



Research and collection of inclusive VET and employment success stories

Report on the national systems and best cases in Bulgaria and Ireland

CuBuFo & NASOR



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1. Aims of the research

This report aims to explore good practices for the inclusion of people with disabilities both in vocational education and in the economy as employees and workers in companies. The report examines examples from Bulgaria and Ireland that can be successfully transferred and implemented in other countries. The report examines two VET practices, as well as two inclusive employment practices from Bulgaria and Ireland.

2. Scope and Definitions of the Research

2.1 Scope and Definitions as far as VET education is concerned (VET types, age, disability categories)

The VET practices selected for presentation here are from Bulgaria and Ireland. Before we dive into the practices themselves, let us look into the legislative frameworks in the two countries.

The standards for inclusive educational environment in Bulgaria are set in the Inclusive education regulation from 2017 with most recent amendment on 6 Aug 2024. The regulation is a contribution to the Law on education and provides the legislative framework for all educational levels, including VET.

Inclusive education in Ireland on the other hand, aims to educate children with SEN alongside their peers in mainstream schools, with roughly 98% of students in mainstream settings and 2% in special schools/classes. The EPSEN Act 2004 supports this process and utilizes a continuum of provision, including in-class supports, of special classes, and specialized schools.

The Vocational High School of Forestry and Woodworking “Nikolay Haytov” in Varna, the first good practice presenter on our list, is a pioneer in inclusive vocational education, being the first school in the city to admit and educate students with SEN since 2009. The school offers a range of vocational programmes, including landscaping and floristry, furniture production, interior design, and park construction, integrating students with SEN into mainstream classes while providing individualized support. The local context is characterized by a growing demand for skilled vocational workers and a need to ensure equal educational opportunities for all students. The school’s inclusive practice is supported by a strong partner network, including resource teachers, school psychologists, pedagogical counselors, parents, NGOs such as ASD “Vision,” and local authorities, all contributing to a structured, supportive, and sustainable educational environment.

The Irish best practice under analysis is the WALK PEER (Providing Equal Employment Routes) Supported Transition Model. This initiative is managed by WALK – Inclusive Employment Services. The programme functions as a critical bridge for young people with SEN, particularly those with intellectual disabilities (ID), transitioning from compulsory school education to mainstream forms of vocational education and training (VET), further education and training (FET), and paid employment. The programme's target group consists of senior students aged 16 and over. The programme operates through collaboration with a network of 10 partner schools in Ireland, including 7 special schools and 3 post-primary schools. The partner network is multifaceted, involving school leadership,



families, local ETBs, and most importantly – employers such as Penneys and PJ Hegarty, who provide real jobs and training opportunities. Funding, which is essential for the operational structure, is provided as a pilot supported transition project through the Dormant Accounts fund of the Department of Education. This partnership between the educational, social, and labor sectors, supported by the European Social Fund (ESF), demonstrates that effective inclusion requires a cross-sectoral approach.

2.2 Scope and Definitions as far as inclusive employment is concerned

The good Bulgarian practice comes from the Agency for Social Development “Vision” (ASD Vision) - a well-established non-governmental organization in the public and social sector, founded in 1997 and based in Bulgaria. It employs around 250 staff across its head office and regional branches. The organization has become a recognized example of inclusive employment, demonstrating how people with various disabilities can be successfully integrated into meaningful and productive work. Diversity and inclusion are embedded in the organization’s culture and operational practices. While diversity in management is still developing, the Human Resources department leads efforts to ensure that employees with physical, sensory, or intellectual limitations are provided with the support they need to thrive. This includes accessible workplaces, flexible schedules, mentoring, and the possibility to work remotely when required. Internal policies on anti-discrimination, health and safety, data protection, and accessibility guide these practices and ensure that inclusion is systematic rather than temporary.

The second analyzed best practice originates from Bank of Ireland (BoI), a leading financial institution operating in both the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom. As a large multinational corporation (MNC) in the financial sector, the organization operates in a highly regulated environment where compliance with equality and inclusion requirements is both a legal obligation and a strategic imperative for maintaining competitiveness and reputation. The Inclusion and Diversity (I&D) strategy is centrally embedded in the Group's corporate purpose: "Helping you thrive".

3. Criteria for Selecting Good Practices

Vocational High School of Forestry and Woodworking “Nikolay Haytov” in Varna is a good practice example of inclusive education and integration of students with SEN for several reasons. It was the first vocational high school in the city to admit and educate students with SEN, starting in 2009, and it continues to serve as a pioneer in developing inclusive educational practices. The school has successfully implemented both integrated learning in mainstream classes and, initially, specialized classes, providing opportunities for students with diverse abilities to acquire vocational skills in areas such as landscaping, floristry, furniture production, interior design, and park construction. Over the years, the school has developed a comprehensive support system, including resource teachers, psychologists, pedagogical counselors, and IEPs, ensuring that each student’s learning, social, and personal development needs are met. The school’s experience demonstrates a structured and sustainable model for inclusive VET, with a long-term commitment to student success, social inclusion, and preparation for the labour market. These factors make it an exemplary institution and a valuable reference for other vocational education providers seeking to implement inclusive practices.



The WALK PEER Supported Transition Model represents an exemplary practice for inclusive vocational education and training (VET) in Ireland, especially for learners with intellectual disabilities. The programme's success is due to its methodological depth – a five-year, long-term intervention that integrates Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to remove systemic barriers with intensive, three-year support for workplace retention.

UDL and Employment: WALK PEER demonstrates the effective application of UDL in the VET sector, where the focus has shifted from reactive accommodation to proactive design that ensures learners' experiences are strategic and purposeful. **The Critical Role of Mentorship:** Long-term mentorship (3 years post-school) from Career and Employment Facilitators is the most important factor in transforming a short-term job placement into a sustainable career, directly linked to high levels of retention and satisfaction. **Economic Rationality:** The model is cost-efficient. Despite initial investment costs (€278,000 annually), it leads to a reduction in long-term social and health costs and creates economically active citizens, providing a high return on public funds.

The Agency for Social Development “Vision” (ASD Vision) was selected as a good practice example of inclusive employment in Bulgaria because it demonstrates a sustainable, internal model of inclusion within a social services organisation. As a provider of social and support services, ASD Vision leads by example by employing approximately 20 people with various disabilities and integrating structured accommodations, mentorship, and flexible working arrangements into its daily operations. The organisation has developed clear policies, processes, and a culture of inclusion without relying on external funding projects, making it a replicable model for other NGOs and small-to-medium employers.

The Irish Financial Sector Model at Bank of Ireland (BoI) was selected as a good practice example of inclusive employment because it represents a mature, systemic corporate approach to inclusion. As the first Irish company to achieve Disability Smart Standard (DSS) Bronze accreditation in 2021, BoI has institutionalised inclusion through the Reasonable Adjustments Passport, Neuroinclusion Policy, and dedicated Employee Support Networks. The model combines strong leadership commitment, external validation, and measurable tools that address the disclosure gap and deliver both social and business benefits, making it highly transferable to other large organisations in regulated sectors.

4. Study Design and Sampling

This report applies a comparative case study design across two countries and two environments: VET providers and employers. The aim is to identify good practices for inclusion of people with disabilities that can be transferred and implemented in other contexts. The case selection is purposive. Four cases are included to ensure parallel coverage across environments and countries. For VET: Vocational High School of Forestry and Woodworking “Nikolay Haytov” in Varna and the WALK PEER Supported Transition Model. For employers: Agency for Social Development “Vision” (ASD Vision) and Bank of Ireland (BoI). Each case is treated as a unit of analysis and documented under common headings aligned to the report structure. Data collection follows two approaches, reflecting the availability of sources by country. Bulgarian practices are documented through completed Google questionnaires provided by the practice owners. Irish practices are documented through desk research based on internet search and publicly available online sources.



5. Data Sources and Tools

The report is based on structured review and extraction of information for the four selected good practices. Two data sources are used. For Bulgaria, completed Google questionnaires provided by the practice owners. For Ireland, desk research based on internet search and publicly available online sources. Across all cases, information is extracted and organized under harmonized headings to support comparability across VET and employer environments: Context and support structures; Practical approach and implementation elements; Accessibility and inclusion measures; Outcomes and observed results where available; Ethics, data protection, and compliance elements. The drafting process uses a single template structure with identical section headings across countries and environments, and an internal consistency check for terminology (SEN, disability, intellectual disabilities, reasonable accommodations, Student Support Teams - SST) and specialist support in VET, HR, policies, and reasonable adjustments tools in employer contexts). All descriptions are provided in open-access format in line with Erasmus+ 2026 open-access requirements for educational resources and project results. The Irish practices were compiled exclusively through desk research from publicly available sources listed in the respective practice sections. No direct contact with the Irish organisations was made for the purpose of this report. All detailed references, footnotes and source links used in the original descriptions are preserved in the Annexes containing the full individual practice files.

6. Best practices for inclusive VET

Title of the best practice:

Vocational High School of Forestry and Woodworking “Nikolay Haytov”, Bulgaria

Vocational High School of Forestry and Woodworking “Nikolay Haytov” is in Varna, Bulgaria. Training of students with SEN has been conducted in the school since 2009. This is the first vocational high school in the city of Varna that started training students with special educational needs, both integrated and in special classes. Students with SEN who did not meet the State Educational Standard were admitted and trained after completing the seventh grade with a certificate document in a three-year course of study in the specialty “Landscaping and Floristry”, profession “Landscaping Worker”. Since 2016, there have been no specialized classes. Students with SEN are admitted to mainstream classes after the seventh grade in the following specialties: “Furniture Production”, “Forestry and Hunting Management”, “Interior Design”, “Park Construction and Landscaping”, “Restoration of Antique Furniture and Joinery”. Students who do not meet the State Educational Standard are trained under IEP; they do not receive a certificate of completed secondary education.

Context:

The Vocational High School of Forestry and Woodworking “Nikolay Haytov” in Varna is a pioneer in inclusive vocational education, being the first school in the city to admit and educate students with SEN since 2009. The school offers a range of vocational programmes, including landscaping and floristry, furniture production, interior design, and park construction, integrating students with SEN into mainstream classes while providing individualized support. The local context is characterized by a growing demand for skilled vocational workers and a need to ensure equal educational



opportunities for all students. The school's inclusive practice is supported by a strong partner network, including resource teachers, school psychologists, pedagogical counselors, parents, NGOs such as ASD "Vision," and local authorities, all contributing to a structured, supportive, and sustainable educational environment.

Problem and motivation:

For many years, students with SEN faced serious difficulties in accessing quality vocational education and training. In many cases, they were excluded from the mainstream education system or directed exclusively to specialized institutions, which limited their opportunities for social integration, personal development, and future employment. The lack of an adapted learning environment, well-prepared teaching staff, and coordinated support further deepened inequalities and led to early school leaving. The school's motivation to admit and educate students with SEN stems from the recognized need to ensure equal access to education and to respond to the individual needs of each student. Guided by the principles of inclusive education and the belief that every child has the potential for development, the school leadership and teaching staff assumed the responsibility of creating a supportive and safe educational environment. The main motivation was not only the academic progress of students with SEN, but also their successful socialization, the development of independent living skills, and preparation for participation in the labour market. This led to targeted changes in the educational approach, the organization of the learning process, and the development of school capacity for sustainable inclusive education.

Practical approach:

The school applies a systematic and multi-layered practical approach that combines individualised pedagogical support with emotional care, continuous collaboration with specialists and external partners, and active involvement of parents and the wider community.

Support in mastering the learning material – an atmosphere of informality and calm is created between students and teachers; a relationship of mutual trust, respect, and support is maintained. In this way, teachers succeed in understanding students' experiences, needs, problems, and requirements. Students seek communication with them daily and gladly share both their positive and negative emotions. The learning content is adapted to the abilities of each individual student. In their work, teachers apply interactive methods, storytelling, conversation, discussion, role-playing games, and problem-solving. They show films created based on works included in the educational programme.

Additional support for the personal development of students – work with a resource teacher. The resource teacher at the school additionally supports students with SEN in the learning process and in extracurricular activities for optimal acquisition of the learning content, intellectual, psychological, and social development, and adaptation to the general learning environment. Together with the mainstream teacher, they organize both curricular and extracurricular activities, teaching individually or in groups depending on the needs.

Work with a school psychologist and pedagogical counselor – in their work, the psychologist and the pedagogical counselor are present daily, consistently, and effectively in the school life of all students, and particularly those with SEN.

Providing emotional support – it is extremely important for students with SEN to be educated in an environment where they feel protected and secure. In their teaching activities, pedagogical specialists work toward developing students' self-esteem and motivation. This is achieved by providing emotional support to all learners.

Work with parents – systematic and regular, with the aim of monitoring progress and discussing important and significant topics related to the student's development.



Work of the student support team (SST) – class teacher, resource teacher, psychologist, teachers of Bulgarian language and literature and mathematics. Discussion of students' development.

Qualification of pedagogical specialists – in recent years, teachers at Vocational High School of Forestry and Woodworking "Nikolay Haytov" have gained confidence in working with students with SEN and skills for maintaining their interest and encouraging their participation in the learning process. Improving qualifications for working with students with SEN is a good practice in which the school management continuously invests.

Interest-based activities – all students in the school are included in clubs for interest-based activities offered by the school.

Interaction with NGOs.

Use of a social service for students with SEN – social assistant from ASD "Vision" – for more than 15 years, students from the school have used social assistants from ASD "Vision". There is very good cooperation between the two institutions.

When training students with SEN, the school has a good system for adaptation and integration.

Among graduating students, indisputable progress is observed in terms of:

- Acquired knowledge and skills;
- Independent handling of a number of practical tasks;
- Sense of security and protection;
- Good communication among them;
- Their behavior in public places is calmer;
- Their practical training classes are interesting, useful, and meaningful;
- They demonstrate high standards toward themselves and others;
- Aggressiveness decreases, motor activity increases, fine motor skills improve, etc.;
- Successful completion of grades 10 and 12 with successfully passed state, matriculation, and qualification exams.

Students trained at the school over the years have had various diagnoses, conditions, and difficulties: mild to moderate intellectual disability, learning skills disorder, visual impairment, hyperkinetic disorder with attention deficit, cerebral palsy, dyslexia, Asperger syndrome, etc.

Results:

Since the introduction of inclusive practices, the initiative has affected a significant number of learners with SEN enrolled in the school over the years, including students with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities, learning difficulties, visual impairments, attention deficit and hyperkinetic disorders, cerebral palsy, dyslexia, and autism spectrum conditions. Each year, students with SEN are integrated into mainstream classes and supported through IEPs and the work of a multidisciplinary SST.

The learners are positively affected through improved access to vocational education, increased academic achievement, stronger social and communication skills, greater independence in practical tasks, improved emotional well-being, and reduced risk of early school leaving. Many students successfully complete grades 10 and 12 and pass state, matriculation, and vocational qualification exams, demonstrating measurable educational progress.

In classroom practice, teachers apply an individual approach by adapting learning content, assigning differentiated tasks, and using interactive methods such as discussions, role-playing, problem-solving activities, and visual learning materials. Practical training sessions are tailored to students' abilities, making learning meaningful and engaging. Collaboration between mainstream teachers, resource teachers, and psychologists ensures continuous support, while peer interaction in mixed-ability classrooms promotes tolerance, inclusion, and mutual respect among all students.



Work-Based Learning and Transition to Employment:

The issues that still remain unresolved in society are related to the employment of graduating students with SEN. The efforts made by the school management and staff remain fruitless, despite numerous meetings with employees of the Employment Office and companies from the sector. Whether only the crisis is to blame for their lack of realization or whether there are other administrative barriers remains unclear. State intervention is necessary in these difficult times to create conditions for graduating young people with SEN to start work in the relevant specialty. This should be implemented in a long-term perspective, not only through temporary employment. Otherwise, they return to their previous level of development. The profession and dignified employment for each student should be the main goal and motto of schools that train students with intellectual disabilities for the labor market. The goal here is not preparation for further education, as this is considered the final stage of training. Therefore, the school feels responsible not only for education but also for the successful placement of students in employment afterward. Of course, this is not always possible, but their efforts are directed toward achieving this goal. Information is obtained from parents, who do not sever their connection with the school after graduation but, on the contrary, contact the school on various issues and participate in concerts and school events.

Outcome Indicators (0, 6, 12 months):

The initiative is monitored through a set of qualitative and quantitative indicators measured at different stages of the learning process. Participation and retention are measured continuously through enrollment records, attendance tracking, and monitoring of students' engagement in both curricular and extracurricular activities. Completion rates are assessed at key milestones, including the successful completion of grades 10 and 12 and the passing of state, matriculation, and vocational qualification exams.

Progression to work-based learning (WBL) and employment is monitored during the final stages of education and after graduation, through cooperation with employers, follow-up communication with parents, and feedback from students. Where available, data from internships, practical training placements, and employment services are used to track transitions to the labour market. Learner satisfaction and well-being are assessed periodically through individual meetings, consultations with the SST, feedback from parents, and observations by teachers, psychologists, and counselors. Additional indicators include the development of social, communication, and independent living skills.

Monitoring and documentation are ensured through IEPs, progress reports, team meeting records, attendance logs, exam results, and qualitative case notes. The collected data are reviewed regularly by the school leadership and the SST to evaluate impact, inform adjustments, and ensure continuous improvement and sustainability of the inclusive practice.

For clearer presentation and easier comparison with other practices, the key indicators are summarized in the table below:



Indicator	Baseline (0 months)	Mid-term (6 months)	Long-term (12 months)	Method of measurement
Participation and retention	Enrollment of students with SEN	Attendance tracking and engagement	Ongoing engagement in activities	Enrollment records, attendance logs
Completion rates	Development of IEPs	Completion of key milestones	Successful completion of grades 10 and 12 + exams	Exam results, progress reports
Progression to WBL/Employment	Status before practical training	Entry into internships/practical placements	Transition to labour market (where possible)	Follow-up with employers and parents
Learner satisfaction and well-being	Initial self-assessment	Satisfaction with support	Improvement in social/communication skills	Surveys, consultations with SST

Sustainability:

The provider has been implementing inclusive education practices for students with SEN since 2009, with continuous development and improvement over the years. These long-term efforts have allowed the school to embed inclusive approaches into its institutional culture, teaching practices, and support systems, rather than treating them as short-term or project-based interventions. The changes are considered sustainable, as they are supported by established structures such as a multidisciplinary SST, trained teaching staff, adapted curricula, and ongoing cooperation with parents and external partners. The good practices developed in the school over the years have contributed to increased trust and interest from parents of children with educational deficits, who increasingly choose to enrol their children in the school already at the lower secondary stage. As a result, the school currently ranks first in terms of the highest number of students with SEN being educated, demonstrating both the sustainability and the long-term impact of the inclusive model.

Transferability:

To replicate the inclusive education model of Vocational High School “Nikolay Haytov,” other VET providers need to ensure several minimum conditions: an accessible physical and digital learning environment, trained teaching staff familiar with inclusive methods, a multidisciplinary support team (Student Support Team – SST), and engagement with parents and external partners such as NGOs and local authorities.

Key steps include conducting a needs assessment of students with SEN, developing IEPs, training staff in inclusive pedagogical approaches, adapting curricula and learning materials, establishing regular communication and collaboration with parents, and integrating support services into both curricular and extracurricular activities. Roles should be clearly defined: class teachers lead day-to-day instruction; resource teachers and SST members provide targeted support; psychologists and counselors address emotional and behavioral needs; school leadership coordinates strategy, monitoring, and resources; parents act as partners in planning and feedback. Resources and time required involve investment in staff training, development of adapted learning materials, time for planning and collaboration between staff, and infrastructure adjustments for accessibility. Implementation may take 1–2 school years to establish a fully functional inclusive system, with ongoing monitoring and adaptation to ensure sustainability.



Cost efficiency:

Vocational High School of Forestry and Woodworking “Nikolay Haytov” is the first school in Varna that boldly and responsibly took on the challenge of educating students with SEN. The many years of experience, the good team of specialists, their responsibility in their work, the good partnership and trust from parents, the good material and technical base, etc., contributed to building a model for working with students with SEN. The current model has proven not only good but also functional and successful in working with the school students and their parents.

The inclusive education model at Vocational High School “Nikolay Haytov” has proven to be cost-efficient due to the long-term benefits it generates relative to the resources invested. By leveraging existing staff, optimizing the use of resource teachers, psychologists, and counselors, and integrating support into regular classes and extracurricular activities, the school minimizes the need for expensive separate programmes. Investments in teacher training, adapted learning materials, and collaboration with partner organizations (such as NGOs and social assistants) are offset by higher student engagement, lower dropout rates, improved academic and social outcomes, and smoother transitions to employment for students with SEN. The model demonstrates that well-structured, sustainable inclusive practices can achieve significant educational and social impact without requiring disproportionate additional funding.

Success Factors:

The successful implementation of the inclusive education practice at the Vocational High School of Forestry and Woodworking “Nikolay Haytov” is the result of long-term and purposeful work by all participants in the school. Strong leadership commitment and coordinated action by the school management and the entire teaching staff ensured the consistent development and continuous improvement of a supportive environment for students with SEN.

A key condition was the qualification and continuous professional development of pedagogical specialists, which enabled teachers to gain confidence and practical skills in working with students with SEN, maintaining their interest, and encouraging active participation in the learning process. The work of a multidisciplinary support structure, including class teachers, resource teachers, psychologists, pedagogical counselors, and subject teachers, ensured coordinated monitoring and support of students’ academic, social, and emotional development.

The availability of a wide variety of extracurricular and out-of-school activities further supported inclusion, social interaction, and personal development. Effective partnerships with non-governmental organizations, particularly through the long-term cooperation with ASD “Vision” and the provision of social assistant services, strengthened the support system for students with SEN. In addition, institutional support from the Regional Department of Education and Varna Municipality contributed to the stability and sustainability of the practice. The combination of committed leadership, qualified staff, coordinated teamwork, partnerships, and institutional support created the conditions necessary for the successful and sustainable implementation of inclusive vocational education.

Challenges and Solutions:

One of the main challenges in implementing inclusive education was addressing stereotypes regarding the abilities of students with SEN, managing concerns about the behavior of students with more severe conditions, and overcoming initial distrust from parents about how their children would



cope in upper secondary education. These challenges were addressed through a combination of targeted strategies. Teachers and staff participated in professional development and awareness-raising sessions to challenge assumptions and build a school culture of inclusion, highlighting the achievements and potential of students with SEN. Collaborative activities and peer learning opportunities were implemented to foster mutual understanding and respect among all students. Clear behavioral support plans, risk assessment procedures, and continuous guidance from the SST, including resource teachers, psychologists, and counselors, ensured that both students and staff felt supported. Regular communication with parents, involvement in IEP development, and participation in open classes and school events helped to build trust and transparency. Continuous monitoring, feedback, and the celebration of successes further reinforced confidence in the inclusive approach and supported the sustainable integration of students with SEN.

Reason for Selecting the Practice for WIN

We have chosen to present the Vocational High School of Forestry and Woodworking “Nikolay Haytov” in Varna as a good practice example of inclusive education and integration of students with SEN for several reasons. It was the first vocational high school in the city to admit and educate students with SEN, starting in 2009, and it continues to serve as a pioneer in developing inclusive educational practices. The school has successfully implemented both integrated learning in mainstream classes and, initially, specialized classes, providing opportunities for students with diverse abilities to acquire vocational skills in areas such as landscaping, floristry, furniture production, interior design, and park construction. Over the years, the school has developed a comprehensive support system, including resource teachers, psychologists, pedagogical counselors, and IEPs, ensuring that each student’s learning, social, and personal development needs are met. The school’s experience demonstrates a structured and sustainable model for inclusive VET, with a long-term commitment to student success, social inclusion, and preparation for the labour market. These factors make it an exemplary institution and a valuable reference for other vocational education providers seeking to implement inclusive practices.

Title of the best practice:

WALK PEER Supported Transition Model: A Comprehensive Five-Year Approach to Inclusive VET and Competitive Employment in Ireland

Provider context:

The best practice under analysis is the WALK PEER (Providing Equal Employment Routes) Supported Transition Model. This initiative is managed by WALK – Inclusive Employment Services. The programme functions as a critical bridge for young people with SEN, particularly those with intellectual disabilities (ID), transitioning from compulsory school education to mainstream forms of vocational education and training (VET), further education and training (FET), and paid employment. At the macropolitical level, the practice aligns directly with national inclusion directives managed by SOLAS (the statutory authority for FET and apprenticeships) and Education and Training Boards (ETBs). The Irish education system is committed to achieving the highest possible level of inclusion, with the philosophy of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) playing a key role in this strategy. While UDL has been adopted at the national level, the WALK PEER programme demonstrates a concrete, intensive, and long-term method for applying these principles within the specific VET context, where



needs often differ from those in traditional higher education. The programme's target group consists of senior students aged 16 and over. The programme operates through collaboration with a network of 10 partner schools in Ireland, including 7 special schools and 3 post-primary schools. The partner network is multifaceted, involving school leadership, families, local ETBs, and most importantly – employers such as Penneys and PJ Hegarty, who provide real jobs and training opportunities. Funding, which is essential for the operational structure, is provided as a pilot supported transition project through the Dormant Accounts fund of the Department of Education. This partnership between the educational, social, and labor sectors, supported by the European Social Fund (ESF), demonstrates that effective inclusion requires a cross-sectoral approach.

Problem and motivation:

The primary motivation behind the creation of WALK PEER stems from the critical challenge associated with low rates of successful progression and employment among young people with intellectual disabilities (ID) after leaving school. Traditional models often led to isolation and dependence, failing to secure competitive employment. The programme represents a direct response to the political pressure generated by the adoption of the Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities (2015), which emphasizes the need for innovative and supported models for transition to employment. Research shows that standard differentiation of instruction, which is typically applied when a teacher faces the specific needs of a particular learner, is reactive. In post-secondary education, this approach is insufficient as instructors often lack the time or opportunity to establish a personal connection with all learners to uncover their diversity. Therefore, the motivation for change is linked to moving from a model focused on the learner's deficits to a model focused on systemic design. UDL serves as the ideological foundation for this shift, treating the most significant barriers as built into the learning environment rather than the learners themselves. This proactive approach allows practitioners to hypothesize potential barriers and remove them preventively through inclusive design before individual accommodations need to be provided. By shifting the focus from therapy and accommodation to strategic preparation for competitive employment, WALK PEER aims to create a system that works for everyone, regardless of their additional needs.

Practical approach:

WALK PEER introduces a radical change by replacing short-term interventions with a comprehensive, structured five-year support model. This long-term commitment is key to building sustainable career pathways.

Timeline and Process:

1. Years 1 and 2 (School Preparation): The focus is on senior students (16+) still in partner schools. Training covers key competencies such as employability skills, entrepreneurship basics, career planning, and "work sampling" (on-the-job trials). The goal is to develop ambitious individual transition plans.
2. Years 3 and 4 (Transition and Direction): Intensive, individual support is provided at this stage, aimed at choosing and planning specific transition steps toward FET, VET, or direct employment. Career and Employment Facilitators (CEF) play a central role, helping learners develop their Personal Progression Plans (PPP).
3. Year 5 and Beyond (Maintenance and Retention): The most innovative aspect of the model is the ongoing mentorship. For those transitioning into paid employment or mainstream training, CEFs provide support and mentorship for a period of three years after leaving school. This directly addresses the historical problem of workplace retention.



Application of Universal Design for Learning (UDL):

WALK PEER adopts UDL not as a set of rules, but as a "lens" or "mindset" for identifying and removing barriers. The application of UDL is carried out through the so-called "Plus-One" thinking: if there is one way to interact, another is added. This ensures that teaching and assessment offer Multiple Means of Engagement (The WHY), Multiple Means of Representation (The WHAT), and Multiple Means of Action and Expression (The HOW). Through UDL, the programme proactively creates opportunities for and with learners, leading to purposeful, motivated, and strategically oriented learners.

The programme has been pilot-expanded to include senior students in 10 partner schools. The key resource, Career and Employment Facilitators (CEF), provides the personalized support necessary to build confidence and independence. The long-term support, continuing for three years after entering employment, represents a significant investment in employment sustainability, significantly reducing the risk of regression and the need for future costly interventions.

Accessibility and inclusion measures:

Accessibility in the WALK PEER model is viewed as a multi-layered approach, integrating institutional design with personalized technological solutions.

Digital and Physical Accessibility: Digital accessibility is a priority, with efforts made to comply with WCAG 2.1 AA standards. This includes measures such as using Plain English, publishing HTML pages instead of PDF files, and ensuring high contrast and navigation compatibility for screen reader users. Regarding physical accessibility, while some older buildings (such as VET centers or offices) may have structural limitations, the programme's focus has shifted to ensuring accessibility at the real workplace.

Pedagogical Accessibility and UDL: Pedagogical accessibility is achieved through the systematic application of UDL (as described above). UDL ensures that learning design is flexible and adaptive, reducing the need for post-hoc accommodations. The successful application of UDL in the FET sector is supported by the development of Professional Learning Networks (PLNs), which encourage collaboration and the sharing of good practices among educators.

Assistive Technologies (AT): Assistive Technology (AT) is perceived as a right, not a luxury, allowing people with disabilities to participate fully in society and the economy. In the context of employment, WALK PEER works with partners such as Assistiv Ireland to provide personalized technological solutions. AT can range from low-tech devices (such as ergonomic pads) to high-tech communication and computer control systems. For people with ID, specialized AT solutions can customize workflows for almost any role. Through this combination of UDL (reducing systemic barriers) and targeted AT (providing functional access), learner independence and productivity in a competitive environment are maximized.

Results:

The WALK PEER programme directly covers senior students (16+) in 10 partner schools. Although specific quantitative data for employment of this pilot cohort is not explicitly stated for a 12-month period, qualitative results and impact on learners are significant.

Qualitative Impact: The model is focused on empowerment. Through intensive support and mentorship, learners develop confidence, independence, and the ability to make informed decisions about their future careers. Participation in programmes with peer support has been proven to lead



to significant improvements in quality-of-life indicators and increased engagement with treatment or support.

Impact on Self-Determination and Motivation (UDL): The practical work of CEFs, assisting students in developing their ambitious Progression Plans, directly contributes to the "Multiple Means of Engagement" (**The WHY of learning**) principle within UDL. By providing choices and real work experience (work sampling), the programme creates purposeful and motivated learners.

Examples from WBL and Employment: Learners are given the opportunity to gain real experience in local businesses. Photographic evidence shows participation in various work environments, including large retail chains (Penneys) and construction companies (PJ Hegarty). The most significant result is achieving paid, competitive employment. Individuals participating in such supported programmes experience a sense of pride in contributing to the economy and find the work to be "life-changing". This outcome is particularly important as it transforms dependent individuals into economically active citizens.

Work-Based Learning and Transition to Employment:

The WALK PEER model ensures a highly structured transition from the school environment to the labour market. This pathway begins in school with work sampling and preparation and concludes with prolonged mentorship.

Structured Transition:

The transition to employment is focused on finding competitive, paid employment or entering mainstream FET. For Work-Based Learning (WBL) to be successful, it must be flexible and meet the requirements of both the workplace and the VET institution. The programme emphasizes formalizing agreements that guarantee the quality of training and the support provided by in-company trainers.

Employer Agreements and Adaptation:

CEFs act as mediators between the learner and the employer. Their function includes ensuring necessary workplace accommodations. Research shows that using workplace and personal accommodations, such as a modified work schedule or changes in sitting/standing requirements, is strongly associated with high job satisfaction and, more importantly, long-term employment retention (four years or more). Employers engaged in the model become partners, supported by WALK PEER to create an inclusive environment.

Mentorship Support After Entry: The continued mentorship provided by CEFs for three years after leaving school is the distinguishing factor that ensures transition sustainability. This personalized support helps learners deal with workplace challenges, use assistive technologies effectively, and continue their professional development. This long period of support is a direct investment in workplace retention, maximizing the return on investment in training.

Outcome Indicators (0, 6, 12 months):

Evaluating the effectiveness of WALK PEER requires tracking results over time, as the impact of supported transition manifests in the long term. Monitoring covers not only entry into employment but also quality of life, retention, and satisfaction, based on methodologies used in research on supported employment and peer support. Monitoring of the programme is carried out by tracking participant flow and using self-reporting mechanisms, often completed by the facilitators (CEF). The monitoring structure, adapted to the 5-year model, includes the following key stages:



For clearer presentation and easier comparison with other practices, the key indicators are summarized in the table below:

Indicator	Baseline (0 Months)	Mid-term (6 Months)	Long-term (12 Months)	Methodological Rationale
Participation Level	Enrollment of students (16+)	Percentage of retention	Ongoing engagement with CEF	Survey performance criteria (>50% retention)
Completion Level	Development of PPP	Successful completion of WBL modules	Completion of FET/VET or competitive employment	Measures preparation and transition
Progression to WBL/Employment	Status before starting work	Entry into internship or paid job	Percentage of paid competitive employment	Primary socio-economic criterion
Workplace/FET Retention	N/A	Retention after 6 months	Retention for 12+ months	Efficacy of 3-year support
Learner Satisfaction	Self-assessment of confidence	Satisfaction with CEF support	Improvement in quality of life and job satisfaction	Qualitative assessment of well-being

The focus on long-term retention (12 months and more) is critical, as the economic justification for the programme depends on employment sustainability. Evidence for retention shows that investment in intensive workplace support, facilitated by CEFs, is an effective method for achieving prolonged professional stability.

Sustainability:

The WALK PEER programme demonstrates significant methodological sustainability, having been in operation since 2013. This long period of implementation shows that the model is operationally viable and applicable across different educational and labour cycles. Despite its proven success and years of experience, the main challenge to the programme's sustainability remains its financial foundation. WALK PEER continues to be funded as a pilot project through the Dormant Accounts Fund. The annual budget for the programme amounts to approximately €278,000. The problem is rooted in fragmented financial responsibility. The benefits and costs of WALK PEER are distributed among multiple government departments – education, social protection, health, and employment. The lack of a unified mechanism or fund to recognize and institutionalize proven cross-sectoral effectiveness makes the transition from pilot to permanent funding difficult. Because the benefits (e.g., reduced social welfare needs and increased tax revenues) are realized across different departments, a structural hurdle exists for securing consistent and sustainable funding. To ensure long-term sustainability, a political decision is needed to transition toward outcomes-based funding mechanisms, which are already recommended for other FET programmes focused on transition to employment. This would allow the budget to be directly linked to proven successes in retaining learners in competitive employment.

Transferability:

The transferability of the WALK PEER model is supported by the fact that the organization has already developed and published a "Guidelines" document in October 2016, specifically intended to



support the expansion of the programme across Ireland. Successfully transferring this model to other VET contexts, such as those managed by ETBs or SOLAS, requires more than just copying procedures. It necessitates a transfer of competence and adaptation of the UDL philosophy.

Key Steps for Replication:

1. **Institutionalizing UDL Principles in VET Design:** Replicating institutions must recognize that the VET sector has unique needs, different from those of higher education, and adapt the UDL focus to practical skills and assessment in a real work environment.
2. **Creating Professional Learning Networks (PLNs):** The transfer of experience and knowledge regarding UDL and supported employment must be cascaded by creating and maintaining PLNs among VET practitioners and CEF equivalents. SOLAS already has a mandate to identify and cascade best practices for vocational training within ETBs.
3. **Specialized Staff Training:** A resource is needed for training new Career and Employment Facilitators. Training must cover not only career guidance but also skills for providing psychosocial support and strategies for dealing with professional burnout.
4. **Standardizing WBL Agreements:** To facilitate employer participation, standardized but flexible electronic forms for Work-Based Learning agreements should be introduced, clearly defining the responsibilities of the VET provider and the company.

Cost efficiency:

The economic efficiency of the WALK PEER model derives from the proven effectiveness of the Supported Employment (SE) methodology, which is at its core.

Comparative Cost-Effectiveness:

Observations show that models based on SE, such as Individual Placement and Support (IPS), provide better results at lower overall costs to the health and social systems compared to standard vocational rehabilitation approaches. IPS is considered more cost-effective and often leads to cost savings, as it significantly increases the number of days participants work in a competitive environment.

Long-Term Return on Investment (ROI):

The annual investment of €278,000 in WALK PEER is economically rational as it provides high social and economic returns. By supporting youth with ID to transition to paid employment, the programme achieves the following economic benefits:

1. **Reduction of Dependency:** It transforms individuals who would otherwise be lifelong social welfare recipients into taxpayers.
2. **Improved Outcomes:** Similar interventions succeed in raising paid employment levels from a very low baseline (e.g., 10.0%) to levels approaching those of the general population (over 40%).
3. **Reduction of Social Costs:** Long-term job retention, guaranteed by the 3-year mentorship, reduces the need for costly health, mental, and social services in the future.

Thus, although initial operational costs are significant, the model is proven to be more effective from the perspective of total public expenditure when evaluating long-term results and contributions to the economy. This supports the argument for transitioning to sustainable state funding.



Success Factors:

The success of the WALK PEER model is due to a specific combination of methodological, organizational, and personnel factors:

1. **Long-Term and Intensive Mentorship:** A critical factor is the provision of 3-year support from CEFs after leaving school. This prolonged support eliminates barriers to workplace retention, which is often a greater challenge than initially finding a job.
2. **Integration of UDL and Supported Employment:** The combination of proactive design of learning and work environments (UDL) and personalized, intensive workplace support (Supported Employment) ensures that learners not only acquire skills but also apply them successfully in real, competitive conditions.
3. **Strong and Active Partnerships:** Success requires high-level cooperation between schools, VET institutions, and employers. Employers must be supported to make necessary accommodations, with CEFs serving as a bridge and guarantor of the worker's success.
4. **Staff Competence and Support:** The quality of work depends on the Career and Employment Facilitators. Their training must be continuous (CPD), focused on supporting learners' well-being, psychological resilience, and social integration.
5. **Ambitious Outcomes:** The focus on competitive, paid employment – rather than lower forms of employment – sets high expectations and increases learner motivation, aligning with the engagement principles in UDL.

The central role of the CEF as a qualified bridge between education, social support, and the labour market is decisive for maintaining high fidelity to the model and achieving positive results.

Challenges and Solutions: Despite proven effectiveness, the implementation and sustainability of WALK PEER face systemic and operational challenges:

1. **Financial and Administrative Fragmentation:**
 - **Challenge:** Scattering financial responsibility across multiple government departments, making the securing of long-term institutionalized funding difficult and uncertain. The programme remains in a vulnerable pilot phase.
 - **Solution:** Constant lobbying and proving economic efficiency (cost-efficiency) based on long-term employment retention data. Evidence that the model is more cost-effective than standard social support should be used as a basis for transitioning to a results-based funding model.
2. **Employer Attitudes and Cultural Barriers:**
 - **Challenge:** Skepticism, lack of awareness, and gaps in workplace organizational culture that hinder the inclusion of people with ID.
 - **Solution:** CEFs play an active role in managing culture change by providing training and direct workplace support, including personalized AT solutions. By demonstrating success and productivity, employers transform from skeptics into partners.
3. **Workforce Management and Facilitator (CEF) Burnout:**
 - **Challenge:** The intensive nature of mentorship and psychosocial support provided by CEFs can lead to a high risk of professional burnout or secondary trauma, similar to other peer-support roles.
 - **Solution:** Organizational provision of continuous professional development (CPD) and support for self-assessment and reflection among CEFs. Creating internal PLNs allows facilitators to share experiences, develop coping strategies, and maintain high motivation, ensuring model fidelity.

Reason for Selecting the Practice for WIN:



The WALK PEER Supported Transition Model represents a successful example for inclusive vocational education and training (VET) in Ireland, especially for learners with intellectual disabilities. The programme's success is due to its methodological depth – a five-year, long-term intervention that integrates Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to remove systemic barriers with intensive, three-year support for workplace retention.

7. Best practices for inclusive employment

Title of the best practice: Agency for Social Development “Vision”, Bulgaria

Company context:

Agency for Social Development “Vision” (ASD Vision) is a well-established non-governmental organization in the public and social sector, founded in 1997, based in Bulgaria, employing around 250 staff across its head office and regional branches. The organization has become a recognized example of inclusive employment, demonstrating how people with various disabilities can be successfully integrated into meaningful and productive work.

Diversity and inclusion are embedded in the organization’s culture and operational practices. While diversity in management is still developing, the Human Resources department leads efforts to ensure that employees with physical, sensory, or intellectual limitations are provided with the support they need to thrive. This includes accessible workplaces, flexible schedules, mentoring, and the possibility to work remotely when required. Internal policies on anti-discrimination, health and safety, data protection, and accessibility guide these practices and ensure that inclusion is systematic rather than temporary.

ASD Vision’s approach is strengthened through a wide partner network. The organization collaborates with public institutions, social service providers, employers, and professional experts, as well as participating in national and international forums and projects focused on accessibility and inclusive employment. These partnerships not only provide guidance and resources but also help to share and scale the organization’s good practices beyond its own operations. As a result, ASD Vision has established itself as a model institution, showing that with structured support, clear policies, and a committed culture, employees with disabilities can contribute effectively, feel valued, and develop professionally.

Problem and motivation:

ASD Vision observed a growing need for inclusive employment practices, as many qualified individuals with disabilities faced barriers to entering or remaining in the workforce. Signals for this need came both from within the organization, through employee feedback highlighting challenges in accessibility and support, and from the wider community, where clients and partner organizations emphasized the importance of a diverse and inclusive workforce.

The motivation for change was grounded in the organization’s mission to serve people with disabilities. As a provider of social and support services, ASD Vision recognized the importance of leading by example, demonstrating that individuals with physical, sensory, or intellectual limitations can contribute meaningfully in professional roles when given appropriate support. This drove the implementation of structured inclusive practices, including accessible workplaces, flexible schedules,



mentoring, and tailored professional development, ensuring that inclusion became a standard, sustainable part of organizational operations rather than a temporary measure.

Governance & ownership:

At ASD Vision, inclusive employment practices are led and coordinated by the Human Resources department, which serves as the executive sponsor for diversity and inclusion initiatives within the organization. While the organization does not yet have a formal diversity committee, responsibility for inclusive practices is distributed across HR, line managers, and mentors, ensuring that policies and accommodations are consistently applied. HR oversees the implementation of accessibility measures, training, and flexible work arrangements, while managers provide day-to-day support and guidance to employees with disabilities. Mentors and volunteer colleagues play a crucial role in onboarding, coaching, and monitoring employees' progress, creating a collaborative system of shared ownership that reinforces a culture of inclusion throughout the organization.

Compliance & policy:

ASD Vision operates under a comprehensive framework of internal policies and procedures that ensure full compliance with national legislation and international standards, with a particular focus on anti-discrimination, health and safety, accessibility, and data protection (GDPR). The organization is committed to fostering an inclusive work environment where employees with disabilities are treated equitably and have full access to professional opportunities. Anti-discrimination policies are applied throughout all organizational processes, including recruitment, onboarding, career progression, allocation of tasks, and participation in projects and training activities. These policies ensure that no employee is excluded or disadvantaged on the basis of disability, and that reasonable accommodations are systematically provided according to individual needs.

In practice, these policies are implemented through multiple concrete measures. Accessible workspaces, adapted equipment, flexible working hours, remote work options, and mentor support are provided to employees with physical, sensory, or intellectual disabilities. The organization also conducts regular training sessions for managers and staff to reinforce awareness of anti-discrimination principles and to ensure that inclusive practices are consistently applied.

Data protection and GDPR compliance are integral to the management of sensitive employee information. Health-related data, personal development records, and accommodation requests are stored securely and accessed only by authorized personnel, including HR, line managers, and mentors. This ensures confidentiality while allowing the necessary monitoring and support of employees with disabilities.

Furthermore, ASD Vision monitors the effectiveness of these policies through regular audits, feedback mechanisms, and consultation with employees and partners. By combining formal compliance with active implementation, the organization ensures that inclusion is not merely a regulatory requirement, but a central and operationally embedded part of its organizational culture. This structured approach allows ASD Vision to serve as a model for inclusive employment in the social and public sector.

Practical approach:

ASD Vision implemented a comprehensive set of practical changes to create an inclusive, supportive, and sustainable working environment for employees with disabilities. These changes encompassed organizational processes, roles, technologies, and support structures, all carefully coordinated to ensure that employees could fully participate in professional activities and develop their careers.

On the process level, the organization introduced structured procedures for requesting accommodations, including flexible working hours, remote work options, and access to mentors who provide guidance and ongoing support. The onboarding process was adapted to include gradual



workload integration, buddy systems, and accessible training modules, ensuring that employees with disabilities could transition smoothly into their roles. Standardized procedures were also applied for monitoring employee progress, engagement, and satisfaction, linking feedback to continuous improvement of support measures.

In terms of roles, responsibility for inclusive practices was distributed across Human Resources, line managers, and mentors. HR served as the executive sponsor, coordinating policy implementation, overseeing accessibility measures, and ensuring compliance with anti-discrimination and GDPR regulations. Line managers provided day-to-day supervision, guidance, and adaptation of work tasks, while mentors and volunteer colleagues supported employees in skill development, workplace integration, and problem-solving.

Technologies and tools were introduced or adapted to ensure accessibility. This included accessible office equipment, communication support such as FM systems¹ for those with partial hearing loss, accessible digital platforms and intranet. These technologies were combined with alternative formats for training, ensuring that employees with varying types of disabilities could fully participate in professional development opportunities.

The timeline for these changes was gradual and iterative, with structured implementation over several years. Individual accommodations, such as flexible schedules or assistive technologies, were typically implemented within 7–14 days of request, while broader organizational changes, including process revisions and training programmes, were developed and refined continuously based on feedback and monitoring outcomes.

The impact of these changes has been significant. Approximately 20 employees with diverse disabilities, including mobility impairments, sensory limitations, intellectual disabilities, and health-related conditions such as oncology diagnoses, have benefited from the inclusive practices. Practical effects observed include increased engagement, improved productivity, higher motivation, enhanced confidence, and a greater sense of security in the workplace. Employees have been able to participate meaningfully in both individual and collaborative tasks, with several achieving professional recognition and successfully advancing in their careers, demonstrating the effectiveness of the integrated approach.

Through these coordinated measures, ASD Vision has established a replicable model of inclusive employment, demonstrating how a structured, well-supported approach can transform organizational culture and create equitable opportunities for employees with disabilities.

Reasonable accommodations process:

At ASD Vision, the process for providing reasonable accommodations to employees with disabilities is formalized, structured, and designed to be responsive to individual needs. Employees who require accommodations submit a request through the Human Resources department, specifying the type of support or adjustment needed, such as flexible working hours, remote work, adapted equipment, or mentoring.

Each request is reviewed and approved jointly by HR and the employee's line manager to ensure that it meets the operational requirements of the role while fully addressing the employee's specific needs. Mentors or other colleagues may also be consulted to assess the practical implications of the accommodation and provide guidance for implementation.

Once approved, accommodations are implemented promptly, typically within 7 to 14 days, ensuring that employees can continue their work without interruption. Terms and conditions for each accommodation are clearly defined, including any agreed-upon adjustments to tasks, schedules, or

¹ An FM system for the hearing impaired is a wireless assistive listening device that uses radio waves to transmit speech directly from a microphone (worn by a speaker) to a receiver (connected to the listener's hearing aids or headphones).



support mechanisms, and are monitored regularly to assess effectiveness and make improvements if necessary.

Budgeting for accommodations is centralized within HR/DEI, allowing the organization to manage costs efficiently while ensuring that all necessary resources—ranging from physical equipment to assistive technologies and training—are provided. While the average cost per accommodation ranges from €501 to €2,000, the investment is considered cost-effective, as it supports employee engagement, retention, productivity, and overall inclusion in the workplace.

Through this structured process, ASD Vision ensures that accommodations are not temporary, but systematically integrated into organizational practice, providing consistent support to employees with disabilities while maintaining operational efficiency and compliance with anti-discrimination regulations.

Accessibility. Recruitment, onboarding & career progression:

ASD Vision ensures that accessibility is embedded across all aspects of the organization, encompassing physical, digital, organizational, and learning environments, as well as assistive technologies.

- Physical accessibility is provided through fully accessible offices, including adapted workstations, accessible toilets, and evacuation plans that take into account employees with mobility or sensory limitations. Workspaces are designed to allow safe and independent movement, while emergency procedures are tailored to ensure that all employees can evacuate safely.
- Digital accessibility is applied across internal and external applications, intranet platforms, and digital learning materials. The organization adheres to international accessibility standards, conducts regular testing to ensure that content, software, and internal tools are usable by employees with visual, hearing, or cognitive impairments. Videos, documents, and training resources are provided in accessible formats, including captions, transcripts, and alternative text where required.
- Organizational and process-related accessibility includes flexible work schedules, remote and hybrid work options, adapted meeting norms, and procedural adjustments that accommodate employees' specific needs. Rules, shifts, and task allocation are designed to be inclusive, ensuring that employees with disabilities can participate fully in all work processes without barriers.
- Learning and development opportunities are fully accessible. All training programmes are offered in multiple formats, such as in-person, online, and via video conferencing with accessible materials. Trainers provide guidance and support to ensure that employees with disabilities can engage with and benefit from professional development opportunities.
- The primary assistive technology currently provided to employees is an FM system, supporting those with partial hearing impairments. Since the organization has not employed individuals with complete hearing loss, this system effectively addresses current needs while ensuring clear communication in the workplace. In line with the organization's commitment to continuous improvement, ASD Vision is actively exploring the development and implementation of additional assistive technologies and methods for the future, aiming to further enhance accessibility, independence, and inclusion for all employees with disabilities.

ASD Vision applies a structured and inclusive approach to recruitment, onboarding, and career progression to ensure that employees with disabilities can fully participate in the workforce and develop professionally. Inclusive job advertisements are published to encourage applications from people with various types of disabilities, emphasizing the organization's commitment to equal opportunities. The recruitment process includes structured interviews designed to accommodate different needs, ensuring that candidates can demonstrate their skills without facing unnecessary barriers.

During onboarding, new employees with disabilities receive tailored support through mentors, gradual workload integration, and accessible onboarding materials. Mentors and colleagues provide



guidance on organizational procedures, day-to-day tasks, and workplace culture, ensuring smooth integration into the team. The organization also offers interest-based activities and coaching to strengthen professional skills and social inclusion.

Career progression is supported through clear criteria for performance and development, accessible training opportunities, and ongoing guidance from line managers and mentors. Internships or apprenticeship opportunities are offered where applicable, enabling employees to gain hands-on experience and develop competencies in a supported environment. By combining structured recruitment, personalized onboarding, and continuous professional development, ASD Vision ensures that employees with disabilities are empowered to achieve their full potential while contributing meaningfully to the organization.

Results:

The inclusive employment practices at ASD Vision have produced tangible and measurable results across the organization. Approximately 20 employees with various disabilities—including mobility impairments, intellectual disabilities, hearing or vision limitations, and health conditions such as oncology diagnoses—have benefited from structured accommodations, mentorship, and tailored support.

One example is an IT specialist with a physical disability who joined the agency in the year of 2000. After initial training with an instructor and subsequent self-directed learning, he now works remotely, maintains websites for multiple organizations, and delivers his own IT courses. Another example is a facilities assistant with epilepsy and mild intellectual disability, who, supported by mentors and flexible working arrangements, successfully performs her duties, develops professionally, and integrates fully into the team.

As a result of these inclusive measures, employees report increased engagement, motivation, and satisfaction with their work. Productivity has improved, absenteeism has decreased, and employees feel safe and supported in their roles. Mentorship and structured onboarding have strengthened teamwork, while inclusive practices have fostered greater tolerance and understanding among all staff members. Employees have successfully completed professional tasks, participated in internal projects, and in some cases achieved professional recognition, demonstrating the effectiveness of ASD Vision's inclusive employment model.

Outcome indicators (0, 6, 12, 24 months):

ASD Vision tracks a range of outcome indicators to evaluate the effectiveness of its inclusive employment practices over time. These indicators include hiring rate, time-to-hire, offer acceptance, accommodation turnaround, retention, career progression and promotions, employee engagement, and absenteeism.

Retention measures the proportion of employees with disabilities who remain with the organization over time, while absenteeism tracks the frequency and duration of unplanned absences, providing insights into employee well-being and workplace satisfaction. Career progression and promotions are monitored to ensure that employees with disabilities have equal opportunities for professional growth, while engagement is assessed through regular surveys and feedback to capture employees' motivation and satisfaction levels.

Accommodation turnaround is recorded to evaluate the efficiency of the process in responding to individual needs, typically measured from request to implementation. Hiring rate, time-to-hire, and offer acceptance help assess the inclusivity of recruitment practices and the attractiveness of the organization to candidates with disabilities.

Monitoring and documentation of all indicators are managed jointly by Human Resources, line managers, and the accounting department. Data is stored securely, in compliance with GDPR regulations, without including personal health information. The collected information is regularly



reviewed and analyzed to refine policies, improve processes, and ensure that ASD Vision continues to provide an inclusive and supportive work environment for all employees. For clearer presentation and easier comparison with other practices, the key indicators are summarized in the table below:

Indicator	Baseline (0 months)	6 months	12 months	24 months	Method of measurement
Hiring rate	Number of open inclusive positions	Number of hires with disabilities	Cumulative hires	Sustained hiring trend	HR records
Accommodation turnaround	N/A	Average days from request to implementation	Average days (target <14)	Average days (sustained)	HR tracking system
Retention	N/A	% Retained after 6 months	% Retained after 12 months	% Retained after 24 months	HR turnover data
Career progression / promotions	Baseline career stage	Number of promotions / skill development	Number of promotions / skill development	Long-term career advancement	Performance reviews, HR records
Employee engagement	Initial survey score	Survey score improvement	Survey score improvement	Sustained high engagement	Anonymous surveys
Absenteeism	Baseline rate	Reduction in unplanned absences	Reduction in unplanned absences	Sustained low rate	Attendance logs

Cost efficiency:

The inclusive employment practices at ASD Vision are considered cost-efficient to some extent, reflecting both the direct and indirect value generated for the organization and its employees. The organization provides reasonable accommodations for employees with disabilities, with the average cost per adaptation ranging from €501 to €2,000, depending on the specific needs and type of support required. These adaptations include flexible working hours, tailored mentoring, accessible onboarding materials, and other personalized measures that enable employees to perform their roles effectively.

Although formal assessments of savings from reduced sick leave, lower staff turnover, or other operational efficiencies have not been conducted, the qualitative outcomes strongly indicate the positive impact of these investments. Employees with disabilities are more engaged, motivated, and productive, which indirectly contributes to organizational stability, team cohesion, and overall workplace efficiency. By providing a supportive environment, ASD Vision reduces potential disruptions and fosters a sense of belonging and commitment among employees, which is essential for retention and long-term performance.

From a return-on-investment perspective, the organization emphasizes the intangible yet significant benefits of setting a strong example in inclusive employment. The leadership and staff view the success of their inclusive practices as a demonstration of organizational values, showcasing ASD



Vision as a model for other employers in Bulgaria and beyond. Satisfaction with the example set, both internally among employees and externally in the broader community, is considered a key indicator of return, reinforcing the organization's commitment to sustainability, social responsibility, and long-term value creation.

Overall, the combination of reasonable financial investment, targeted support measures, and demonstrated improvements in employee engagement and professional growth makes the inclusive employment practices at ASD Vision both effective and cost-conscious, providing a replicable model for other organizations seeking to integrate people with disabilities into meaningful employment.

Success factors:

The success of ASD Vision's inclusive employment practices is built on a combination of strategic leadership, skilled staff, strong partnerships, and structured processes. Leadership plays a central role, providing a clear mandate and demonstrating commitment to inclusion across all levels of the organization. This top-down support ensures that diversity and accessibility remain organizational priorities and that resources are allocated effectively to implement accommodations and support measures.

Training and professional development of staff are key to success, equipping managers, mentors, and colleagues with the skills and confidence to work effectively alongside employees with disabilities. Continuous learning ensures that inclusive practices are applied consistently and adapted to evolving needs.

Partnerships with external organizations, including NGOs, industry networks, and social service providers, strengthen the support system available to employees with disabilities, providing additional expertise, mentoring, and resources that complement internal efforts.

Structured processes and tooling also contribute to success. Clear service-level agreements (SLAs) define expectations for response times, accommodation implementation, and employee support, ensuring that requests are handled efficiently and consistently. Mentorship programmes, accessible onboarding materials, and defined career progression pathways provide employees with guidance and opportunities for professional growth, while formalized monitoring of indicators such as retention, engagement, and absenteeism allows the organization to evaluate and refine practices over time.

The combination of leadership support, staff training, strong partnerships, and well-defined processes has created a sustainable and effective model for integrating employees with disabilities into the workforce, fostering both personal development for employees and organizational benefits.

Challenges & solutions:

In implementing inclusive employment practices at ASD Vision, the organization encountered several key challenges that required strategic responses. One significant challenge was related to attitudes, including existing stereotypes and misconceptions about the abilities of people with disabilities. To overcome this, ASD Vision invested in awareness-raising initiatives, staff training, and mentoring, creating a culture of respect, understanding, and collaboration across all teams. Employees learned to recognize the value of inclusion and to actively support colleagues with diverse needs.

Logistics and operational processes also presented challenges, including adapting workstations, schedules, and workflows to accommodate employees with different physical, cognitive, or health-related needs. These challenges were addressed through flexible working hours, tailored mentoring, individualized onboarding, and close coordination between Human Resources, line managers, and mentors to ensure smooth integration into the workplace.

Budget limitations were another factor, as providing personalized accommodations and support requires careful financial planning. ASD Vision approached this by prioritizing interventions that



offered the highest impact, efficiently allocating resources, and collaborating with external partners such as NGOs to complement internal capacity.

Procedural challenges included formalizing the accommodations request process, ensuring timely implementation, and maintaining consistency across departments. The organization established clear procedures, defined responsibilities, and implemented service-level agreements (SLAs) to streamline workflows and guarantee equitable support for all employees.

Finally, data protection represented an important challenge, particularly in handling sensitive information about employees' health and accommodations. ASD Vision strictly adheres to GDPR regulations, securely collecting and storing data to ensure confidentiality while allowing effective monitoring of outcomes such as retention, engagement, absenteeism, and overall satisfaction. Through these comprehensive measures—addressing attitudes, logistics, budget, procedures, and data protection—ASD Vision successfully transformed potential obstacles into opportunities for improvement, creating a sustainable, inclusive, and supportive work environment that benefits both employees and the organization as a whole.

Sustainability:

The inclusive employment practices at ASD Vision are maintained through a combination of structured planning, dedicated resources, and continuous monitoring, ensuring that the benefits for employees with disabilities are sustainable over the long term. Financially, the organization allocates a dedicated annual budget to support accommodations, mentorship programmes, and inclusive initiatives, allowing consistent implementation of policies and resources without disruption.

Training plays a crucial role in sustainability. Regular professional development and awareness programmes for HR staff, line managers, mentors, and colleagues ensure that all employees understand inclusion principles, can effectively support colleagues with disabilities, and remain up to date with evolving best practices. This ongoing education reinforces a workplace culture that values accessibility, respect, and collaboration.

Monitoring and evaluation are conducted systematically. Key performance indicators, such as retention, engagement, absenteeism, and career progression, are tracked at regular intervals to assess the effectiveness of inclusive practices and identify areas for improvement. These insights allow ASD Vision to adjust processes, improve accommodations, and respond proactively to employee needs.

In addition, annual accessibility audits review the physical and digital work environment, ensuring that offices, workstations, and digital platforms remain accessible and aligned with recognized standards. The audits, combined with employee feedback and regular policy reviews, guarantee that the organization maintains a safe, inclusive, and supportive workplace over time.

Overall, the sustainability of ASD Vision's inclusive employment practices is achieved through the combination of financial investment, ongoing staff training, systematic monitoring, and proactive maintenance of accessibility measures, creating a reliable and long-lasting model for inclusive employment.

Transferability:

The inclusive employment practices developed by ASD Vision can be transferred to other organizations, provided certain minimum conditions are met. At a basic level, potential adopters must ensure that candidates meet the requirements for the respective job positions and that the organization has qualified mentors available to provide guidance and support. Without these foundational elements, successful replication may be limited.

The key steps for transfer include opening inclusive job positions, establishing a formal process for requesting and approving accommodations, assigning mentors to support employees with



disabilities, and providing training for managers and staff on inclusion and accessibility principles. In parallel, organizations should set up monitoring systems to track outcome indicators such as retention, engagement, absenteeism, and career progression, allowing them to assess the effectiveness of implemented measures.

Resources required for replication include financial allocation for reasonable accommodations, time investment from HR staff and mentors, training materials, and partnerships with external organizations or NGOs where appropriate. Structured procedures and clear roles within the organization are also essential to ensure consistency, efficiency, and accountability.

Potential risks to monitor include uncertainty in the retention of newly hired employees, variability in performance outcomes, and possible initial resistance or lack of understanding among colleagues. Proactive measures, such as awareness campaigns, mentoring, and gradual integration processes, are recommended to mitigate these risks.

By ensuring the necessary conditions, following defined steps, and carefully managing resources and potential risks, other organizations can replicate ASD Vision's model, creating inclusive, supportive, and sustainable employment practices for people with disabilities.

Title of the best practice: The Irish Financial Sector Model. Implementing the Disability Smart Standard through a Comprehensive Neuroinclusion and Reasonable Accommodations Framework. Bank of Ireland (BoI), Ireland

Company context:

The analyzed best practice originates from Bank of Ireland (BoI), a leading financial institution operating in both the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom. As a large multinational corporation (MNC) in the financial sector, the organization operates in a highly regulated environment where compliance with equality and inclusion requirements is both a legal obligation and a strategic imperative for maintaining competitiveness and reputation. The Inclusion and Diversity (I&D) strategy is centrally embedded in the Group's corporate purpose: "Helping you thrive". Diversity governance at BoI is structured and supported from the bottom up through seven active Employee Support Networks, which are vital for achieving strategic goals. For the purposes of inclusive employment, two of these networks have direct responsibility: the Accessibility Network, which focuses on accessibility and the inclusion of people with disabilities, and the Neuroinclusion Network, which aims to support neurodivergent colleagues and assist in the formation of neurodiverse teams. These networks not only support colleagues but also act as internal advisory bodies informing policy development. A key aspect of the model is the strong emphasis on external validation and strategic partnership. In 2021, BoI became the first Irish company to receive the Disability Smart Standard (DSS) accreditation from the Business Disability Forum (BDF), achieving "Bronze" status. This accreditation serves as an external, structured framework for continuous improvement, transforming I&D initiatives from voluntary efforts into an auditable, business-critical process evaluated across ten key areas. In addition to its commitment to the BDF, the institution maintains specialized partnerships. Collaboration with the NCBI (National Council for the Blind of Ireland) is critical for user testing of digital accessibility, particularly mobile banking. Furthermore, the strategic partnership with organizations like Auticon supports the development of targeted neuroinclusion tools and policies, indicating programme maturity that goes beyond general accessibility measures to focus on specific talents.



Problem and motivation:

The motivation for implementing a comprehensive inclusive employment framework is two-fold – focusing on both humanitarian and business arguments. At the people level, the primary goal is to create a culture based on respect, dignity, and equity, where every employee can "thrive". The most critical operational signal necessitating structural change is the so-called Disclosure Gap. Industry research (e.g., Heidrick and Struggles) indicates that while approximately 30% of employees may have a disability (hidden or visible), only about 10% disclose it to their employer. This means that a significant portion of the workforce (around 20%) spends "valuable resources and energy" concealing their condition. This energy, which could be directed toward work and innovation, is instead spent managing stigma and the fear of being perceived as "less capable". Bridging this disclosure gap is a direct ROI motivator. When employees feel safe being themselves, their engagement and productivity increase. From a business perspective, the organization recognizes that attracting people with different skills, backgrounds, and abilities makes the company stronger and more successful. Furthermore, AHEAD research in Ireland shows that 75% of employers view hiring people with disabilities as an important contribution to business innovation. The strategic advantage underlying this model is the recognition of inherent leadership qualities often found in people with disabilities: resilience, adaptability, and innovation. These qualities are developed through the necessity of navigating a world not designed for them. Consequently, the inclusion of people with disabilities is positioned not as charity or minimal compliance, but as a strategic search for talent that brings a competitive edge. Tools such as the Inclusion Passport and the Neuroinclusion Policy are a direct operational response aimed at eliminating the fear of stigma and unlocking the full potential of this "hidden" workforce.

Governance & ownership:

Inclusive employment governance is integrated at all levels of the organization. The I&D strategy is sponsored at the executive level, ensuring it receives the necessary resources and strategic prioritization. Senior management actively supports internal **Employee Resource Groups (ERGs)**, which serve as the primary engine for the Group's I&D strategy. The Accessibility Network and the Neuroinclusion Network are the primary internal process owners. These networks not only support colleagues but also participate in the development of specific guidelines, such as the Neuroinclusion Policy. Key roles and mechanisms ensuring operational ownership include:

1. **HR and People Managers:** They are responsible for the daily implementation of accommodation policies and the use of the Reasonable Adjustments Passport.
2. **Recruiters:** These specialists must undergo Inclusive Hiring training, ensuring the entry process into the company is fair and accessible.
3. **External Governance (DSS):** The Business Disability Forum (BDF) framework imposes external ownership and accountability across ten key areas. This framework ensures that the commitment is maintained across all business units, not just within HR. The Inclusion Passport tool plays a pivotal role in governance as it institutionalizes support. By documenting agreed adjustments, it ensures consistency and removes the need for repeated disclosure when a manager or role changes, shifting the responsibility for maintaining adjustments onto the organization.

Compliance & policy:

The organizational compliance framework is built on rigorous anti-discrimination policies that exceed minimal regulatory requirements. The Group's Code of Conduct explicitly states that no form of discrimination based on protected characteristics, including disability, will be tolerated. Any allegations of discrimination, harassment, or intimidation are treated as serious matters and



addressed promptly and confidentially. Operationalization of Anti-discrimination through Policies: The legal obligation to provide reasonable accommodations is operationally applied through the introduction of the Reasonable Adjustments Passport and Guide. This tool is the primary mechanism for fulfilling the Equality Act, providing a clear and easy-to-follow process. The institution has also developed specialized policies aimed at specific demographic groups, such as the Neuroinclusion Policy. This policy provides guidance for managers and employees, ensuring that support for neurodiverse talent is precise and effective, demonstrating legal and operational precision beyond general frameworks.

GDPR Compliance and Confidentiality:

Extreme attention is paid to data security and confidentiality in the application of the Reasonable Accommodations Passport and the Neuroinclusion Policy. These tools serve as mechanisms for the controlled and voluntary sharing of sensitive personal data (such as Self-ID of health conditions). The Passport ensures that:

1. Data is used strictly for the purpose of providing support.
2. Information sharing is controlled by the employee and limited only to the direct manager and HR.8 By documenting agreed adjustments and ensuring their portability, the organization demonstrates proactive and continuous compliance with its obligations under the Equality Act, reducing the risk of legal disputes related to the refusal or delay of support.

Practical approach:

The practical approach focuses on institutionalizing inclusion through the introduction of specific tools and process changes.

Changes in Processes and Roles:

The most significant process change is the introduction of the Inclusion/RA Passport. This tool standardizes the request, approval, and documentation of workplace adjustments. It removes the administrative burden from the employee of repeating their needs with every change in manager or position.

Role changes are primarily related to increasing competence:

- All recruiters are required to undergo inclusive hiring training.
- People Managers receive a specialized Neuroinclusion Toolkit and guidance on applying the neuroinclusion policy. This decentralizes responsibility for inclusion from central HR to the line of management, accelerating the implementation of adaptations.

Technological Changes and Timeline:

The organization is committed to continuously improving digital accessibility, targeting technological changes toward compliance with the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) version 2.2 AA.14 Key moments in the timeline include:

- 2021: Achieving Bronze Disability Smart Standard (DSS) accreditation.
- Post-2021: Active focus on internal tools (Inclusion Passport) and specialized areas such as neuroinclusion (Neuroinclusion Policy, Charter, Toolkit), often in partnership with external experts. These changes affect the entire organization: all employees (through the new Code of Conduct and I&D training), as well as all managers, recruiters, and, of course, colleagues who use the Passport for adjustment.



Reasonable accommodations process:

The reasonable accommodations (RA) process is standardized to ensure speed, fairness, and confidentiality. Requesting Accommodations:

1. **Candidates:** For job candidates requiring support for the application or interview process due to disability, neurodivergence, or a medical condition, a specialized online form is available.
2. **Employees:** For current employees, the request process is managed through the Inclusion Passport. This process begins with a confidential conversation between the employee and their People Manager. The employee shares their needs, preferences, and preferred working styles, which are then formalized in the Passport.

Approval and Ownership: The approval of most standard operational adjustments is performed by the People Manager in consultation with HR. For large or complex adjustments, the process may require review by specialized units (IT for technological needs, Facilities Management for physical changes) or the internal Disability Liaison Officer (DLO). Typical examples of adjustments include: changes to the work environment (lighting, sound, important for neurodivergence), assistive technologies, communication support (interpreters), and structural support (shift flexibility or changes to the format of meetings/interviews).

Timelines (SLA) and Budget: While specific internal SLA and budget data are not publicly available, the need for prompt reaction is critical for employee retention. Industry standards and analysis of related cases indicate that for the RA Passport process to be effective, it must operate with high speed. For standard, low-budget adjustments, the target Turnaround Time (TAT) should be within 10 to 15 working days. Budgetary provision for reasonable accommodations is usually classified as an operational expense, centralized for significant investments (e.g., expensive assistive technologies or physical changes) and decentralized for daily needs. The success of the Passport ensures that costs are managed effectively, avoiding duplicative costs and delays that would otherwise lead to higher turnover costs and lower productivity.

Accessibility:

Accessibility is analyzed across four main dimensions, with the organization demonstrating a comprehensive approach encompassing the physical, digital, and organizational environment, as well as support through training and technology.

Physical (offices, evacuation, workplaces) Physical accessibility is a mandatory requirement for a large organization with a branch network. All branches offer basic accessibility measures, including wheelchair access and compliance with DDA (Disability Discrimination Act) standards. Key elements of physical accessibility include:

- Branch Accessibility: Providing ramps and accessible facilities, which was highly rated in the Disability Smart Standard audit under the "Premises" area.
- On-site Assistive Technologies: Availability of induction loops (hearing loops) in all branches, which improves sound quality for hearing aid users during customer service and internal meetings.

Investments in physical accessibility serve the needs of both customers and employees, representing a strategic dual investment that enhances both the user experience and workplace attractiveness.

Digital (apps, intranet, WCAG/EN 301 549, testing) The commitment to digital accessibility is high, as financial services increasingly rely on online and mobile platforms. The organization aims for compliance with Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) version 2.2 AA for its website and mobile apps.¹⁴ Choosing WCAG 2.2 AA shows proactivity, given that this exceeds the minimum requirements of older standards and anticipates future regulatory requirements (e.g., the European Accessibility Act).



Testing and Validation: The organization uses external validation. Collaboration with the NCBI (National Council for the Blind of Ireland) is critical, with user testing of mobile banking performed to ensure the app is easily accessible for customers and employees with visual impairments. All internal tools and policies (such as the Neuroinclusion Policy and Inclusion Passport) are also available online.

Organizational/process (rules, shifts/flexibility, meeting norms) Organizational accessibility is achieved through flexibility and the modification of standard working norms, especially regarding neurodiversity.

• **Flexibility and Hybrid Model:** Support for a hybrid working model is a primary organizational adjustment.

• **Inclusion Passport:** This tool institutionalizes flexibility, allowing employees to define their work preferences and include "Structure Supports", such as changes in working hours or meeting formats.

• **Meeting Norms:** The introduction of the Neuroinclusion Policy prompts managers to adopt more inclusive meeting norms, including providing materials in advance and reducing sensory overload in the work environment. L&D (accessible training, alternative formats) The Learning and Development (L&D) process is tailored to the needs of employees with disabilities.

• **Alternative Formats:** The organization offers the possibility to request communications (letters, statements, training materials) in alternative formats, including Braille, Large Print, Audio, and colored paper.

• **I&D Training and Recruitment:** I&D training is conducted throughout the Group. Mandatory inclusive hiring training for all recruiters is critical.

• **Focus on Managers:** The primary investment is in the Neuroinclusion Toolkit, aimed at managers. This shows an understanding that the success of inclusion critically depends on the skills of direct supervisors to apply policies in practice.

Assistive tech (hardware/software, support) The provision of assistive technologies (AT) is integrated into the reasonable accommodations process.

• **Types of Support:** "Equipment & Technology Supports" are offered, covering a wide range of hardware and software solutions, including screen readers and specialized equipment.

• **AT Support:** Delivery and support are managed by IT and HR, using the RA Passport process.

• **Communication AT:** Text Relay (Relay UK) is supported for customer service for customers who are deaf, hard of hearing, or have speech impairments.

Recruitment, onboarding & career progression:

The integration of inclusion into the talent lifecycle is a strategic priority aimed at creating a level playing field for all candidates and employees.

Recruitment and Pipeline: The goal is to create an inclusive recruitment environment that actively seeks and celebrates "different ways of thinking". This begins with job advertisements, where the option to request accommodations is provided via a dedicated online form. This proactivity ensures the process is accessible from the very beginning.

• **Culture and Competence:** All recruiters have completed Inclusive Hiring training.

• **Specialized Commitment:** A Neuroinclusive Hiring Charter has been introduced, specifying the commitment to fair hiring practices for neurodiverse candidates, aiming to remove barriers in the selection process.

Interview Formats and Support: The organization offers reasonable accommodations at every stage of the selection process. These include:



- **Structural Accommodations:** Changes to the interview format, extra time, or providing questions in advance to assist with preparation.

- **Candidate Preparation:** A Candidate Support Hub is available, providing guides and information on the interview process, further reducing uncertainty and increasing candidate confidence.

Onboarding and Career Development:

- **Inclusion Passport:** The adjustment passport is introduced during onboarding or in the early stages of work. It is transferable and follows the colleague when they change roles or managers. This feature eliminates the so-called "moving penalty," where an employee must prove their needs repeatedly, which is critical for long-term retention.

- **Mentoring and Support:** Colleagues are encouraged to join networks such as the Accessibility Network and the Neuroinclusion Network, which provide internal support, guidance, and informal mentoring opportunities. Targeted efforts in neuroinclusion, supported by leadership (such as statements from the CPO), transform inclusive hiring from mere compliance into a corporate standard, increasing the likelihood of permanent integration of diverse talents.

Results:

The impact of this best practice can be evaluated through achieved external accreditations and specific operational improvements:

1. **External Recognition and Validation:** The organization achieved a historic success, becoming the first Irish company to receive the Disability Smart Standard (DSS) accreditation from the BDF, with "Bronze" status and an average score of 75% across ten business areas in 2021. This result is a strong indicator of institutional commitment.
2. **Improved Digital Accessibility:** Successful collaboration with the NCBI led to external testing and ensuring the accessibility of mobile banking for customers with visual impairments. This ensures that critical services are accessible and demonstrates commitment to WCAG 2.2 AA standards.
3. **Efficiency of RA Procedures:** The BDF external audit praised the Reasonable Adjustments Guide and Passport for being "clear and easy to follow". This is a direct result of institutionalizing support and ensures the process is operationally effective.
4. **Leadership in Neuroinclusion:** The development and active sharing of the Neuroinclusion Toolkit positions the organization as a leader in this specialized field, contributing to broader social change and building internal capacity.

Outcome indicators (0, 6, 12, 24 months):

Effective management of inclusive employment requires structured outcome measurement beyond traditional HR metrics. Although public annual reports do not contain specific internal data on the hiring or retention of employees with disabilities, projected KPIs can be defined based on the tools introduced.

Monitoring & Documentation: The collection of sensitive disability data (Self-ID) is performed by HR Operations and the People Data Analytics Team, ensuring strict GDPR compliance. Data is stored confidentially in the HRIS, and information from the Inclusion Passport is managed according to the privacy policy.

For clearer presentation and easier comparison with other practices, the key indicators are summarized in the table below:



Indicator (KPI)	0 Months (Baseline)	12 Months (Projected Result)	24 Months (Strategic Goal)	Significance/Relationship
Self-Identification Rate (SIR)	10% (Industry benchmark)	15% (Post-Passport introduction)	20% (Targeting 2x average)	Indicator of trust and workplace safety
Accommodation Turnaround (TAT)	Unstandardized/High TAT	40% reduction (via Passport)	< 10 working days for standard RA	Key factor for retention and productivity
Retention (Disabled Colleagues)	Unknown (likely below average)	Equalization with average Rate	90%+ of Group average Retention Rate	Direct measure of RA Passport effectiveness
Engagement Score	Average/Low for hidden disabilities	10% increase for Passport users	Significantly higher than company average	Indicates increased engagement and belonging
Hiring Rate (Specific Programmes)	Low (general process only)	Increase via Charter/Training	Sustainable % of neurodiverse talent	Measures success of Neuroinclusive Hiring Charter
Offer Acceptance Rate (OAR)	Industry average	5-10% increase for candidates requesting RA	Consistently higher OAR in target groups	Indicator of positive candidate experience

Cost efficiency:

The financial efficiency of inclusive employment is determined not only by the cost of adaptation (CPA) but primarily by Avoided Costs and the long-term return effect. Industry experience shows that most reasonable accommodations are low-budget or free. The primary investment is in processes (RA Passport), L&D (Neuroinclusion Toolkit), and external audits (DSS). Avoided Costs and ROI:

1. **Reduced Turnover (Attrition):** The most significant ROI is generated from employee retention. When an employee leaves due to a lack of suitable adjustments, replacement costs can exceed an annual salary. The Inclusion Passport directly reduces this risk.
2. **Increased Productivity and Innovation:** By removing the Disclosure Gap, the organization releases a significant amount of energy previously spent concealing a disability. This energy is redirected toward work, leading to increased productivity and innovation.
3. **Regulatory Risk:** Proactively using an accredited framework (DSS) and standardized processes (RA Passport) represents a strong defense against claims of discrimination. Despite the lack of specific public ROI data, the organizational model focusing on institutionalizing support and increasing Self-ID is designed to achieve high ROI by capitalizing on hidden talent and minimizing turnover costs.

Success factors:

The model's success is due to a combination of strategic commitment, operational standardization, and external expertise:



1. Leadership Commitment: I&D is embedded in the core corporate purpose ("Helping you thrive"), ensuring initiatives are not isolated projects but strategic imperatives supported by senior management.
2. Tooling and Standardization: The Reasonable Adjustments Passport is the most critical operational factor. It eliminates the repetitive administrative burden associated with adjustment and ensures consistency.
3. Strategic Partnerships: Collaboration with organizations like the BDF (for audit and framework), NCBI (for digital testing), and Auticon (for specialization in neuroinclusion) provides access to leading expertise and external credibility.
4. Training and Competence: Investments in mandatory inclusive hiring training and the specialized Toolkit for managers increase cultural and operational competence at all levels.
5. Clear Frameworks: The use of the Disability Smart Standard imposes clear, measurable standards across ten business areas, ensuring systemic coverage of all inclusion aspects.

Challenges & solutions:

Challenge	Problem Description	Applied Solution
Cultural Attitudes and Stigma	Fear of disclosing disability (Disclosure Gap) due to being perceived as "less capable".	Introduction of the RA Passport... Active communication about the value of neurodiversity.
Procedural Inefficiency	Slow implementation of adjustments or the need to repeat the request upon changing manager/role.	Inclusion Passport – ensures agreed adjustments are portable and not re-evaluated during management changes.
Lack of Expertise	Insufficient competence among managers, particularly regarding neurodiversity.	Development of a specialized Neuroinclusion Toolkit and targeted training, decentralizing expertise.
Data Security (GDPR)	Managing highly sensitive health information disclosed during an adjustment request.	Clearly defined policies and Passport process ensuring data is stored confidentially and shared in a controlled manner by the employee, solely for support purposes.

Sustainability:

Programme sustainability is guaranteed through embedded mechanisms for continuous review and improvement, rather than relying on one-off projects.

- Cyclical Audit (BDF DSS): The most important sustainability mechanism is the cyclical evaluation according to the Disability Smart Standard. This framework requires periodic audits across ten business areas, ensuring the company does not stagnate after reaching an initial level (Bronze) but works toward achieving Silver or Gold.
- Budgeting: I&D initiatives and networks are funded centrally, while costs for standard reasonable accommodations are integrated as operational expenses (Opex), ensuring their constant availability.
- Continuous Training: Through annual reviews and updates of tools (like the Neuroinclusion Toolkit) and mandatory I&D training, cultural competence is maintained even with employee turnover.
- Technology Updates: Commitment to WCAG 2.2 AA 14 requires continuous testing and updating of digital assets, ensuring accessibility evolves alongside technological progress.



Transferability:

The inclusion model focusing on DSS accreditation and the adjustment Passport is highly transferable, especially for large organizations operating in regulated sectors. Minimum Conditions for Replication:

1. **Executive Commitment:** The initiative must be sponsored at the executive committee level and embedded in the company's core mission.
2. **External Framework:** Adoption of an externally recognized evaluation framework (DSS, NOD Blueprint, or equivalent) is necessary to provide a structured path for improvement.
3. **Support Standardization:** Implementation of a Reasonable Adjustments Passport to remove operational barriers and increase employee trust.

Key Steps for Replication:

1. **Current State Assessment:** Perform an internal audit (Month 0) to evaluate the Disclosure Gap and the current state of physical and digital accessibility.
2. **L&D Investment:** Invest in mandatory inclusive hiring training for recruiters and develop a specialized toolkit for managers.
3. **Pilot Passport Implementation:** Launch the RA Passport in key departments, supported by a trained HR team.
4. **Specialization:** After achieving general accessibility, target specialized areas like neuroinclusion through the development of targeted policies and partnerships with experts (e.g., following the Auticon example).

Risks during Transfer: The main risk is related to cultural resistance or insufficient engagement of direct managers. If the adjustment Passport is not applied effectively by managers, it can lead to cynicism among employees and reduce the level of self-disclosure (Self-ID), invalidating the entire process. Another risk is the lack of a long-term budget to maintain digital accessibility according to high WCAG 2.2 AA standards.

8. Ethics and Data Protection

Bulgaria

ASD Vision operates under a comprehensive framework of internal policies and procedures that ensure full compliance with national legislation and international standards, with a particular focus on anti-discrimination, health and safety, accessibility, and data protection (GDPR). The organization is committed to fostering an inclusive work environment where employees with disabilities are treated equitably and have full access to professional opportunities. Anti-discrimination policies are applied throughout all organizational processes, including recruitment, onboarding, career progression, allocation of tasks, and participation in projects and training activities. These policies ensure that no employee is excluded or disadvantaged on the basis of disability, and that reasonable accommodations are systematically provided according to individual needs.

In practice, these policies are implemented through multiple concrete measures. Accessible workspaces, adapted equipment, flexible working hours, remote work options, and mentor support



are provided to employees with physical, sensory, or intellectual disabilities. The organization also conducts regular training sessions for managers and staff to reinforce awareness of anti-discrimination principles and to ensure that inclusive practices are consistently applied.

Data protection and GDPR compliance are integral to the management of sensitive employee information. Health-related data, personal development records, and accommodation requests are stored securely and accessed only by authorized personnel, including HR, line managers, and mentors. This ensures confidentiality while allowing the necessary monitoring and support of employees with disabilities.

Furthermore, ASD Vision monitors the effectiveness of these policies through regular audits, feedback mechanisms, and consultation with employees and partners. By combining formal compliance with active implementation, the organization ensures that inclusion is not merely a regulatory requirement, but a central and operationally embedded part of its organizational culture. This structured approach allows ASD Vision to serve as a model for inclusive employment in the social and public sector.

Ireland

The organizational compliance framework is built on rigorous anti-discrimination policies that exceed minimal regulatory requirements. The Group's Code of Conduct explicitly states that no form of discrimination based on protected characteristics, including **disability**, will be tolerated. Any allegations of discrimination, harassment, or intimidation are treated as serious matters and addressed promptly and confidentially.

Operationalization of Anti-discrimination through Policies:

The legal obligation to provide reasonable accommodations is operationally applied through the introduction of the **Reasonable Adjustments Passport and Guide**. This tool is the primary mechanism for fulfilling the Equality Act, providing a clear and easy-to-follow process.⁵

The institution has also developed specialized policies aimed at specific demographic groups, such as the **Neuroinclusion Policy**. This policy provides guidance for managers and employees, ensuring that support for neurodiverse talent is precise and effective, demonstrating legal and operational precision beyond general frameworks.

GDPR Compliance and Confidentiality:

Extreme attention is paid to data security and confidentiality in the application of the Reasonable Accommodations Passport and the Neuroinclusion Policy. These tools serve as mechanisms for the controlled and voluntary sharing of sensitive personal data (such as Self-ID of health conditions). The Passport ensures that:

1. Data is used strictly for the purpose of providing support.
2. Information sharing is controlled by the employee and limited only to the direct manager and HR.⁸

By documenting agreed adjustments and ensuring their portability, the organization demonstrates **proactive and continuous compliance** with its obligations under the Equality Act, reducing the risk of legal disputes related to the refusal or delay of support.



9. Comparative Analysis and Key Lessons Learned

The four selected good practices – two from the VET sector and two from the employment sector in Bulgaria and Ireland – provide a rich transnational perspective on inclusive practices for people with disabilities. A comparative analysis reveals both common success factors and context-specific approaches that can inform future transfer and adaptation.

Common Strengths Across All Practices

- Long-term, structured support is the central pillar.
- Specialized personnel play a decisive role (CEF, SST, mentors, trained managers).
- Combination of universal design and individualized support.
- Cross-sectoral and partnership-based approach.

Key Differences

1. Irish practices emphasize systemic frameworks and competitive employment.
2. Bulgarian practices demonstrate strong grassroots and community-driven models.
3. Measurement: Irish practices use detailed time-bound tables; Bulgarian practices combine qualitative and quantitative tracking.

Key Lessons Learned for Transferability

1. Long-term mentorship (3–5 years) is more critical than initial placement.
2. Specialized staff training and dedicated roles are non-negotiable.
3. Combining UDL/RA Passport with personalized accommodations yields highest impact.
4. Cross-sectoral partnerships are essential; fragmented funding is the biggest risk.
5. Visible leadership commitment and external validation accelerate cultural change.

These lessons confirm that successful inclusion requires moving from reactive accommodations to proactive, systemic design embedded in organizational culture and supported by measurable, long-term monitoring.

10. References

All descriptions in this national report are based on the following sources:

For the two Bulgarian practices: original best-practice documents provided directly by the practice owners (Vocational High School “Nikolay Haytov” and Agency for Social Development “Vision”) through completed Google questionnaires.

For the two Irish practices: desk research based on publicly available online sources and official websites, as documented in the compiled best-practice files.



Full reference lists, including all URLs, footnotes and sources used in the desk research for the Irish cases, are included in the respective practice sections of the report and in the Annexes.

1 General and methodological sources

Erasmus+ Programme Guide 2026

URL: <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/programme-guide>

Erasmus+ Inclusion and Diversity Strategy 2021–2027

URL: <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/inclusion-and-diversity>

2 Bulgarian practices

Inclusive education regulation: https://www.mon.bg/nfs/2024/06/naredba-priobshtavashto_06082024.pdf

Vocational High School of Forestry and Woodworking “Nikolay Haytov” official website

URL: <https://pggsd-varna.com/>

Agency for Social Development “Vision” official website

URL: <https://vision-bg.com/>

3 Irish practices – WALK PEER Supported Transition Model

WALK – Inclusive Employment Services

URL: <https://www.walk.ie/WALK-PEER-Programme-Bridging-the-Gap>

WALK PEER Programme platform

URL: <https://walk.tovuti.io/peer>

SOLAS – UDL for FET Practitioners

URL: <https://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/6154fce37c/udl-for-fet-practitioners.pdf>

SOLAS – FET Funding Model Review

URL: <https://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/99ca806e56/fet-funding-model-review-june-2022.pdf>

Zero Project

URL: <https://zeroproject.org/view/project/71647c60-9e17-eb11-a813-000d3ab9b226>

Dublin City University (DCU) – Progressing Accessible Supported Transitions to Employment

URL: <https://www.dcu.ie/instituteofeducation/news/2018/04/progressing-accessible-supported-transitions-to-employment>

4 Irish practices – Bank of Ireland

Bank of Ireland – Neuroinclusion

URL: <https://careers.bankofireland.com/neuroinclusion>

Bank of Ireland – Inclusion and Diversity

URL: <https://careers.bankofireland.com/inclusion-and-diversity>

Bank of Ireland – Disability Smart Standard Accreditation (2021)

URL: <https://www.bankofireland.com/about-bank-of-ireland/press-releases/2021/bank-of-ireland-becomes-first-irish-business-to-gain-disability-smart-standard-accreditation/>



Bank of Ireland – Reasonable Accommodations

URL: <https://careers.bankofireland.com/reasonable-accommodations>

Bank of Ireland – Accessibility Statement

URL: <https://www.bankofireland.com/legal/accessibility/>

Business Disability Forum (BDF) – Disability Smart Tools

URL: <https://businessdisabilityforum.org.uk/services/disability-smart-management-tools/ds-self-assessment/>

5 Additional research and international sources

ILO – Skills for Inclusive Employment

URL:

https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/%40ed_emp/%40ifp_skills/documents/publication/wcms_861714.pdf

MDPI – Inclusive Employment Research

URL: <https://www.mdpi.com/2673-9259/4/1/3>

Taylor & Francis – Workplace Accommodations

URL: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09638288.2019.1687764>

AHEAD Ireland – Disclosure Guide

URL: https://www.ahead.ie/userfiles/files/shop/free/AHEAD_DisclosureGuide2023-digital.pdf

Full original documents with footnotes and detailed sources are attached as Annexes 1–4.

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