



# Untapped Talents

Guide to Employment of Youth with Different Abilities



Organizator:

Partners:



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## Untapped Talents: A Guide to the Employment of Youth with Diverse Abilities

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ISBN: 978-80-975078-1-7  
Year: June 2026  
Place of publication: Bratislava, Slovak Republic  
Published by: Alma Career Slovakia, s.r.o., Pribinova 19, Bratislava, Slovak Republic  
Second edition, spiral bound

The guide was published with the financial support of the Tesco Foundation, which was established in 2010 as the successor to the Tesco Fund and leverages the experience of TESCO STORES SR, a.s., in philanthropy and social responsibility. Since its inception, the Foundation has supported various projects with a total amount exceeding 3.8 million euros. Its activities are focused on helping people and communities (diversity, inclusion, health, local projects, volunteering) as well as on protecting the planet (climate change, environment, circular economy, fighting food waste).

This manual is a comprehensive guide for employers, HR professionals, and community partners seeking to foster inclusive employment opportunities for youth with different abilities.

It introduces the Profesia Lab model—a four-stage, research-informed approach designed to bridge the gap between education and employment for transition-age youth with disabilities. Readers will learn about practical strategies for both job seekers and employers, including skills training, workplace explo-

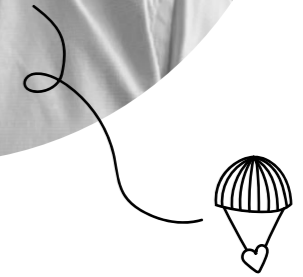
ration, and the implementation of reasonable accommodations. The manual also explores the importance of neurodiversity, motivational support, and ethical performance evaluation, providing actionable recommendations from employers as well as testimonials from job seekers and their caregivers.

By following this guide, readers will gain a clear understanding of how to participate in the international Inclusive Hub model and help build more inclusive workplaces across diverse regions.

*Inclusion is not bringing people into what already exists; it is making a new space, a better space for everyone.*

— George J. Sefa Dei

# Introduction



## Dear Readers,

You are about to explore a truly unique resource that bridges the latest research with practical application. As a leading provider of digital recruitment and HR solutions, our mission is to educate, innovate, and connect the right people with the right companies.

We recognize that many talented individuals remain on the margins of the mainstream labor market and require additional support to showcase their abilities and succeed. Through our operations in Finland, Baltics, Central Europe, and Balkans, we have observed varying levels of supporting services and challenges in identifying and retaining strong candidates from diverse backgrounds.

We are proud to introduce Inclusive Hub—a collaborative approach to employing tran-

sition-age individuals with different abilities and disabilities. Over the past three years, we have piloted this model through our local job search engine, Profesia.sk, which has shown significant results. We believe that scaling this model to other countries can amplify its impact and foster resilient partnerships across Europe.

Collaboration is a journey, and we are taking small, meaningful steps toward building sustainable employment ecosystems. This initiative is an important part of our corporate social responsibility, delivering high added value to both our customers-employers and job seekers alike.

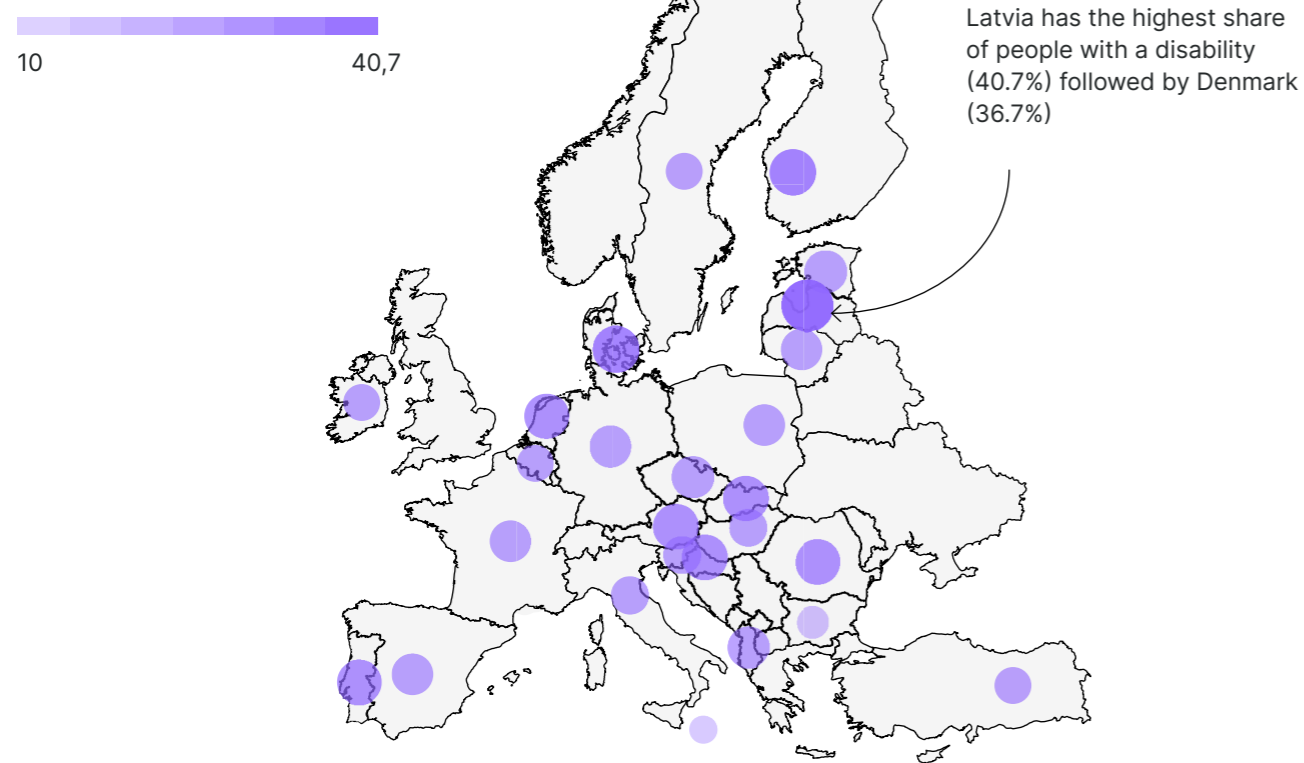
Thank you for joining us on this important journey.

**Vesa-Pekka Kirsi**  
Executive Vice President | Alma Career

# Employment data in Europe: People with disabilities

The World Health Organization (WHO) and World Bank's World Report on Disability estimates that approximately 15% of the global population, or about 1 billion people, live with some form of disability. In 2023, 27% of the EU population over the age of 16 had some form of disability. According to Eurostat estimates, that equals to 101 million people or one in four adults in the EU.

Percentage of people with a disability per country  
Source: Eurostat 2023



The employment rate for young people with disabilities aged 20-29 in the European Union is just 47.4%, compared to 75.6% for their peers without disabilities.

- **Almost 1 in 5 are unemployed:** 17.7% of people with disabilities aged 20 - 26 were unemployed

in 2020, compared with 8.6% of people without disabilities from the same age group.

- **1 in 3 are at risk of poverty or social exclusion:** In 2023, 28.8% of people with disabilities were at risk of poverty or social exclusion, compared with 18% of people without disabilities.

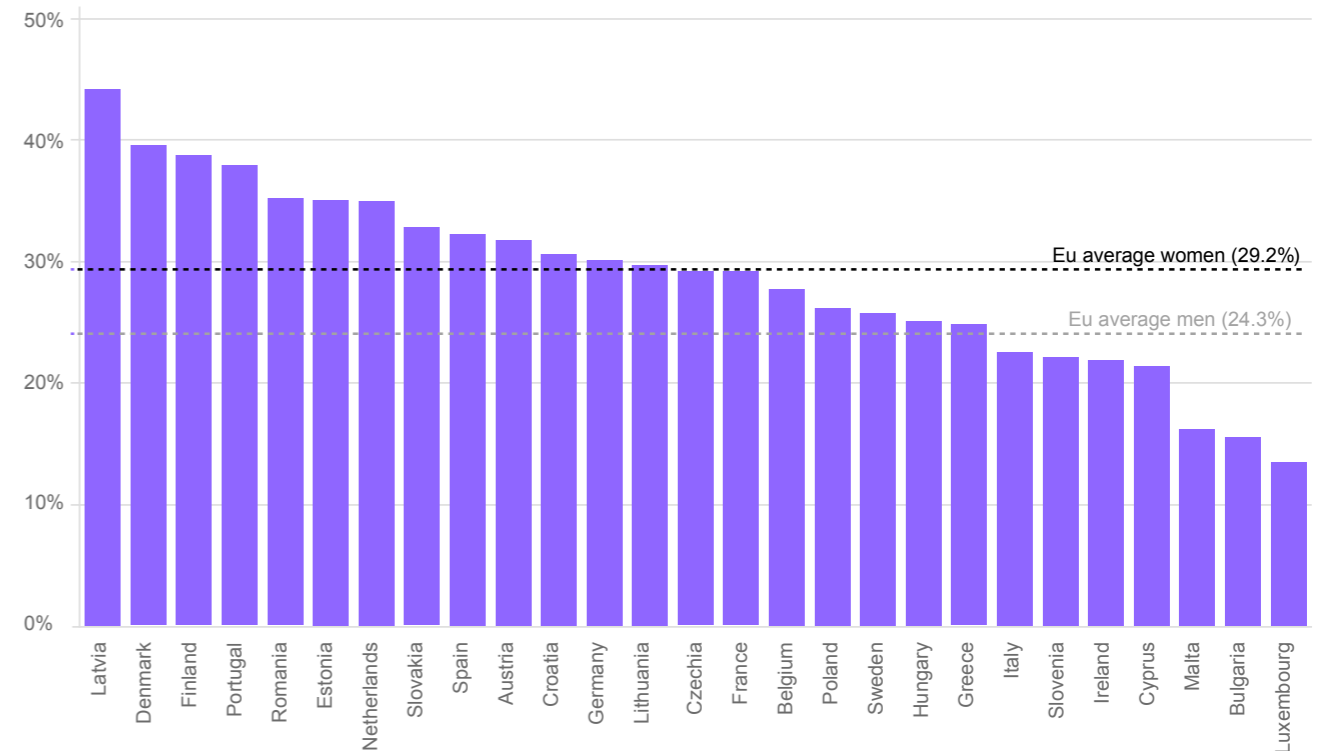
## There are more women with a disability

In 2023, the share of women with disabilities was higher than that of men in all member states. In the EU, on average, 29.2% of the total female population has a disability, compared to 24.3% of the total male population.

Focusing on transition-age youth is crucial, as this period represents a critical juncture for establishing long-

term employment outcomes. Research indicates that youth who receive vocational rehabilitation services at age 14 have better employment outcomes compared to those without access to such services (Iwanaga et al., 2023; Iwanaga et al., 2024; Tincani et al., 2024). Early intervention during this transition period can significantly impact future employability and work experience acquisition.

Percentage of women with a disability per country



Source: Council of the European Union. (2025, February 18). Disability in the EU: Facts and figures. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/disability-eu-facts-figures/>



# Bridging the gap between education and employment

for people with disabilities

Anna Podlesná



**Anna Podlesná**  
CSR Manager responsible for development of Profesia Lab and Inclusive Hub



In today's competitive job market, creating inclusive workplaces is not merely about meeting legal requirements – it is about accessing a diverse talent pool that contributes unique perspectives and valuable skills. That is precisely the gap that Profesia Lab was designed to close — and that Inclusive Hub is now bringing to employers across Europe.

## From Slovak Pilot to European Programme

Profesia Lab is a Slovak initiative launched in 2022 by Alma Career Slovakia in partnership with Michigan State University. It is a 9-month, four-step programme that helps young people with disabilities (aged 17–30) transition into competitive employment through evidence-based skills training, employer engagement, and collaboration with regional NGOs.

Since its launch, the programme has grown from 10 employer partners in 2022 to 29 in 2026. Between 2023 and 2025, 325 candidates registered, approximately 40% of whom secured paid internships — many of which extended into long-term employment.

Notable employer partners include Tesco Stores, IKEA, Deutsche Telekom, Volkswagen, PwC, and the capital city of Slovakia, Bratislava. The programme has received an Impact Award (2022) and National Career Awards (2021 and 2025).

Inclusive Hub is the international version of Profesia Lab, coordinated by Alma Career Slovakia and currently expanding across Europe. Active programmes are now in development in Czechia, Lithuania, and Croatia.

Inclusive Hub operates under a zero-profit model — Alma Career invests alongside local NGOs and partners to keep participation costs as low as possible. The pro-

gramme is free of charge for job seekers. The working language is English, enabling cross-border collaboration between employers, candidates, employment specialists (job coaches), and researchers.

## Why Join Inclusive Hub?

People with disabilities represent one of Europe's largest underutilised talent pools — yet the employment rate for young people with disabilities aged 20–29 in the EU stands at just 47.4%, compared to 75.6% for their peers without disabilities. For employers already facing recruitment challenges, this is an opportunity, not a constraint.

Inclusive Hub builds a pre-screened pipeline of motivated, supported candidates — so your organisation does not need to build that capability internally. The programme handles sourcing, skills training, and onboarding support from start to finish.

## What employers gain by participating

- **Access to untapped talent** — reach candidates from non-traditional pools, including neurodivergent professionals and young people with various disabilities.
- **Higher retention and loyalty** — employees with

- disabilities show significantly lower turnover when well-matched to a role.
- **Stronger team performance** — neurodivergent employees bring distinct strengths: attention to detail, pattern recognition, and reliability.
- **CSRD readiness** — the EU Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive requires companies to evidence social inclusion; participation in Inclusive Hub provides documented, measurable impact.
- **Lower costs than you think** — 59% of workplace accommodations cost nothing; the median cost is just €500.
- **Reputation and consumer preference** — consumers actively prefer companies with inclusive hiring practices.

### Who Can Join?

#### Employers

Any company or public-sector organisation committed to inclusive hiring and willing to:

- Host at least one workplace site visit for candidates
- Offer paid internship opportunities where suitable candidates are identified
- Engage with programme training and evaluation
- There is no limit on the number of employer partners per country.

#### Job Seekers

Inclusive Hub welcomes students and young people (aged 17–30) with disabilities or special needs who have less than one year of work experience — entering the workforce for the first time after completing their education.

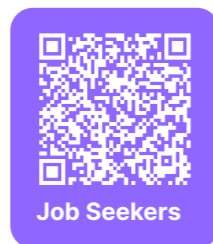
For the 2026/27 cohort, we are actively seeking candidates from Slovakia, Czechia, Lithuania, and Croatia.

#### How to Register?

Visit [www.almainclusive.com](http://www.almainclusive.com) to register as an employer or job seeker. The registration deadline is **31 October 2026**.



> **Register now** →



Job Seekers



Employers

[www.almainclusive.com](http://www.almainclusive.com)

### What Employers Actually Do: A Step-by-Step Journey

Inclusive Hub and Profesia Lab follow a structured, 9-month cycle. Your commitment at each stage is clearly defined — there are no open-ended obligations.



#### 1 Preparation and Selection

September – January

- Register at [www.almainclusive.com](http://www.almainclusive.com) and complete an introductory interview with the programme team
- Sign a memorandum of cooperation and gain access to the internship platform
- Attend an introductory one-day training covering the full employment cycle and practical expectations
- Collaborate with a business network developer to plan your site visit and any potential internship

At this stage, there is no commitment to offer an internship. You are simply getting to know the programme and the candidates.



#### 2 Training and Planning

February – March

- Join the annual Alma Inclusive conference, bringing together employers, NGOs, and researchers from across Europe
- Participate in up to three online webinars covering: (1) disability diversity and accommodation needs, (2) how to organise effective workplace visits, and (3) best practices for internships with candidates with less than one year of work experience
- Continue planning your site visit with support from your assigned job coach

All training is online and takes approximately 3–4 hours in total. Materials are provided in English and Slovak.



#### 3 Company Visits

April – May

- Conduct practice interviews - an informal opportunity to meet candidates without being committed to a specific vacancy
- Organise one to two guided visits to your workplace (typically 2-3 hours each), during which candidates try out real job tasks in your environment
- Your job coach is present throughout to support both candidates and your team

Hosting a site visit does not obligate you to offer an internship. The decision is yours, made after the visit.



#### 4 Internships and Evaluation

May – December

- Optionally publish a paid internship offer for free on [www.almainclusive.com](http://www.almainclusive.com)
- Set your own internship length and timing; interns receive standard remuneration for junior part-time roles
- Job coaching support is available to both the employer and the intern until 1 September
- Complete a performance evaluation at the end of the internship, followed by a short interview with the programme team — your input directly feeds international vocational rehabilitation research

Whether an internship leads to further employment is entirely at your discretion. Around 40% of Inclusive Hub graduates have been retained as employees after their first year.

## A Strategic Approach to Inclusive Hiring

Inclusive Hub model follows the employment cycle as described by Bonaccio et al. (2020). The preparation of employers and job seekers follows the same timeline, ensuring effective coordination of processes.

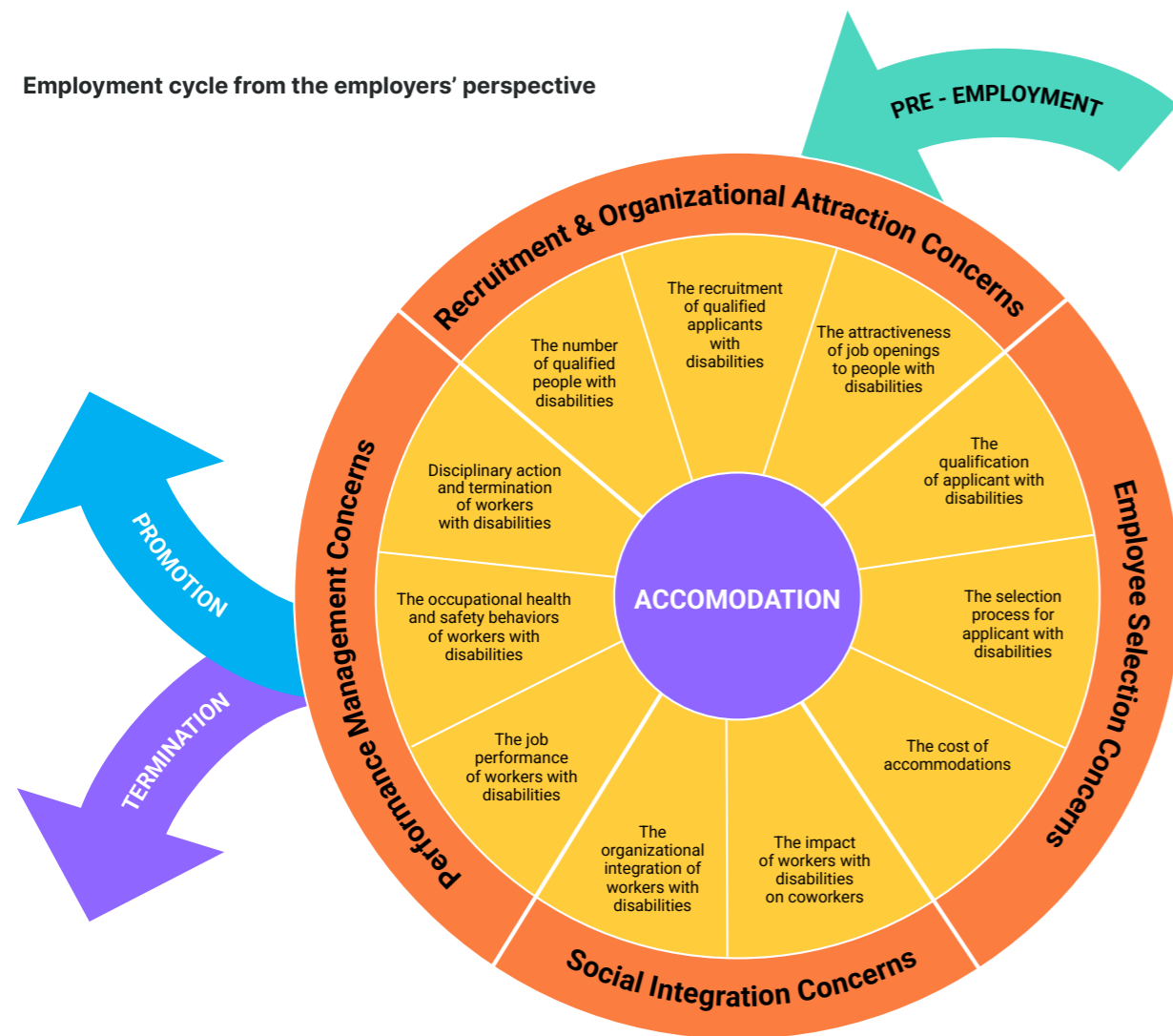
Over the last four years, we have tested this model in collaboration with 29 employers from various sectors. Most of them have continued with us since 2023, and over the years they have deepened their understanding of inclusive employment practices. The types of jobs employers have offered range from manual labor and administrative work to IT positions.

For employers, we address concerns and barriers identified throughout the recruitment, selection, and integration phases. We are currently developing the performance measurement phase, with the goal of adapting evidence-based, and well-researched instrument for transition-age individuals with disabilities by 2027.

Profesia Lab also offers educational webinars for participating employers, with three planned online sessions focusing on:

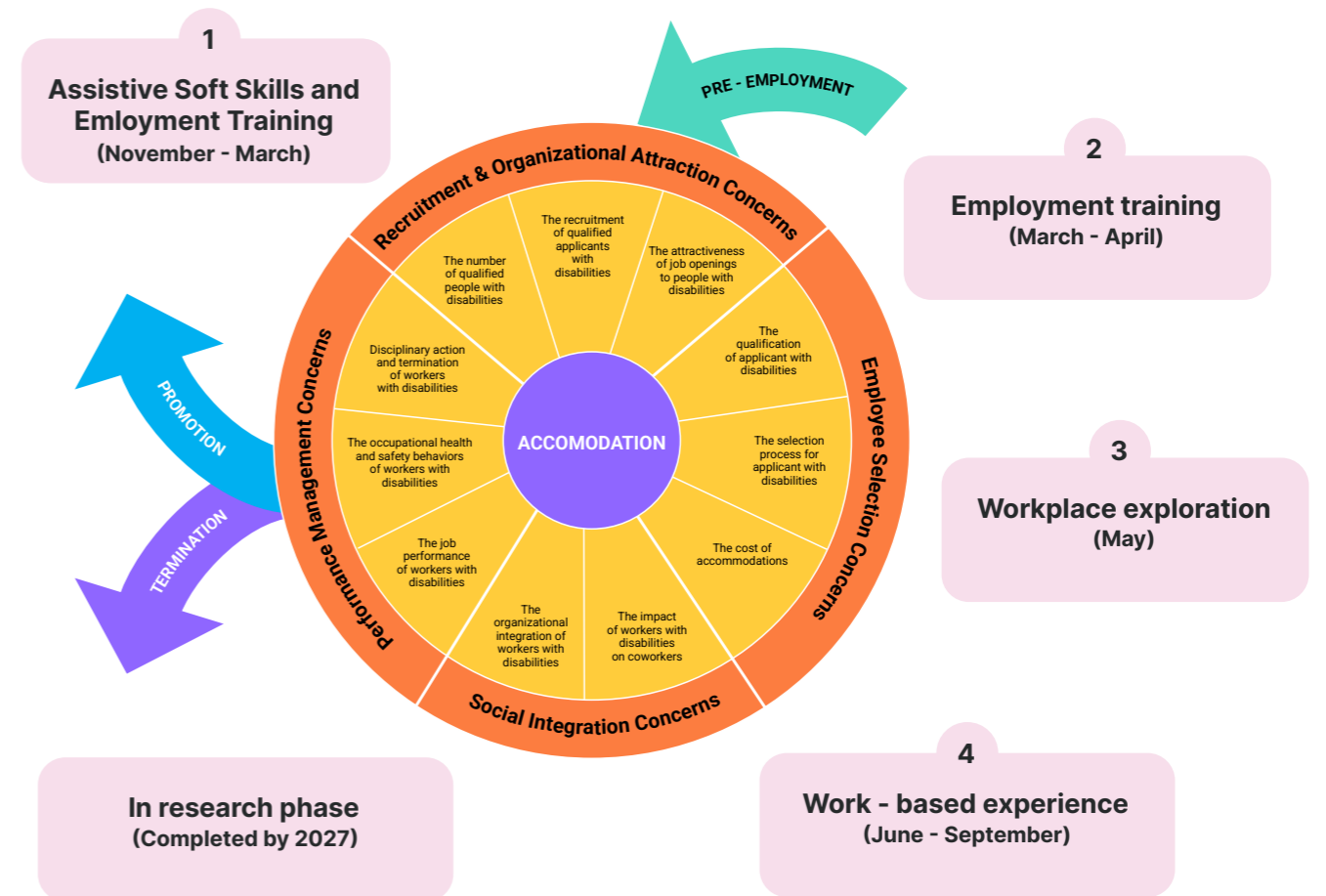
- Diversity in disabilities and needs for accommodations
- Collaboration with community partners
- Preparation of site visits and internships

Employment cycle from the employers' perspective



**Figure 2:** Bonaccio, S., Connelly, C. E., Gellatly, I. R., Jetha, A., & Martin Ginis, K. A. (2020). The Participation of People with Disabilities in the Workplace Across the Employment Cycle: Employer Concerns and Research Evidence. *Journal of Business & Psychology*, 35(2), 135. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10869-018-9602-5>

A Dual Approach — Job Seeker Preparation Mapped to the Employment Cycle



**Figure 3:** Timeline of Profesia Lab activities with job seekers aligned with the Employment Cycle framework (Bonaccio et al., 2020).

### Successful Employment Outcomes

Successful employment outcomes are influenced by a complex interplay of factors that extend beyond traditional metrics. According to a comprehensive research review (Ikutegbe et al., 2023), these outcomes are determined by three interconnected categories of predictors: supply-side (individual), demand-side (employer), and environmental factors.

- On the supply side, the nature of an individual's disability, socioeconomic background, disclosure decisions, social support networks, personal motivation, and prior work experience all significantly impact employment success.
- From the demand side, employer attitudes toward people with disabilities, specific job characteristics, organizational size and sector, workplace concerns about costs and compliance, and corporate culture create the framework within which success can be achieved.

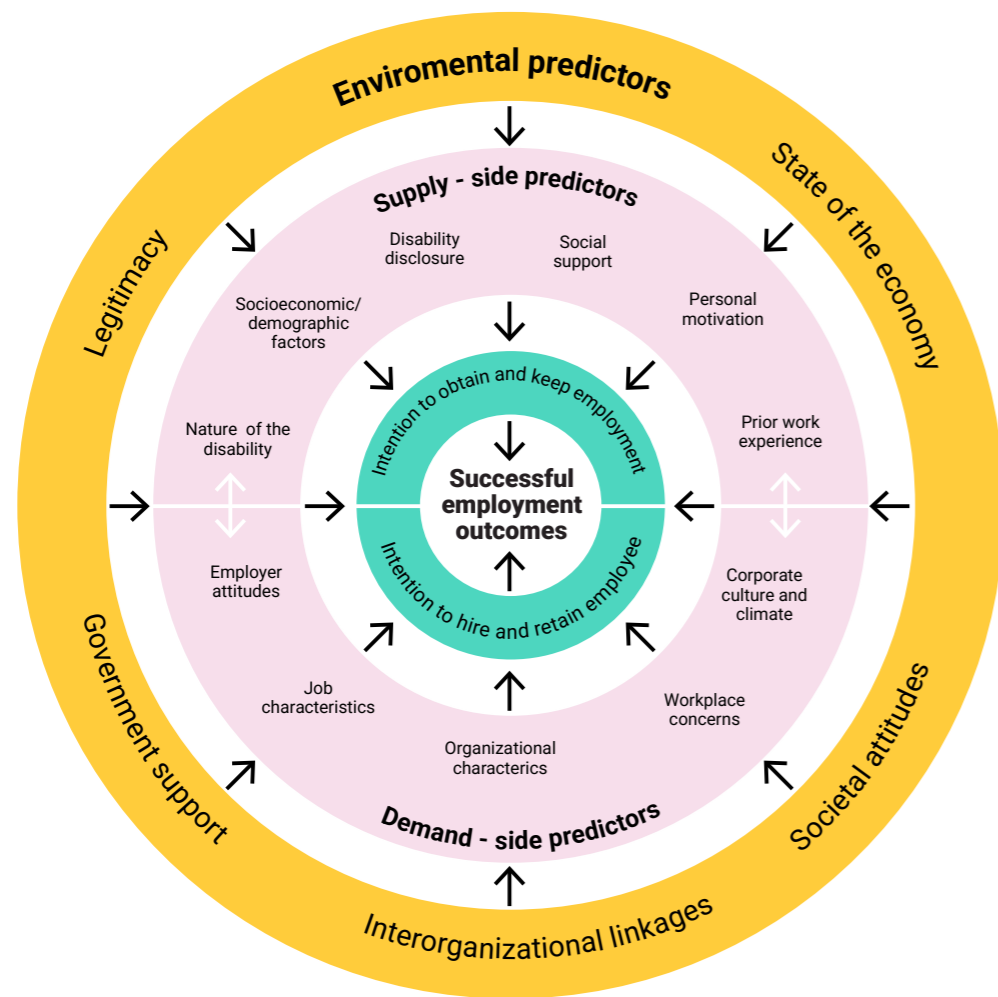
- These factors operate within a broader environmental context that includes legitimacy of organizational practices, government support programs, interorganizational partnerships, prevailing societal attitudes, and economic conditions.

A holistic understanding recognizes that "success" in employment varies among stakeholders - employees may prioritize job satisfaction and work-life balance, while employers often focus on sustainability and workplace functioning.

The most effective approach acknowledges that successful employment outcomes result from the quality of interactions between individuals and their work environments, addressing physical, psychological, and social needs rather than focusing solely on employment duration or compensation (as shown in Figure 4).

# Reasonable workplace accommodations

Anna Podlesná | Andrea Kozova | Katarína Vanková



**Figure 4:** From “Successful Employment Outcomes for People with Disabilities: A Proposed Conceptual Model,” by P. Ikutegbe, M. Randle, L. Sheridan, R. Gordon and S. Dolnicar, 2023, Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice & Research, 75(3), 202–224 (<https://doi-org.proxy2.cl.msu.edu/10.1037/cpb0000222>)

Recent research by Grześkowiak et al. (2021) reveals critical insights that employers should consider when approaching disability in the workplace. Their cross-cultural study found significant differences in how employers accept various types of disabilities, with cultural factors strongly influencing these perceptions. Particularly in post-communist countries, disability is often narrowly viewed as primarily physical impairment, overlooking its diverse aspects.

Most importantly, the research confirmed that employers’ knowledge about disability directly impacts their willingness to hire people with disabilities.

As participation in Profesia Lab follows the employment cycle described by Bonaccio et al. (2019), it addresses each stage and helps employers build their own first-hand experience with unlocking the potential of people with various abilities.



The integration of people with disabilities into the open labor market represents a complex process. Along with complying with applicable legislation, it is also necessary to properly understand what reasonable workplace accommodation is. Workplace accommodations are also at the center of the Employment Cycle (Bonnaccio et al., 2020), which we explained in the previous chapter. The information and recommendations in this chapter are based on our experiences from three years of Profesia Lab in Slovakia.

## Legislative Framework

The Slovak National Center for Human Rights has summarized the principles of equal treatment in the employment of persons with disabilities in the form of an Employer's Guide, which is available in Slovak language for download on the website <https://www.snslp.sk>

On the European Commission's website, a guide titled **"Reasonable accommodation at work - Guidelines and good practices"** is available for downloading, providing information, practical examples, and several useful links to additional resources for employers.

Within Profesia Lab, we inform employers in Slovakia primarily about these key legal regulations:

- Act No. 365/2004 Coll. (the Anti-discrimination Act) clearly states that employers are obliged to adopt measures that allow persons with disabilities access to certain employment, performance of certain activities in employment, functional or other advancement in employment, or access to vocational education. However, this obligation does not apply if the adoption of such measures is "unreasonably difficult" for the employer.
- The Employment Services Act 5/2004 Coll. defines who is considered a citizen with a disability for employment purposes. This refers to a person recognized as having disability according to a special regulation, and this person must prove their disability and the percentage rate of decrease in ability to perform gainful activity by a decision or notification from the Social Insurance Agency.
- A person who has health problems but does not have a decision from the Social Insurance Agency regarding disability cannot be counted for the purpose of demonstrating compliance with the mandatory share of employment of citizens with disabilities under Act No. 5/2004 on employment services.

Similarly, a person who only has a card of a person with severe disability is not counted.

## Insights from Profesia Lab '25

### Mapping Workplace Accommodation Needs

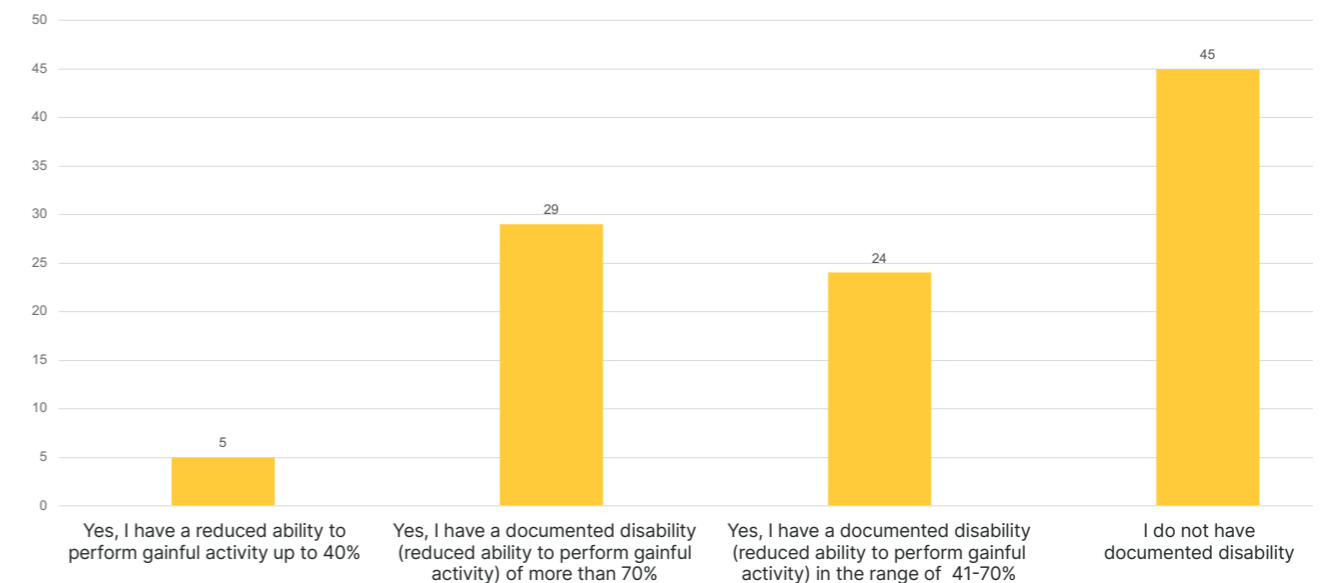
In 2024, we revised the registration process for Profesia Lab to enable the identification of workplace accommodation needs during initial interviews. Based on the data collected, 103 applicants registered for participation in Profesia Lab 2025 indicated specific accommodation requirements, as follows:

- **Cognitive and Process Needs:** Over 35% of applicants indicated the need for additional time to understand instructions, support with work planning, and assistance in managing stress.
- **Communication Preferences:** Over 26% of applicants reported specific communication needs, including a preference for reduced communication, independent work, or an inability to communicate by telephone.
- **Physical Barriers:** Only 1% of registered applicants required a barrier-free workplace.

When asked whether they possess official documentation of their disability - a requirement under Act No. 461/2003 Coll. - 45 applicants stated that they do not have recognized disability status.

During the transition of young people from school to the labor market, we encourage both parents and applicants to consider obtaining official documentation of disability, in accordance with the legislative framework in Slovakia. However, we frequently encounter concerns that such documentation may become an obstacle to future employment opportunities.

Figure 1: Responses from Job Seekers Registered for Profesia Lab 2025



**Note:** The term "documented disability" refers to the percentage decrease in the ability to perform gainful activity, as defined in Annex 4 of Act No. 461/2003 Coll. on Social Insurance in Slovakia.

The accommodation needs indicated by job seekers during the registration process are taken into account when assigning participants to ASSET groups and delivering training in social and employment skills relevant to the labor market. During these sessions, ASSET facilitators support participants in practicing how to effectively communicate their needs to employers.

### Communication with Employers

Initial information regarding accommodation needs, collected through the registration form, is also utilized by community partners when organizing employer site visits. To ensure the appropriate selection of candidates for each visit, it is essential to clarify the following aspects:

- Requirements related to the working environment
- Job description and required skills
- Opportunities for reasonable workplace adjustments
- Company culture and the level of support available

Below is an example of the questions we seek to answer, depending on the type of work:

#### 1. Requirements Related to the Working Environment

- Is your workplace barrier-free? How is barrier-free access to the building and movement within the workplace ensured?
- Does the workplace have natural or artificial lighting?

- Is it possible for an employee to adjust the lighting according to their needs?
- What options are available for managing noise in the workplace? Can an employee wear headphones?
- Is there a quiet room or space at the workplace where an employee can withdraw if needed?
- How is workplace ergonomics addressed? Is it possible to adapt the desk, chair, or other equipment to individual needs?
- Do you have experience providing assistive technologies for people with visual impairments?
- Can employees use artificial intelligence as an assistive tool?
- How is access to common areas (kitchen, toilets, meeting rooms) ensured?

#### 2. Job Description and Required Skills

- What are the key tasks and responsibilities of this position? Which are considered essential and which are supplementary?
- Is it possible to divide work tasks into smaller, more manageable parts?
- How is the working day structured? Is there flexibility in work organization?
- Does the position require fine motor skills or manual dexterity? If so, which specific tasks?
- Will the candidate be working with tools or equipment? How will they be trained?

- Is telephone communication part of the role? Is it possible to substitute it with another form of communication?
- How often is interaction with other people required? Is it possible to work independently?
- What are the expectations regarding meeting deadlines and time management?
- How are work instructions provided? Are they available in written form? Are they available in pictorial form or as videos? Is it possible for employees to record instructions during an online meeting for later reference?

### 3. Opportunities for Reasonable Workplace Adjustments

- Does your company have an established process for requesting reasonable workplace adjustments for existing employees? If so, could you make this process available to us in advance so we can review it with candidates?
- Do you have experience implementing workplace adjustments for employees with disabilities?
- Is it possible to adjust working hours or allow remote work?
- Do you have guidelines for new employees regarding the minimum time they must work on-site before being eligible to request remote work?
- Do you provide any support for commuting to work (e.g., company shuttle buses, parking spaces for people with disabilities, etc.)?
- What options are available for providing assistive technologies or special equipment? (For example, is key workplace software compatible with technologies for the visually impaired?)
- Is there an option to assign an internal mentor to new employees?
- How do you address the need for additional time to understand instructions or complete tasks?

### 4. Company Culture and Support

- Are there employee groups or networks within your company for people with disabilities?
- Have you already provided any training for employees regarding working with people with disabilities?
- How do you handle situations where an employee needs additional support or finds themselves in a stressful situation?

- Do you have experience employing people with disabilities (e.g., due to injury, chronic illness, or congenital conditions)? If so, what has been your experience with the attitudes of colleagues who work with them?
- How do you evaluate employee performance and provide feedback? (For example, is feedback given in writing or only verbally—do you use regular evaluation questionnaires, etc.?)
- What experience do you have in adapting company events and team-building activities for employees with disabilities?

### Workplace exploration

After the preparatory phase in Profesia Lab, company visits—known as site tours—follow. The purpose of a site tour is to provide candidates with a real-life experience of the type of work they plan to undertake and the workplace environment where such work would be performed during an internship. Organizing a site tour does not obligate the employer to offer an internship. This decision can be made after the site tour has taken place.

Based on our previous experience, we recommend the following to employers:

#### 1. Planning and Communication

- Provide information about the site tour well in advance, including the schedule, program, and the names of key individuals participants will meet. Please discuss these details with our site tour coordinator beforehand. Supporting materials such as photos of the premises, product images, or videos demonstrating the work can be very helpful. If there will be a meeting with HR after the tour, kindly provide interview questions in advance.
- Clearly define both the tasks and the physical abilities required for the job (for example, physical fitness, handling loads, or working in confined positions). This will help us to select suitable candidates. You may also assess candidates' skills by assigning a task they must complete before the site tour.

- If possible, schedule the visit during a quieter time of day.

- Provide information about transportation options and parking spaces for people with disabilities.

#### 2. Space and Accessibility

- Ensure that there is accessible, barrier-free entry to the building and the workplace (including elevators,

doors, and toilets). If you are using premises managed by another company, notify them of the specific date of the site tour, as they may have scheduled maintenance or repairs.

- Prepare alternative routes in case certain areas of the workplace are inaccessible.
- Ensure there is sufficient space for maneuvering a wheelchair.
- Identify and mark potential obstacles such as stairs or narrow spaces.
- We recommend having a quiet room available where participants can withdraw if needed (for example, during breaks). This is especially important for neurodivergent candidates.

### 3. Site Tour Program

- Schedule the site tour for 2–3 hours, with sufficient breaks included. The main objective of the tour is to observe candidates as they perform your work—this should be the central part of the program.
- If possible, provide the site tour program in a visual format (such as a timeline or pictograms).
- It is helpful if company representatives wear name tags; participants may also be provided with name tags.
- Begin by introducing the guides and providing a brief overview of the program.
- If feasible, demonstrate the work in a hands-on manner. Then, allow participants to try the work independently. Permit participants to use concentration aids, such as stress-relief tools (e.g., soft squeeze balls, fidget spinners) or headphones to help them focus during the activity.
- Allocate sufficient time within the program for the practical activity. Participants will be performing the work for the first time—they may complete it quickly, but initially, they might also require much more time than your junior colleagues. This can be difficult to predict in advance.
- During the activity, a job coach may help participants understand the instructions. However, the candidate should perform the actual task independently—without assistance from the coach.

### 4. Communication During the Site Tour

- Use clear and simple instructions, provide practical examples, and allow extra time for understanding

information (speak more slowly and include pauses).

- Offer information in various formats—verbal explanations, written materials, and visual aids.
- Ensure that all participants are appropriately positioned—those with hearing impairments should be close to the guide, and wheelchair users should be seated in the front row.
- Allow sufficient time for questions and feedback. A job coach can also support communication and mutual understanding during the tour.

### 5. Participant Support

- Allow participants to touch objects and experience the workplace tactilely, whenever possible.
- We do not permit parents to attend site tours. However, the presence of job coaches or the site tour coordinator should be expected.
- We aim to limit the size of the group according to the workplace's capacity. If, by agreement, a larger group (for example, 10 candidates) is scheduled, we recommend dividing the group into smaller subgroups, each accompanied by a company representative available to answer questions.

### Recommendations for HR Professionals

The interview conducted after the site tour is a crucial moment for gathering feedback from candidates and for the employer to make a decision regarding internship selection.

- Provide the questions you intend to ask in advance, ideally during the preparation of the site tour. Use clear and simple language—avoid company jargon and complex sentences.
- Ensure a quiet and calm environment—choose a room with minimal distractions.
- Consider alternative communication methods you can offer, such as verbal, visual (charts, images, diagrams), or written formats. Allow the candidate sufficient time to respond. Do not pressure for quick answers.

Explain the purpose and procedure of the interview using simple and clear sentences. Reassure the candidate that the conversation is intended to be mutually beneficial. Be aware that some candidates may prefer to write down their answers in advance and bring them to the meeting—allow them to read their responses.

Begin the conversation with open-ended questions:

- What interested you most about today's site tour?
- Which tasks do you feel you could perform independently, and for which would you need support?
- What adjustments to the workplace would help you perform the job you observed today?
- Would you be able to commute to work independently?
- Do you prefer to work independently or as part of a team?

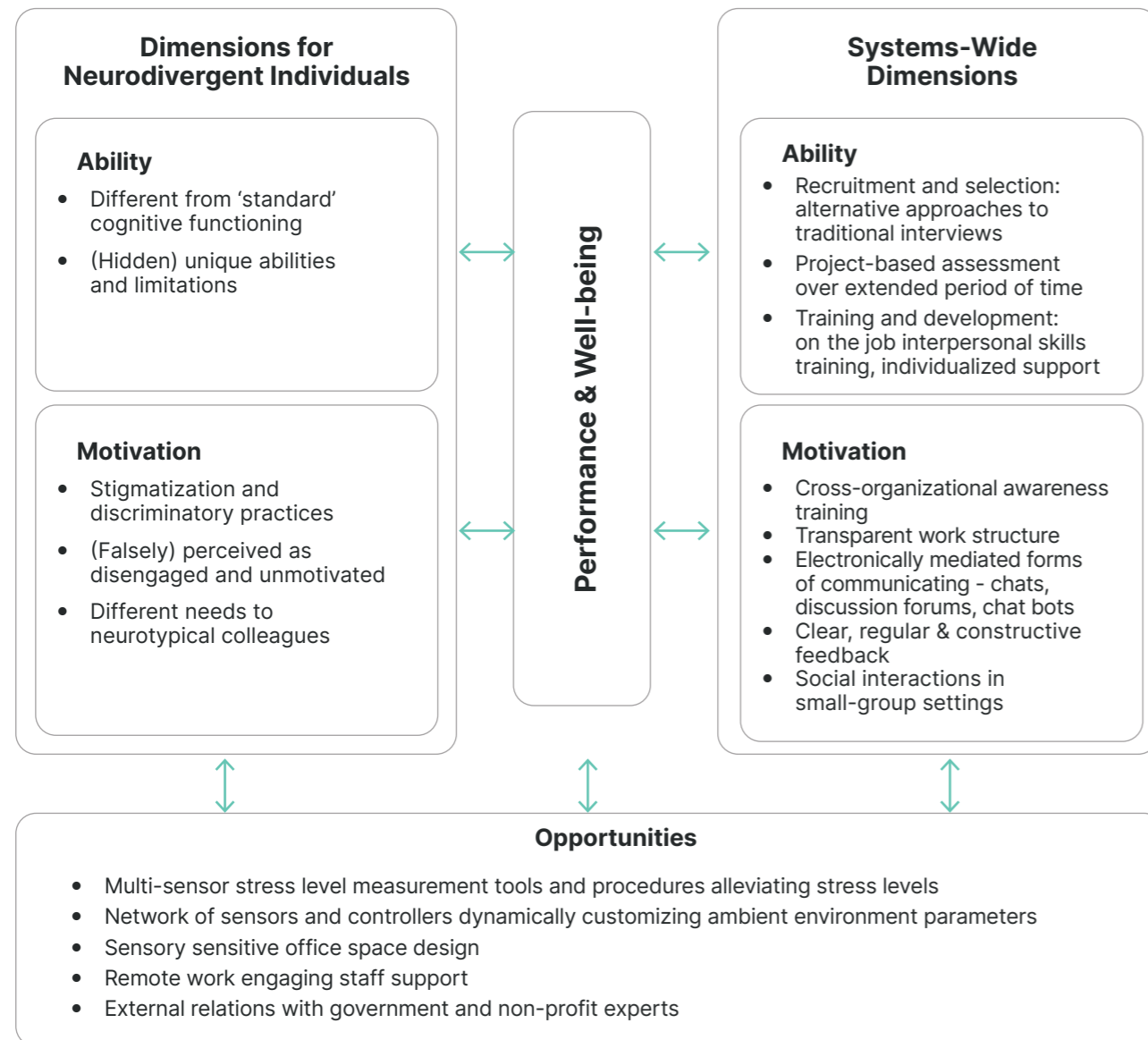
Clearly and concisely explain the next steps in the selection process. Provide this information in writing as well. Make every effort to adhere to the promised deadlines. If circumstances change, inform the site tour coordinator accordingly.

## Neurodiversity in the Workplace

Neurodiversity has the potential to introduce unique perspectives and talents into the workplace. Drawing on the study by Szulc et al. (2021), we have summarized an adapted dynamic version of the AMO model (introduced by Kellner et al.; 2019) that provides guiding principles for the inclusion of neurodivergent employees.

The adapted AMO model — where AMO stands for Ability, Motivation, and Opportunity — explains how successful workplace inclusion is shaped by the interaction between individual characteristics and the organizational system (as shown in Figure 2).

**Figure 2:** Framework for Neurodivergent Workplace Integration according to the study by Szulc et al. (2021), adapted from Kellner et al. (2019)



## Abilities

Neurodivergent team members demonstrate cognitive abilities and thinking styles that vary from traditional neurotypical approaches. While each neurodivergent employee brings individual strengths and challenges, certain shared traits and workplace behaviors are commonly observed within specific neurodivergent groups, as detailed in Table 1.

According to the AMO (Ability, Motivation, Opportunity) model outlined by Szulc et al. (2021), organizations should recognize and leverage these distinctive strengths to foster inclusivity and enhance performance.

**Table 1:** The table below summarizes the potential workplace benefits associated with various neurodivergent conditions, as adapted by Schulz et al. (2021) from Doyle (2020).

Condition	Prospective workplace contributions	Prospective workplace challenges
<b>Attention-Deficit /Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)</b>	Creativity, hyper-focus, energy and passion, authenticity, entrepreneurialism	Impulsive temper outbursts, hyperactivity, low frustration threshold, poor listening skills, difficulty with maintaining employment, difficulty with team-work
<b>Autism spectrum conditions</b>	Concentration, fine detail processing, memory, honesty, sensory awareness	Over- and under-sensitive to light, noise, touch, temperature; difficulty with speech and language, difficulty with stress control, poor listening skills
<b>Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD)</b>	Verbal skills, empathy, intuition, honesty	Difficulties with planning, coordination, poor spatial awareness, over- and under-sensitive to light, noise, touch, temperature; difficulty with speech, difficulty with stress control, poor listening skills
<b>Dyscalculia</b>	Verbal skills, innovative thinking, creativity	Difficulty with number concepts and calculations, poor listening skills
<b>Dyslexia</b>	Visual thinking, creativity, 3D mechanical skills, authenticity, entrepreneurialism	Difficulty with words: reading, writing, spelling, speaking, listening, preference for non-linear thought, distractibility, poor listening skills
<b>Tourette syndrome</b>	Observational skills, cognitive control, creativity, hyper-focus, innovative thinking	Verbal and physical tics, poor listening skills

To help these abilities flourish, we recommend that employers adapt their recruitment and selection processes. Traditional interviews can disadvantage neurodivergent candidates, as they often prioritize social interaction and self-presentation over genuine skills. Instead, consider:

- practical skills assessment over longer periods;
- focusing on abilities rather than social contact and communication-based self-presentation.

## Motivation

Neurodivergent employees may be motivated differently than their neurotypical colleagues. For example:

- Employees on the autism spectrum may prefer structured, repetitive tasks and may find too much autonomy overwhelming.
- Employees with ADHD can be motivated by engaging, interesting tasks.
- Clear, regular, and constructive feedback can have a positive impact on motivation.

To enhance motivation, consider the following:

- Implement electronic communication tools (to facilitate interaction.)
- Create a structured work environment with predictable tasks that align with individual interests.
- Foster supportive relationships through daily communication and teamwork in small groups.

### Opportunities

Providing appropriate opportunities also involves removing barriers that prevent neurodivergent employees from effectively utilizing their skills:

- Implement assistive technologies, such as personal digital assistants (for managing schedules and task priorities) and virtual reality, which offer predictability and stability.
- Adapt the workplace to accommodate diverse needs — for example, by providing quiet rooms to reduce sensory overload, using less intense colors in offices, allowing the use of headphones at work, and installing sensors to monitor temperature, humidity, noise, and lighting.
- Collaborate with partners specializing in supporting neurodivergent job seekers (e.g., employee education, support groups).

### Common Misconceptions

- Mistaking Neurodivergent Traits for Poor Performance: With appropriate workplace adjustments, performance can improve significantly.
- Assuming Uniform Needs: Every neurodivergent candidate has unique needs. Open communication is essential, and it is not appropriate to assume that everyone requires the same workplace accommodations.
- Overgeneralizing Behavior: Avoiding eye contact does not necessarily indicate autism; avoid making diagnostic assumptions based on isolated traits.
- The “Superpower” Narrative: While highlighting strengths is positive, portraying neurodivergent individuals as employees with “superpowers” can create unrealistic expectations and overlook real needs and solutions for workplace challenges.

### Implementing AMO model at Profesia Lab

- The Profesia Lab model offers a longer preparation period for work and enables candidates to gain hands-on experience by trying out job tasks.
- We ensure that detailed descriptions of site tours are provided to minimize stress and uncertainty in new situations.
- We strive to obtain interview questions in advance and guide candidates in their preparation for meetings with HR professionals.
- We encourage companies to focus on evaluating candidates’ skills and their ability to perform the job within the actual workplace and specific teams, with the selection interview serving as a supplementary element in the process.
- We identify and explain candidates’ needs based on observations made during our preparatory phase— for example, their ability to interpret spoken language literally, maintain eye contact, work independently, manage time, and more.
- HR professionals are gradually gaining practical experience through this process, which they can also apply to selection procedures outside of Profesia Lab.

Suggestions for Improvement – Based on Our Experience:

- Approach to Site Visits: Avoid treating site visits as performance evaluations with strict time limits or high-pressure tasks. Instead, prioritize mutual introductions and the presentation of opportunities.
- Office Arrangement: The traditional “panel versus participants” setup can create barriers and tension. Opt for an arrangement that promotes open dialogue and equal relationships.
- Highlighting Diversity: Actively incorporate your company’s diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives into your presentations. Addressing these topics helps foster a sense of safety and belonging.
- Basic Amenities: We recommend providing basic refreshments for participants, such as water or light snacks.

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# Research

Empowering youth for employment success through

# Communication and soft skills training

Connie Sung, PhD, CRC, LPC

Each year, more than half a million youth and young adults with disabilities transition from high school to adulthood and into a labor market. As we often say, the transition should be from school to work — not from school to the basement.

Yet, far too many young people with disabilities continue to encounter significant barriers to obtaining and sustaining meaningful employment due to reasons such as limited access to inclusive training opportunities, inadequate workplace accommodations, stigma and misconceptions among employers, and a lack of support in navigating the transition from school to work.

While “hard skills,” such as academic knowledge and task-specific abilities, remain essential in preparing young people with disabilities for workforce participation, today’s employers increasingly prioritize a broader set of interpersonal and communication abilities—commonly referred to as “soft skills.” These include collaboration, adaptability, emotional regulation, and professionalism. Mastery of such skills are essential not only for securing employment but also for maintaining and advancing in a career. Notably, up to 90% of job loss among individuals with disabilities may be attributed to deficits in these very areas (Elksnin & Elksnin, 2001).

Although many individuals with disabilities possess the technical expertise required for employment, deficits in soft skills often create disproportionate barriers to success. Even highly capable individuals may face job exclusion due to misunderstandings, difficulties in workplace communication, or perceived unprofessionalism (Roux et al., 2013; Bross et al., 2021). Challenges in navigating social interactions within the workplace can hinder both initial job placement and long-term career growth.



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Her expertise includes occupational therapy, cognitive neuroscience, and rehabilitation counseling psychology. Her research focuses on the role of biopsychosocial factors and community-based interventions in improving individuals with disabilities in transition, career development, and psychosocial adjustment.



This issue is particularly pronounced for youth and young adults with disabilities.

Investing in the development of soft skills is therefore critical—not only to improve individual employment outcomes but also to foster a more inclusive, adaptive, and productive workforce. Research has shown that strong social competencies significantly enhance job prospects: individuals with well-developed interpersonal skills are up to 5.4 times more likely to secure and retain employment compared to those with weaker social skills (Chiang et al., 2013). Furthermore, employees who can collaborate effectively, adapt to workplace expectations, and manage interpersonal challenges are more likely to succeed in both entry-level positions and leadership roles (Deng et al., 2014; Vielma et al., 2022).

Addressing these challenges requires intentional, targeted interventions that prepare young people with disabilities to meet the evolving demands of the modern workplace. Programs like the Assistive Soft Skills and Employment Training (ASSET) program (Connor et al., 2022; Sung et al., 2019) offer a promising model. Through structured training in communication, professionalism, emotional regulation, and teamwork, such programs empower participants to build essential competencies. In doing so, they help unlock access to employment, broaden talent pipelines, and enable businesses to realize the full potential of a diverse and inclusive workforce.

## What the Research Tells Us: Evidence from Recent Studies

A meta-analysis and a systematic review (Choi et al, in press)—two of the most comprehensive studies to date—offer compelling evidence for the effectiveness of soft skills interventions:

### 1. Moderate-to-large gains in social competence

Interventions led to significant improvements in participants’ overall social functioning, including workplace behavior, communication clarity, and collaboration. Research demonstrated the effectiveness of targeted soft skills training for youth and young adults with disabilities in improving social adjustment, social performance, and social skills.

### 2. Behavior-focused training is most effective

Programs that emphasized real-world application through modeling, role-play, and feedback showed stronger outcomes compared to those using only traditional instruction. This suggests that hands-on, experiential learning strategies are particularly effective in promoting skill acquisition and workplace readiness.

### 3. Direct assessment shows the most significant improvements

Interventions evaluated through direct observation (e.g., structured job interview simulations) yielded greater measurable improvements than self-reported or third-party evaluations. This highlights the value of performance-based assessments in capturing true behavioral changes.

### 4. Communication is the most frequently targeted skill

Approximately 65% of the employment-related social skills interventions focused on communication, underscoring its foundational role in workplace success. Communication skills not only standalone but also serve as the backbone for developing professionalism, teamwork, and problem-solving abilities.

## The ASSET Program: A Leading Example

One standout intervention is ASSET (Assistive Soft Skills and Employment Training), which is a structured 15-session program focused on preparing individuals with disabilities for the workplace by building essential social and communication skills, including workplace professionalism, emotional regulation strategies, and real-world workplace simulations. Delivered through group training, ASSET is often paired with individualized job coaching to ensure practical application and readiness for internships and employment.

## ASSET program: Overview of 15 sessions

### Session 1: Welcome

- ASSET program introduction
- Objectives of Profesia Lab, cooperation with job coaches and companies



### Session 2: Types and Ways of Communication

- Explore different types of communication (verbal vs. nonverbal)
- Understand the importance of listening



### Session 3: Communication Expectations in the Workplace

- Identify appropriate and expected ways of communication
- Recognize the nuances of communication differences across people and settings



### Session 4: Working with Different Personalities

- Learn various personality traits using the 'OCEAN' model
- Recognize different personality types



### Session 5: Showing Positive Attitude and Enthusiasm

- Learn what attitude is (positive vs. negative) and what it looks like



### Session 6: Disability Awareness and Self Advocacy

- Identify one's own strengths and support needs and how they relate to the workplace
- Job coaching in Profesia Lab | How to communicate your needs to an employer



### Session 7: Teamwork

- Learn the importance of teamwork and different roles in team
- Explore characteristics of good team player



### Session 8: Networking and Digital Identity

- Making contacts, how to briefly introduce yourself, important principles in the use of technology and networking in online world



### Session 9: Critical Thinking and Problem Solving

- Understanding the importance of critical thinking
- Discuss effective strategies to solve common workplace problems



### Session 10: Introduction to Professionalism

- Setting professional goals
- How to behave professionally in the workplace



### Session 11: Time Management and Planning and Being organized

- Managing your time in the workplace: meetings, work tasks



### Session 12: Mental Health and Stress Management

- How to take care of your mental health
- Managing stress in different situations



### Session 13: Emotion Recognition and Regulation

- How to recognize emotions and regulate emotions
- Conflict resolution options



### Session 14: Self-Awareness and Awareness of Others

- How my behaviour affects others at work



### Session 15: Maintaining Workplace Relationships

- Workplace culture (company culture)
- Personal hygiene



## The ASSET Program: Summary of Findings

The ASSET program, a manualized, group-based intervention designed to build soft skills in autistic young adults, demonstrated strong feasibility, high participant satisfaction, and promising outcomes across several psychosocial domains (Connor et al., 2022; Sung et al., 2019).

**1. Improved Social Functioning:** Participants showed significant improvements in overall social functioning and social cognition after completing the ASSET program. These gains reflected enhanced ability to navigate relationships, complete tasks, and engage more meaningfully in both workplace and social contexts.

**2. Increased Self-Efficacy:** Participants showed significant improvements in general, social, and empathic self-efficacy after completing the ASSET program. They reported feeling more confident in their ability to manage challenges, understand others' emotions, and engage in social interactions effectively.

**3. Improved Psychological Wellness:** Participants reported improvements in mental health and psychological wellness (i.e., anxiety and depressive symptoms) after completing the ASSET program.

**4. High Satisfaction and Feasibility:** Participants and facilitators reported strong satisfaction with the ASSET program. Over 94% of sessions were attended, and participants rated the content as relevant, engaging, and applicable to real-world employment scenarios.

## 5. Positive Perceived Impact on Workplace Readiness:

Participants reported improvements in key workplace soft skills, including communication, teamwork, professionalism, problem-solving, and critical thinking. Many reported that ASSET increased their confidence in pursuing job opportunities and performing well in employment settings.

These findings underscore the critical role of targeted, community-based soft skills training for improving employment readiness, psychosocial functioning, and self-confidence among neurodivergent population. Furthermore, one of the most impactful aspects of implementing the ASSET program in Slovakia has been its role in normalizing conversations around disability disclosure and the process of requesting workplace accommodations. In a context where such discussions are often considered private or avoided altogether, ASSET provided participants with a safe, structured environment to learn and practice how to talk about their support needs with potential employers. Through role-plays, guided discussions, and tailored coaching, participants gained not only the language but also the confidence to communicate their strengths, identify barriers, and advocate for reasonable accommodations.

This represents a significant cultural shift—encouraging transparency, self-advocacy, and inclusion in a system where open dialogue about disability in the workplace has historically been limited. Programs like ASSET help bridge this gap by strengthening not only soft skills but also self-advocacy and readiness for real-world employment—fostering a more inclusive and empowering path forward.

## Why This Matters to Employers, HR Professionals, and Community Stakeholders?

### For Employers and HR Professionals

Investing in soft skills development for employees with disabilities can lead to:

- Improved retention rates: Employees with stronger soft skills adapt better and stay longer.
- Enhanced team dynamics: Diverse teams with trained individuals excel in problem-solving and innovation.
- Broader talent pipelines: Employers can tap into a skilled but underutilized labor pool, addressing workforce shortages.

Furthermore, inclusive hiring practices aligned with soft skills interventions can enhance a company's brand, compliance with diversity goals, and employee morale.

### For Community Stakeholders & Policymakers

Supporting and promoting soft skills training programs:

- Improves employment outcomes: Communities benefit from reduced unemployment and underemployment among individuals with disabilities.
- Reduces reliance on public assistance: Long-term employment leads to financial independence.
- Fosters inclusive economic growth: A more diverse workforce contributes to innovation and competitiveness.

## Practical Recommendations

### For Employers & HR Professionals

1. Partner with community-based training programs like ASSET to provide work experience opportunities and mentorship.

2. Integrate soft skills training into onboarding and professional development for all employees, with accommodations and coaching for those who need it.

3. Adopt inclusive assessment practices that recognize diverse communication and interaction styles during hiring and evaluations.

### For Community Stakeholders

1. Advocate for expanded funding and access to soft skills training as part of prevocational/vocational training program.
2. Encourage collaborations between schools, employers, and service providers to embed soft skills instruction into transition programs.
3. Support research and data collection on long-term employment outcomes and best practices in soft skills development.

## Moving Forward: Building Inclusive Workplaces Together

The transition to adulthood and employment is a critical juncture for youth and young adults. As the demand for soft skills in the workforce grows, so does the importance of equipping young people with the social and communication competencies necessary to succeed. Programs like ASSET, supported by robust research, demonstrate that with the right training and support, neurodivergent individuals can not only meet but exceed expectations in the workplace.

For employers and HR leaders, embracing this opportunity means rethinking traditional hiring practices and investing in development programs that recognize diverse talents and learning styles. For community stakeholders, it requires fostering partnerships and advocating for evidence-based interventions.

Together, by prioritizing soft skills development, we can dismantle barriers to employment, enrich our workplaces, and contribute to a more inclusive, equitable society.

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Person-centered and motivational approaches in

# Supported employment for individuals with disabilities

Jennifer Harrison, PhD, LMSW, CAADC

In Slovakia, the disability gap in employment, or the percentage of people with disabilities who are employed compared to those without disabilities, is 27%.

In neighboring countries in Central Europe it is as high as 37%.

This means substantial unemployment for individuals with disabilities, who without jobs are often left to live and be supported by family members without regular meaningful activity.



There are environmental constraints on a person-centered approach to hiring individuals with disabilities. There is also a tension in determining based upon intersectional needs which individuals are ready with resources for the open labor market. And yet regulatory required to be more inclusive in employment are clear, including national quotas and EU directives.

The alternative which Profesia Lab has committed to implementing is supporting employment through research into effective interventions, collaboration with employers and job coaches to insure individuals have the support they need, and ASSET training to teach and reinforce soft skills for individuals with disabilities. This multi-prong approach has the goal of minimizing the disability employment gap, but is not without other barriers, both individual and systemic. Motivational approaches and skills in person-centered employment services can be another key to unlocking employment potential for individuals with disabilities and their families, and providing the workforce with the skills and job-ready employees they need. Profesia Labs incorporated Motivational Interviewing training was a useful starting place in collaboration with Fulbright program in early 2025.

William Miller, one of the parents of Motivational Interviewing, spoke about the strategy of motivational interviewing as being a collaborative, person-centered form of guiding to elicit and strengthen a person's motivation for change (Miller & Rollnick, 2023). Although Motivational Interviewing was initially developed in relation to behavioral health treatment, it has now been broadly applied to a substantial variety of complex behavior changes, from adherence to HIV medication regimes to parental substance use, and adolescent mental health treatment to diabetes management. It is not hard to see the utility of Motivational Interviewing when we think about its acceptance of ambivalence as a normal state for people who are early in their readiness for change, and in the interventions that can help enhance readiness and support people as adjuncts to the self-change process. Key components of Motivational Interviewing include helping people who are engaged in complex behavior change, including but certainly not limited to getting and keeping a job, with some of the key skills below:

- Discover their own interest in considering and/or making a change in their life (e.g., diet, exercise, managing symptoms of physical or mental illness,

reducing and eliminating the use of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs)

- Express in their own words their desire for change (i.e., "change-talk")
- Examine their ambivalence about the change
- Plan for and begin the process of change
- Elicit and strengthen change-talk
- Enhance their confidence in taking action and noticing that even small, incremental changes are important
- Strengthen their commitment to change (Case Western Reserve University Center for Evidence-Based Practice, 2025)

## The Role of Motivation in Supported Employment

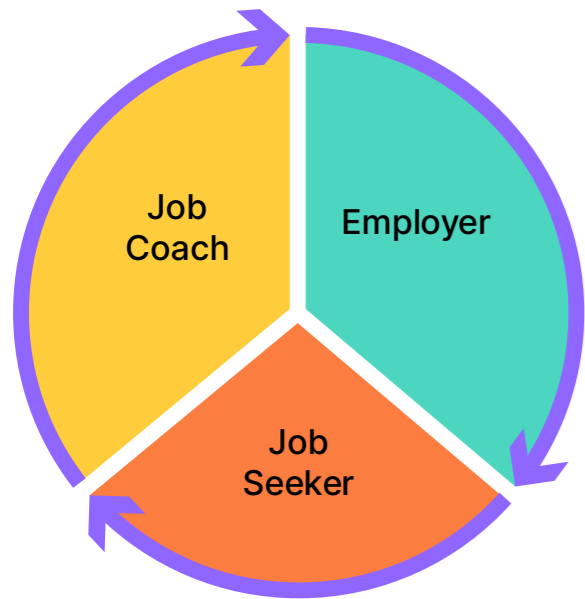
The evidence to support motivational and person-centered approaches to supporting employment for individuals who are disenfranchised or otherwise excluded from employment include several recent studies, many focused on Europe.

In Rymenans and colleagues (2024), Motivational Interviewing's main mechanisms were supporting autonomy, communicating with empathy and respect, facilitating feelings of competence and focusing on solutions instead of hindrances. Motivational Interviewing workshops provided to prospective employees yielded more change talk, indicating an increased readiness to change (Britt et al., 2022).

Motivation is also important during work in addition to preparing for it. Individuals who participated in an MI group showed faster return to work and lower rates of relapse which took them away from work (Vanovenberghe et al., 2023). In Aanesen and co-authors (2022), employees needed less time with case managers by seven fewer days in a month. We know that Motivational Interviewing can be an effective tool for individuals seeking or keeping employment. But what about the rest of the system? If the families and natural supports of job seekers or employers are not willing to engage in the same person-centered and motivational approaches, we may only have part of the system being addressed.

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**Figure 1:** Person-centered approach including all stakeholders.

## Barriers to Person-Centered Approaches

Profesia Labs has found that motivational approaches and person-centered models need to not only involve potential job seekers, but also employers and job coaches as seen in Figure 1 here. In addition, the Job Seeker's family's motivation and their experience with protecting, advocating for, and encouraging ever greater independence for their family members is also a significant variable. Balancing the dual needs of employment opportunities that are both feasible and healthy takes all stakeholders working collaboratively.

As discussed in other sections of this manual, there is a long history of individuals with disabilities being kept at home after their initial education, often with no meaningful activity. Even though there are economic incentives for employers to hire and retain individuals with disabilities, they are often not sufficient unless employers also value a more inclusive workforce. Thankfully, many employers who partner with Alma Career Slovakia value exactly that, and Profesia Lab has been active in outreaching to individuals with disabilities and their families, providing the skills training through the ASSET program, and supporting job shadowing and internships to increase exposure to real-world jobs and the demands they bring to any new employee. Job coaches provide critical bridges in balancing the needs of all parts of the system, including setting individualized and person-centered goals with the individuals employed, and assuring that the employer needs are met. But we know, this level of system change is not easy and support for all stakeholders through training, coaching, and policy changes is needed.

## Practical Guidelines for Stakeholders

When implementing motivational and person-centered approaches to employment for individuals with disabilities, the development of individualized goals for each person, and the willingness of all stakeholders to work to support those goals while also holding the job seeker or employee responsible for meeting their needs and fulfilling the functions of their job include the following steps by all parts of the system:

- Support job-seekers self-efficacy to try new skills (autonomy)
- Recognize ambivalence from all people as normal (managing resistance and empathy)
- Encourage commitment by talking through incremental steps (goals)
- Openly discuss how to deal with setbacks and mistakes (collaboration)

The shared goal of all of these stakeholders is that the disability employment gap is minimized and that people with disabilities are employed, advanced, and contributing to their communities and local economies in the same way that people without disabilities are enabled to do. Person-centered approaches help to ground the employment system in effective and evidence-based interventions to support this goal.



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# Performance evaluation and ethical considerations

in employment of persons with disabilities

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People with disabilities are employed across a broad spectrum of industries, though their representation varies by sector and is influenced by both organizational practices and societal factors (Bonaccio, et al., 2019).

Employees with disabilities work in industries such as education and health services, retail trade, professional and business services, manufacturing, and public administration. In the United States, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) mandates that employees with disabilities meet the same performance and conduct standards as employees without disabilities (Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, 42 U.S.C. § 12101 et seq., 1990), and in the European Union, member states are informed by the Employment Equality Directive (EED) 2000/78/EC which has direct implications for developing performance evaluation procedures affecting persons with disabilities (Council of the European Union, 2000). Both directives, however, highlight the need for incorporating reasonable accommodation or appropriate support into this process in order to ensure compliance.

Overall, performance evaluation processes require unique considerations based on the type of work that is being performed, across differing work contexts, such as production and nonproduction work environments. These performance standards and evaluation processes should support ethical business practices that aim to balance performance accountability (as would be applied to any employee regardless of condition) with dignity and respect in order to develop and maintain a productive workforce.

## Performance evaluation in production work environments

Approximately 8.5% of workers with disabilities in the United States are employed in manufacturing, a sector that often provides structured roles with quantifiable tasks (Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS], 2020), which is expected to increase based on labor shortages and high production demands. Production roles, such as assembly-line work and machine operation, are increasingly accessible due to adaptive equipment and flexible scheduling for persons with disabilities (Lyubykh et al., 2020). Because production roles typically rely on quantifiable metrics—such as output quotas, error rates, and safety compliance—performance evaluation standards in these environments can be structured in a more objective and systematic manner than in nonproduction settings, where qualitative or more subjective evaluation measures are used.

The ADA mandates that employees with disabilities meet performance standards if provided reasonable accommodations to address disability-related barriers (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission [EEOC], 2023). Under the EED, employers must provide reasonable accommodations to ensure employees with disabilities can participate equitably in performance evaluations. For example, ergonomic workstations that are height-adjustable enable workers who use wheelchairs

or have limited standing tolerance to perform assembly tasks at the same pace and quality as their peers without disabilities, without altering the essential job functions or the workflow of the line (Bonaccio et al., 2019). Assistive technologies, such as voice-activated machinery controls, hands-free devices, or tool-balancing arms, can further support workers with limited dexterity or strength, allowing them to operate equipment or handle materials efficiently (Ikutegbe et al., 2023).

With respect to measuring the performance of individuals with disabilities in production-based work environments, some important considerations are:

- Employers should not lower production standards as an accommodation, but should consider providing or installing tools (e.g., ergonomic workstations, assistive technology) to assist employees meet requirements (Work Without Limits, 2023). For instance, a study of manufacturing workers with musculoskeletal disabilities found that adjustable-height workstations reduced fatigue-related errors by 22% (Lyubykh et al., 2020). A 2021 longitudinal study by Bonaccio et al., (2019) noted that workplace adjustments like flexible scheduling or modified equipment reduced disability-related performance disparities by 34% in manufacturing settings.
- Performance evaluations should apply the same quantitative criteria (e.g., units produced per hour) to all employees regardless of disability. Adjustments to how tasks are performed are permissible, but outcome expectations should remain the same (EEOC, 2023).
- Production managers or supervisors should address performance gaps promptly with employees and collaborate to identify accommodations aligning with production demands since delayed feedback has been found to increase disability-related challenges (Ikutegbe et al., 2023).

While studies have shown that when accommodations are effectively implemented, employees with disabilities can achieve parity in productivity to those without disabilities, challenges with systemic bias in the performance evaluation of persons with disabilities persist. For example, supervisors' may underestimate employee capabilities which can stem from unconscious biases and stereotypes about disability-related productivity, even when employees meet objective benchmarks. This discrepancy arises because invisible disabilities (i.e., back pain, mental illness, epilepsy,) are less likely to prompt accommodations, and supervisors may misinterpret symptom-related behaviors (e.g., fatigue, wincing,) as markers of poor performance (Lyubykh et al., 2020). While it remains the employee's responsibility to inform the employer of the need for accommo-

ation, supervisor observations regarding performance can facilitate discussions regarding the need for accommodation, which can in turn help preserve the employee-employer relationship and reduce hardship for both the employee (i.e., remediation, termination) and employer (i.e., employee turnover, retraining).

## Performance evaluation in nonproduction work environments

Research has shown that people with disabilities are actually more likely to be employed in service-producing sectors, including retail and hospitality, as well as in government positions, which are perceived to offer better accommodations and lower risks of discrimination (Bonaccio et al., 2019). Nonproduction roles, such as customer service, retail, office and administrative work, prioritize qualitative metrics like communication skills, problem-solving, and teamwork. In nonproduction work environments, it is important that employers design evaluation processes that are both valid and flexible. This allows employee performance to be assessed by alternative or adapted methods of assessment necessitated when an employee's disability. This helps to ensure that performance assessments incorporate both the essential job functions and the individualized accommodations that facilitate job-task performance.

With respect to measuring the performance of individuals with disabilities in nonproduction-based work environments, some important considerations are:

- The focus of the performance evaluation should be on whether the employee is meeting the essential job requirements and achieving the desired outcomes, not on whether they are completing tasks in the same manner as employees without disabilities. For example, a trainer with a speech-related disability might be evaluated on clarity of content delivery with assistive technology rather than vocal tone (Work Without Limits, 2023). If an employee who is blind uses a screen reader to manage emails and documents, their performance should be assessed on the quality, accuracy, and timeliness of their work—not on their ability to read print visually or use a mouse in the more traditional way.
- Indirect factors, such as workplace socialization, influence retention, job satisfaction, and performance. Neurodivergent employees (such as those with autism, ADHD, or other cognitive differences) often face mismatches between their communication styles and organizational norms, which supervisors may misinterpret as performance deficiencies (Bonaccio et al., 2019). When this mismatch occurs, supervisors and colleagues may misinterpret these

differences as deficiencies in performance or as a lack of “fit,” even though the employee is meeting their job requirements. For example, a neurodivergent employee might prefer direct, literal communication or may avoid small talk, which could be misread as disengagement or lack of teamwork by supervisors unfamiliar with neurodiversity (Bonaccio et al., 2019; Mahto, 2022).

- Edwards (2021) found that neurodivergent employees’ job satisfaction and intent to stay were significantly influenced by the quality of workplace social capital, including the level of acceptance and understanding from colleagues and supervisors, as opposed to strictly meeting merit-based performance standards.
- While output standards remain consistent, nonproduction roles benefit from personalized goal setting (e.g., client satisfaction scores) to accommodate distinct working styles. A 2022 meta-analysis found that employees with autism in technology informed roles thrived when evaluated on problem-solving outcomes rather than adherence to rigid collaboration protocols (Ikutegbe et al., 2023).
- Studies have shown that personalized goal setting and flexible evaluation criteria are also relevant and beneficial for employees with physical disabilities in nonproduction roles. When performance evaluations in nonproduction environments recognize and support these alternative methods of task completion, employees with physical disabilities are better able to demonstrate their abilities and meet organizational goals (Bonaccio et al., 2019; Lyubykh et al., 2020).

Overall, employees with disabilities working in nonproduction roles, such as call centers, administrative positions, or customer service, often require accommodations emphasizing communication tools or workflow adjustments. For example, research has shown that implementing flexible break schedules for call-center employees with anxiety disorders led to a 40% reduction in absenteeism, and importantly, this did not negatively affect the quality of service provided (Lyubykh et al., 2020). However, despite the effectiveness of such accommodations, biases in performance evaluation persist. Supervisors in the same study rated employees with mental health disabilities 15% lower on “teamwork” than their peers, even though peer feedback did not reflect these differences. These findings highlight the need for employers to adopt standardized and objective performance evaluation rubrics that focus on actual job outcomes rather than subjective impressions. Such performance rubrics help ensure that all employees, including those with disabilities, are assessed fairly based on their work performance rather than on stereotypes or misunderstandings about disability.

## Ethical considerations in performance management and evaluation

Ethical performance management and evaluation intersects with autonomy, fairness, and non-discrimination. The United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Article 27) underscores the right to equitable employment, necessitating respect for self-determination in accommodation requests (UN, 2006). Performance evaluation systems that are transparent—where expectations, criteria, and decision-making processes are clearly communicated—help counteract negative stereotypes and reduce the likelihood of biased evaluations for employees with disabilities, in fact, research has shown that structured interviews reduce hiring bias by 45% for candidates with visible disabilities, aligning with fairness principles (Bonaccio et al., 2019).

Accountability mechanisms, such as documenting performance issues and accommodation efforts, ensure consistency and legal compliance. The Retaining Workers with Disability (RWD) model identifies direct factors (e.g., organizational policies) and indirect factors (e.g., cultural perceptions) influencing retention of persons with disabilities and stresses the continuing need for ethical leadership and direction (Krisi et al., 2021). Proactive measures, such as regular accessibility audits of evaluation tools, align with the ADA’s mandate for equitable treatment while promoting long-term retention (Krisi et al., 2021).

There are a variety of key issues that employers should be familiar with pertaining to ethical performance management and the evaluation of employees with disabilities:

- Employees may withhold disclosing a disability due to fear of stigma, complicating accommodation requests. For example, a more recent study found that 62% of employees with invisible disabilities (e.g., depression, anxiety, chronic pain) delayed disclosing their disability until performance issues arose, risking disciplinary action (Ikutegbe et al., 2023). This highlights the need for employers to develop ethical employee-employer relationships, which in turn promotes veracity (honesty) and autonomy (self-governance), allowing employees to feel more comfortable choosing to disclose disabilities and reduce the jeopardization of the employment relationship.
- Terminating employees for performance issues linked to unmet accommodation needs violates ADA and UN Convention principles on the employment of persons with disabilities, and employers should

engage in an interactive, performance review process before taking disciplinary action, highlighting the ethical principle of justice. For example, in 2020 a retail worker with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) was terminated for violating the employer’s attendance policy (e.g., tardiness), however, it was found that the employer failed to consider flexible scheduling, resulting in a \$150,000 discrimination settlement (EEOC, 2023).

- Traditional merit-based performance evaluations may create unequal standards, where employees may be judged based on irrelevant factors (e.g., demographics, personal traits) rather than actual performance.
- Unconscious biases may lead to inflated leniency or undue harshness. For example, in 2023, Paycor, a cloud-based Human Capital Management (HCM) software company found that employees with physical disabilities were rated 23% higher on “effort” than non-disabled peers for identical work outputs, reflecting paternalistic assumptions about their capabilities. Training managers should focus on objective criteria (e.g., “You missed three deadlines”) rather than assumptions about capability.

Employers can develop ethically informed performance management and evaluation processes by considering primary ethical principles that will help ensure uniform application of standards for all employees while help-

ing to eliminate systemic barriers to the employment of persons with disabilities. This includes removing bias and misperceptions of disability through training and education. For example, research has found that 59% of accommodations cost \$0 for employers, such as permitting telework, while the median, one-time expenditure for accommodations by employers is \$500 (JAN, 2025), which contradicts commonly held notions that job accommodations are expensive and cause undue hardship for employers. Employers should develop protocols that allow employees with disabilities to retain agency in deciding whether, when, and how to disclose disabilities or request accommodations, recognizing that policies which force disclosure erodes trust and violates confidentiality in many cases (Lindsay et al., 2020).

Structuring performance evaluation systems and managerial conduct in ways that prevent harm supports the ethical obligation of nonmaleficence and promotes beneficence. This includes avoiding biased assessments, discriminatory hiring and evaluation practices, or paternalistic assumptions that undermine the dignity or opportunities of employees with disabilities. Avoiding harm requires proactive measures by employers, such as the implementation of accessible evaluation tools and anti-discrimination policies. In fact, organizations with disability-inclusive cultures report 30% lower turnover rates among employees with disabilities (Ikutegbe et al., 2023).

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# Conclusion



Overall, performance evaluations for employees with disabilities demand a balance between applying consistent performance standards and understanding the process and application of individualized accommodations. In production environments, quantifiable metrics may be commonly applied, whereas nonproduction jobs require more adaptive evaluation methods. Ethically, organizations must prioritize transparency, mitigate biases, and uphold dignity through inclusive performance management practices.

We should expect continuing challenges, including systemic biases and the risk of misinterpreting disability-related behaviors as performance deficiencies, emphasizing the importance of transparency, fairness, and ethical leadership in performance management.

By prioritizing inclusive, evidence-based evaluation frameworks and upholding the principles of autonomy, non-discrimination, and nonmaleficence, employers can foster equitable workplaces that enhance productivity, comply with legal mandates such as the ADA or EED, and support the dignity and retention of employees with disabilities in the workforce.



# Data-driven performance assessment

for inclusive workplaces

Anna Podlesná





**Anna Podlesná**  
 CSR Manager responsible for development of Profesia Lab and Inclusive Hub

A key factor contributing to lower employment rates among people with disabilities is that employers frequently hold negative assumptions about their work capabilities. After starting with Profesia Lab in Slovakia, we looked for instruments to address these biases. We found that Slovakia lacks a performance measurement instrument to support the transition of individuals with disabilities from school to work.

In order to address this gap, we investigated potential tools based on the following criteria:

- **Representation in Scientific Literature:** The instrument should have sufficient representation in peer-reviewed publications and/or demonstrate widespread use in the field.
- **Sound Psychometric Properties:** Evidence of psychometric qualities, including construct validity, internal consistency, sensitivity to change, and test-retest reliability.
- **Ease of Administration:** The instrument should allow for flexible administration methods, including in-person assessment and online or remote administration.
- **Broad Applicability:** The tool should be applicable across a range of disabilities and conditions, ensuring its versatility in diverse employment settings.
- **Multiple Perspectives:** The instrument should incorporate both self-report and independent report components, following the same constructs to provide a comprehensive assessment.
- **Cost:** Inexpensive, it requires lower direct costs.

We have identified and tested Job Observation and Behavior Scale (JOBS) which is an evidence-based tool allowing employers, job coaches, educators, rehabilitation professionals, and others to assess workers' job performance quality, determine their need for support, and compare their performance with workers not receiving support who perform the same competitive jobs (Brady & Rosenberg, 2000). It incorporates both qualitative and quantitative aspects of assessment, as well as self-report and informant report elements, making it adaptable to different disability types and severities, as well as different types of employment settings (e.g., service, production, etc.).

Over the past two years, we have been exploring the implementation of this instrument under the conditions of Profesia Lab, and we have gained confidence to progress toward its validated translation into the Slovak language.

In the first phase, we obtained evaluation from 50 experts regarding the relevance and clarity of each item. Based on these recommendations, we are preparing for the second phase data collection in the coming years. This will be a longitudinal study conducted through Profesia Lab. Going through this process will also inform other European countries about the potential translation and adaptation of the JOBS Scale.



## Case study

The goal of this case study is to illustrate, through a practical scenario, how JOBS could help us have constructive communication and provide feedback in order to make data-driven employment decisions. For further information, we recommend following the Job Observation and Behavior Scale Examiner's Manual published by Stoelting Co.

A Profesia Lab graduate received a 10-hour weekly employment contract for 1 year. After six months, the employer expected to gradually assign more professional work, but the employee currently cannot perform it in the required quantity and quality. The employer had regular weekly check-in calls with our job coach, and the employee met with the job coach via an online app twice per month. The topics discussed were mostly related to

stress management, challenges with traveling to work, and interpersonal work interactions.

In this situation, we tested the JOBS questionnaire. The supervisor completed the JOBS scale and an employee completed the JOBS-OSD (Opportunity for Self-Determination).

- Through the quantitative part, we can determine if there is a specific barrier causing lower work performance.
- Through the qualitative part, we can identify how to adjust or supplement the type of support to increase the employee's performance quality.

The quantitative part of JOBS and JOBS-OSD has 30 items.

### Subscale I.

#### Work-Required Daily Living

- Attendance
- Punctuality
- Personal Hygiene & Grooming
- Travel
- Verbal Communication
- Non-verbal Communication
- Money Use
- Reading
- Math
- Self-identification
- Work Schedule
- Personal Schedule
- Work Facilities

### Subscale II.

#### Work-Required Behavior

- Stress Tolerance
- Interpersonal Work Interactions
- Interpersonal Social Interactions
- Changes in Routines
- Honesty
- Reaction to Criticism
- Work Initiative
- Work Endurance

### Subscale III.

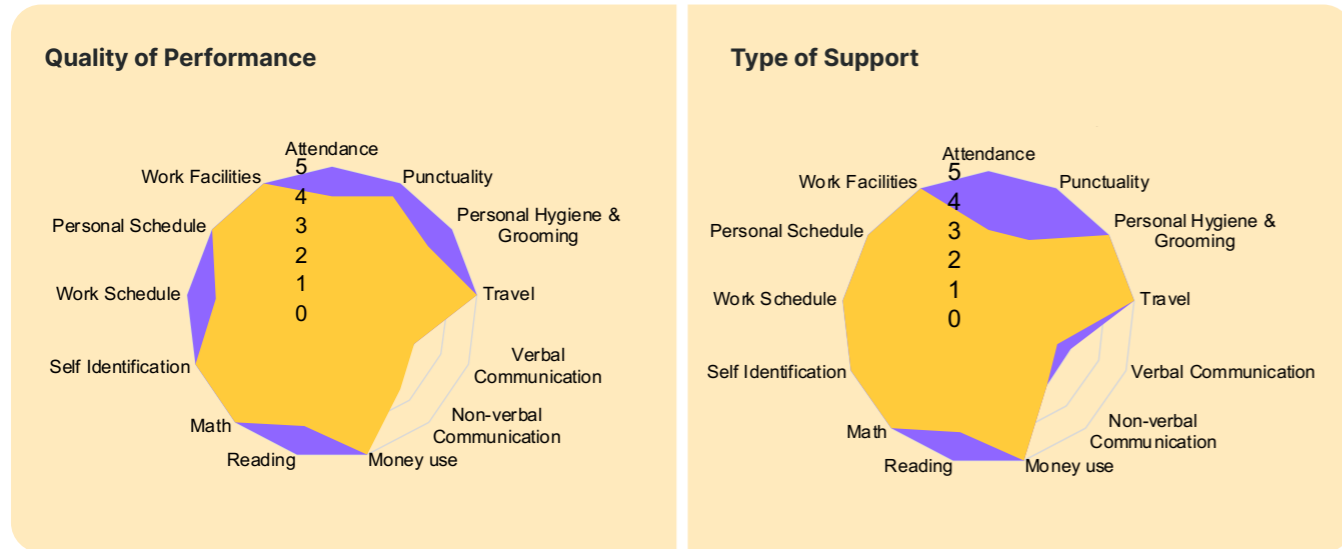
#### Work-Required Job Duties

- Quality of Work
- Quantity of Work
- Speed of Learning New Tasks
- Performance on Previously Learned Tasks
- Multiple Task Performance
- Organization of Work Tasks
- Safety Procedures
- Cleanliness of Work Environment
- Employee Motivation

**Outcomes**

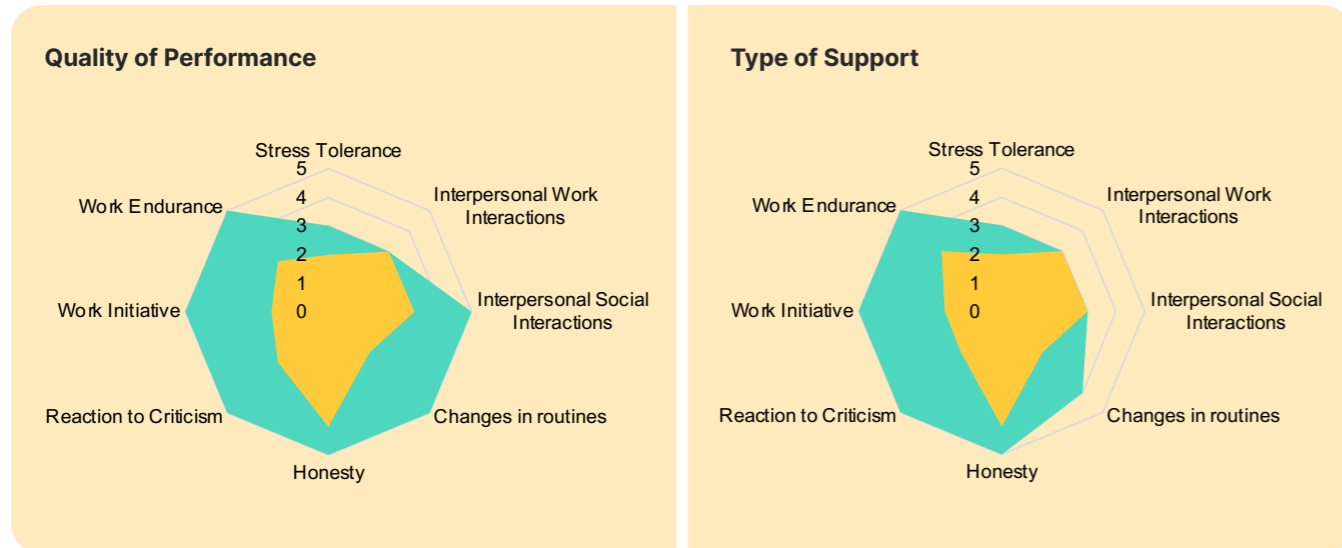
*Subscale I.*

Employee Employer



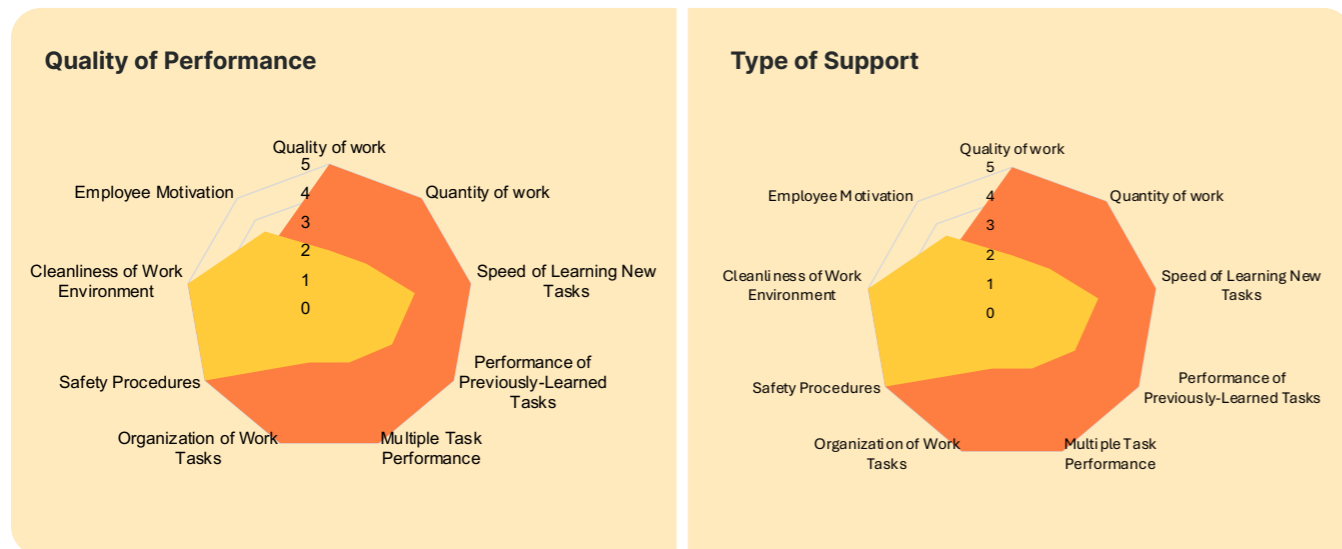
*Subscale II.*

Employee Employer



*Subscale III.*

Employee Employer



**In the qualitative section, the supervisor identified the following areas of concern:**

- Arriving at work on time.
- Asking for help if unable to solve a task or if additional information is needed.
- Following instructions when performing work duties-entering completed tasks into the system, and if an error is identified, reporting it using the designated procedure.

**The Job Coach in JOBS-OSD noted the following topics discussed with the employee:**

- He is afraid to make decisions because he has had several negative experiences in the past (for example, he entered a task incorrectly into the system or accidentally spammed his colleagues' inboxes). He performs tasks that he is afraid of.
- He perceives that his colleagues are very busy, so he is hesitant to interrupt them with questions. He has already experienced a negative reaction from a colleague.

- His colleagues have stopped inviting him to lunch during breaks, so he goes alone.
- He is able to describe procedures in great detail, which is something he feels confident about.
- He does not understand the new public transport schedule, after it was changed from summer to winter season.

**Next steps:**

1. The job coach met with the employer to discuss both the employer's and the employee's evaluations, as well as possible adjustments to work process or workplace (including the option to change the type of tasks).
2. This was followed by a joint meeting with the employer, job coach, and employee, during which they set goals together for the remainder of the year.

Short-term goals:	Date	Long-term goals:	Date
Learn to use public transportation (understand the timetable, calculate how long it takes to get ready and travel from home to work, identify suitable connections and alternatives in case the bus is delayed, and learn how to notify the supervisor if I am late to work).	July 2025	Arrive at work on time; zero late arrivals per month. If a late arrival does occur, timely notification must be provided to the supervisor.	December 2025
Learn to create detailed procedures for new types of tasks (develop the employees' strengths).	August 2025	Adjustment of job responsibilities (more tasks where attention to detail can be utilized, and fewer tasks that require decision-making).	December 2025

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# Applied Practice



## **Why does TESCO focus on hiring people with disabilities?**

We believe that everyone deserves a fair chance. We observed that our standard positions were too complex for some candidates with disabilities, so we created new positions adapted to their abilities. Our goal is to offer genuine employment with all benefits - not just temporary work positions.

## **What barriers did you face?**

Our basic sales assistant position was too broad and demanding. Many candidates could not pass the required medical examinations or obtain food safety certificates, especially if the work involved fresh food or heavier physical work. These requirements excluded some talented people

## **How did you solve this?**

We created a new position: Support Worker. This position includes basic tasks that people with various disabilities - including Down syndrome and neurodivergent conditions - can manage. We removed duties that required food safety certificates or heavier physical work, and instead focused on tasks that are both productive and accessible.

## **What practical steps did you take to make this work?**

We collaborated with our safety and health partners in defining the new position so that candidates could pass medical examinations. We focused on non-food goods and packaged foods, where the work is less demanding. This enabled us to offer permanent employment contracts, not just short-term agreements.

## **How do you handle pay and fairness?**

We are mindful of equal pay for equal work, especially with incoming new EU regulations. By creating a separate position, we ensure fair compensation that corresponds to the responsibilities of the given position.

## **What advice would you give other employers?**

Be prepared to adapt positions and processes. Listen to your candidates and employees, and do not hesitate to create new positions if necessary. Inclusion is not just the right thing to do - it brings loyal colleagues and new perspectives to your company.



**TESCO**

**Anna Steranková**

Lead Retail People Partner  
at TESCO STORES SR a. s.



**Silvia Novorková**  
Senior Recruiter, IKEA

### Why does IKEA employ people with disabilities?

We don't want to be just a responsible company — we want to grow as people while simultaneously supporting the growth of our teams. That's also why we joined the Profesia Lab project. We perceive it as an opportunity to create real work possibilities and learn together, not just as a formal fulfillment of requirements.

### How do you choose roles for candidates with disabilities?

We offer genuine job positions in various areas — logistics, restaurant, design, and other departments. These are not artificially created positions for the sake of inclusion. We adapt work tasks according to needs, but it is always real work that corresponds to the abilities of the specific individual.

### What makes your onboarding process unique?

We utilize what we call a buddy system. Every new employee or intern with a disability has an assigned 'buddy' — an experienced colleague who helps with training, integration, and serves as support during their

initial period with the team. We select the buddy carefully — they must be open, patient, and enthusiastic about this role. We involve them from the first meeting with the candidate, which helps build trust and reduces stress.

### How do you prepare for their arrival?

Preparation is crucial. We organize introductory meetings, provide clear and comprehensible instructions, and create photographic and video manuals for each work position. During visits within the Profesia Lab project, we enable candidates to actually try the work. At the same time, we limit the size of groups so we can better get to know each person and evaluate whether the position is suitable for them.

### What challenges have you faced?

Naturally, some nervousness appears — will the new colleague fit into the team? Will they have support? But each time, we have been positively surprised by the motivation and dedication of both the candidates and our employees. It has often happened that candidates who were not successful in one position later applied for another and were successful.

### What advice would you give to other employers?

Don't be afraid to go for it. What's important is team preparation, open communication, and selecting the right buddy. Give candidates a chance to experience real work, be flexible, and focus on their strengths, not on limitations. Inclusion doesn't just bring benefits to individuals — it enriches and motivates the entire team.



**Filip Molčan,**  
CEO of Good Sailors

### What inspired Good Sailors to focus on hiring people with disabilities?

At Good Sailors, we have always believed that what some perceive as limitations can actually be transformed into strengths. Our journey began over 22 years ago, and throughout this time, we have recognized that neurodiversity and disability can bring exceptional value to projects—particularly in areas such as software development, where unique perspectives and talents truly excel. We do not simply see disabilities; we recognize untapped potential and make it our mission to celebrate every talent.

### Have your diverse teams added value to your clients?

Absolutely. For example, when we worked on a complex gas storage management system for RWE, we had a colleague on the autism spectrum who excelled at the advanced mathematics and algorithms required. His focus and expertise enabled us to deliver a solution where others had encountered difficulties.

With Warhorse Studios, our team members - some with obsessive-compulsive disorder - are outstanding game testers. Their attention to detail ensures that fewer bugs are overlooked. We also have a colleague who is nearly deaf and contributes to designing in-game dialogues, leveraging his heightened sensitivity to non-verbal cues. These are just a few examples of how our teams' unique abilities have become genuine advantages for our clients.

### What is your recruitment approach?

We approach this somewhat differently. Instead of waiting for a business need to arise, we actively seek out talented individuals with disabilities - even if we do not have an immediate project for them. Through available state support, we can bring them on board, assess their strengths, and then identify or create appropriate opportunities for them. It is about discovering what motivates them and where they can excel, rather than forcing them into predefined roles.

### How do you make sure your teams work well together?

Our teams are a genuine blend: about 30% of our members are individuals without disabilities, but most of them are personally connected to the topic or are motivated to work for a company with a strong sense of purpose. We organize small teams led by team leaders—often individuals with disabilities themselves—who act as a bridge between the team and the client. Through experience, we've learned that simply placing a person with a disability into a mainstream team rarely leads to success unless the team already has relevant experience or empathy. That's why we provide ongoing education and support for everyone involved, ensuring that both colleagues with and without disabilities can thrive together.

### What challenges have you faced, and how do you overcome them?

One of our most significant challenges is higher absenteeism—some colleagues, due to their health conditions, may only be available for part of the year. We address this by maintaining flexible teams and consistently ensuring we have enough personnel to meet our clients' needs. We are transparent with our clients about our approach and structure our teams so that the work is completed, even if it means assigning two individuals to cover what would normally be one full-time position.

### What's your top advice for employers wanting to hire people with disabilities?

Don't focus on what individuals cannot do—focus instead on what they do exceptionally well. Look beyond the disability and recognize the unique strengths each person brings. Build supportive teams, provide an appropriate environment, and remain open to flexible arrangements. Most importantly, foster a culture where diversity is seen as a genuine asset, not just a compliance requirement. If you approach hiring this way, you will discover remarkable talents.

### Where do you see inclusive employment heading in the future?

We are entering an era where technology, AI, and automation will transform the nature of work. Routine positions will disappear, and what will matter most are unique talents and creativity. Individuals with disabilities often possess exactly those extraordinary abilities. Our goal is to continue expanding this model, demonstrating that inclusive employment is not just the right approach—it is a strategic business advantage for the future.



# Testimonials of Profesia Lab Graduates

Over the past three years, we have had the opportunity to accompany more than 300 young people on their journey to employment. Some have successfully secured employment, others have continued their studies, and some are still searching for the right path. Here are inspiring testimonials from selected graduates and their parents. We believe these will serve as encouragement for you as well.



**Iveta Čorošová**

**Profesia Lab Graduate 2023**

Full video here:



My name is Ivetka Čorošová, and I graduated with a specialization in assistant cook and waiter services. I am someone who could not find employment anywhere after finishing school. First, I enrolled in a program called Profesia Lab and participated in a site visit to TESCO's clothing department. Besides coaches Ms. Dáška and Ms. Inga, an employee from TESCO, Ms. Danka, also assisted me.

Ms. Danka is exceptional; when something does not work out, she repeats the process for me two or three times until I understand how to do it correctly. At TESCO, I primarily learned how to code merchandise, but

I also learned how to unload boxes, open them properly, and I have even learned to operate a pallet jack.

Profesia Lab provided me with the best experience I could have for my current work. I am no longer afraid to ask questions or seek assistance. After completing the internship, they extended my contract. I have been working here for more than a year now, and I am also training new colleagues. I tell them not to hesitate to ask me questions, such as where items belong. I encourage them to approach me for guidance, as I am committed to passing my experience on to others.



**Miroslava Slovákova**

**Profesia Lab Graduate 2024**

Full video here:



My name is Miroslava Slovákova. I had never worked before and had no prior work experience. I learned about the program through my school, as they provided us with an informative presentation, and that was when I thought that there might finally be an opportunity to demonstrate what I am capable of.

First, we attended lessons, followed by meetings with job coaches where, in my case, we primarily focused on self-presentation, self-confidence, and overcoming negative self-perception so that I could develop greater self-belief. After that, there were site visits, and then I applied for internships at the companies that interest-

ed me most. I am currently working for Profesia Lab, where I handle spreadsheets, edit texts, and input data into documents. I also completed an internship at Slovenská sporiteľňa, where I was part of the creative team.

Simply the experience of going to work and feeling useful means a great deal to me. When they called to inform me that I had been accepted at Profesia, I actually cried, and when I received my first paycheck, I nearly cried again. For typical individuals, this might not seem significant—they would consider it routine—but for me, having never experienced this before, I was finally proud of myself for the first time in my life.



**Darina Sadovská**

**Mother of Profesia Lab Graduate 2024**

Full video here:



My name is Darina Sadovská, and I am the mother of a daughter on the autism spectrum. My daughter is eager to find employment and fulfill her potential. While searching for resources online, I discovered the Profesia Lab program.

Profesia Lab is a long-term program that begins with several months of training focused on developing social and communication skills. Participants learn how to collaborate with others, recognize their strengths, and communicate effectively in various situations.

The program starts with an academic phase, during which participants also have the opportunity to prepare psychologically. This is especially important for individuals on the autism spectrum, as they often need a low-pressure, supportive environment and time to adapt.

After this initial phase, participants gradually begin to interact with potential employers. My daughter took part in ten company site visits. These visits alone are incredibly valuable, as individuals who may feel isolated often have limited understanding of how the labor market works. Experiencing the workplace environment and overcoming initial fears is crucial.

Job coaches accompany participants during these visits, providing guidance and support to help overcome barriers. This assistance is extremely beneficial.

The final stage of the program involves internships with partner companies. My daughter completed an internship at Deutsche Telekom in an administrative role, where she entered data into the system. Individuals on

the autism spectrum often excel at tasks requiring patience, concentration, and attention to detail, and she truly enjoys this type of work.

Just today, as we were heading to work, she expressed how much she was looking forward to a busy day. Before beginning her employment, she often lacked a sense of purpose and would retreat into her own fantasy world. Now, I observe her planning her days, adjusting her sleep schedule, paying greater attention to her surroundings, and even planning her purchases. For example, she recently mentioned wanting to buy work trousers similar to mine—something she never would have considered previously. Purchasing clothes specifically for work demonstrates that she is living a more engaged and realistic life.

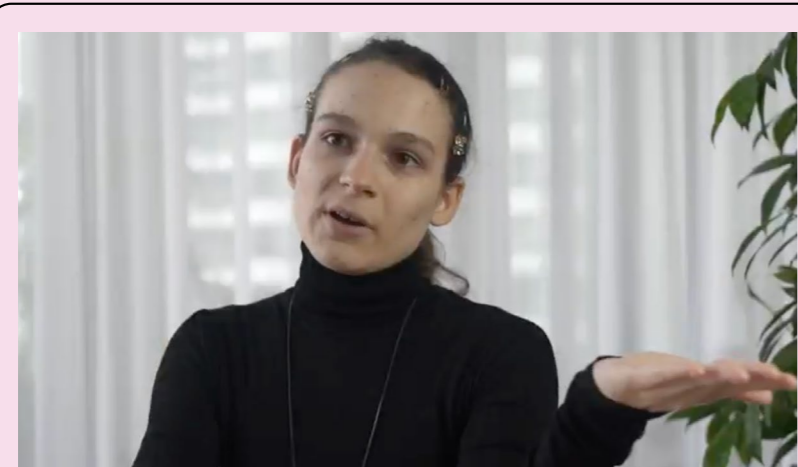
For my daughter, work provides meaning in life. It makes the difference between having a child who stays at home and does not understand the purpose of leaving the house, and having a child who will make progress and advance in her life. It is remarkable to have such an opportunity.

### Have you also applied for internships?

I chose 3 companies. It was Deutsche Telekom as I was interested in the job description, PricewaterhouseCoopers because I really liked their premises and Henkel because of the positive attitude the employees had towards us. In Deutsche Telekom I was working mainly with Excel and in Henkel, where I am now, I sort documents. It is amazing that all these companies involved in Profesia Lab already know what to expect from people with disabilities.

### How would you evaluate Profesia Lab?

It is important to have a feeling that I am not helpless, that I can function in this world and not all the doors are closed for me. I instinctively know that I am able “to cross the room from one side to the other”, but I can also see some “stones” on the road which can stop me. Profesia Lab gave me the knowledge what to do with these “stones” - should I go around them or should I kick them aside and how to deal with these issues.



## Lucia Sadovská

Profesia Lab Graduate 2024

Full video here:



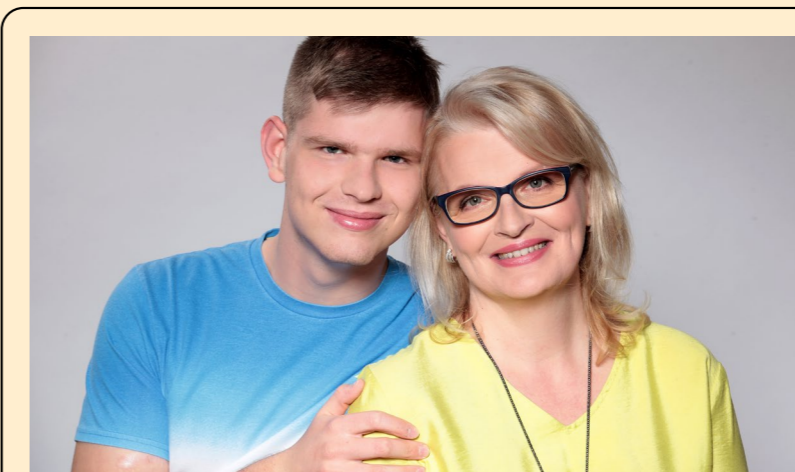
My name is Lucia Sadovská. I visit the organization SPOSA, where I received information about the existence of Profesia Lab, and I managed to enter the program at the last minute. My expectations were to become more self-confident, become part of society, and learn to be productive.

### What have you learned in Profesia Lab?

We have covered the main rules of workplace socialization with colleagues, including how to communicate or to dress appropriately and how to cope with different problems and not to be afraid to ask questions.

### Have you participated in company visits?

I went to many company visits. It was important for me to figure out how it works and to get familiar with the premises. If the contact had been limited to written communication only, I would not have been able to determine whether I liked the building, if there were areas within the premises where I could feel comfortable, or whether the space was too open or too enclosed. I also appreciate when there is a quiet retreat where I can withdraw and be alone when experiencing high levels of stress.



## Marieta Kováčová

Mother of Profesia Lab Graduate 2025

Published book:



### Ten years ago, your 14-year-old son Maxim suffered a skiing accident. How did this change your family's life?

We are a family of four—besides our son Maxim, we also have a daughter, Michaela, who is a year and a half older. We were confronted with the new challenge of managing the changes in our lives emotionally, health-wise, financially, and practically. My husband continued working to support us, while I remained at home to care for Maxim. The care gradually evolved—first in the hospital, then during spa treatment, and later at home in our city of Bratislava. It primarily involved securing and organizing therapies, exercises, and other supportive activities to restore Maxim's memory. Our son remained in a conscious coma for four months following the accident and was subsequently confined to a wheelchair for another six months. During this period, friends and family provided tremendous assistance, including financial support for purchasing more expensive medical aids and paying for therapies.

### What challenges did you experience with Maxim's return to school?

Before the accident, Maxim was among the exceptionally gifted students. School came easily to him; he was dedicated to English and German, with Italian and Spanish added later. He enjoyed organizing activities, served as class president, and represented the school at sporting events in squash and table tennis. One year after the accident, Maxim returned to the school system. It was a challenging period due to new limitations in Maxim's communication fluency, impaired memory, rapid fatigue, and loss of concentration. I did not return to work and remained available to ensure Maxim's well-being, assist with school preparation, and coordinate other therapies to improve his health condition.

### How did you find balance between caring for your son and your own career?

After Maxim's accident, I attempted to return to work approximately three times, but due to new health complications and later COVID-19, I only succeeded on the third attempt. During this period, I wrote a book about Maxim and his journey, documenting everything we experienced over those years and identifying which therapies helped us, so they might potentially assist other people who find themselves in similar situations.

After completing elementary school, Maxim graduated from a Secondary Vocational School of Education and Social Work with a high school diploma, and subsequently completed a two-year post-secondary study program in social-legal awareness at a specialized secondary school for young people with disabilities.

### What did participation in Profesia Lab bring to Maxim?

Maxim applied to Profesia Lab because he perceived it as an excellent opportunity to bridge the period between completing school and his first work experience. He had the opportunity to familiarize himself with processes in the working world and to develop new social

and communication skills for professional life. The most attractive aspect for him appears to be the opportunity to participate in site visits to several companies across various job positions, as well as the chance to complete an internship as his first work experience.

We thank Profesia Lab for creating a program that is tremendously beneficial for young people with disabilities. It provides them with guidance and a supportive environment when searching for their place in professional life. As parents, we sincerely hope that Maxim will find a position where he can fully utilize his talents and bring a fresh perspective to addressing new challenges.

### Song written by Profesia Lab Graduate 2023

## Crown, Heart and Big Key



I come home from work,  
sit down at the table,  
thinking about what I've been through,  
it's been a long journey.  
A get-together in the village,  
spending the weekend evening together,  
we're sitting at the pub again,  
I ask for a cola.  
As I sip my drink,  
a question is thrown at me:  
"What's it like to be different?"  
So listen carefully.  
Haven't I told you?  
The guy's been through hell.



Parents of classmates saw you as defective.  
Everyone was against you because you were simply different to them.  
Even your classmates never liked you.  
To them, you were like a bad, inferior race.  
Everywhere you heard that you were just trouble,  
that your whole family was full of fools.  
With every step, classmates crushed your dreams.  
With every insult to your face, you hid deeper into darkness.  
The end of the school year brought you joy, sighs, and hope,  
but in the end, the doors closed, and you had to keep walking.  
After a week, at a family gathering, they say you look good.  
But when you start talking, they cut you off immediately.  
You tell them something three hundred times, but they're deaf and blind.  
When it comes down to the crunch, somehow you're always the one to blame.  
You look in the mirror and ask yourself if there's any hope above you,  
in your soul, you're like a homeless man just hours before death.

#### [Refrain]

In your world, you are your own king,  
you walked a path full of snakes.  
You always link your dreams with your journey,  
in your world, there's a crown, a heart, and a big key.

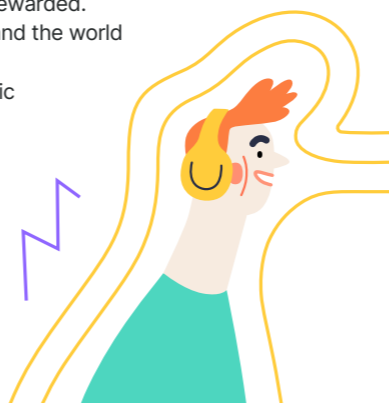
You never faced your childhood again.  
Why was it you who was thrown away like a bag of garbage?  
Why are people like you the ones nobody wants?  
This question followed you for a long time.  
After severe suffering, you looked back on what happened,  
why no one accepted you, and why so few people welcomed you and kept you in their memories.  
Why were there people who barely cared about you?  
Then came an opportunity you couldn't refuse—  
an opportunity that flipped the cards and lifted you up.  
It was a place where you would finally feel good,  
where blind people would finally drop their jaws in shock,  
where envious people would finally sit down,  
where this person could show he had a different map inside him.  
People were amazed you knew more than just one folder,  
in your world, this place felt like reaching the top.

#### [Refrain]

You achieved something no one else in the world did your way.  
Offended little eyes watch you on the internet.  
An envious passerby gives you a slimy look,  
says, "You just got lucky, you gambling autistic!"  
You look at him, smile, and turn your back.  
Because everyone knows who the winner is, and he feels it bitterly.  
You tossed hateful comments into the trash with a cold heart.  
Only the chosen ones know who really stood by your side.

#### [Refrain]

May your steps be guided by God and your paths discovered.  
May all the good you've done be richly rewarded.  
Your view is truly different; you understand the world in your own way.  
You never know how brightly your autistic spectrum may shine.



# Contributors



### Mgr. Andrea Kozová

has been working at the Institute for Vocational Rehabilitation since 2011, focusing on the work potential of people with disabilities. She has collaborated with the job portal profesia.sk since 2018, when the first pilot projects were launched through the “Výpomoc so srdcom” (Help with Heart) program. She is an ASSET facilitator and job coach who helps train other job coaches. She has experience in adult education, particularly in developing communication and social skills.



### Andrew Nay, PhD, CRC, CDMS, CMS

is a highly recognized practitioner and assistant professor of rehabilitation counseling at Michigan State University. His research interests include disability policy and legislation, counseling ethics and the law, and forensic rehabilitation. He also has a graduate degree from MSU in Human Resources and Labor Relations, is a Fellow on the American Board of Vocational Experts, and is a Certified Compensation Management Specialist, Rehabilitation Counselor, and Disability Management Specialist. Dr. Nay is frequently called upon to conduct forensic rehabilitation analyses to assess the employability and ability to earn wages of individuals involved in litigation at both the state and federal level. He routinely consults with employers, forensic accountants, insurance companies, and attorneys on issues involving employability affected by occupational or personal injury, employment discrimination, divorce and wrongful discharge. In 2014, he was appointed to the Commission on Rehabilitation Counselor Certification (CRCC) Ethics Committee tasked with providing advisory opinions on selected situations having ethical implications to the rehabilitation counseling community, and currently serves as a Board Member at Large with the National Association of Service Providers in Private Rehabilitation (NASPPR).



### Jennifer Harrison, PhD, LMSW, CAADC

is a social worker, chemical addictions counselor, and full professor in the School of Social Work at Western Michigan University. She is a co-founder of Goal Scaling Solutions, a secure digital outcome application. Jennifer's clinical social work focus is on working with individuals and families with complex co-occurring conditions and assuring all people have access to the best resources to support their lives. This comes in part from being raised by feisty family members, several of whom also had mental illness and co-occurring substance use disorders in their lives. Her research is focused on motivational interviewing, evidence-based practice im-

plementation, outcome measurement, and workforce development. She has developed two study abroad courses focused on social justice and community health in India and Guatemala and has presented in English and Spanish internationally.



### Mgr. Anna Podlesná

is a CSR manager at Alma Career Slovakia and a second-year doctoral student at Michigan State University's Counselor Education and Supervision Program. She also works as a Research Assistant for Project Excellence while continuing to develop the socially innovative project Profesia Lab. Her research interest focuses on collaboration among various stakeholders in the employment of under-represented groups in competitive labor market settings. In 2021, she received a Fulbright Scholarship and spent a year as a visiting scholar at Michigan State University, which led to successful collaboration recognized by the Impact Award from the U.S. Department of State and the Institute of International Education. In 2022, The Pontis Foundation and Ashoka included her on the map of social innovators in Slovakia.



### Connie Sung, PhD, CRC, LPC

is a professor at the School of Social Work at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor with extensive expertise in disability employment research. She earned her Master of Philosophy in Rehabilitation Sciences from the Hong Kong Polytechnic University and her PhD from the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Dr. Sung's research focuses on community-based interventions for improving career development and psychosocial adjustment among individuals with disabilities. Applying a holistic, strengths-based approach, she has led multiple projects developing interventions that involve interdisciplinary, interagency, and international collaborations. Her scholarly impact is demonstrated through over 100 publications and more than \$20 million in secured research funding. Most recently, she served as program director of the MA in Rehabilitation Counseling and co-director of the Michigan State University Center for Services, Training, and Research for Independence and Desired Employment (STRIDE), where she advanced practical applications of her research in disability employment services.



### Ing. Katarína Vanková

graduated in Personnel Management from the University of Economics in Bratislava and has dedicated her

entire professional career to this field. She gained extensive HR experience at major companies including Coca-Cola, Slovak Telekom, and Union Insurance, where she managed HR teams. Since 2018, she has been an entrepreneur running Jobfit s.r.o., a company specializing in headhunting and HR consulting with a focus on effective employee selection, employer branding, and comprehensive HR strategy development.

Her personal experience as a mother of a child with autism spectrum disorder has deepened her commitment to diversity and inclusion. She is an ASSET facilitator and helped start the first pilot projects through the “Výpomoc so srdcom” (Help with Heart) program in 2018. She also co-creates the podcast “Život na spektre” (Life on the Spectrum) to raise awareness about autism.

# Afterword

Profesia Lab was created as an initiative to strengthen the community of practitioners in Slovakia. The first idea emerged in February 2022 during my stay at Michigan State University, when I had the opportunity to collaborate with Dr. Connie Sung.

In Slovakia we have many practitioners working in isolation - investing significant resources in training and skill development of disadvantaged job seekers, but lacking direct pathways to employers. I met companies willing to hire diverse talents but needed a systematic, nationwide solution. Drawing on the proven supply-and-demand model of job portal profesia.sk, we used this approach in Profesia Lab to create structured connections between employers and job-ready candidates, supported by evidence-based practices from research.

In Profesia Lab, we strive for open communication and create a safe space for sharing concerns and practical experiences. Through regular meetings, we learn together how to improve our approaches. Profesia Lab brings together job seekers, employers, non-governmental organizations, state institutions, schools, HR and career counselors, experts on various vulnerable groups, and trainers of social and communication skills.

Our partnership with Michigan State University provides access to cutting-edge research on inclusive employment practices. This academic collaboration enables us to implement evidence-based strategies, avoid common implementation pitfalls, and focus our efforts on proven solutions that deliver measurable results for both employers and job seekers.

Several people and organizations have been instrumental in this journey, and we want to acknowledge their vital contributions.

- Dalibor Jakuš, founder of the job portal profesia.sk, who ensured that truly everyone could find work.
- Ivana Molnárová and Martin Menšík, who enabled us to build corporate social responsibility as a core part of our business.
- All employees of Profesia company and, since 2024, Alma Career Slovakia. The entire model emerged from our ability to allocate 2 % of income taxes and company donations. Together we sought ways to make this topic visible in events, communications, and daily operations.
- Martina Čápková, who accepted the challenge of coordinating Profesia Lab in June 2023 when many aspects were still unclear. With courage, pragmatic approach, and generous spirit, Martina became key support for the entire executive team, job seekers, and employers.
- Zuzana Kaňuchová, who demonstrates how personnel management should be practiced. Thanks to her, we have learned over the years what the true role of HR is and how to successfully integrate new people into the workplace.
- ASSET facilitators and community partners, with whom we can share successes and solve problems: Adriana Barlogová, Mária Brnušáková, Barbora Čaputová, Gabriela Čičmancová, Katarína Eliášová, Juraj Hudák, Michala Kamhalová, Dagmar Kočiová, Ingrid Kostelníková, Andrea Kozová, Stanislav Lörincz, Martina Mladšíková, Mária Mojžišová, Michal Minarský, Patrik Pauko, Janka Sekerešová, Miroslava Slovákova, Lucia Sujová, Zuzana Švédová, Katarína Vanková, Lenka Zemančíková.

- Dr. Connie Sung, Dr. Andrew Nay and employees of Peckham company for their trust and all the time they have devoted to us so far.
- Klaudia Bednárová and KOGNEO for guidance in the world of adult education.
- The Fulbright Commission in Slovakia for their trust, support and access to global knowledge, and for the opportunity to collaborate with Dr. Jennifer Harrison.
- All professors and staff at the College of Education in the Ph.D. program Counselor Education and Supervision, for their support and guidance.
- People who supported us on our journey, listened to us, guided us, encouraged us, or deepened our understanding: Sebastián Antal, Eva Birčáková, Erika Bočeková, Riley Crawford, Ivetka Čorosová, Veronika Eliášová, Eduard Filo, Soňa Gergeľová, Viera Hincová, Marcel Kapuš, Lenka Krušinová, Daniel Kupčo, Lucia Kupčová, Monika Tajblik Löfflerová, Dušan Piršel, Sukyeong (Su) Pi, Darina Sadovská, Lucia Sadovská, Magda Sedláčková, Alicia Strain, Eva Hribíková Šebelová, Simona Šimková, Peter Štaffen, Eva Turáková, Ján Vojtko, employees of CURADEN Slovakia company and many other Profesia Lab graduates, experts and partners.
- To the employers with whom we have had the opportunity to collaborate so far: Bratislavská vodárenská spoločnosť, Dedoles, Deutsche Telekom IT & Telecommunications Slovakia, Deutsche Telekom Services Europe Slovakia, Deutsche Telekom Systems Solutions Slovakia, DXC Technology Slovakia, Henkel Slovensko, Hlavné mesto SR Bratislava, IKEA, INPROKOM In, Kyndryl Services Slovensko, OLO (Odvoz a likvidácia odpadu a.s.), Orange Slovensko, PHOENIX Zdravotnícke zásobovanie, Plzeňský Prazdroj Slovensko, PricewaterhouseCoopers, Slovenská sporiteľňa, Tesco Stores SR, UNIQA 4WARD, UNIQA Group Service Center Slovakia, Union poisťovňa / Union zdravotná poisťovňa, Úrad vlády Slovenskej republiky, Volkswagen Slovakia, Všeobecná úverová banka, Wood Service Group.

However, if we were to continue focusing solely on internal improvement, we would not be fulfilling our mission: A world of work for everyone. Inclusive Hub is a small pilot project through which we aim to share what we have learned thus far and explore whether we can assist other countries in Europe as well. We approach this step with deep respect and full recognition that what has proven successful in Slovakia may not be applicable or beneficial in another context.

**Join our community of practitioners and experience with us what it means to transform people's lives for the better.**

”



**Anna Podlesná**  
June 2025

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