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Norway  **Active
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Good Practice Guide

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Project implemented by:



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SPECIALISTERNE



INTRODUCTION

The “AcceDis - Access to the Labour Market for People with Disabilities” project was implemented by the Help Autism Association in partnership with Specialisterne Iceland through the Active Citizens Fund Romania program, Bilateral Relations Fund, funded by Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway through EEA Grants 2014-2021. The project ran from 6 June 2023 to 6 January 2023 with a budget of 30,000 EURO.

The main objective was to strengthen partnerships between organizations supporting people with autism in Romania and Iceland to encourage their access to the labor market.

AcceDis continues the steps initiated 2 years ago by HELP Autism Association, through another project, which aimed to increase the chances of people with autism in Romania on the labor market, also implemented with financial support from Active Citizens Fund Romania.

The results of the AcceDis project have been translated into a legislative study looking at anti-discrimination laws, accessibility and accommodation, education, employment, healthcare, social services and benefits, transport and independent living in the two partner countries, as well as into this Good Practice Guide on supporting people with autism in Romania and Iceland to enter the labor market. The Guide was developed on the basis of the exchange of experiences that the representatives of the partner NGOs made during the project, through mutual visits, but also on the basis of the experience previously gained by Help Autism in the project “Increasing the chances of access to the labor market for young people with AUTISM” (project code RO2020/ACF_A7_MM_35). The project also included a round table organized by Help Autism Association, which was attended, in addition to the project team of the partner organization, by representatives of other organizations, companies and public institutions with responsibilities in this field in Romania.

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For more information visit: www.eeagrants.org.

More details on the project page: <https://helpautism.ro/help-hire/accedis-acces-pe-piata-muncii-pentru-persoanele-cu-dizabilitati>.

PARTNERS

HELP Autism Association

Since 2010, **HELP Autism** has been supporting more than 3,000 children and young people diagnosed with AUTISM - autism spectrum disorder - in therapy programs carried out in 7 centers and at home. From specific therapy to school integration programs, from support for parents to awareness and advocacy campaigns, HELP Autism is constantly striving to provide a range of solutions for children with autism and their families. With more than 140 specialists, HELP Autism Association is today the largest organization dedicated to this cause in Romania, founder of the informal network RO AUTISM, composed of 86 autism organizations. HELP Autism's mission is to accompany the steps of people with autism and their families, from diagnosis to recovery and real integration into the community, building a community open to understanding, acceptance and support of diverse minds.

Help Autism's mission is to help children and young people with autism fulfil their potential through diagnosis, assessment, therapy, education and social integration to improve their quality of life and transition to adulthood. It also guides their families throughout the process and supports their needs. It all started with one family's efforts to raise funds for their autistic child's therapeutic program, and in the 13 years since, the Association has been able to help over 3,000 people with autism and their families. To this end, the Association has assembled a team of over 60 professionals - psychotherapists, speech therapists, physiotherapists, social workers, fundraisers, but also dedicated supporters of the cause - influencers, ambassadors of the cause, volunteers. The association currently has over 600 beneficiaries, children and young people diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

From 2020, Help Autism is developing a new service, Help Home - a program aimed at developing independent living skills for adolescents and young people with autism. The organization has opened 2 dedicated day centers in Bucharest and 1 in Targoviște for this program.

Specialisterne Iceland

The organization was founded in 2009 when a group of parents whose children had been diagnosed with autism came together to prepare for their children's future in the labor market. In December 2010, the group became a member of the international network Specialisterne under the new name Specialisterne Iceland (Specialisterne á Íslandi). The Specialisterne network (from the Danish word for "specialists") is an innovative social business concept originally founded in Denmark in 2004 by Thorkil Sonne. Specialisterne is internationally recognized as the first and foremost example of how adults with autism can be effectively integrated into society and provide valuable, high quality services to employers. The international Specialisterne network has offices in 14 countries, including Iceland.

Specialisterne Iceland's 11 years of existence have been an exciting journey with many achievements. Its mission goes beyond finding jobs for people with autism/disabilities, to improving their social skills, having a better life and a healthier lifestyle. That is why Specialisterne Iceland includes social activities such as visiting museums and art exhibitions, going to cafes and hiking in its programs. Awareness-raising activities are also part of the organization's programs, such as promoting and defending the rights of people with disabilities and fighting discrimination based on disability. The focus continues to be on helping people with disabilities find employment. Attention has been given to identifying employers and developing partnerships with them to create employment opportunities for people with disabilities. Specialisterne Iceland has also created jobs for more than 75 people within the organization itself over the years.

ICELAND

European Commission Recommendations

A report by the European Commission's Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion¹ highlights the following issues:

"The country has a number of laws and regulations that protect the rights of people with disabilities and promote their employment. However, much remains to be done to improve the employment rate of people with disabilities in Iceland. This report reviews good practices in the employment of people with disabilities in Iceland and makes recommendations to employers.

Iceland does not have quotas for the employment of people with disabilities. This was noted by the European Commission's Network of Legal Experts in the Field of Equality and Non-Discrimination in the 2020 Non-Discrimination Country Report, which states on page 40: "In Iceland, national legislation does not provide for quotas for the employment of persons with disabilities. This has not changed in Iceland at the time of writing.

The relevant legislation governing the wage agreement is now quite outdated, but is still valid and in force (Reglugerð um öryrkjavinnu 159/1995). Responsibility for this wage agreement was transferred to the Directorate of Labor by the Labor Market Measures Act of 2006 (55/2006). According to this regulation, contracts are concluded with individuals for either full-time or part-time work that does not exceed "100%", which means that the work is a standard shift and not overtime. The contracts specify the place of work and the job description and follow the standards for the job. The authorities reimburse the employer a maximum of 75% of the salary and never less than 25%.

¹ European Commission, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, Rice, J., *Striving for an inclusive labour market in Iceland - Positive actions and reasonable accommodation to facilitate hiring and employment of persons with disabilities involving employers and employer initiatives*, Publications Office of the European Union, 2023, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2767/009884>

In Iceland, employment and disability guides, websites and counselling services are often produced by disability organizations and are aimed at disabled jobseekers rather than employers. One exception, however, is a 17-minute video produced by the DPO Landssamtökin Proskahjálp (National Association of People with Intellectual Disabilities in Iceland). This video (“Réttindi fatlaðs fólks á vinnumarkaði” - Rights of people with disabilities in the labour market) is aimed at companies and organizations.”

Landssamtökin Proskahjálp (National Association of People with Intellectual Disabilities in Iceland) (2021), **“Réttindi fatlaðs fólks á vinnumarkaði”** (Rights of people with disabilities in the labor market) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j95eK68J4G0>.

The same report also included the following recommendations:

“Employers should use inclusive recruitment practices that focus on skills and qualifications rather than disability. They should also avoid language or questions in job descriptions that may discriminate against people with disabilities.”

“Providing reasonable accommodations: employers are required to provide reasonable accommodations to employees with disabilities, such as modified work schedules, assistive technology or specialized training.”

“Creating a favorable working environment: employers should create a supportive work environment free from discrimination and harassment. They should also train their staff on how to work effectively with people with disabilities.”

“Offer flexible work arrangements: consider offering flexible work arrangements, such as telecommuting or compressed work weeks, to meet the needs of people with disabilities.”

“Provide mentoring and support programs: create mentoring and support programs to help people with disabilities integrate into the workplace and succeed in their roles.”

Working visit observations

Equal opportunity is a universal working model in Iceland. People with disabilities have the right to live a normal life and the whole mechanism, both private and state, makes every effort to facilitate this.

The integration of young people with autism is supported from the earliest stages by both state and private processes/mechanisms/organizations and the two ways complement each other, not compete.

The use of local authority funds to build housing for adults with disabilities (where they live by paying rent from disability pensions) is a significant local benefit for quality of life, over and above the labor market integration aspects.

There is a close link between state agencies and private institutions, and efforts are shared between the state and the private sector for the ultimate benefit of the person with a disability. Where there are gaps in the employability components of

the state system, private intermediaries seem to facilitate (e.g., NGOs, specialized centers, etc.).

There is a strong emphasis on the early stage of the employment process. Companies receive all the necessary support - both financial, by deducting a percentage of the gross salary, and personal, by receiving the necessary help from counselors who follow the integration process of people with disabilities.

The company employing people with disabilities **is treated with the same importance as the person, being half of the equation in facilitating employability.** Retention of people with disabilities is tracked after the recruitment process and any problems are addressed/intermediated.

There are private intermediaries (e.g., NGOs) that work closely with government institutions to take up cases from local authorities and support the employment process of people with disabilities. **The work of such intermediaries is not in competition with any official state channel, the two types of support are complementary.**

There is an open dialogue between the institutions supervising the employability process and the companies. A disabled person's path **can start by filling in an online form**, and then they will be supported at each stage of the process: interview, hiring, induction, retention.

Bureaucracy is minimal or non-existent, and the referral process can often be done informally through intermediaries.

In addition, a culture of equal opportunities is developing. Responsibility is shared between local authorities, state bodies, intermediaries and private companies to provide help and opportunities for people with disabilities to have a job and normal living conditions.

- There are media campaigns², high-level officials (including the President) are involved, benefits are offered to companies, etc. The focus is on involving the whole community in the process of integrating people with disabilities into society and the workplace.
- Businesses are positively encouraged to employ people with disabilities through benefits and ongoing support (rather than punitively, through fines for not meeting employment quotas).

The visit to Iceland allowed the Help Autism team to collect a series of good practices from private and public institutions, presented below:

² European Commission, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, Rice, J., *Striving for an inclusive labour market in Iceland - Positive actions and reasonable accommodation to facilitate hiring and employment of persons with disabilities involving employers and employer initiatives*, Publications Office of the European Union, 2023, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2767/009884>

Public institutions

Presentation “Fræðslusetrið Starfsmennt” Educational Center

<https://www.smennt.is/>

Scope of responsibilities:

Design and implement job profiles with local authorities based on the skills required by the candidate. Guiding candidates to further education by attending complementary courses. Validation of previous studies in order to place a person correctly.

- Set up as a ‘social partner’, owned and partly funded by government agencies.
- Part of a chain of ‘lifelong learning centers’ where people with and without disabilities can attend courses to acquire the skills needed to access the labor market.
- It provides the job profiles needed by both typical people and people with disabilities.
- It works with educators and specialists in the field to profile the skills needed for each job and fill the gaps through training.
- Mediates with other organizations the employability process of people with disabilities by outlining the skills profile of the candidate and matching them in the right direction or suggesting courses to fill the skills gaps for a job.
- To validate previous studies, people with disabilities are interviewed by two people (one in the targeted field) to demonstrate previously acquired skills.

Summary:

Such a center creates educational opportunities where the traditional education system has not been sufficient. This increases the chances of people with disabilities to continue their functional education (consisting of real skills required by the labor market) and their chances of integration into the labor market.

Presentation “Icelandic Directorate of Labour”

<https://www.vinnumalastofnun.is/>

Scope of responsibilities:

Accepting files from candidates seeking employment, analyzing job postings, matching the candidate with a suitable area, supporting the candidate, and facilitating the recruitment and retention process.

- Provides feedback and support throughout the recruitment process **for both employee and employer**.
- Facilitates the recruitment and retention process. Counsellors (Ministry

staff) receive completed application forms from jobseekers, scan the available job market and find suitable vacancies for candidates.

- Rewarding the recruitment and retention process of people with disabilities: companies can pay 75% of the gross salary of the disabled employee in the first year, and this percentage decreases to 25% with each year of employment (if it remains constant).
- The involvement of an internal **mentor** for people with disabilities is encouraged. Where there is reluctance or insufficient financial/time resources, the mentor can receive a bonus from the state for their services.
- The counsellor's role is to monitor the integration of the disabled person at work and to mediate between the needs of the individual and the requirements of the organization, integrating the needs of both. Counsellors stay in contact with the mentor of the person with a disability in the workplace and solve any problems that may arise.
- A person with a disability is followed through the entire employment process, from filling in the application form, through the job search, integration in the first days and the subsequent retention process.

Summary:

Given the fluidity of the support process provided by the Directorate of Labor, a person with a disability may have a similar employment experience to a typical person.

The presence of a counsellor who closely follows the employment process, as well as a designated mentor within the company where the person with a disability is hired, complements the team effort required to integrate into the job and the company.

Presentation "Fjölsmiðjan" Vocational center for young people aged 16-24

<https://fjolsmidjan.is/english/>

Scope of responsibilities:

Support efforts to reintegrate children/young people with disabilities or in rehabilitation through paid work, education and support programs. Follow-up of each beneficiary throughout their integration.

- The center was set up by the Red Cross in 2001 with the support of the Ministry of Education, the Directorate of Labor and the municipality.
- 100 children aged 16-24 attend the center, the average age being 18, with 20 of them attend school.
- The center is open to the public and has a restaurant, carpentry and crafts area.
- The beneficiaries are looked after for one and a half years, during which time they receive an income from the state. This is 100% at the beginning

and then reduced to 25% over time. During this time, they combine their work at the center with studies to complete their training and gain access to the labor market.

- The center provides psychological support to the beneficiaries, communicates progress to the municipality and provides support for each case.
- Each beneficiary has an individual file and plan, which can also be consulted on an app. It is kept in an archive throughout the work.
- The center is also supported by the local community, which offers support to each beneficiary, whether they attend the center for one month or two years.
- No beneficiary is ever excluded from the center and the program; they are supported throughout.

Summary:

All the organizations visited (whether private or public) constantly and correctly adapt to the needs of the beneficiaries and make every effort to support them in the diversity of their needs.

Presentation “Reykjavik City Service Center” - one of Reykjavik Municipality’s service centers

<https://reykjavik.is/en/north-center>

The municipality’s website provides the following information:

<https://reykjavik.is/en/disabled-people>

“Services must be available to everyone and the institution must ensure that no one is left out. Everyone decides what kind of services they want and need.

If a disabled person does not want a service, it should not be forced on them. People with disabilities should have easy access to information, including all their rights.

People with disabilities must be given the opportunity to live in any type of accommodation they choose or to go on a visit.

All means of transport, such as buses, taxis and airplanes, must be accessible for wheelchairs and other assistive devices.

Technical aids, such as computers and the Internet, must be designed in such a way that they can be used by all disabled people”.

Scope of responsibilities:

Reykjavik Municipality’s main goals in serving people with disabilities:

- People with disabilities should have access to the services to which they have a legal right.
- Services should be what disabled people want and need.
- The service should be suitable for everyone.

- The service should meet all the needs of disabled people, not just some.
- Services should be changeable if people have a wish to do so.

Support for independent living in their own home

- Home care and services for people with disabilities should be what they want them to be.
- The service is designed to support a person with a disability so that they can live an independent, good and enjoyable life.

Housing

- People with disabilities should be able to choose their housing like everyone else.
- The City of Reykjavík must provide housing that meets the needs of people with disabilities.
- It is the policy of the City Council to promote increased independence of the beneficiaries, and to this end the City Council provides and pays for all necessary services: mobility assistance, social workers, assistance with shopping, daily activities and anything else the disabled person needs.
- The council provides several types of support centers: social houses, respite centers, day centers, residential centers and a mobile team.
- The council has its own employability project, a dedicated center with counsellors who monitor the progress of each beneficiary.
- A person with a disability has all the support of the City Hall, is supported in all his needs and activities, receives all the necessary support and is helped to adapt in an employment process or in daily activities.
- A person with a disability has all the support of the municipality, is supported in all his needs and activities, receives all the necessary assistance and is helped to adapt in an employment process or in daily activities.

Summary:

Private and public organizations do not compete, but work together to integrate beneficiaries into the labor market. Reduced bureaucracy allows people with disabilities to access a range of services and facilities in a timely manner and according to their needs.

Private Institution

Presentation “Ás styrktarfélag” - Day centre for adults with disabilities

<https://styrktarfelag.is/english/>

Scope of responsibilities:

Integrating a significant number of adults into paid work. Supporting them during their working days with all the necessary staff. Adapting the working environment to integrate each beneficiary.

- It started as a day center for children. It then developed into a day center for adults.
- More than 150 adults are involved in various activities that produce goods or services that are demanded and paid for by local businesses.
- In this way, people with disabilities are engaged in activities/work that are paid for and are thus self-sufficient.
- It integrates a wide range of disabilities, with the help of staff from different backgrounds, supporting the needs of each individual (some people need partial help sometimes, others need two people all the time).
- Non-donation/charity based ‘business’ model, fully self-sustaining through services/work produced based on local needs.
- Various levels of activities: tailoring, carpentry, wax melting etc.

Summary:

The local companies often decide to delegate certain tasks/orders (or to share certain aspects of the final product) with this center in order to support the jobs in the center. In this way they support the work of people with disabilities and ultimately their integration.

Presentation “Specialisterne Iceland” - Foundation for the integration of people with AUTISM in the labor market

<https://specialisterne.is/>

Scope of responsibilities:

Mediating the process of employment in the labor market for a significant number of adults with autism. Working with private and public institutions to mediate the process of integrating people with disabilities into the labor market.

Since 2008, the **Specialisterne Foundation** has been advocating for the inclusion of neurodivergent people in the labor market and promoting broader systemic and attitudinal changes. The Foundation’s goal is to enable the creation of viable jobs for one million neurodivergent people worldwide by 2030, in line with the Sustainable Development Goals.

1. Promotes a change in mentality

Raising awareness of the abilities and rights of neurodivergent people based on the UN Convention, the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Sustainable Development Goals. Highlighting the talents of neurodivergent people and encouraging companies to use their skills.

2. Research & Development

The documentation of good practices and the development of models of inclusion for all stakeholders.

3. Replicating, facilitating and catalyzing employment patterns

Support international development and implementation of the Specialisterne network and partners whose business model is based on the neurodivergent assessment, training and employment concept.

4. Creating multi-stakeholder communities

Collaboration with a range of stakeholders (companies, NGOs, families, schools, local and national government, independent representatives, etc.) for the creation of inclusive jobs.

Summary:

The Icelandic branch of Specialisterne is a small center with a strong social impact. It adapts previously validated network methods to local needs in Iceland and facilitates the integration of people with autism into the workforce. It trains and assesses people on the autism spectrum and finds them suitable jobs based on their strengths.

The integration model is based on highlighting each person's strengths rather than focusing on their disabilities. *In this way, each neurodivergent person can make a unique contribution to the labor market.*

THE EMPLOYABILITY OF PEOPLE WITH AUTISM IN ROMANIA CASE STUDY

The project "Increasing the chances of access to the labor market for young people with autism", project code RO2020/ACF_A7_MM_35, funded by the Active Citizens Fund Romania program, has an implementation period of 24 months (1 April 2022 - 31 March 2024) and aims to create employment and integration opportunities in the workplace for people with autism through integrated actions at several levels: state institutions that can influence changes at the societal level, companies (supporting them in the process of becoming inclusive), but also at the level of professionals and organizations that support the beneficiaries in their personal efforts for preparation, employment and integration in the workplace.

The impact study on the Help Autism intervention to improve access to the labor market for people with autism presents 3 perspectives, from the 3 parties involved in the process: Help Autism Association, companies, counselor.

I. HELP AUTISM INPUT

Parties involved

As a grant applicant, Help Autism Association proposed an intervention involving 3 main actors, each with a clearly defined role:

- **Help Autism Association** - through the accessibility specialists (trained within the project itself, coming from Help Autism staff and covering different areas of expertise, but necessary for the planned intervention) - ensured contact with the partner companies in the project, providing general information about autism (in awareness workshops dedicated to all company staff), but also specific information about the candidate in the recruitment process (inclusion workshop with the team of the department where the candidate would work), identifying candidates interested in taking up a job, initial interview to identify the candidate's strengths and weaknesses and profiling, introducing the candidate to the company and advising on the right position for him/her in the company, making the recruitment process, the job and the working environment accessible to the selected candidate, advising the candidate on participating in the recruitment process and taking up the job, identifying and advising the mentor within the company, mediating on the follow-up of the candidate in the job; also in the project: social assistance specialist, human resources specialist;
- **Companies** - were involved: 1) D&I (Diversity and Inclusion) departments, where they existed, were contacted and helped to organize the awareness workshop for staff (in full), 2) HR departments then took over the recruitment discussions, and 3) departments where positions for candidates with autism were identified/created;
- **Counsellor** - was involved in advising both companies on the accessibility needs of candidates and counselling candidates to participate in the recruitment process and subsequently carry out assigned and pre-negotiated job duties through the counsellor. The counsellor identified the job skills of the candidates and helped the companies to either find or create a position that matched the candidate's skills.

The logic of the intervention - consists of the following steps

1. Identifying companies willing to work with people with autism (targeting the broader category of "people with disabilities"). At this stage, existing relationships with companies with which the association had worked in the past on other projects were used, or D&I (Diversity and Inclusion) managers were contacted directly. We started from the premise that these companies were under pressure to implement D&I programs, but lacked the knowledge and experience to do so. In this way, we found a basic openness on the part of

these companies that favored the implementation of the intervention.

2. Organize an autism awareness workshop for all employees of the company. Workshops were conducted by Help Autism specialists in person, online or hybrid (depending on the company's needs). The objectives of the awareness workshop were:
 - a. Autism - prevalence, myths, signs, abilities/challenges
 - b. Some thoughts on the lives of people with autism
 - c. Employment challenges for people with autism - the need to make the hiring process and jobs more accessible to people with autism
 - d. Help Autism Proposal - areas of intervention, the way forward: companies - consultants - candidates

In the framework of the project "Increasing the chances of access to the labor market for young people with autism", project code RO2020/ACF_A7_MM_35, a total of 6 awareness-raising workshops were held, attended by a total of 303 people.

3. Open discussions with HR departments to make the recruitment and hiring process more accessible - with the help of the project consultant. Based on the specific needs of the identified candidate, the following aspects were pursued:
 - a. Making the recruitment process more accessible, most often by adapting the interview or replacing it with a skills test. Although companies have not abandoned the interview method as a way of getting to know the candidate, the adaptations have consisted in: replacing some questions that require processes to design situations, the participation of the counselor alongside the candidate (for psychological support, without intervening in questions/answers). At the end of the process, the consultant was able to give feedback to the company on how the process had been carried out, thus enabling the company to learn on the spot how to achieve the necessary accessibility.
 - b. The accessibility of the employment process was achieved by involving both the project counselor and other Help Autism specialists (such as a social worker) who advised both companies on concluding employment contracts with people diagnosed with autism and possibly classified in different degrees of disability. The candidate's family was also involved and had the opportunity to provide the necessary information for the companies to know the candidate's needs and support them through the process.

Within the framework of the project "Improving the chances of young people with autism to enter the labor market", project code RO2020/ACF_A7_MM_35, interviews were held with representatives of human resources departments of 7 companies.

4. At the same time, suitable candidates are identified for the type of tasks for which the company is willing to work with candidates with autism. They will attend an interview with a Help Autism specialist (member of the organization's HR team) and following the interview a profile will be prepared and presented to the company/companies.
5. Open discussions with the departments where positions for candidates with

autism have been identified/created in order to make the job accessible - with the help of the project consultant. Based on the specific needs of the identified candidate, the following aspects were followed: accessibility of the working environment, accessibility of the working hours, accessibility of the work tasks (in line with the candidate's existing work skills, but also his/her possibilities to learn and train new skills).

Within the framework of the project "Increasing the chances of access to the labor market for young people with autism", project code RO2020/ACF_A7_MM_35, discussions were held with representatives of 3 companies for positions identified / created for candidates with autism.

6. Identify a mentor within the department where the candidate with autism will be integrated, who will: give the candidate work tasks, support him/her in his/her work (explaining the tasks, presenting them in a way that allows him/her to understand them correctly), but also in his/her relations with the company and colleagues at work, monitor the candidate's work and results, etc. The recommendation of the specialists of Help Autism to the companies is that the appointment of the mentor should take into account some characteristics that can help the process: to be a patient, empathetic person, possibly a person who has children.
7. Organize a workshop held by the counsellor with the colleagues of the department where the position for the candidate with autism has been identified/created to inform them about the candidate's needs, to make recommendations on how to work, to set up an action strategy to monitor the candidate and his/her progress in the company. Basically, this workshop starts the process of integrating the candidate into the team. At the same time, the administrative process of hiring is carried out: drawing up the employment documents, carrying out the medical examination, drawing up the documents giving the candidate access to the company (if applicable) and those giving him/her other rights as an employee (gym membership, medical, etc.).

II. INPUT BY COMPANIES

The case study on the companies that participated in the recruitment-employment process of young people with autism within the project "Increasing the chances of access to the labour market for young people with autism" revealed the following points:

Strengths

The companies involved in the project were willing to adapt the requirements of their recruitment and employment activities to employ people with autism.

For most of the companies, the integration of people with autism into the workforce was extremely beneficial, both for their development and for the development of team spirit/collegial climate.

Adaptability was rated as good by companies, companies found mentors for people with autism and they guided their work accordingly.

Direct colleagues were willing to go out of their way to understand the person's particularities and asked for additional information where it was not at hand, showing their involvement.

Webinars were organized to raise awareness of autism, and several departments were involved.

Mentors were involved throughout the process of integrating people with autism.

Weak points

The lack of information needed for integration at the time (which was remedied during integration) indicates a general lack of cultural awareness.

The lack of a general culture about Autism Spectrum Disorder, especially in the context of the professional work climate, is a reality that needs to be remedied.

Conclusions and needs to be addressed

The explanations received from the specialists were vital to the process.

The explanation of the diagnostic specifications by the specialists to those in the company was a necessary and useful information process.

There is a continuing need for more information to be disseminated to the general public (general knowledge).

There is an ongoing need for information about the specifications of autism to the HR departments of companies.

III. CONSULTANT INPUT

Counseling to make the recruitment process, the hiring process and the workplace more accessible has focused on two aspects: counseling companies and counseling candidates, both separately and in the areas where the two parties intersect in the process.

Counselling companies

Counseling companies consisted primarily of assisting the recruiting team in preparing and interviewing the candidate. The counselor attended the interview with the candidate (beneficiary) with the primary goal of facilitating communication between the recruiter and the candidate. The counselor adapted the recruiter's questions (if necessary) to be more clearly understood by the candidate, thus facilitating communication between the two parties.

The second stage of consulting for companies was to help them adapt the job description and plan the implementation of the tasks assigned to the future employee with autism. In this phase we worked mainly with the mentor and the team to which the employee will belong. The mentor and the team are informed about the abilities and peculiarities of the new employee before he starts work. Based on the job description, the counselor guided the mentor and the team on

how to present the employee with autism with the tasks, what kind of help the employee might need, how to recognize the employee with autism in difficult situations, but also how his colleagues can act for a successful social integration of the employee with autism into the team.

The third stage was monitoring and follow-up, where the counselor discusses integration situations with the mentor and the team. This phase begins when the employee with autism begins work and continues until the employee is fully integrated into the team and gains independence at work.

Counselling the beneficiary

The support of young applicants and then employees started with their participation in a vocational training program for employment. In this program, the young people with autism who participated in the project were, among other things, informed about the recruitment and then employment process in general, went through the necessary steps to enter the labor market (creating a profile on job platforms) together with the counselor, were exposed to different situations specific to recruitment and employment through role-playing, received specialized support to model interaction behaviors during the job interview.

The counselor then assisted candidates who reached the corporate interview stage in preparing for the moment, managing emotions, and developing adaptive coping mechanisms.

During the interview, the counselor provided the candidate with both emotional support and assistance in understanding the interviewer's questions and formulating the most comprehensive responses to the situations under discussion.

During the pre-interview and post-interview periods, the counselor was in constant communication with the beneficiary/candidate, supporting both his or her emotional and cognitive processes.

This support was especially necessary in situations where the candidate did not get the job and tended to cognitively catastrophize the interview experience.

The counselor also provided support during the integration period in the workplace if the candidate was hired. Support in this context included: time planning, managing travel to work, explaining tasks and time spent at work, managing relationships with co-workers, explaining rules specific to the work environment.

THE CURRENT SITUATION IN ROMANIA

Adults with autism face many barriers to real access to the labor market, and the effects are devastating: only 1% have a job, while the European employability rate is 10%; 75% of people with autism live with their parents, compared to 16% of people with disabilities.

There are approximately 22,783 people diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) living in Romania, of which 3,800 are adults aged 18-25 and 16,983 are children under 18. In 2022, there were 2,000 newly diagnosed individuals. Limited access to school makes it difficult for people with autism to enter the labor market later in life, resulting in low employability rates among people with autism.

“• Between 2015 and 2019, the number of people with disabilities receiving employment services has halved.

• People with disabilities who live in rural areas, have low levels of education, or are between the ages of 20 and 34 are even more likely to be inactive.

• 88% of disabled people aged 20-34 and 92% of those aged 50-64 are economically inactive.

• Also, 90% of persons with severe disabilities in rural areas and 90% of persons with severe disabilities who have not completed primary education are inactive.

• Number of persons with disabilities employed in licensed sheltered units in December 2019: 121;

Persons employed in social integration enterprises in December 2019: 11.

• 19% of working persons with disabilities aged 18-64 were at risk of poverty in 2018, 5 percentage points more than the employed population without disabilities.

• People with disabilities are more likely to be in low-skilled jobs and less likely to be in high-skilled jobs than people without disabilities.

• Only 39 people with disabilities were included in the training programs of the public employment services in 2019.

• Only 2% of people with severe disabilities have participated in skills training, compared to 10% of people without disabilities, and 1% of people with severe disabilities attended adult learning courses.”³

The integration of people with disabilities into the labor market depends to a large extent on an inclusive education system in both mainstream and special schools, in

³ The national report prepared by Help Autism Association within the project “Autism Spectrum Pathways (ASP) - Inclusivity in education and the workplace” https://helpautism.ro/images/doc/ASP_National_Report_Romania.pdf

both urban and rural areas, and there are major differences between regions. Romania also has work to do on the mentality front, to encourage people with disabilities to become self-sufficient, to live independently and to be supported in the private and public sectors.

FINAL CONCLUSIONS LESSONS FROM ICELAND AND NEXT STEPS

The visit to the Icelandic units allowed us to formulate a number of recommendations for the situation in Romania, which are detailed below:

Legislative recommendations

Although legislation requires companies with more than 50 employees to employ a minimum percentage of people with disabilities (4% of the total workforce), they choose to pay the fines rather than commit to the extra effort and expense.

Recommendation:

A more effective alternative to fines for non-compliance with employment quotas could be to incentivize/reward companies involved in the process of employing people with autism through bonuses, facilities, support and advice from specialists.

This percentage is not fulfilled even by the state, in state institutions.

Recommendation:

Public institutions should contribute directly to increasing the employability of people with autism. By setting a good example, they could bring about significant changes in the culture of equal opportunities.

The National Employment Agency and its territorial branches do not have qualified experts to work with people with disabilities. According to the law, these agencies can contract specialized services from accredited private providers, but there are no regulations governing implementation (in terms of minimum standard costs or minimum quality standards).

Recommendation:

Accessibility of public institutions and private companies must be promoted primarily through awareness raising and information. Access to the labor market for people with autism can only be achieved through close cooperation between employers, professionals and employees. Energy and work must be invested in training and educating employers' human resources departments to understand and respond to the needs of employees with autism. Specialist involvement is crucial.

Employment support services are not tailored to the needs of people with disabilities and need to focus on both their needs and those of the employer.

Recommendation:

Both the employee and the employer need support and guidance during the recruitment-hiring process. A change of perspective is needed that includes the company as a key component in the accessibility paradigm.

Romanian legislation does not include performance indicators, obligations or recommendations for monitoring the situation of people with disabilities in the labor market.

Recommendation:

There is a need for basic education, training and awareness on the part of employers and their human resources departments regarding the recruitment and hiring of people with autism, and the accommodations that are a prerequisite for focusing on this population as potential employees. In addition, implementing basic incentives for employers would also help the process.

Lack of monitoring of working conditions for people with disabilities.

Recommendation:

After implementing a process of education and training for employers, it is also necessary to establish recommended work rules for people with disabilities and to implement systems to monitor compliance.

In many cases, people with disabilities choose disability pensions or state benefits over the instability, discrimination and harassment they face in the labor market.

Recommendation:

People with autism need support throughout the process of integration into employment. A cultural shift towards equal opportunities would also be an important confidence booster in the integration process.

People with disabilities find themselves entering the labor market without an assessment of their abilities, limitations or expectations.

Recommendation:

Integrating people with autism into the workplace can only be achieved with the support of all those involved in the process. A strong awareness campaign is needed to achieve this. The need to consider this population as an important employable resource will become increasingly important. Information from specialists, their involvement in the recruitment process, openness and accessibility of companies are important factors in the recruitment process.

Company recommendations

Employers are often unaware of the conditions under which people with disabilities are able to work and/or they do not know how many hours a day or how many hours a week they are able to work.

Recommendation:

The direct involvement of specialists in the recruitment process is necessary. In this sense, their direct involvement in the recruitment process (through flexibility of processes, adaptation of rules and job requirements, creation of reasonable conditions, etc.) will improve the success rate.

The subsidy scheme for employers recruiting people with disabilities is not a sufficiently attractive option, given the costs involved for companies. In 2019, only 171 employers applied for such subsidies.

Recommendation:

The funds needed to make jobs accessible have been allocated in a project. The recommendation would be to make this a permanent practice to support this practice and encourage companies to train and employ people with autism on a long-term basis.

There is a tendency to specialize job opportunities for people with disabilities according to the type of disability (e.g. in the past, people with visual impairments were expected to work in brush making, whereas now the emphasis is on training and employing them in areas such as massage).

Recommendation:

There is a need for an ongoing information and awareness campaign on the difficulties of adults with autism accessing the labor market. A cultural change of mindset towards autonomy, independence, equal opportunities and support for all people with disabilities will improve their chances of accessing jobs suited to their abilities. This change will have to take place at personal, institutional, cultural and legislative levels.

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