

**SUPPORTING
WORKERS**
with **DISABILITIES**
and
**MAKING JOBS
MORE ACCESSIBLE**



**J-ILO
COMMITTEE**

STUDY GUIDE ILO: SUPPORTING WORKERS WITH DISABILITIES AND MAKING JOBS MORE ACCESSIBLE

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KEY TERMS

- **Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)** = A law that protects disabled people from discrimination at work
- **Equality Act 2010** = A law that ensures equal rights in the UK
- **Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)** = A global agreement protecting disabled people's rights
- **Quota Systems** = Rules that require companies to hire a certain number of disabled workers
- **Benefit Trap** = Fear of losing support if you get a job
- **Stigma** = Negative stereotypes about disabilities
- **Employer Bias** = Employers having unfair opinions
- **Accessible Infrastructure** = Buildings designed for everyone (ramps, elevators).
- **Assistive Technology** = Tools that help (screen readers, voice software).
- **Digital Accessibility** = Making websites and software usable for all.
- **Flexible Work** = Options like remote work or flexible hours
- **Inclusive Hiring** = Hiring processes that are fair to everyone
- **Disability Employment Programs** = Government or company programs to help disabled people get jobs
- **Vocational Rehabilitation** = Training to help people find or return to work.
- **Return-to-Work Programs (RTW)** = Helping people go back to work after illness/injury
- **Policy Gaps** = Laws exist, but are not fully followed
- **Sustainable Employment** = Long-term, stable jobs
- **Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP – USA)** – U.S. government agency that develops policies to increase employment opportunities for people with disabilities.
- **Disability Employment Strategy (EU)** – European Union framework promoting equal labour participation and workplace inclusion.

1. Introduction to the Committee: International Labour Organisation

1.1 Historical Background of the Committee

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) is a United Nations agency whose mandate is to advance social and economic justice by setting international labour standards. Founded in October 1919 under the League of Nations, it is one of the first and oldest specialised agencies of the UN. The ILO has 187 member states: 186 out of 193 UN member states plus the Cook Islands. It is headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland, with around 40 field offices worldwide, employs some 3,381 staff across 107 nations, of whom 1,698 work in technical cooperation programmes and projects.

1.2 ILO's Role in Promoting Fair and Inclusive Workplaces

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) plays a central role in promoting fair and inclusive workplaces by setting international labour standards, fostering social dialogue, and providing technical assistance to eliminate discrimination and improve working conditions worldwide. The ILO's approach is rooted in ensuring equality of opportunity and treatment for all workers, regardless of characteristics like gender, race, disability, or HIV status.

The ILO develops and promotes conventions and recommendations that act as benchmarks for national labour laws and policies. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) Disability Inclusion Strategy 2024–27 aims to create more inclusive labour markets by ensuring that the nearly 1 billion people with disabilities worldwide can access decent and productive work. The strategy focuses on removing barriers such as discrimination, inaccessible workplaces, and limited training opportunities. By promoting inclusive policies, improving accessibility, and encouraging employers to adopt fair hiring practices, the ILO seeks to empower people with disabilities to participate fully in the workforce. Ultimately, the strategy supports equal opportunities, social protection, and sustainable economic growth through disability-inclusive employment.

2. Background Information

2.1 Defining Disability in the Workplace

In the workplace, a disability is generally defined as a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities. Legal frameworks, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the UK Equality Act 2010, protect individuals with such conditions, requiring employers to provide reasonable accommodations to enable them to perform their jobs

- **Physical or Mental Impairment:** *This includes a wide range of conditions, such as physiological disorders, anatomical disfigurements, mental illnesses, or learning disabilities.*
- **Substantial Limitation:** *The impairment must cause a significant, rather than minor, restriction on daily activities, including working, walking, seeing, hearing, speaking, or concentrating.*
- **"Long-Term" Threshold:** *Often, the impairment must last or be expected to last for at least 12 months.*
- **Chronic or Episodic Conditions:** *Conditions that are in remission or episodic (e.g., cancer, HIV, epilepsy) are covered if they would substantially limit a major life activity when active.*
- **"Regarded As" Protection:** *Individuals are protected if they are treated as disabled by an employer, even if they do not have a limiting impairment*

2.2 Rights of Workers with Disabilities

Workers with disabilities have the right to equal employment opportunities, protection from discrimination, and reasonable accommodations in the workplace, as mandated by laws such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Key rights include accessibility, fair hiring/promotion, and confidentiality of medical information.

Key Rights and Protections

- **Non-Discrimination:** Employers (typically with 15+ employees) cannot discriminate in hiring, firing, pay, promotion, or training based on a disability.
- **Reasonable Accommodation:** Employers must provide modifications to enable employees to perform their jobs, unless doing so would cause "undue hardship". Examples include modified equipment, schedule changes, or accessible facilities. Reasonable workplace accommodations are modifications to the work environment, job duties, or policies that enable qualified employees with disabilities to perform essential job functions and enjoy equal employment opportunities. These adjustments, which must not impose undue hardship, include flexible scheduling, ergonomic equipment, telework, and job restructuring
- **Confidentiality & Inquiries:** Employers cannot ask about the nature or severity of a disability before a job interview, and they must keep medical information confidential.
- **Protection from Retaliation:** Employees have the right to request accommodation or file a complaint without being punished.
- **Accessibility:** Workplaces must be accessible, covering physical access, transportation, and communication technologies.

Application Process and Employment

- **Job Inquiries:** Employers can only ask if you can perform job duties with or without reasonable accommodation.
- **Medical Exams:** Generally, medical exams are allowed only after a job offer is made, if required for all entering employees in that category.
- **Support:** Rights include access to vocational rehabilitation, training, and job retention programs

Common Accommodations

- Making existing facilities accessible.
- Restructuring jobs or modifying work schedules.
- Acquiring or modifying equipment or devices.
- Adjusting training materials or policies

2.2.1 Equal Employment Opportunities And Disability Rights under the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) is a legally binding international treaty that ensures that persons with disabilities enjoy full equality, dignity, and human rights, shifting the view from charity to rights-based, autonomous, and active participation in society. It mandates accessibility, non-discrimination, and inclusion across all areas of life, including education, employment, and independent living. Key principles of disability rights include respect for dignity and autonomy, ensuring that individuals can make their own choices and live independently. They also emphasise non-discrimination and equality, meaning people with disabilities must receive equal protection under the law. Accessibility is another essential element, requiring access to physical environments, transportation, information, and communication, including tools such as braille and sign language. These rights also protect the right to life, liberty, and legal capacity, while promoting independent living and full inclusion in the community rather than institutionalisation. Additionally, individuals with disabilities must have equal access to education and employment opportunities without discrimination, as well as social protection that guarantees an adequate standard of living, including access to clean water, healthcare services, and assistive devices. Finally, they must be able to actively participate in political, public, and cultural life as equal members of society.

2.3 Importance of Accessible Jobs for Social Inclusion

Accessible and inclusive employment plays a crucial role in improving the lives of persons with disabilities (PwD). Having fair and open access to jobs promotes financial independence and helps reduce poverty by enabling individuals to earn a stable income rather than relying solely on social welfare. Meaningful work also improves self-esteem and mental health by giving individuals a sense of purpose and confidence. In addition, accessible workplaces help people build social networks, reduce isolation, and foster a sense of belonging within the community. Quality employment opportunities can also break the “benefit trap,” in which individuals remain stuck in low-wage or protected jobs, by enabling career growth and long-term economic stability. Furthermore, employment empowers persons with disabilities to have a stronger voice in society and advocate for their rights. Creating inclusive jobs requires thoughtful design, including physical adaptations such as accessible workspaces; digital accessibility in software and communication tools that work with assistive technologies like screen readers; flexible work arrangements such as remote work or adjusted hours; and an inclusive workplace culture supported by staff training and strong diversity policies. Inclusive employment also benefits society and employers by encouraging innovation through diverse perspectives, improving company performance, and strengthening a company’s reputation as a socially responsible and forward-thinking organisation

3. Current Situation in the 21st Century

3.1 Employment Rates of People with Disabilities Worldwide

In the 21st century, supporting workers with disabilities and making jobs more accessible has transitioned from a compliance-focused, charity-based model to a rights-based approach focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). As of 2024-2025, while employment rates for people with disabilities have hit record highs in some regions (e.g., 38% in the US), significant gaps remain. The landscape is defined by the promise of remote work and assistive technology, but is countered by persistent, systemic barriers, including a high rate of rejection of accommodation requests. People with disabilities (PWD) face significant global employment challenges, with employment rates roughly half that of people without disabilities. Approximately 30% to 44% of working-age PWD are employed, often facing a 25+ percentage point employment gap compared to non-disabled peers. While recent data indicate a record 25% labor force participation in some areas, substantial barriers remain, including lower wages (roughly 12% less per hour) and higher unemployment rates.

3.2 Barriers to Employment

Despite growing awareness and legislation, many barriers still prevent persons with disabilities (PwD) from fully accessing the labour market. A 2024 Deloitte survey found that 74% of employees who requested workplace accommodations had at least one request rejected, indicating that legal protections do not always translate into practice. People with disabilities also face a “double gap” in both employment and wages: they are significantly less likely to obtain employment and, when they do, they are often placed in lower-skill and lower-paying jobs, resulting in a persistent wage gap compared to employees without disabilities. In addition, the growing return-to-office mandates by some employers risk reversing progress made through remote work, which has been an important accessibility tool for many individuals who rely on flexible working conditions. Another major challenge is the prevalence of invisible disabilities—around 70% of disabilities are not immediately visible—which can lead to misunderstanding, stigma, and reluctance to disclose a disability. Many employees fear negative judgment or discrimination from managers and colleagues, preventing them from requesting the support they need.

Furthermore, limited workplace accessibility, insufficient employer awareness, and inadequate implementation of inclusive policies continue to restrict equal opportunities and full workforce participation. Employment data shows that people with disabilities still face significant inequalities in the labour market. While some studies estimate that only about one-third of working-age persons with disabilities are employed, other data across 32 countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) suggest the employment rate can reach around 44%. However, labour force participation remains much lower overall—generally about 30% lower than for people without disabilities.

In some recent studies from late 2025, participation reached roughly 25% globally, while data from the U.S. Bureau of Labour Statistics reported a participation rate of about 42.6% for people with disabilities in December 2025. A significant employment gap also exists in the European Union, where the difference between employment rates of persons with disabilities and non-disabled people averages around 24.4 percentage points and can rise to 38–40 points in countries such as Ireland and Belgium. Even when employed, workers with disabilities often experience wage and job-quality disparities, earning about 12% less per hour on average. Women with disabilities face even greater challenges, as they are more likely to encounter barriers to employment and larger pay gaps compared with both men with disabilities and women without disabilities.

3.3 Accessibility in Workplaces and Infrastructure

Modern employment is increasingly based on information processing rather than physical labour, with tasks such as reading, analysing, documenting, and coordinating information. Despite this shift, many workplace systems still assume full visual access. Data from the American Foundation for the Blind (AFB), based on the 2023 Current Population Survey, highlights this disparity: among working-age adults with vision difficulties, only 42% of women and 40% of men aged 16–64 were employed, compared with 68% and 76% of people without disabilities. These gaps are largely the result of structural barriers rather than limitations in ability. Many knowledge-based roles—an idea popularised by Peter Drucker—depend on interacting with digital content such as documents, emails, reports, and shared files. However, inaccessible formats like scanned PDFs, screenshots, or poorly structured documents can significantly reduce productivity for workers with low vision. Ensuring accessibility should therefore be considered a core part of workplace infrastructure rather than a post-hoc accommodation. Implementing accessible systems from the hiring and onboarding stages, along with appropriate tools and training, can remove unnecessary barriers and allow employees with visual impairments to work efficiently and participate fully in the modern information-based workforce

3.4 National Policies and Disability Employment Programs

National policies and disability employment programs aim to increase the workforce participation of people with disabilities through non-discrimination laws, quota systems, and targeted support services. Key initiatives include reasonable accommodation mandates, vocational training, tax incentives for employers, and federal hiring targets, guided by frameworks like the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Key National Policies & Frameworks

- ***UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD):*** Article 27 recognises the right of persons with disabilities to work on an equal basis with others.
- ***Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA - US):*** Prohibits discrimination in employment and requires employers to provide reasonable accommodations.
- ***Disability Employment Package (EU):*** A strategy designed to support EU Member States in improving employment outcomes and ensuring economic autonomy.
- ***Quota Systems: Various nations*** (e.g., in Europe and Asia) require companies of a certain size to hire a specific percentage of employees with disabilities.
- ***Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (India):*** Mandates non-discrimination and promotes education and employment.
- ***Disability Employment Programs & Initiatives Of the Disability Employment Policy (ODEP - US):*** Develops and influences policies to promote inclusive workplace cultures, including customised employment and training.
- ***Federal Hiring Initiatives:*** Programs in the U.S. that aim to hire a specific number of people with disabilities into government roles (e.g., 100,000 workers over 5 years).
- ***Stay at Work/Return to Work (SAW/RTW):*** Initiatives to support individuals who acquire a disability while employed, aiming for retention.
- ***Vocational Rehabilitation & Training:*** National programs focusing on skill development, such as the National Action Plan for Skill Development of PwDs in India

4. Challenges in Supporting Workers with Disabilities

4.1 Workplace Discrimination and Stigma

Employment provides important social, economic, and psychological benefits for people living with psychosis, including improved financial stability, greater independence, and enhanced self-esteem. However, significant barriers to employment remain, particularly due to stigma and discrimination associated with serious mental health conditions. A qualitative study examining these challenges collected data through focus groups and interviews with multiple stakeholders, including individuals living with mental health conditions, healthcare professionals, caregivers, employment consultants, community members, and employers. The findings revealed that workplace stigma can have profound effects on employment outcomes. Many individuals reported avoiding work opportunities, hesitating to disclose their mental health condition to employers due to fear of discrimination, experiencing increased work-related stress, and struggling to maintain long-term employment. These barriers not only limit job opportunities but also contribute to social exclusion and economic insecurity. The study highlights the importance of developing stronger support systems, including mental health–friendly workplace policies, employer education programs, and inclusive hiring practices. Promoting a workplace culture that values understanding, flexibility, and psychological safety is essential to improving employment opportunities, job retention, and overall well-being for people living with psychosis.

4.2 Lack of Accessible Infrastructure and Technology

A 2023 report by the European Disability Forum, funded by Google.org, examined the persistent causes of low employment rates among persons with disabilities. The report found that only 51% of persons with disabilities are employed compared to 75% of people without disabilities, highlighting a significant employment gap. One of the key issues identified is the lack of inclusive hiring practices: only 1 in 4 employers has developed accessible recruitment processes, which are essential to ensuring equal opportunities during the hiring process. Additionally, 81% of employers reported having no policy for acquiring assistive technologies to support employees with disabilities, and only 25% are aware of or use public support programs designed to provide reasonable workplace accommodations. The report emphasises the need for employers to invest in accessible technology regardless of whether employees currently disclose a disability. At the same time, public authorities should expand, simplify, and better promote financial support schemes that help companies implement reasonable accommodations. It also recommends that technology companies involve persons with disabilities directly in the design of technological solutions to ensure accessibility from the outset. As noted by Maureen Piggot, a member of the Executive Committee of the European Disability Forum, greater awareness, support, and policy action are essential to ensure that workers with disabilities are not only employed but also fully valued and included in the workforce.

4.3 Limited Employer Awareness and Training

Limited employee awareness and training regarding disability leads to significant workplace barriers, including poor communication, a lack of proper accommodations, and exclusion. Effective disability awareness training, which should cover both visible and invisible disabilities, is crucial for educating staff on etiquette and legal obligations and for fostering an inclusive, supportive environment. Improving workplace awareness and training is essential to creating an inclusive environment for employees with disabilities. Effective training programs should focus on disability etiquette and communication, helping staff interact respectfully with colleagues with disabilities and avoid making assumptions about their abilities. They should also teach employees to identify and remove both physical and digital barriers in the workplace, and to increase awareness of assistive technologies that support accessibility. In addition, training should address legal responsibilities, including the obligation to provide reasonable adjustments or accommodations for employees with disabilities. Awareness initiatives should cover a wide range of conditions, including visible and invisible disabilities such as mental health conditions, chronic illnesses, and neurodiversity.

Finally, organisations should promote inclusive onboarding practices by preparing teams in advance and providing guidance on how to support new disabled colleagues, helping create a welcoming and supportive workplace culture from the first day of employment

4.4 Economic and Policy Limitations

Disabled employees face significant economic and policy limitations that hinder their employment, career progression, and financial well-being, often resulting in lower workforce participation rates (around 30% lower than those without disabilities in most OECD countries). Despite legal protections, these barriers stem from systemic issues, including discriminatory hiring practices, inadequate workplace accommodations, and restrictive welfare policies. Persons with disabilities often face significant economic limitations that affect their financial stability and participation in the labour market.

One major challenge is the persistent wage gap, as workers with disabilities frequently earn considerably less than their non-disabled peers for similar work. In addition, unemployment and labour market inactivity remain high; in the European Union, nearly 40% of persons with disabilities aged 20–64 are excluded from the labour market. Social security systems can also unintentionally create a “benefit trap,” in which individuals fear losing essential healthcare or income support if they enter employment, thereby discouraging workforce participation.

Furthermore, people with disabilities often face additional living expenses, including higher healthcare costs, transportation needs, and specialised equipment, which reduce their disposable income and increase the risk of poverty. Even when employed, many individuals with disabilities experience underemployment or are more likely to work in part-time or insecure jobs, leading to higher turnover rates and greater income instability over time. Policy and structural limitations continue to hinder employment opportunities for persons with disabilities. Quota systems, such as the 3% requirement in Turkey’s private sector or 4% in the public sector, are often poorly enforced and perceived as insufficient to ensure meaningful inclusion.

Similarly, anti-discrimination laws, including the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in the US and comparable legislation in Europe, are often slow to enforce and insufficient to address hiring bias and workplace stigma. Many employers fail to provide reasonable accommodations or are deterred by perceived costs, creating both physical and operational barriers. Social support systems are often fragmented, lacking the mechanisms to help individuals transition from unemployment to sustained employment and to support skill development and career growth. In addition, inaccessible workplaces and challenges with transportation, including long or difficult commutes, further restrict consistent workforce participation, emphasising the need for comprehensive policy, infrastructure, and workplace reform

5. Questions to Ponder

- What are some barriers that make it hard for people with disabilities to get jobs?
- How can workplaces make jobs more accessible for employees with disabilities?
- What is “reasonable accommodation,” and why is it important?
- How does stigma or discrimination affect people with disabilities at work?
- Why is accessibility in digital tools (like computers and software) important?
- What are some ways employers can support workers with invisible disabilities, like mental health conditions?
 - How do policies like quotas or anti-discrimination laws help, and why aren't they always enough?
 - How does including people with disabilities benefit workplaces and society as a whole?
 - Why do some people with disabilities earn less than others even if they have the same job?
 - How can flexible work hours or remote work help employees with disabilities?
 - How can coworkers help make the workplace more welcoming for people with disabilities?
 - How can training and awareness programs change attitudes toward disabled workers?
 - How can technology make jobs easier for employees with disabilities?
 - Why is early support and accessible onboarding important for new employees with disabilities?

6. Possible Solutions

Strengthen Anti-Discrimination Laws and Enforcement Mechanisms: Governments should implement and enforce robust legal protections prohibiting discrimination in hiring, promotion, and the workplace treatment of persons with disabilities. These laws must include clear complaint mechanisms and penalties for non-compliance.

Improve Access to Education and Vocational Training:

Barriers to employment often begin before the workplace. Inclusive education systems and accessible vocational training programs should be expanded to ensure equal skill development opportunities for persons with disabilities.

Address Stigma Through Public Awareness Campaigns:

National and international awareness campaigns should be implemented to challenge stereotypes and misconceptions about disability, promoting inclusion and equal opportunity in employment.

Ensure Physical Accessibility in Work Environments:

Workplaces should be designed or modified to include ramps, elevators, accessible restrooms, ergonomic workstations, and clear navigation systems to accommodate employees with physical disabilities.

Promote Universal Digital Accessibility Standards:

Digital tools, software, and workplace platforms must be accessible to all employees, including support for screen readers, captioning systems, and adaptable user interfaces.

Integrate Accessibility into Workplace Design from the Start:

Accessibility should not be an afterthought but a core part of workplace planning, ensuring inclusive environments in both new and existing infrastructures.

Expand Flexible Work Arrangements:

Flexible working hours, remote work options, and task adaptation can significantly improve employment opportunities for persons with disabilities, especially those with mobility or chronic health conditions.

Provide Individualised Workplace Adjustments:

Employers should assess employee needs on a case-by-case basis, ensuring that accommodations are tailored rather than standardised.

Implement Workplace Anti-Discrimination Training:

Regular training programs should be introduced to educate employees and management about disability rights, inclusion, and unconscious bias.

Encourage Innovation in Accessible Work Tools:

Governments and the private sector should support research and development of inclusive workplace technologies that enhance productivity and independence.

Monitor Inclusion Through Workplace Data Collection:

Governments and organisations should track employment rates, wage equality, and indicators of workplace inclusion for persons with disabilities.

