

**Beyond
Inclusion**



**Employability for
persons with disabilities**

K2 – Strategic Partnerships

"Beyond Inclusion: Employability for persons with disabilities"

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**Research study on employability-disability nexus for the
development of learning material for SMEs and
persons with disabilities for social inclusion and benefits for SMEs**

REPORT FOR BULGARIA



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Contents

1. Methodological approach	3
2. Literature review regarding the disability-employability nexus in Bulgaria.	4
2.1 Employability of persons with disabilities in Bulgaria	4
2.1.1 Statistics of employability of persons with disabilities	4
2.2.2 Main institutions	5
2.2 Legislation regarding employment of persons with disabilities in Bulgaria	6
2.2.1 Legislation and regulatory acts	6
2.2.2 Strategic and policy documents	7
2.3 Barriers and enablers to employment in Bulgaria	7
2.3.1 Barriers	7
2.3.2 Existing enablers	9
2.4 Good practices for learning materials in Bulgaria	10
2.5 Good practices for policy recommendations in Bulgaria	11
3. Quantitative and qualitative study on employability-disability nexus	14
3.1 Employability of the persons with disabilities in the SMEs	14
3.2 Levels of awareness regarding the social, cultural, financial value of a diverse, disability-inclusive workforce in the SMEs	15
3.3 Impeding factors in hiring persons with disabilities in the SMEs	16
3.4 Perceived facilitating factors in hiring persons with disabilities in the SMEs	17
3.5 Perceived benefits of hiring persons with disabilities in the SMEs	18
3.6 Preferred steps and guiding/training/consulting pedagogy, material, guidelines towards creating a disability-inclusive workforce	19
4. Conclusions on developing learning materials and tools for SMEs and persons with disabilities	21
Recommendations regarding the training contents and delivery	23



1. Methodological approach

The research process in Bulgaria was based on the approved Methodological Guidelines (IO1) and by utilising the adopted common research tools and methods. The research activities took place in the period February – June 2021, a period particularly influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting consequences (i.e. social, economic, health, etc.).

The objectives of the research process were:

- To get information on the employability prospects of persons with disabilities in Bulgaria.
- To understand the attitude of SMEs representatives on employing persons with disabilities and achieving diversity on the grounds of disability as a valuable resource in the work environment, rather than 'moral/ law obligation'.
- To analyse the existing challenges and opportunities of employment of a person with disabilities from their perspective.
- To analyse and promote existing good practices, policy proposals and recommendations will transpose the activity-driven flow of the intervention towards social inclusion for persons with disabilities through employment and the role of SMEs towards that goal.

The data gathered in the different phases of the research process will be utilised to draft a methodological framework for developing learning material for SMEs and persons with disabilities for social inclusion and benefits for SMEs.

The research process in Bulgaria went through the following stages and activities:

- **Phase 1:** Desk and internet research of existing information and resources. At the initial stages of the research process, the project team at BICC – Sandanski undertook targeted desk research of existing online documents and data of existing strategic documents, projects, the National Statistical Institute of Bulgaria, and the relevant ministries institutions, working in support of people with disabilities in Bulgaria. Data of the desk research provided insights into the main definitions regarding disabilities in Bulgarian legislation, key statistics of employability of persons with disabilities, main institutions and stakeholders, legislation and regulatory acts, strategic and policy documents, etc. In addition, the desk research aimed to gather information on existing good practices of learning materials regarding the inclusion and participation of persons with disabilities in Bulgarian SMEs.
- **Phase 2:** Online survey with primary and secondary target groups – according to the adopted Methodological guidelines for the research process, BICC organised an online survey for both representatives of SMEs and people with disabilities. Following the adopted indicators, 24 responses were received from SME representatives and 5 responses from persons with disabilities.
- **Phase 3:** Qualitative research by open interviews was carried out with people with disabilities to add to the findings of the previous research phases. A total of 6 interviews were carried out with people with disabilities, most of them working in sheltered employment enterprises in the region of Blagoevgrad. Two of them were self-employed.

Data and information gathered in each of these activities supported the development of the present National Report.



2. Literature review regarding the disability-employability nexus in Bulgaria.

At the initial stages of the research process, the project team at BICC – Sandanski undertook targeted desk research of existing online documents and data of existing strategic documents, projects, the National Statistical Institute of Bulgaria, and the relevant ministries institutions, working in support of people with disabilities. Data of the desk research provided insights into the employability of persons with disabilities, support legislation and regulatory mechanisms, existing strategic documents and papers, existing barriers and enablers for employment, etc.

2.1 Employability of persons with disabilities in Bulgaria

In Bulgaria, the definition of a person with a disability is stipulated in the relevant legislation and regulatory documents in the field, i.e. the Persons with Disabilities Act (PDA) (further described below). According to the PDA, "persons with disabilities are considered people with a loss of physical, psychological, intellectual or a sensory impairment, which can prevent their efficient use of the surrounding environment and active participation in the society".

In addition, a "person with a permanent disability" is a "person who, as a result of anatomical, physiological or mental impairment, has permanently reduced capacities to perform activities in the way and at the level of a healthy person and for whom the medical assessment authorities have estimated a level of the reduced working capacity of 50 and more per cent".

2.1.1 Statistics of employability of persons with disabilities

In 2020, more than 20% of the EU population had been officially declared with some form of disability. In addition, according to data of Eurostat for 2019, 29,8% of people with a disability (aged 16 or over) were at risk of poverty or social exclusion, compared with 18.4% of those with no activity limitation. Thus, in 2019, 68.0 % of the EU population with an activity limitation would have been at risk of poverty without social benefits, allowances or pensions. In 2019, the Member States that recorded the highest proportion of people with a disability who were at risk of poverty or social exclusion were: Bulgaria (50.7%), Latvia (42.1%), Estonia (40.0%), Lithuania (39.9%) and Ireland (37.8%)¹.

Current data of the Agency for People with Disabilities in Bulgaria (APD) indicates that in 2019, there are over 460,000 people with permanent disabilities of working age in Bulgaria. However, only 30,7% of them are employed, and 5-6% are registered as unemployed, i.e. 64,7% of these non-disabled people are not employed. **This data shows that more than 120 000 people with disabilities are inactive and should be integrated into the labour market.** However, Bulgarian policy in support of disabled people in Bulgaria should cope with another negative trend. Statistics of the APD show that more than 58% of the people with disabilities in Bulgaria prefer to stay inactive and rely on financial support from the state rather than engaging in employment and taking an active role in society. Data from Eurostat and National Statistical Institute (NSI) show that the employment rate of people with

¹ Source: Eurostat



disabilities in Bulgaria remains one of the lowest in the EU (35.4 %; EU average 50.8 %). Disabled persons are half as likely to be employed as persons without disabilities, which **is stable during the last ten years. It is also expected to continue for at least another decade** if a radical change in the policies and support measures are implemented.

2.2.2 Main institutions

The **Council of Ministers** sets out the relevant state policy related to people with disabilities in Bulgaria. The state policy on the rights of people with disabilities is implemented by the applicable state and local authorities in cooperation with the national representatives' organisations of and for people with disabilities, nationally representative organisations of employers and employees who create conditions and assist in the implementation of the programmes and projects in support of people with disabilities.

The **Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MLSA)** of Bulgaria is responsible for implementing and coordinating the state policies supporting people with disabilities and their rights. The strategic goal of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MLSP) in the field of people with disabilities is the integration of people with disabilities in all areas of public life, in coherence with the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities.

The **National Council for Integration of People with Disabilities** was set up at the Council of Ministers to support the elaboration. The implementation of the disability policies and its chairperson is the minister of labour and social policy. It is constituted of representatives of various state and local authorities and institutions, national employers and employees associations, and the National Association of Municipalities of Bulgaria. It is the main consultative body for all regulatory, strategic and policy documents.

To support the implementation of the state policies for people with disabilities, the MLSA is supported by a specialised body, i.e. the **Agency for People with Disabilities (APD)**. It has numerous functions related to the coordination of policies, programmes and projects in the field of people with disabilities. It also manages a register for the Specialised Enterprises and Cooperatives of People with Disabilities (see Chapter 4). In addition, APD publishes and coordinates financial support programmes for people with disabilities, fostering their economic activities and self-realisation. Other important tasks of the APD include the provision of employment, vocational rehabilitation and social inclusion of people with disabilities.

The **Employment Promotion Agency** manages all programmes and project supporting the active inclusion of people with disabilities on the labour market, as part of the Annual Employment Action Plan, which established the main disadvantaged groups on the labour market, including people with disabilities.



2.2 Legislation regarding employment of persons with disabilities in Bulgaria

The necessary mechanisms to ensure the exercise of the right of people with disabilities in Bulgaria to independence and social integration are stipulated in Article 6(1) of the Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria. It states that "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights, and the equality before the law for all citizens is enshrined in paragraph 2 of the same provision. Therefore, there are no rights or privileges based on race, ethnicity, gender, origin, religion, education, beliefs, political affiliation, personal or social status or wealth.

2.2.1 Legislation and regulatory acts

The main normative act guaranteeing the rights of people with disabilities in the Republic of Bulgaria is the Law on People with Disabilities (LPD), in force since 01.01.2019. The previous version of the law was introduced back in 2005, in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which entered into force on May 3 2008.

The law introduces a comprehensive legal framework for settling public relations related to the exercise of the rights of people with disabilities in the country. The impact in the field of employment, living standards and quality of life on vulnerable groups of people with disabilities continues to be a significant focus of the legislation, with a focus on accessibility. Another important aspect of the act is the quota principle for the maintenance and sustainability of jobs for people with permanent disabilities. The act also regulates the spending of public funds in the form of direct financial assistance and subsidies for hiring people with disabilities, the appropriate incentives for both employers and employees, as well as the financial schemes and projects aimed at fostering the business initiative and self-employment of people with disabilities. The law further establishes the rights of people with disabilities to equal access to education, vocational training, rehabilitation, justice and an accessible physical environment.

The Regulations for Implementation of the Persons with Disabilities Act and the Guidelines for individual needs assessment of persons with disabilities were implemented on April 2 2019 are the two main documents that support the implementation of the PDA. The Guidelines for individual needs assessment regulate the manner in the evaluation of the need to provide social services, personal assistance, or other types of support under conditions and according to the procedure established by law.

The Employment Promotion Act (EPA) of Bulgaria provides for the unemployed and promotion and maintenance of employment, providing services for mediation in finding employment, vocational training, and guidance, including people with disabilities. Under the Employment Promotion Act, an "unemployed person" is a person who has registered at the Local Employment Department, does not work, searches for a job and is ready to start working in a 14-days period after notification of the Local Employment Department. "Long-term unemployed" is a person who has registration at the Local Employment Department that has not been interrupted for at least 12 months. In addition, the law recognises unemployed young people and adults with permanent disabilities as part of the group of persons in the disadvantaged (unequal) situation on the labour market. As such, EPA provides various incentives and opportunities for labour inclusion.



2.2.2 Strategic and policy documents

The Bulgarian governments adopted a number of strategic documents in the implementation of the general obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which are updated on an annual basis. However, their efficiency in terms of achieving their overall objective, i.e. ensuring the rights of people of disabilities to equal access to all spheres of the social and economic life in Bulgaria, is rather questionable.

The main strategic document that regulates the policies of Bulgaria in support of people with disabilities is the National Strategy for Persons with Disabilities 2021 – 2030 (NSPD). The Strategy represents a continuation and an update of the previous Strategy, which covered the period 2016 – 2020. It was developed in coherence with the National Development Program Bulgaria 2030 (NDP Bulgaria 2030). On a European level, the Strategy is coherent with the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030. As with the previous NSPD, the Strategy was developed in connection with the fulfilment of national commitments on the implementation of the ratified Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, particularly in terms of implementing strategic goal 8, point 8. 2 of the Action Plan of the Republic of Bulgaria to implement the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2015-2020).

The implementation of the Strategy is reported through an Annual Plan for implementation, which is adopted by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies of Bulgaria. The Annual report includes an overview of all activities and policy measures that were undertaken throughout the relevant year, as reported by the relevant stakeholders that participate in their implementation.

2.3 Barriers and enablers to employment in Bulgaria

A good overview of the main challenges related to the overall situation of the national policies and support measures related to people with disabilities is **provided into the European Semester 2020-2021 country fiche on disability equality**. It provides a detailed presentation of the main challenges and recommendations on the existing situation and policies in support of people with disabilities. In addition, there are various publications and articles of non-governmental organisations that work with and in support of people with disabilities, as well as business and employment entities that provide insights on the main barriers that disabled people currently face on the employment market.

2.3.1 Barriers

Unfortunately, there are still many stereotypes among Bulgarian society, which lead to rejection and isolation of people with disabilities. When people with disabilities are invisible to society, the proper identification of their problems and rights become very difficult. It also signals that much effort is needed to overcome these negative trends and attitudes, resulting from a multitude of cultural factors, issues and stereotypes. Dating back from the socialist era, when people with disabilities were purposefully hidden from society, these stereotypes put an additional burden on disabled people, making them feel irrelevant and burdened to society, rendering them unwilling to integrate or participate in a society that constantly ignores them. This negative attitude is obvious in the employers' attitude to persons with disabilities. Most employers, especially in smaller communities,



prefer not to employ people with disabilities. This further increases social isolation and lack of motivation for employment.

Still, one of the key deficiencies in the Bulgarian policies related to people with disabilities remains the lack of equal access to employment. The biggest challenge in the policy for people with disabilities is to ensure job opportunities and employment of people with disabilities in an integrated work environment and to provide adequate support for workers and employers. The reasons for this situation are multidimensional but could summarise as follows. Despite the fact that COVID-19 had a beneficial effect on the flexibility of the work environment in Bulgaria, still many employers fail to provide a flexible and adaptive work environment, as well as for applying innovative and alternative support mechanisms for employment of people with disabilities to their individual characteristics - age, type and degree of disability, functional capabilities, capacity for work. Apart from larger companies and corporations that have adopted comprehensive CSR strategies, many small employers (which represent the backbone of the Bulgarian economy) fail to recognise that people with disabilities have the necessary potential and skills to "fit in" their team and company policies.

Specific employment promotion measures for persons with disabilities are provided for in the Employment Promotion Act and one national programme. However, they do not seem to be effective and popular both among persons with disabilities and employers. The support for people with disabilities who are motivated to work and engage in employment is still insufficient. The funds granted by the Agency for Persons with Disabilities annually cannot meet the needs of working people with disabilities. It is necessary to put in place more measures to encourage employers to hire people with disabilities, such as incentives for accommodation, transport, etc. Significant support comes from the national budget for sheltered employment in outdated facilities/technologies.

The limited access to employment for people with disabilities is also influenced to a larger extent by the lack of equal access to education. The limited participation in education leads to inequality in income and poverty for people with disabilities, as well as social exclusion and isolation. There are various factors that limit the equal access of people with disabilities to education and lifelong learning opportunities. According to the conclusions provided in the yearly reports on the disability equality of the European Semester for Bulgaria, there are many deficiencies in the educational system, starting from pre-school education, going through the insufficient vocational education and training of people with disabilities and reaching the higher education system. Especially in the field of vocational education and training, according to the national analysis provided in the National Strategy for People with Disabilities 2016 – 2020, the vocational training of students with special education needs is conducted only in the very few specialised schools and out-of-school centres for education of people with sensory impairments. It is important to highlight that the number of majors taught in these institutions is still very limited. In general, there is a lack of vocational training for persons with disabilities matching the needs of the labour market.

The public environment still remains largely inaccessible for persons with different kinds of disabilities. Universal design is not adopted as a notion/definition, and measures for its potential implementation are taken on EU funded projects basis sporadically. There is a sound regulatory framework in place that sets the necessary accessibility requirement to the public facilities and environment. However, access to much of the public environment in Bulgarian settlements is either difficult or very limited.



2.3.2 Existing enablers

Unfortunately, there are not many enablers that could enhance and facilitate the access of people with disabilities to the labour market and thus improve their overall professional and personal realisation prospects and quality of life. The existing incentives are based on financial support, tax amendments and direct subsidies for people with disabilities who are seeking to enhance their entrepreneurship and self-employment prospects.

Specific employment promotion measures for persons with disabilities are provided in the Employment Promotion Act and in the People with Disabilities Act (PDA). There are two types of incentives – financial and quota-based. According to PDA, Bulgarian companies with staff exceeding 50 employees must hire people with disabilities, according to the new Disability Act. In order to ensure the employment of people with permanent disabilities in the normal working environment, the legislator has foreseen that employers with personnel headcount ranging from 50 to 99 employees must provide work for at least one person with permanent disabilities. Employers with 100 or more employees and workers must provide work to people with permanent disabilities in a number equal to 2 per cent of their current headcount (e.g., a company employing 100 employees must provide work to at least 2 employees with permanent disabilities). In order to meet its quota for recruitment of employees and workers with permanent disabilities, the employers follow a procedure whereby they inform the territorial divisions of the Employment Agency about the vacancies, the required employee profiles, and the necessary qualification and professional skills. Within three months of being notified, the employer is required to employ people with permanent disabilities who meet the requirements for employment at the workplace. Under the law, persons with permanent disabilities are defined to include "persons with permanent physical, mental, intellectual and sensory impairment who may impede their full and effective participation in public life and to whom the medical expertise has established a degree of disability of 50 and over 50 per cent." In case of non-compliance with the obligation, the employer will be liable to pay a monthly compensation contribution in the amount of 30 % of the minimum wage for each vacancy for a person with a permanent disability that has not been filled. It is worth noting that the General Labour Inspectorate may decide to exempt employers from this obligation provided there are specific factors in the working environment that prevent the recruitment of people with permanent disabilities or in case of an absence of persons with permanent disabilities.

In Bulgaria, protected employment is provided to persons with multiple disabilities, including people with psycho-social and intellectual disabilities, through establishing a Centre for Protected Employment under the Persons with Disabilities Act and the Regulations for its implementation. The Centre for Protected Employment provides a minimum package of support services related to specific jobs to support the creation and maintenance of sheltered employment. Employment is provided by developing work habits of 15 people with multiple permanent disabilities (including psycho-social and intellectual disabilities) to help their integration in the active labour market.

Financial support and incentives for people with disabilities are provided in the framework of the National Strategy for People with Disabilities (2012 – 2020). The Bulgarian government has initiated a grant scheme "Supporting entrepreneurship of people with disabilities" and "Supporting self-employment of people with disabilities". Both initiatives have proven to successfully support and finance persons with disabilities to start a new business and self-employment activities. There has



been substantial financial support for the specialised enterprises, offering sheltered employment to persons with disabilities. According to the Register of specialised enterprises for people with disabilities, in Bulgaria, there are 222 specialised enterprises and cooperatives of people with disabilities, which provide employment to 2345 people with disabilities, of which 48% have permanent disabilities.

Training opportunities for people with disabilities are provided mostly through EU funded projects and programmes. There are several projects that provide support for people with disabilities for improving their employability skills. Project "Employment and education" provides support for the training of unemployed people aged 29 + who have permanent disabilities. The project supports the education and employment of people with disabilities in local authorities and SMEs of the private sector through subsidies for 24 months of employment and a bonus for long-term employment. The National programme for employment of people with disabilities provides financial support for employers who are willing to employ persons with disabilities, covering their salaries and social contributions for a period of 24 months.

2.4 Good practices for learning materials in Bulgaria

Unfortunately, not many good practices are available in Bulgaria for learning materials regarding the inclusion and participation of persons with disabilities in the SMEs workforce. In the process of the desk research, the following good example was identified. Furthermore, none of the participants in the quantitative or qualitative phase of the research could recall a good practice worth mentioning in the report.

NAME OF THE GOOD PRACTICE 1:	JAMBA
Type of good practice (Training Programme, Teacher Training, Handbook/Guidelines, Online Tool / learning Platform etc.).	Non-governmental organisation providing trainings to people with disabilities / online tool for promotion of initiatives for people with disabilities
Description of the identified good practice.	JAMBA is a Bulgarian NGO that provides support for people with disabilities. The founders of the NGO found out that the problem associated with the job market inclusion is one of the biggest challenges for the people with disabilities as well as the solution to this problem as a prerequisite for the increase of the economic welfare of the people and the increase in actively working Bulgarians.
Short description of the main aims, methodology and delivery method.	In partnership with LinkedIn Social Impact, Jamba is offering an Accessible Training Session for people with disabilities. The main aim of the training is to support people with disabilities to improve their employability prospects by



	optimising their LinkedIn Profile&Build a Professional Brand.
Elements of the identified good practice that can be transferable to "O2 – Digital training modules for SMEs and persons with disabilities for a disability-inclusive workforce	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learn to Create or Optimise your LinkedIn Profile & Build a Professional Brand • Job Search Support - CV & Interview Support • Discover LinkedIn's Learning Paths
Do the learning contents of the identified good practice address different levels of learners? How these contents organised and what are the main differences amongst levels?	No
Does the practice identified comply with the accessibility and usability provisions in order to allow teachers and trainers to use its contents? In the affirmative case, please describe the adaptations implemented.	Yes. It is provided in an online and fully accessible environment.

2.5 Good practices for policy recommendations in Bulgaria

Provided below are few policy recommendations regarding the inclusion and participation of persons with disabilities in employment in Bulgaria which are worth mentioning.

NAME OF THE GOOD PRACTICE 1:	National Strategy for Persons with Disabilities 2016-2020
Type of policy recommendation (policy, Strategy, funding, governmental programme or facility, guidelines, standards and benchmarks on accessibility and inclusion etc.)	Strategy
Description of the identified good practice.	The Strategy serves as a roadmap for all actions and policy measures the Bulgarian government and state agencies undertake in support of people with disabilities. One of the key aims of the Strategy is to ensure job opportunities and employment of people with disabilities in an integrated work environment and to provide adequate support for workers and employers.
Short description of the main aims, target and desired impact (businesses/employers, persons with	The measures in the Strategy are based on the fundamental principles enshrined in Article 3 of the



<p>disabilities, social services/support providers etc.)</p>	<p>Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The following key policy priorities are envisaged:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To provide access to a living environment, to transportation and transportation services, to information and communications. 2. To provide access and inclusion of every child in the education system and the opportunities for lifelong learning. 3. To ensure effective access to quality health services. 4. To provide conditions for work and employment of people with disabilities. 5. To provide adequate support for community living 6. To provide access to sport, recreation, tourism and participation in cultural life.
<p>Elements of the identified good practice that can be transferable to "O4 – Policy recommendations for social inclusion of persons with disabilities through employability: The role of SMEs and good practices of the Beyond Inclusion intervention"</p>	<p>Work from home and teleworking are very suitable for people of working age with a high degree of reduced capacity. The home-based form of employment of people with disabilities is used in specialised enterprises and cooperatives of people with disabilities since their creation. This concept could be further examined and updated to further enhance the employability of people with disabilities.</p>

<p>NAME OF THE GOOD PRACTICE 2:</p>	<p>Specialised enterprises and cooperatives of people with disabilities</p>
<p>Type of policy recommendation (policy, Strategy, funding, governmental programme or facility, guidelines, standards and benchmarks on accessibility and inclusion etc.)</p>	<p>Governmental supported facility</p>
<p>Description of the identified good practice.</p>	<p>Specialised enterprises for persons with disabilities (sheltered employment) (SEPD) have a contract with the Agency for people with disabilities and enjoy various benefits for both the enterprise itself and the workers provided with the sheltered employment.</p>
<p>Short description of the main aims, target and desired impact (businesses/employers, persons with</p>	<p>SEPD are equal in the labour market as an essential form of provision of permanent employment of the target group.</p>



<p>disabilities, social services/support providers etc.)</p>	<p>The home-based form of employment of people with disabilities is used in specialised enterprises and cooperatives of people with disabilities since their creation. This form has proven its effectiveness, especially during the COVID-19 crisis.</p>
<p>Elements of the identified good practice that can be transferable to "O4 – Policy recommendations for social inclusion of persons with disabilities through employability: The role of SMEs and good practices of the Beyond Inclusion intervention."</p>	<p>Sheltered employment is suitable for providing jobs for people with severe and complex disabilities, and sheltered workshops are places excluded from the competitive market. Therefore, it is necessary to develop a system of incentives for municipal administrations to introduce this type of employment and to raise awareness of the public to the concept of sheltered employment. Also, specialised enterprises could be further expanded in the concept of social enterprises.</p>





3. Quantitative and qualitative study on employability-disability nexus

3.1 Employability of the persons with disabilities in the SMEs

In Bulgaria, from the analysed sample, 52.6% of SMEs are currently employing and/or have employed in the past persons with disabilities (hearing impairments, visual impairments, mobility impairments, other types of disabilities).

When hiring persons with disabilities, these companies have mainly used the following approach: direct recruitment/recommendations (60%), the Employment Office (State Institution) (30%), by using online recruitment and selection platforms (20%), while the persons with disabilities prefer to look for a job: through recommendations (with the help of family, friends, acquaintances) (60%), through the Employment Office (State Institution) (20%) and by applying online for an available position, using one of the popular job-seeking portal in Bulgaria (jobs.bg, zaplata.bg, rabota.bg, etc.). It can be observed that both SMEs representatives and people with disabilities use a similar approach when looking for a job candidate/job.

Less than half of surveyed representatives of SMEs (47.4%) are not employing and/or have not employed in the past persons with disabilities due to reasons such as:

- *Never had such candidates;*
- *No such job applicants were available at the Local Employment Office;*

When looking for a job, the persons with disabilities are motivated by the following reasons: 1) Lack of financial means, 60.0%; 2) To be financially independent of the family (60.0%), and to learn new things/Acquiring new skills (20.0%) and refer to friends (100.0%); family (40.0%); former classmates or co-workers (20.0%) for advice or support.

Merely 5.3% of SMEs consider the legislation supporting the integration of people with disabilities into the labour market to be effective, while 42.1% of SMEs view the legislation in Bulgaria as not effective enough.

The respondents have identified the following shortcomings and gaps in the legislation:

- *Lack of enough incentives for employees to hire people with disabilities, e.g. training in ensuring an inclusive environment for people with disabilities, as well as infrastructure, mindset, etc.;*
- *Numerous legal and administrative barriers related to the employment of people with disabilities;*
- *Lack of knowledge on the legislation.*

Most of the questioned persons with disabilities (hearing impairments, visual impairments, mobility impairments) (66.7%) think that finding and sustaining work in Bulgaria is very challenging.

To elaborate on the aspects addressed in the quantitative surveys in Bulgaria, 5 qualitative interviews were held. Most of the people were employed in enterprises providing sheltered employment for people with disabilities located in Southwest Bulgaria. 2 of them were self-employed IT specialists. In their opinion, Bulgarian society has numerous stereotypes towards people with disabilities, which originate back from socialist times, when people with disabilities were hidden from society on purpose. Since most of them were already employed and have been in their positions for more than 10 years (i.e. the sheltered employment enterprises), they could not recall any specifics regarding their initial employment challenges. However, the two self-employed people said they had to choose this form of employment because they could not find a regular job due to their disability (i.e. visual impairment).



For them, the attitude of employees to such people is very negative, resulting from both the lack of awareness of the specific needs of disabled persons and the numerous regulatory requirements related to ensuring the safe and productive environment of such people. Employees fear (with a reason) that their administrative burden will increase drastically and prefer not to risk it, despite the fact that there are financial incentives for hiring such persons. The lack of confidence is another impeding factor that results from the constant neglect of people with disabilities by society. This also applies to colleagues and co-workers.

3.2 Levels of awareness regarding the social, cultural, financial value of a diverse, disability-inclusive workforce in the SMEs

Some 73.7% of the SMEs consider the inclusion of individuals with disabilities into the labour market as important or very important.

When approaching the employment of the persons with disabilities, most of the responding SMEs agree that:

- *89.5% of SMEs recognise the fact that a person with disabilities has a disadvantage in the labour market.*
- *89.5% confirm that a person with disabilities makes a greater effort to find a job than a person without disabilities.*
- *78.9% of SMEs agreed or strongly agreed that employers consider physical disability an impediment to employment.*
- *68.4% think that for a person with disabilities finding a job is mainly determined by the skills and knowledge possessed.*
- *57.9% agreed or strongly agreed that hiring persons with disabilities has positive effects on the image of the company/organisation/institution.*

When asked the same question, persons with disabilities have similar views as the representatives of the SMEs. From their perspective:

- *A person with disabilities has a disadvantage in the labour market.*
- *Some employers consider physical disability an impediment to employment.*
- *A person with disabilities makes a greater effort to find a job than a person without disabilities.*
- *The quality of the work done by a person with disabilities is the same as that of those without disabilities.*
- *A person with disabilities can integrate very well into the normal work pace.*

From the 52.6% of the SMEs which are currently employing and/or have employed in the past persons with disabilities, all are satisfied and very satisfied with the performance of the persons with disabilities in the workplace.

While applying for a job, 80.0% of the respondents encountered "a positive/encouraging behaviour with regard to the integration of persons with disabilities". In comparison, 20.0% were subject to a negative/discriminatory/discouraging behaviour with regard to the integration of persons with disabilities".

For all of the surveyed people with disabilities, it is important and very important to have a job, and for 80.0% of them, the current position is the right one.

While at the workplace, most of the respondents would like to see the following changes in the attitude of their colleagues/peers:

- *To be more tolerant of the difficulties I have*
- *To be more supportive/understanding when I make mistakes*
- *To have more patience with me*
- *To avoid focussing on my disability and act as they would normally act*



3.3 Impeding factors in hiring persons with disabilities in the SMEs

Most of the representatives of SMEs note that they have concerns when hiring persons with disabilities, such as:

- Lack of knowledge or information about people with disabilities, 68.4%
- Not knowing how much accommodation will cost, 73.7%
- Actual cost of accommodating a disability, 73.7%
- Concern about the cost of health care coverage, 68.4%
- You cannot find qualified people with disabilities, 63.2%

When accommodating employees with disabilities within the company, they also note that the unfavourable attitude of colleagues (15,8%), the unfavourable attitude of supervisors (15,8%), the unfavourable attitude of customers (5,3 %), and mostly the special requirements in carrying out the job (94.7%) may hinder this process.

From the perspective of the SMEs representatives, persons with disabilities face the following main challenges when entering the labour market:

- Lack of promotion of jobs among persons with various disabilities (68.4%)
- Particularities of vacancies (52.6%)
- The cost of providing reasonable accommodations so that workers with disabilities can do their jobs / other costs, such as increased health insurance or worker's compensation premiums (42.1%).
- Employers are afraid they won't be able to discipline or fire a worker with a disability for poor performance because of potential lawsuits (42.1%)
- Employers rarely see people with disabilities applying for jobs (36.8%)

The persons with disabilities consider that they face the following challenges when entering the labour market:

- Lack of promotion of jobs among persons with various disabilities
- Employers are afraid they won't be able to discipline or fire a worker with a disability for poor performance because of potential lawsuits
- Lack of training of persons with disabilities for job vacancies
- Lack of necessary skills / experience of persons with disabilities needed to fill vacancies

From the online survey results, it could be concluded that both SMEs and people with disabilities consider the lack of promotion of jobs among persons with various disabilities as the most important impeding factor for increasing employability and expanding job opportunities. The interviewed persons further elaborated this as part of the qualitative phase of the research. According to the opinions gathered, there is no information on the available job opportunities for people with disabilities at both SMEs and the relevant state authorities that manage the labour market in Bulgaria. In addition, people with disabilities lack a formal platform or a single place where they can advertise their potential and increase their opportunities of being spotted by a company or entrepreneur for either full-time or part-time employment/service.

Despite the fact that people with disabilities are fully committed to learn new things and adapt to a particular work environment, many of them lack the confidence to "go out there" and present their potential. Therefore, according to one of the interviewees, the project should increase the motivation, self-awareness, and presentation skills of people with disabilities to better "sell" themselves in the labour market. However, none of the respondents in the online survey and the interviews liked the concept of "marketing disability". Instead, they preferred to market the person itself and his/her skills



and experience. Interviews agreed that there is a huge problem with the self-esteem of people with disabilities. Having low self-esteem leads to depression, poor mental and physical health. Therefore enhancing independence and improving self-esteem, especially from an employability aspect, is essential.

3.4 Perceived facilitating factors in hiring persons with disabilities in the SMEs

To increase the number of persons with disabilities in employment, the SMEs indicate the following possible measures:

- Investments in specific programmes and services for persons with disabilities, 84,2%
- More financial/economic facilities for employers (e.g. tax reduction in relation to the number of persons with disabilities employed), 73,7%
- Adapting legislation so that it is more inclusive towards persons with disabilities, 63,2%
- Increasing public awareness and understanding of disability, 57,9%
- More adequate policies and standards to take into account the needs of persons with disabilities (e.g. clear policy of inclusive education, enforceable access standards in physical environments, and priority accorded to rehabilitation), 57,9%

Similarly, the persons with disabilities view the following measures as possible to lead to an increase in the number of persons with disabilities in employment:

- More adequate policies and standards to take into account the needs of persons with disabilities (e.g. clear policy of inclusive education, enforceable access standards in physical environments, and priority accorded to rehabilitation)
- More financial/economic facilities for employers (e.g. tax reduction in relation to the number of persons with disabilities employed)
- Investments in specific programmes and services for persons with disabilities
- Increasing public awareness and understanding of disability
- Creating specific jobs for persons with disabilities

According to the respondents, in order to better integrate in the workplace, the persons with disabilities need/can benefit from:

- Adaptation of the job, including adjustment and modification of machinery and equipment and/or modification of the job content, working time and work organisation (e.g. reduced working hours, light tasks, less demanding jobs), 63,2% SMEs; 60,0 % Persons with disabilities respectively;
- Adaptation of the work environment to provide access to the place of work (e.g. accessible parking, elevators, modified toilets, railings), 57,9% SMEs; 40,0 % Persons with disabilities respectively;
- Accommodation measures and/or transportation assistance in order to utilise the residual potential and skills, 52,6% SMEs; 60,0 % Persons with disabilities respectively;
- Ensuring equal opportunities with other workers at the workplace to acquire the skills and experience necessary to advance in the career, 52,6% SMEs; 40,0 % Persons with disabilities respectively;
- Enforcing policies prohibiting discrimination in the workplace, 42,1% SMEs; 60,0 % Persons with disabilities respectively;



To get a job, for the persons with disabilities, the determining factors are skills acquired during studies, 80,0%; personal relationships (family, friends, acquaintances), 40.0%; Occupational interests, 40.0%; Consistent tracking of job postings, 20.0%; Experience in the field, 20.0%;

The knowledge and understanding of the legislation regarding the employment of persons with disabilities would improve the work situation for more than 80.0% of respondents.

Participation in programmes supporting professional development for inclusion in the labour market (courses, trainings, seminars/workshops, etc.) is useful for 40% of respondents. However, only 20% of persons with disabilities have participated in such initiatives. Less than one-fifth of SMEs organise this type of programme within their company/ institution, for example, training funded with the EU's support.

For the respondents, the following skills and abilities are considered to be the most important to be developed in a person with disabilities, for employment: Respect, 100,0%; Sincerity, 100,0%; Responsibility, 100,0%; Cooperation, 100,0%; Change Management, 80,0%; Problem Solving, 80,0%; Motivation, 80,0%; Team Work, 80,0%; Openness to Experience, 80,0%;, etc.

To further elaborate on the aspects addressed in the quantitative surveys in Bulgaria, 5 (five) interviews were held. The results of the interviews clearly show that disabilities are affecting the employability of people in Bulgaria. Moreover, the current mindset of Bulgarian SME representatives does not consider the particular skills of a disabled person as an asset but more as a source of an additional administrative burden. As mentioned above, the majority of interviewees stated that initially, they lacked self-confidence due to their low self-esteem. When presented with the list of skills, most interviewees selected skills such as resilience, cooperation, flexibility, respect, responsibility, motivation, time management, and change management to increase their employability prospects. However, the current mindset of SMEs, especially in smaller communities, is very limited in regards to people with disabilities and therefore, they see their employment prospects only in self-employment (in the field of ICT, graphic design, social research, e-commerce business, as well as social entrepreneurship (i.e. small crafts, arts, etc.). In addition, many of them expressed interest in carrier consulting and professional development prospects (i.e. participation in trainings, establishing an online personal brand, etc.).

3.5 Perceived benefits of hiring persons with disabilities in the SMEs

When considering the advantages/benefits of hiring individuals with disabilities, the following were identified by the responding SMEs :

- *Better interaction between diverse staff members / a positive workplace culture, 42.1%.*
- *A positive effect on the company's workforce, its customer base, and the community/ demonstrate commitment to social responsibility, 36.8%.*
- *Employees with disabilities are as capable as anyone else, 36.8%.*
- *Tax breaks for the company/employer financial or economic incentives, 26.3%.*



3.6 Preferred steps and guiding/training/consulting pedagogy, material, guidelines towards creating a disability-inclusive workforce

Some 20.0% of the questioned persons with disabilities have been involved in training programmes before, i.e. these were organised with the support of the European Union. The majority of the respondents (80,0%) did not previously participate in training programmes due to: lack of free time, 50%; and because they didn't know where to turn, 50.0%. However, the majority of respondents (80.0%) would be interested in being involved in a training program with topics such as: showing how to demonstrate, acquire, develop job skills and /or apply transferable soft skills at the workplace to help; and enhance their professional growth (100.0%). Training courses that are interactive/stimulating were preferred by only 20% of respondents, while classic, theoretical, lecture-based courses by most participants in the online survey (80.0%).

The following topics in developing learning tools for persons with disabilities to be better equipped in finding and maintaining a job are viewed as essential and very important:

- About myself: Personality traits and inventory (60.0%), interests (80.0%), personal values (60.0%), my life skills (100.0%);
- Disability and the job market: Career exploration (80.0%), job search methods (80.0%), identification of jobs and job matching 80.0(%)
- Self-presentation and self-marketing: applying for a job 80.0(%), the resume and the job interview (80.0%), dealing with employers and negotiation (80.0%), self-presentation skills (80.0%), promoting the value in me (what can I offer) (80.0%), marketing disability (20.0%);
- At the workplace: job skills vis-à-vis disability (100.0%), focus on soft skills (understanding and readiness for application) (80.0%), dealing with employee and employer expectations (80.0%), professional development (100.0%).

Overall, during the interviews, persons with disabilities shared that they would prefer mostly a typical classroom/workshop setting, working in a group with other like-minded individuals sharing similar issues and challenges. Online and blended learning was also suitable. In terms of timing, most interviewees preferred short (i.e. 60 minute sessions), once or twice a week. All presented options were interesting to them as soft skills were considered particularly important in terms of content. Many wanted help in developing their own professional branding online, i.e. creating an appealing CV and portfolio, LinkedIn profile, how to post intriguing content to enhance their professional image, etc.

When developing learning tools to create a disability-inclusive workforce, the following topics were considered essential by the SMEs:

- Benefits of hiring people by looking at all labour markets, 62,5%.
- The inclusive and diverse workplace as a driver for increased consumer market and revenue, 54,2%.
- The added value for job morale, company culture and social mission, 58.3%.
- Enhancing and increasing productivity (products and services) by bringing unique skills, creativity, experiences and understanding, 58.3%.
- Employees with disabilities as a means to reduce employee turnover (longer tenure of employees with disability leading to reduced training and recruitment costs), 41.7%.
- Responding to government guidelines and initiatives, 50.0%
- Personnel strategy (e.g. recruiting, retention, talent identification, professional development strategies and practices etc.), 54.2%



- *Promoting and communicating equal opportunity commitment on the ground of disability as the company's business differentiator and driver, 45.8%.*
- *Building synergies and partnerships with recruitment sources promoting persons with disabilities as prospect employees, 54.2%.*
- *Creating the right work environment and providing workplace flexibility (including time, place, task), 54.2%.*
- *Workplace mentoring for employees and employers for a disability-inclusive and disability-friendly workplace, 45.8%.*

The SMEs also consider that is important and very important to include the following type of information in the learning tools developed:

- *Information showing how hiring people with disabilities has benefited other companies, 75,0%.*
- *Information showing how hiring people with disabilities has benefited nationally recognised companies, 79,2%.*
- *Information showing how hiring people with disabilities can benefit the company's bottom line, 70,8%.*
- *Information showing how hiring people with disabilities can increase a company's productivity, 66,7%.*
- *Information that is supported by statistics or research, 45,8%.*
- *Information on satisfactory job performance, attendance, and retention of people with disabilities, 58,3%*
- *Testimonial information of senior executives/human resources managers/ line managers attesting to the success for their companies, 62,5%.*

The respondents prefer to take professional training courses:

- 1) *SMEs representatives would be interested in attending courses that include: Open educational resources (OER); Audio and video files; Animated presentations, 42.1%.*
- 2) *Persons with disabilities: Printed materials; Slides for an overhead projector; Open educational resources (OER), 60.0%.*

Regarding delivery methods:

- 1) *SMEs representatives would prefer: 1) Face-to-face training, 42.1%; 2) Blended learning, 36.8%; 3) Work in small groups, 36.8%.*
- 2) *Persons with disabilities prefer similar delivery methods, i.e. 1) Face-to-face training, 40.0%; 2) Blended learning, 40.0%; 3) Work in small groups, 40.0%.*



4. Conclusions on developing learning materials and tools for SMEs and persons with disabilities

The different phases of the research process in Bulgaria aimed to analyse the existing situation, issues and challenges that people with disabilities face in terms of employment. Data is based on information gathered utilising both quantitative and qualitative research methods. The conclusions and recommendations gathered in the different phases of the research process will be utilised to draft a methodological framework for developing learning material for SMEs and persons with disabilities for social inclusion and benefits for SMEs.

The following main conclusions could be summarised from the research process:

- *As in the other countries that participated in the research, only a small part of people with disabilities in Bulgaria are employed. Current statistical information shows that more than 120 000 people with disabilities are inactive and should be integrated into the labour market. This negative trend is expected to continue for the next ten years unless a radical change in the policies and support measures are implemented.*
- *In Bulgaria, as a member of the EU and a signatory of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the necessary regulatory mechanisms are emplaced to ensure the exercise of the right of people with disabilities in Bulgaria to independence and social integration. The relevant labour market legislation also provides numerous incentives for people with disabilities, including promotion and retention of employment, providing services for mediation in finding employment, vocational training, and guidance, including people with disabilities.*
- *Unfortunately, there are still many stereotypes among Bulgarian society, which lead to rejection and isolation of people with disabilities. When people with disabilities are invisible to society, the proper identification of their problems and rights become very difficult. It also signals that much effort is needed to overcome these negative trends and attitudes, resulting from a multitude of cultural factors, issues and stereotypes, originating from the socialist era.*
- *This negative attitude is evident in the employers' attitude to persons with disabilities. Most employers, especially in smaller communities, prefer not to employ people with disabilities. This further increases social isolation and lack of motivation for employment. Many of them are unaware of the persons with disabilities skills, potential and job preference. Others are "afraid" of the additional administrative burden that a person with disabilities might require. However, in many cases, SME managers are simply unfamiliar with the legal and administrative requirements related to the employment of people with disabilities. Apart from larger companies and corporations that have adopted comprehensive CSR strategies, many small employers (which represent the backbone of the Bulgarian economy) fail to recognise that people with disabilities have the necessary potential and skills to "fit in" their team and company policies.*
- *Still, one of the key deficiencies in the Bulgarian policies related to people with disabilities remains the lack of equal access to employment. The biggest challenge in the policy for people with disabilities is to ensure job opportunities and employment of people with*



disabilities in an integrated work environment and to provide adequate support for workers and employers.

- The existing employment promotion measures for persons with disabilities do not seem to be effective and popular both among persons with disabilities and employers. The support for people with disabilities who are motivated to work and engage in employment is still insufficient.*
- Unfortunately, there are not many enablers that could enhance and facilitate the access of people with disabilities to the labour market and thus improve their overall professional and personal realisation prospects and quality of life. The existing incentives are based on financial support, tax amendments and direct subsidies for people with disabilities who are seeking to enhance their entrepreneurship and self-employment prospects.*
- One such measure which is considered rather effective and successful over the years is the protected (sheltered) employment. Specialised enterprises for persons with disabilities (sheltered employment) (SEPD) have a contract with the Agency for people with disabilities and enjoy various benefits for both the enterprise itself and the workers provided with the sheltered employment.*
- Training opportunities for people with disabilities are provided mostly through EU funded projects and programmes. Several projects provide support for people with disabilities for improving their employability skills. Some NGOs also organise and provide training to people with disabilities, aiming to increase their economic welfare and overall quality of life. However, these are still quite a few.*
- The majority of the SMEs representatives who participated in the research have no experience employing persons with disabilities (hearing impairments, visual impairments, mobility impairments, other types of disabilities). Most of them never had such candidates or a selection of such employees to choose from at the Local Employment office.*
- As with other people, persons with disabilities are motivated to start employment mostly due to financial reasons and professional development.*
- Both SMEs representatives and people with disabilities consider that the current environment in Bulgaria, regarding employability for persons with disabilities, is very challenging. Support and inclusion policies are ineffective, and there is a lot of administrative burden for SMEs that should be further regulated / or removed. Even though the majority of SMEs consider the inclusion of individuals with disabilities into the labour market as important, most of them confirm that a person with disabilities makes a greater effort to find a job than a person without disabilities.*
- SMEs are uncertain about employing persons with disabilities and having concerns related to the lack of knowledge or information about people with disabilities, accommodation costs, health coverage, etc.*
- The current mindset of SMEs, especially in smaller communities, is very limited in regards to people with disabilities and therefore, they see their employment prospects only in self-employment (in the field of ICT, graphic design, social research, e-commerce business, as well as social entrepreneurship (i.e. small crafts, arts, etc.).*
- People with disabilities feel discouraged looking and applying for a job, fearing discrimination and the poor attitude of employers and colleagues. However, the research results indicate that only 1 of 5 people with disabilities has been subject to negative/discriminatory/discouraging behaviour on their job.*



- *For people with disabilities, the lack of promotion of jobs among persons with various disabilities and the lack of training of persons with disabilities for job vacancies are some of the main challenges for entering the labour market. People with disabilities lack a platform or a single place where they can advertise their potential and increase their opportunities of being spotted by a company or entrepreneur for either full-time or part-time employment/service.*
- *Despite the fact that people with disabilities are fully committed to learn new things and adapt to a particular work environment, many of them lack the confidence to "go out there" and present their potential. It is important to increase the motivation, self-awareness, and presentation skills of people with disabilities to better "sell" themselves in the labour market. There is a problem with the self-esteem of people with disabilities for enhancing their employability potential.*
- *To facilitate the employment of persons with disabilities, SME managers would need more specific programmes and services, financial/economic incentives to promote the employment/inclusion of disabled people in employment.*
- *From the perspective of people with disabilities, it is important to have more adequate and efficient policies and standards to take into account the needs of persons with disabilities (e.g. clear policy of inclusive education, enforceable access standards in physical environments, and priority accorded to rehabilitation).*
- *To get a job, for persons with disabilities, the determining factors are the personal relationships and the skills required during formal and informal education.*
- *Only 1 out of 5 persons with disabilities has been involved in training programmes before. In-house training, especially in smaller companies in Bulgaria, is still quite limited.*

Recommendations regarding the training contents and delivery

Based on the findings of the research, the following recommendations could be taken into account in the process of implementing the future activities of the project:

- *At the beginning of the training, participants should participate in pre-assessment activities in order to evaluate their skills and adapt/modify (only to a certain extent) the contents and methodology of the training based on the identified needs. A similar test should be carried out upon exit of the Programme to compare results.*
- *Regarding training methodology, based on the results of the desk and the qualitative phases of the research, both SMEs representatives and people with disabilities would prefer to attend professional training courses in a face-to-face or blended setting, containing OERs, classical PPPs, printed materials and easy-to-navigate content.*
- *Regarding the potential topics, the majority of both SMEs representatives and persons with disabilities would be interested in being involved in a training program with topics such as: showing how to demonstrate, acquire, develop job skills and /or apply transferable soft skills at the workplace to help; and to enhance their professional growth. Many wanted help in developing their own professional branding online, i.e. creating an appealing CV and portfolio, LinkedIn profile, how to post intriguing content to enhance their professional image, etc. All these topics could contribute to increasing the employability of persons with disabilities in Bulgaria.*



- *When developing the training, partners should consider the existing and potential employment prospects of people with disabilities (including self-employment options) in the field of ICT, graphic design, social research, e-commerce business, and social entrepreneurship (i.e. small crafts, arts, etc.).*
- *People with disabilities would need to have their overall self-esteem boosted. Therefore, some soft skills and teaching methods for improving the overall self-confidence should be incorporated in the training programme. Also, good practices for existing self-employment and successful businesses managed by people with disabilities could be incorporated throughout the training modules.*
- *A mandatory requirement for the training would be its complete accessibility to persons of all types of disabilities (blind/visually impaired, deaf/hard-hearing, physical disabilities).*