementation of the European Disability strategy 2010 – 2020 to improve the access to employment and vocational training and qualification for disabled European citizens

The project was designed and all related activities are performed as a collaborative effort of the following organizations:

IEWS International ([www.viewsinternational.eu](http://www.viewsinternational.eu)),

LWL Berufsbildungswerk (<http://www.lwl.org/>)

AFORISMATOSCANA (<http://www.aforismatoscana.net/>)

Istituto Regionale Rittmeyer (<http://www.istitutorittmeyer.it/>)

Deutscher Blinden- und Sehbehindertenverband ([www.dbsv.org](http://www.dbsv.org))

The following recommendations are based on the results of a survey including 30 blind and partially sighted young adults from the partner countries and the collected information and practical experiences gained during the execution of this project. Though our drawn conclusions might not be representative in terms of a sufficient number of interviewed persons, we sincerely hope they might be of some help to strengthen your efforts and endeavours to foster the employment of disabled European citizens. We would like to conclude our introduction by quoting one of our survey participants, who summarizes in a very personal way, the main challenges for blind and partially sighted youngsters in search of a fulfilling and income generating job:

“I find it crazy that people have to be stuck with only two professions, switchboard operators and physiotherapists, just because they're lacking sight, instead of doing what they really like. Unfortunately, visually impaired people in Italy find it hard to get a job for at least three reasons: because the policy-makers don't address the problem as they should; employers are not informed about what visually impaired people can and cannot do; and lastly many of us are too resigned and passive.

At the age of thirty, I'd like to fulfill myself, to pass on to pupils the linguistic knowledge acquired through my studies and experiences abroad. Or I would like to have an open-ended contract with a company and be responsible for its international relations. But, of course, it's just a dream!

## **Policy recommendations**

### ***Reasonable accommodation, enforcement mechanisms and financial incentives***

As stated above, we welcome and appreciate the adoption of the Council Directive 2000/78/EC of 27 November 2000 establishing a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation. After its application, a range of significant and positive improvements in view of the career situation and antidiscrimination of disabled EU citizens have taken place:

Examples are the establishment of specially protected jobs, introduction of national financial incentives for employers to encourage the employment of disabled persons, the adoption of national anti-discrimination legislation and the set-up of practical enforcement and complaints mechanisms for affected disabled persons.



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Despite of these remarkable efforts the number of unemployed disabled persons is still significantly higher compared to those who are unemployed and not disabled. Further great national divergences are existing in the legislative and practical implementation of the directive.

### **Reasonable accommodation**

Reasonable accommodations are an absolutely essential requirement for the establishment of a working environment for blind and partially sighted persons, to enable them to carry out their tasks effectively and maximize their capacity to the fullest extent. Naturally working spaces are not tailored in a way which would consider the needs of our target group. Inaccessible computer hard- and software, inaccessible working materials like flipcharts, bulletins, power points ... and incompatibility of working related software with open source assistive software are still the standard in the labour market. Therefore the need for adaptations also known as reasonable accommodations is constantly increasing and vital to ensure a safe and accessible working experience for disabled employees. Many EU countries have tackled this issue in their national legislations, but greatly differing in their application approaches. Some countries have introduced reasonable accommodation as a measure, which depends on the occurring costs an adaptation would require an employer to spend. If the employer assesses that the costs for an adaptation constitutes an undue burden for him, he can reject the recruitment of the concerned disabled person. Other EU countries have established legislations which have to consider the costs for a reasonable accommodation in relation to its effectiveness for the disabled employer. In this regard a reasonable accommodation is justified, if it does not create an undue burden for the employer in relation to the increase of work efficiency the adaptation helps to achieve. This legislative approach tries to accomplish a balance between costs and effectiveness for the disabled person. Often this approach is complemented by an option which allows employers to apply for extra funding, provided by governmental schemes, which helps to cover occurring costs for needed adaptations.

We believe that only an approach, which takes into account the possibility for employers to use public funding as a complement to cover extra expenses, can create realistic and sustainable working opportunities for blind and partially sighted persons. If the responsibility of financing any kind of needed accommodation lays at the discretion of the employer, no significant growth in this sector can be achieved.

The attitudinal barriers concerning the perception of disabled persons already hinder their access to the labour market. if on top of that, extra expenses come into play, two preclusive factors make a successful employment virtually impossible.

National member states need to be encouraged to use public financial resources to foster the adaptation of work settings and to learn from best practices of other member states how to apply these legislative measures in practice and gain needed resources.

Further EU member states should be advised to apply their financial principles of subsidising reasonable accommodation to all job sectors and not only to protected job categories. We have come across various cases, where the maximum of reasonable accommodation support was only granted for certain job types, like physiotherapists or switchboard operators.

This procedure lacks flexibility and prevents the access for highly qualified disabled persons to innovative and well-known working sectors. One quote from a blind young Italian man may illustrate the disparity between a few protected professions and the labour market reality:

“The working situation in Italy is really difficult, even for sighted young people.

As for visually impaired people, the Italian law protects certain professions; on the one hand, this has given many opportunities to job-seekers, especially in the past; on the other hand, though, it has made many employers believe that visually impaired people are ONLY able to do those professions. And such stereotyped is hard to destroy.”

### **Robust enforcement mechanisms**

A range of EU member states has introduced so called quotas to foster the employment of disabled persons. If employers are not able to fulfil these quotas they have to pay a monthly fine as a compensation. Many countries use the proceeds of the penalties to finance sheltered workshops or reasonable accommodations. We agree to the reinvestments of penalties in initiatives or aids which foster the employment of our target group, but we are less convinced about the effectiveness of these incentives. Our observations in the last decade have clearly shown that penalties were not effective nor dissuasive in decreasing the unemployment rate of disabled persons and encourage companies to hire disabled persons. Many employers use the payment of fines as a loophole to escape from their obligation to employ disabled persons. We believe that national governments should more invest in awareness raising campaigns and in practical measures to facilitate the access to the labour market and the daily job routine for disabled persons.

### **Establishment of effective and accessible complaint mechanisms and arbitration boards**

As described above great inconsistencies are existing in the different EU member states in applying legislative and executive instruments to prevent discrimination in the labour market. Especially the access to legal complaint and redress mechanisms is often very limited and fairly inaccessible.

Lack of knowledge of affected persons, inaccessible complaint systems and related documents, professionals active in the legal sector who are not familiar with legal claims and needs of disabled persons, prevent an effective and accessible use for the beneficiaries. Additionally a lack of arbitration boards which could be set as the first instance and leave a trial as the last resort for affected disabled persons, impedes the reveal and legal protection of the rights of disabled persons in this area. An improved dissemination and sharing of best practices may help to address this issue. Especially arbitration boards have been fairly successful within the last years, to resolve work related disputes and to establish an usable and easy to handle mechanism for disabled persons.

## **Practical initiatives to facilitate the performance of work related tasks for disabled persons**

Most EU countries provide financial support concerning the provision of assistive devices or financial incentives for employers, which partly cover salary and social security costs for a disabled employee for a certain time period. The financing of assistive devices often depends on the job type or on the financial situation of the affected town or federal state. This patchwork situation often leads to great disparities in the provision of assistive devices and hinders employers to effectively perform their job related tasks. A quote from one of our survey participants may underline this grievance:

*“I think I could work in a more gratifying way and thus be more useful to my office. Now, even if I try to work at the best of my capacity, I'm forced to do so with an old and malfunctioning computer with no internet connection, which means I have no access to some information that may be useful to the callers.”*

The right to the provision of assistive devices should not depend on the job type, nor on the costs. We agree to the fact that the provision of assistive devices should not constitute an undue burden for all concerned, but it should always be considered that the disabled person needs assistive aids, which enable him to the fullest extent, to comply with the job related requirements and do his tasks in an effective manner.

### **Personal assistance**

A very effective way of work support guarantees the provision of personal assistance. Unfortunately this work model is only used in Sweden and Germany. An human resource assistant performs all assistive tasks, which the partially sighted or blind person due to his sight loss, is unable to perform. Tasks could be, driving a car to external appointments, formatting a document to ensure a visually attractive style, guiding a blind person within an unknown territory etc... This working model allows a very effective work and compensates any disadvantage caused by the disability or an inaccessible environment, the disabled person may have. It is not a replacement for assistive devices, but can complement its use. Further it creates more job opportunities for disabled and non-disabled persons likewise and allows also less qualified persons, to actively participate within the labor market.

The public availability and wide spread dissemination of Positive working models or innovative adaptation methods, should be strengthened, to offer committed employers and employees the chance to benefit from each other and to allow mutual exchange and support.



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## Considering innovation in the labor market for disabled employees

Many traditional occupations like switchboard operators, physiotherapists or even handcraft vocations are treated as protected job types for blind and partially sighted persons, neglecting the fact, that most of these jobs are suffering from extinction or are not always feasible for blind persons. Governments in connection with job agencies should put stronger focus on new jobs, which also consider the strides technology has made within the past years. Today blind persons can act in web and program development settings, sound design areas, script dolmetcher for deaf persons and many others. The following quote of a young Belgian blind participant may underpin the need for new innovative jobs and sufficient assistive aids to cope with the challenges the labor market provides:

- *“Many people are unemployed. We do not have the right equipment to perform our jobs appropriately. We need innovative jobs, which fit better into the new globalized society. Employment models related to visually impaired people need to be completely readjusted, because switchboard operators are gradually disappearing, and physiotherapists encounter many difficulties in the daily exercise of their job, because of problems inherent to the job itself. IT skills should be encouraged and fostered, and new professional profiles should be created in the fields of archiving or back-office.”*

## Awareness raising to create a better understanding for the abilities and limits of blind and partially sighted persons

During the performance of our awareness raising workshops we were assailed with questions. Often the questions were rather simple like: “How do blind people eat? Can blind people cook? How does this work? How do they clean their flat? Can they use a computer keyboard? This rather plain and just questions revealed a great lack of knowledge about the living conditions of blind and partially sighted persons. This fact apart from any other causalities, may not create any interdependence. But while looking on criteria’s which make a person eligible for a job, independence, neat and proper way of life are fundamental prerequisites for the entry into the labour market. Many blind and partially sighted people bear these attributes, but employers are not aware of them.

EU institutions and national governments might need to establish more opportunities for young disabled adults and their representative organizations to get in touch with potential employers to demonstrate their way of life and their abilities. Further adults need to have increased possibilities to do short term internships, to gain work experiences and to familiarize potential employers with their way of working.

A pooling of resources needs to be enforced, to ensure that disabled persons can get easy access to assistive devices, needed for a short or long term internship. Up to date, the reception of assistive devices for internships, which can be a ticket to a working contract, is very restricted and often connected to a long waiting period. Such burocratical barriers are aggravating the chances of equal participation in the labour market for blind and partially sighted persons.

One quote from a young Belgian woman, who studied marketing and public relations may underline this need:

- *"I'd urge politicians to increase internship opportunities for blind people, in order to destroy the false image that employers often have of them: they see them as fragile people who can't use stairs and will trip and fall if there's a cable on the floor; however, reality is so different! Every time I did an internship, I really felt that people's initial mind-set towards blindness completely changed at the end of the internship."*

Employers should take our professional skills into account, rather than our handicap. Handicap is not a barrier. We are people with strengths and weaknesses, like anyone else. The labor market should be more open to our differences.

### **Final messages**

We would like to thank you for your attention and would like to conclude by listing some of the replies of our participants which contain final messages to EU institutions and national governments. For further questions or any kind of feedback, do not hesitate to contact us:

Final messages from participants:

- Loss of Sight should not be a boundary to limit job opportunities.
- I'd tell him to try and better advertise blind people's skills, urging the society to see us as more than just switchboard operators, who have now become useless. I'd also tell him to urge blind people to not be satisfied with protected and easy jobs, by ensuring that the right to work is guaranteed not only for those two categories.
- Blind people have to work like anyone else: everyone has limitations, but they can be overcome!
- If you want the economy to prosper, you have to let people find their own way to succeed.
- My message would be that if we want this country to grow it is essential that everyone's work is acknowledged and rewarded properly, regardless of gender, disability and level. Everyone should have the chance to study and get educated. Talents should be acknowledged and rewarded. Companies respecting employees and encouraging their professional growth should be rewarded also through economic incentives.
- I'd try to enable everyone, including disabled people, to express himself to the best of their potential, harnessing their desire to prove their skills.
- Inform, empower, include!