



Employment of people with intellectual disabilities

Before, during and after the **COVID-19** pandemic



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This report was written by **Inclusion Europe** and **Plena inclusión** under the **My Talents For Diversity project**.

This publication was funded by the European Union's Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme (2014-2020). The publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the European Union cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.



This project was funded by the European Union's Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme (2014-2020)

Published DECEMBER 2020

Contents

Introduction.....	4
Before the COVID-19 crisis.....	6
Data on employment rates among people with intellectual disabilities	6
What was the situation in Europe before the pandemic?	6
What was the situation in Spain before the pandemic?	8
During the COVID-19 crisis	9
How did the European Union respond to the crisis?	9
What happened at the national level?	10
Advocacy and experiences	13
Key issues and Advocacy in Spain	13
Key issues and advocacy at European level	15
What is the European Union Recovery Plan?	18
Recommendations.....	20
Covid report: Neglect and discrimination. Multiplied	21

“Having a job is **about being independent,** it is about having co-workers and it makes me feel that what I do is important. I have been working for a long time and I am happy with my job. But I know not all people with intellectual disabilities have the opportunity to have a job.” *Soufiane El Amrani*¹

Introduction

To achieve an inclusive society where people with intellectual disabilities make their own choices and live independently, secure employment is essential. Having a job ensures people with disabilities have financial independence, feel valuable, and contribute their talents to society.

However, people with intellectual disabilities face significant obstacles in access to employment. For example, being under guardianship means not being able to make your own choices or sign a contract. Those who are placed in segregated education may not receive a school certificate that allows them to work or access higher education.

Institutionalisation increases the difficulties in accessing the open labour market, and often involves working within sheltered settings, where wages are lower and worker status is not recognised.

If a person with intellectual disabilities does enter the open labour market, they often lose their disability benefits, leading to higher costs of living.

Many employers do not believe people with intellectual disabilities are able to work and perform the tasks their business needs.

All of these factors have consistently led to much lower rates of employment among people with intellectual disabilities, and to a higher risk of poverty and social exclusion. These inequalities have increased during the Covid-19 pandemic. Sheltered workshops close, people with intellectual disabilities are being laid off or unable to work online, and fewer new jobs opening up that are accessible for them.

People with disabilities have a right to work just like everybody else.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities recognises “the right to the opportunity to gain a living by work freely chosen or accepted in a labour market and a work environment that is open, inclusive and accessible to persons with disabilities.” The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the European Social Charter and the European Union Charter of Fundamental Rights also recognise the right to work; furthermore, the European Union Charter of Fundamental Rights affirms “the right of persons with disabilities to benefit from measures designed to ensure their independence, social and occupational integration and participation in community life.” The authorities have an obligation to respect and ensure the fulfilment of this right.

This report describes how the pandemic has affected employment for people with intellectual disabilities. Created from a deep concern about a lack of respect for the rights of people with disabilities, the report shows how the pandemic and measures taken in response to it have increased the discrimination of people with intellectual disabilities. It also offers recommendations and good practices to support employment in these circumstances.



Before the COVID-19 crisis

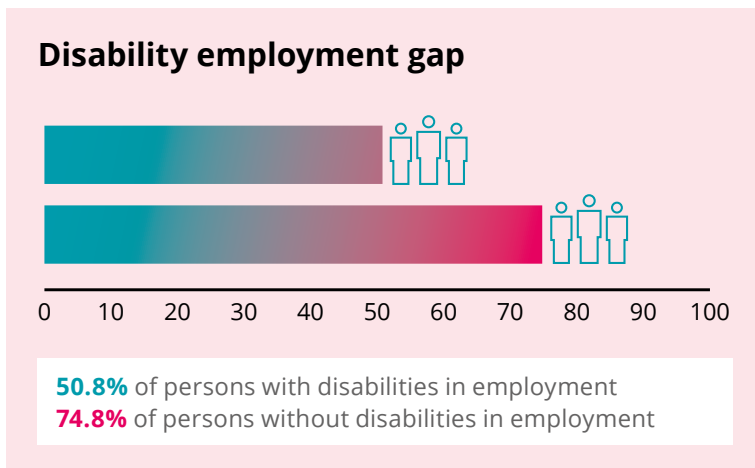
Data on employment rates among people with intellectual disabilities

Before the Covid-19 crisis started, there were already concerning inequalities regarding employment among people with intellectual disabilities. While we lack robust data disaggregated per type of disability, we can see that people with intellectual disabilities are more likely to be unemployed, have lower rates of employment, and are often in sheltered settings.

What was the situation in Europe before the pandemic?

Prior to the pandemic, people with disabilities had lower rates of employment than persons without disabilities. **Studies show that only 50.8% of persons with disabilities are in employment, compared to 74.8% for persons without disabilities.**²

In Ireland, for example, 36% of adults with an intellectual disability were engaged in some form of work, 29% in sheltered centres and only 7.1% in the open labour market.³ In Scotland, only 6% of people with learning disabilities have a job.⁴ It has been shown that only 10% of people on the autism spectrum are able to get a job,⁵ a significant number of them in part-time and low-paid jobs, under-qualified positions and sheltered settings.⁶



Source: EU SILC 2017



There are reasons to believe that a significant percentage of employed people with intellectual disabilities are not part of the open labour market, but work in sheltered workshops. These sheltered workshops do not promote independent living, and in many cases, workers do not earn a minimum wage or have access to labour rights on the same grounds as the general population. To this we should add the fact that many people with disabilities lose their social benefits when they start working.

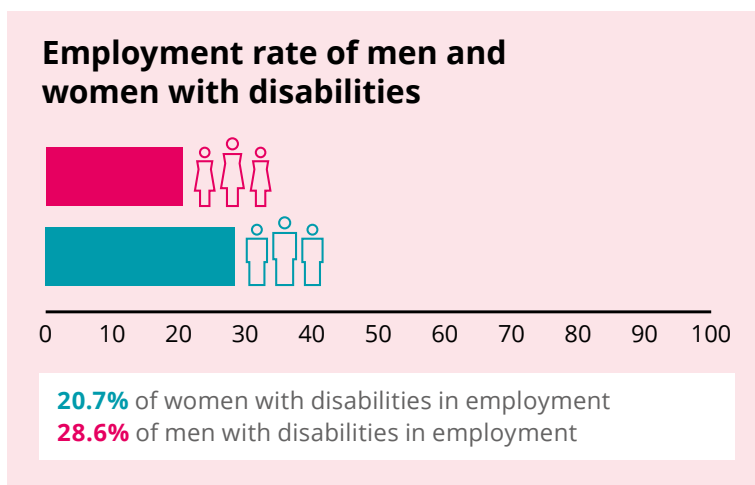
Since people with disabilities face higher costs, losing their benefits can push them into poverty when they enter the labour market. Even before the pandemic, their work was more unstable, and based on temporary or part-time positions.⁷

Among people with disabilities, most of those not seeking employment are unable to do so due to a disability or health problem; this was also the number one reason given by people with disabilities who left their last job.⁸

Among the young, there are significant disparities between those with disabilities and those without. In Bulgaria, 77.2% of people between 15 and 24 years old who experience difficulty in performing basic activities are neither employed nor studying or training, as opposed to 21.4% of those without difficulty in the same age group; 81.2% of those between 15 and 24 years old with a limited ability to work face this situation, compared to 21.5% among those without any limitations.⁹

There is also a lower employment rate among women with disabilities than among men: 20.7% of women with disabilities are employed full-time, compared to 28.6% of men with disabilities.¹⁰ There are important disparities among EU countries regarding temporary employment, but in certain countries a large percentage of people with disabilities are employed in temporary positions.¹¹

Among people with disabilities, it is clear that those with intellectual disabilities have even lower rates of employment, despite the lack of disaggregated data.



Source: Gender Equality Index 2019

What was the situation in Spain before the pandemic?

People with intellectual disabilities in Spain have lower rates of employment than people without disabilities. For instance, the last data available from 2018 indicates that only 20.2% of people with intellectual disabilities are in paid employment, while the employment rate of the general population was 63.4%. There is no specific data for people with intellectual disabilities, but around 80% of people with a disability in Spain work in protected employment enterprises.¹²

People with intellectual disabilities also have a higher rate of unemployment, 25.2% in 2018 compared to 15.4% among the general population. In addition, when they do get a job, their wages are among the lowest; the average hourly rate for people without disabilities is €15.60, and just €8.40 for people with intellectual disabilities, nearly half of the rate.¹³

During the COVID-19 crisis

As the Covid-19 crisis started and lockdown measures were put in place many workers lost their jobs. To tackle this, some countries have put measures in place to mitigate the effects of unemployment, and the European Union has put in place emergency aid to address this issue.

How did the European Union respond to the crisis?

The European Parliament called for a comprehensive anti-poverty strategy in its [resolution of April 2020](#), expressing its concern about the impact of the crisis on vulnerable groups such as people with disabilities. It also called for the EU and Member States to respect the rights of persons with disabilities in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, particularly in relation to healthcare, community-based care and support services, access to public information, and consultation of people with disabilities in decisions that affect them.

Later in July 2020, the European Parliament adopted a [resolution](#) specifically on the rights of persons with intellectual disabilities and their families during the Covid-19 crisis, after the Committee on Petitions received a submission on the matter. This resolution recognised the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on people with disabilities, the need for support services during lockdown, and the importance of accessible information.





At the European Union level, the SURE initiative is an emergency programme that will provide up to €100 billion in loans to countries that need it to ensure that workers receive an income and businesses retain their staff.¹⁴ The loans are to be directed where they are most urgently needed, particularly in the countries most affected by the Covid-19 crisis.

SURE will support short-time work schemes to help Member States protect jobs, and shield employees and the self-employed against the risk of dismissal and loss of income. Firms will be able to temporarily reduce employee hours or suspend work altogether, with income support provided by the State for hours not worked. These short-time work schemes could be an opportunity for people with intellectual disabilities to enter the open labour market, as well as for carers to combine their employment and care duties.¹⁵

What happened at the national level?

While the generalisation of distance work could have brought an opportunity for inclusion of people with disabilities,¹⁶ lockdown measures and the closing of businesses put employment of people with intellectual disabilities at risk. Many people with intellectual disabilities working in the open labour market prior to the pandemic had to stop working due to the restrictions. Some countries provided special leave provisions, while others left them more unprotected. Those working in sheltered workshops were also affected by the restrictions, as many centres were closed, as it was the case in [Slovakia](#).¹⁷

Some countries did put measures in place to prevent people with intellectual disabilities from losing their job, while in others, they were protected under general measures:

In **Bulgaria**, a new National Programme for the employment of persons with disabilities is aimed at creating employment conditions for them.¹⁸

In **Czechia**, the Rytmus organisation, which supports the employment of people with intellectual disabilities on the open labour market, estimated that around 20% of their clients lost their job during the COVID-19 crisis since a large percentage of them were employed in the hotel and restaurant sector that closed its doors due to the restrictions.¹⁹

In **Denmark**, those employed on the open labour market benefited from the support given to companies to cover part of their salaries during the lockdown.²⁰

In **Germany**, during the pandemic, unemployment among persons with disabilities rose by 13.6% from March 2020 to August 2020; this means that 21,269 people with disabilities lost their jobs.²¹ An amendment was passed in March which allowed the funds raised from employers for non-compliance with the employment quota of people with disabilities to be used for purposes other than financing programmes and incentives for employing people with disabilities. The Ombudswoman requested an assessment of the constitutionality of this measure.²² It has also been reported that several sheltered workshops have cut the wages of their employees. Despite government funding aimed at mitigating the consequences of COVID-19, persons with disabilities are left with only €141 per month, which for some means 50% less income.²³

In **Ireland**, interviews conducted among people with intellectual disabilities showed that all the participants had lost work because of Covid-19. Most of them had worked in centres and services for people with disabilities.

In **Italy**, there was a benefit for “fragile” workers to take time off from work to avoid Covid-19 infection, but this measure was not extended to people with immunosuppression or undergoing life-saving therapies.²⁴

In **Luxembourg**, a law was introduced to improve access to the open labour market and continued employment for people with disabilities through accompanying measures under the guidance of inclusion in employment assistance.²⁵

In **Malta**, a grant was given to people with disabilities who could not retain their job.²⁶

Available data in **Spain** shows how the COVID-19 crisis has negatively affected the situation of people with intellectual disabilities.

Plena inclusión España launched research in June 2020 to understand how the crisis affected people with intellectual disabilities, their families and services providers. The results of the research have not yet been published, but some initial data analysis shows that 16.2% experienced a worsening in the material welfare dimension of Quality of Life.²⁷ The same research reveals that 68.4% stopped working during the crisis. Around 37% of people with disabilities employed before the lockdown have been placed under temporary partial unemployment, a much higher percentage than the general population, and 14% switched to remote work.²⁸ While during the last 7 years prior to the pandemic we had seen an increase in employment among people with disabilities, in 2020 employment of people with disabilities fell by 30%, affecting especially women with disabilities and the young. At the moment, only 1 in every 4 people with disabilities are working in Spain.²⁹

In the **United Kingdom**, a study from Leonard Chesire has revealed that the pandemic has resulted in a loss of income for 71% of people with disabilities, with many being furloughed or forced into unemployment. The ability to work of 57% of those between 18 and 24 years old has been impacted and 54% believe the pandemic has damaged their future earnings potential. Sadly, two in five employers said they were discouraged from hiring people with disabilities due to concerns around supporting them during the pandemic. Consequently, Leonard Chesire has proposed measures to the government for tackling the situation and making employers more inclusive.³⁰ The members of the Business Disability Forum have tried to mitigate this by enabling workplace adjustments that could bring long-lasting benefits, such as reviewing routine working hours, support through assistive technology, and transporting adjustments to employee homes.³¹



Advocacy and experiences

As Europe faces a second wave of Covid-19, it is important to be prepared to deliver an appropriate response that takes into account the rights of people with intellectual disabilities.

Through our advocacy actions, Inclusion Europe and Plena inclusión have called numerous times on the authorities to ensure the rights of people with intellectual disabilities during the pandemic. As we anticipate further impact of the pandemic on the economy and on employment opportunities, a key element is the European Recovery Plan. Its purpose is to help the most affected countries in the European Union to mitigate the effects of the pandemic. The EU and the governments must ensure people with intellectual disabilities are included in the recovery plans.

Key issues and Advocacy in Spain

Plena inclusión España held a series of seminars and published several press releases to raise awareness about the situation of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

The first press release, published on 28 March, explained how protected employment is the most frequent employment option for people with intellectual disabilities in Spain at this time and that due to the lockdown and pandemic, the priorities of those work centres became: protecting the health of their employees, avoiding job losses and fostering sustainability and the viability of working centres in the near future.

Even though the government developed general measures to protect employment, Plena inclusión demanded more support and specific measures for protected employment centres since, at the moment, they are the main source of employment for people with disabilities in Spain.



On 28 April, Plena inclusión España launched another press release to praise the work of employees with and without disabilities in the sector.

It was an opportunity to thank all employees, especially those working remotely during the lock down, as well as those from special education schools and sheltered workshops, and in protected employment. People with intellectual disabilities have shown themselves to be extremely reliable during those months, attending to their work-related tasks every day.

On 5 May, Plena inclusión held its first seminar about employment during the COVID crisis, which was attended by more than 600 people. People with intellectual disabilities working in essential services (the services that were allowed to work during the lockdown) and their colleagues or managers explained their work and the protective measures taken; the objective was to promote a positive image of workers with intellectual disabilities. This exchange of experiences was followed by a debate about the current and future employment situation of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities from different perspectives (families, services providers, people with intellectual disabilities, employers, etc.)

Plena inclusión held another seminar on 19 June to present the different experiences of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities who returned to work after the lockdown. The seminar was part of a series of events intended to raise awareness and provide guidance about reopening services and returning to work, protective measures, and issues to take into account after the lockdown.

The last seminar was held in cooperation with the Minister of Inclusion.³² The government approved a protection measure against poverty for unemployed people, but it is difficult for people with intellectual disabilities to meet the requirements for access to this protection measure because the lower income they receive means they tend to live with their families their whole lives. The measure does not promote independent living within this population because it considers that they are protected by family income. There are also other benefits that families of people with disabilities receive when they have children under 18 years old that are affected by this measure.

The last press release about employment was published on 31 August and included another call for special measures to protect the employment of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities by increasing public funding for protected employment settings.

Key issues and advocacy at European level

During the crisis, Inclusion Europe worked with its members to monitor the situation in employment of people with intellectual disabilities, and has raised concerns on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the employment of people with intellectual disabilities.³³ Furthermore, Inclusion Europe launched a petition to defend the rights of people with intellectual disabilities and their families during the Covid-19 emergency to the Committee of Petitions.³⁴ In this petition, Inclusion Europe called on the European Union to include people with intellectual disabilities in their Covid-19 emergency response.

During recent months, under the project “My Talents. For Diversity,” funded by the 2014-2017 European Union’s Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme, Inclusion Europe organised a series of online events that to share practices that support employment for people with intellectual disabilities. These events also focused on EU employment policies, providing insight into the legal and policy instruments in place foster employment of people with intellectual disabilities.

In the first event, KLAPjob shared their project taking place in Denmark, which aims to include people with learning disabilities in the labour market.

KLAPjob is an initiative under the Lev association which offers flexible jobs for people with intellectual disabilities and other cognitive difficulties. KLAPjob has agreements with municipalities, companies and organisations throughout the country. They have created over 3,600 jobs for early retirees. KLAPjob employees receive €5-6 per hour (approximately 33% of a minimum wage). With a 20-hour part-time job, this amounts to €495 per month. Companies can obtain a €3 reduction on the hourly wage. KLAPjob meets with each candidate, listens to their professional expectations, and suggests concrete vacancies in relation to their requirements. This project helps people with intellectual disabilities be part of the community and make their own choices regarding employment.³⁵

On 15 September, Inclusion Europe hosted an event on EU instruments that could foster employment of people with intellectual disabilities. Timothy Ghilain highlighted the Equality in Employment Directive that prohibits discrimination on the grounds of disability in the field of employment, as well as the European Disability Strategy and European Social Pillar. Expert Mark Bell said that, to make employment accessible, denial of reasonable accommodation must be considered a form of discrimination. Finally, Anouk Van Hoofstadt emphasised the importance of including the voices of people with intellectual disabilities in employment projects, and to re-think jobs so they can be accessible for people with disabilities. Workers with intellectual disabilities add value to any company and can be their best ambassadors.³⁶

A third event was organised to introduce Rytmus, an organisation that helps people with intellectual disabilities find jobs. They first meet with job seekers to learn more about their job preferences, and then help them create a CV and answer job offers. They use social media to make first contact with companies or to introduce the candidate (LinkedIn and Facebook) and organise networking sessions. Rytmus meets with employers to learn more about them, and then launch the job selection procedure for people with disabilities. When this procedure is done, Rytmus sets up meetings between employers and employees to personalise working conditions. They implement what they call “job shadowing,” giving people with disabilities the possibility to work from 1 to 3 days in the company before starting work.³⁷

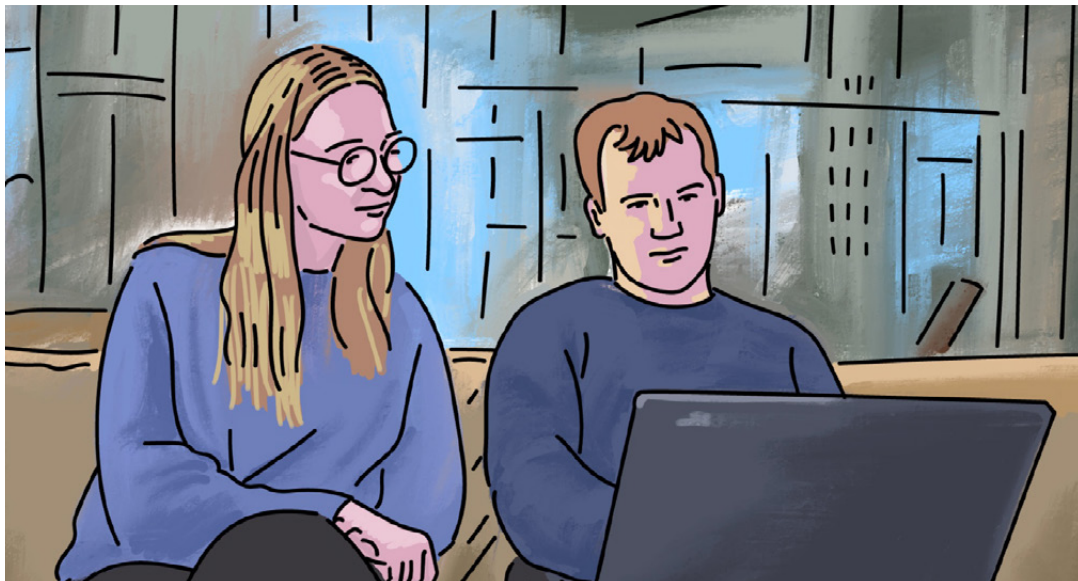
On 9 October, a fourth event took place on the topic of employment in the next European Union Disability Strategy. Soufiane El Amrani, the editor of Inclusion Europe, shared the importance of having a job for people with intellectual disabilities, which provides a sense of independence, connections with co-workers and the feeling that their work is important. Katarina Ivanković-Knežević, the Director for Social Affairs at the European Commission, pointed out the importance of increased visibility of the disability angle through the Disability Strategy. She highlighted past campaigns and initiatives that have helped people with disabilities find jobs, such as the Youth Employment Initiative and the #EUvsDiscrimination campaign, as well as next steps. Haydn Hammersley from the European Disability Forum shared the importance of using European Funds to help people with disabilities find jobs, ensuring that they are not paid less than minimum wage, retaining disability benefits when these individuals gain employment, and implementing mutual recognition of disability assessment among Member States. Finally, MEP Milan Brglez affirmed that the pandemic calls for more engagement to deal with discrimination in access to employment, so the next strategy must include the aspect of social exclusion of people with disabilities.³⁸



During another seminar we discussed how EU institutions can foster inclusion of people with disabilities on the labour market. In the Council of the European Union, according to Rebekka Wiemann, they have been working on this issue by creating traineeships for EU nationals with disabilities and by establishing networks of staff and carers with disabilities. In addition, Katrin Langensiepen presented the first draft of a new report to the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs of the European Parliament on equal treatment in employment in light of the UNCRPD, to which Inclusion Europe contributed. She emphasised the importance of measures such as diversity quotas or establishing EU guidelines on reasonable accommodation. At the United Nations, the United Nations Disability Strategy aims to include more people with disabilities in their staff, as well as give staff information and training on how to include people with disabilities.³⁹

What is the European Union Recovery Plan?

The European Union Recovery Plan could represent an opportunity for people with intellectual disabilities to access the open labour market and for those already employed to secure their positions. Through the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) and Next Generation EU (NGEU), extraordinary funds have been allocated to address the sanitary crisis and the challenges it has generated.





The MFF includes programmes such as the European Social Fund+. This fund will merge the European Social Fund (ESF), the Youth Employment Initiative (YEI), and the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD), the Employment and Social Innovation Programme (EaSI) and the EU Health Programme⁴⁰. The new fund aims to increase social inclusion and improve skills and jobs in the transition to a green and digital economy. Furthermore, the React-EU package, which is part of the NGEU, includes additional funds that will be made available through funds such as ESF+.

Young people across the EU have been particularly affected by unemployment. To tackle this, the Youth Employment Initiative (YEI) supports young people who are not studying, employed or training.⁴¹ This is combined with the new Youth Employment Support, based on the Youth Guarantee, which has existed since 2013. The new proposal reinforces the Youth Guarantee, and steps up and expands outreach to vulnerable young people across the EU to cover people aged 15 – 29.⁴²

- The Commission’s proposal on vocational education and training aims to make systems more modern, attractive, flexible and fit for the digital and green economy. More agile, learner-centred vocational education and training will prepare young people for their first jobs and give more adults opportunities to enhance or change their careers.
- Additional measures to support youth employment include employment and start-up incentives in the short term, and capacity building, young entrepreneur networks and inter-company training centres in the medium term.

Recommendations

- **Consult people with intellectual disabilities and their representatives** in all decisions that affect them, especially during times of emergency.
- **Recognise people working in sheltered workshops as workers.** Make sure they can benefit from measures taken to protect workers during the pandemic.
- **Include people with intellectual disabilities in Recovery Plans.** Use European Funds to promote employment of people with intellectual disabilities and ensure they are not left out of Recovery Plans.
- **Address the digital gap.** As the European Union strives to achieve a digital economy, make technology accessible for people with disabilities. Create accessible training to allow people with intellectual disabilities to use the necessary technological tools to work at home, and make subsidies available to buy necessary technological devices.
- **Help people with intellectual disabilities develop the necessary skills to find employment.** Provide accessible training to people with intellectual disabilities on skills that can help them find employment, such as writing a CV or performing well during interviews.
- **End the so-called “benefit trap”.** Ensure people with intellectual disabilities do not lose the disability benefits when they enter the open labour market.

- **End segregation.** Ensure the transition from sheltered settings to the open labour market through deinstitutionalisation and by including people with intellectual disabilities in life-long learning and vocational training programmes.
- **Provide training to employers** on employing people with intellectual disabilities and their obligations in this regard, particularly the obligation to provide reasonable accommodations.
- **Collect and provide better data that informs policies.** Produce more accurate data, disaggregated for each type of disability, which also includes people in institutions and those with complex support needs.

Other resources

“Neglect and discrimination. Multiplied. How Covid-19 affected the rights of people with intellectual disabilities and their families.” Inclusion Europe, 2020.

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My Talents for diversity



The project was funded by the European Union's Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme (2014-2020).

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