

Better Sport Through Inclusion



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European roundtable on the employment of
people with disabilities in the sport sector.

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Executive Summary

The BeST Inclusion is an Erasmus+ funded project that strives to achieve an inclusive workforce within the sport sector. The BeST inclusion consortium is formed by 12 partners from 9 different countries.

Three European roundtable were organised around three key areas addressed by the BeST Inclusion project: disability, age and gender. In this report, the results of the EU roundtable on disability will be outlined.

Participants from multiple EU countries shared their insights about the status quo of the employment of people with disabilities in the sport sector. As part of this discussion, five themes emerged as current barriers to employment of people with disabilities:

- Diversity is not welcome
- Education
- Inclusive workplaces
- Awareness raising
- Role models

These findings should be accompanied by an increasing advocacy work to fulfil the rights of people with disabilities to employment in the sport sector.



Introduction

The BeST inclusion project

The BeST Inclusion project is coordinated by EASE (European Association of Sport Employers), with the support of experts, academic partners and sport employers coming from 9 different European countries.

The main goal of BeST inclusion is to achieve an inclusive workforce within the sport sector. In order to do so, it will consider the inclusiveness and the diversity of the European sport workforce around 3 axes: gender, age and disability. The objective of the BeST Inclusion project is to strengthen their employability by supporting sport employers and giving them all the keys to hire these different categories of workers without fear. The main objectives are as follows:

- Assess the barriers to a more inclusive workforce for the sport sector in terms of gender, age, and disability
- Identify the existing best practices in terms of policy for a more inclusive workforce for the sport sector
- Address the inclusiveness of the sport workforce with policy recommendations in line with the economic reality of the sport sector
- Increase the exchange of knowledge between the economic actors of the sport sector and the stakeholders acting for a more inclusive sport
- Produce the tools to act concretely for a more inclusive workforce for the sport sector

The BeST Inclusion project allows to address the topic of good governance in sport at European level by approaching the theme of social inclusion in the sport field. It will contribute to European sport policies by enhancing exchanges between European sport actors.

The Consortium

The BeST Inclusion project brings together diverse organisations such as European networks (2), sport employers (4), universities (3) as well as expert organisations (3) working on various inclusion issues.

The consortium has been made up of relevant organisations which have a strong expertise in the three targeted areas with for each of them a university and an expert organisation forming a specific working group. It is then composed of a consortium of 12 partners from 9 different countries:

- EASE
- EOSE
- Arbetsgivaralliansen
- WOS
- Sportwerk Vlaanderen
- IHRSA
- University of Murcia
- UNESCO Chair Munster Technological University
- University of Cassino and Southern Lazio
- Alice Milliat Association
- ENGSO Youth
- Finnish Paralympic Committee

The European Roundtables

The consortium conducted research to assess the state of inclusiveness of the sport workforce in Europe. However, due to the lack of data regarding the employment of people with disabilities, further input was sought by organizing group discussions with key stakeholders.

Three European roundtable were organised for each specific topic addressed by the BeST Inclusion project: disability, age and gender. These roundtables were held online and organised by the expert partners to gather stakeholders that have experience with the inclusion and diversity in terms of disabilities, age and gender. The main goal was to gather their insights about the status quo of the employment of people with disabilities in the sector, share examples of good practice and identify the main barriers to employment regarding each topic of the project.

In this document, the results of the European roundtable on the employment of people with disabilities will be outlined.

Methodology

The organisers

The working group on disability gathers two partners who have already worked together and who are deeply involved in the empowerment of people with disabilities in the sport sector at both national and European level.

- The **UNESCO Chair Munster Technological University** which is a Research Centre that brings together a multi-disciplinary international team of world leaders in PE, Sport, Fitness and Recreation. It works closely with UNESCO and other UN agencies, as well as governmental and non-governmental agencies to advance disability inclusion in and through sport. It will work closely with the Finnish Paralympic Committee as it will study the barriers to employment in the sport sector in terms of disability.
- The **Finnish Paralympic Committee** is a non-governmental umbrella sports organization for persons with disabilities in Finland. It coordinates the processes of integration and inclusion with an objective to tie disability sports and adapted physical activity more closely together with sports and physical activity of able-bodied persons. Since December 2020, it is currently running a project at national level that directly echoes the BeST Inclusion project.

Objective

The objective of this roundtable was to:

Gather insightful input from sport-related professionals with experience in disability sport regarding barriers to employment in the sport sector for people with disabilities

Key research questions:

- Is the sport sector one that welcomes people with disabilities as employees? Explain your perspective.
- What are the barriers to including people with disabilities as employees in the sport sector?
- Do you know an example of the employment of people with disabilities being employed in the sport sector? Please outline the factors that led to this.

Call for Participants

The BeST consortium drafted an invitation, which was sent via email and social networks to relevant stakeholders in the field of disability sport.

Then, using a snowball sampling technique, those stakeholders helped identifying other potential subjects to participate in the roundtable.

Participants were asked to fill out an online form (see image) to register to the session and provide their informed consent to record the session for research purposes.

Registration to the European roundtable on the employment of people with disabilities in the sports sector

(i) Mandatory questions are marked with a star (*)

The roundtable will be held 11.00-12.30 (UTC+2) 27th October via Teams. You will get the link in email after the registration. Please note that the roundtable will be recorded and the recording will be used for the studying purposes in the BeST Inclusion project.
In case you have any questions, please contact Pia Korpi (pia.korpi@paralympia.fi) or Reeta Lindeman (reeta.lindeman@paralympia.fi).

1. Contact information

First name *
Last name *
Email *
Organization
Job role
Country

2. I understand and agree that the roundtable will be recorded and the material will be used for the studying purposes of the BeST Inclusion project. *

yes

Participants profile



Sixteen participants actively contributed to the European roundtable. Participants came from 8 different countries: Finland, Lithuania, Germany, United Kingdom, Ireland, France, Spain and Portugal. All participants were fluent in English and they were involved in sport-related organisations working with a local, national and/or European remit.

Data collection and analysis

The roundtable had a duration of 90 minutes. The initial part of the session was dedicated to introducing the theme of the discussion and get to know the participants. Then, two discussion groups were created to discuss the research questions. The transcripts of these discussions were recorded for the later analysis. After the group discussions, the whole group of participants resumed and shared the main ideas that were considered in each group.

The analysis of the transcripts of the discussion groups was undertaken by a researcher from the UNESCO Chair MTU. A thematic analysis of the discussions was conducted. The software Nvivo was used to create themes and codes, which will be presented in the next section.



Results

Five themes emerged as key areas to be considered for addressing the barriers to employment in the sport sector for people with disabilities. Each theme includes subthemes, which will be outlined including anonymised quotes from participants.

Diversity is not welcome

There was a general agreement about the welcoming of people with disabilities as employees. On one hand, the sports sector is no more or no less welcoming than most sectors, where there is generally a need to improve accessibility and inclusivity in workplaces. On the other hand, it was also highlighted that the sport sector is not doing enough and is being slow to react to this demand.

Some participants claimed that the sport sector doesn't understand the needs of people with disabilities:

Our sports environment, it's not welcoming if you are different. And I would say it's not only about people with disabilities you know, but all kinds of marginalised groups are also not really welcomed, I think they're not welcomed.

Two aspects were outlined as factors leading to the resistance of the sector to employ people with disabilities: lack of knowledge and the prevailing values.

Lack of knowledge about diversity:

In general, businesses are not aware of the benefits of having a diverse workforce. People with different abilities are positioned to fulfil jobs and contribute with an added value to the company and the services offered. As one of the participants expressed:

I think the lack of knowledge about the diversity of disability shows that we the disabled people are not systematically employed in different sectors. So yeah, I think representation matter. But as you say, we don't want to be an object, you know, we should show to the world the that [...] disabled people are capable to do a lot of things, doing better thing than non-disabled people, but we have to show it.

On this notion, one of the participants referenced the need to educate the sport sector in order to address an unconscious bias or stigmatisation towards the employment of marginalised groups, including people with disabilities, as well as to contribute to fulfilling their right to employment.

In many ways, the sports sector could be not only doing better business but good business as well, if they were to include a more tangible, transactional diversity approach which is why I said the need to educate the sector on why their unconscious bias or stigmatization is cutting away not only at the rights and abilities of people with different abilities, but to their own productivity and efficiency as well.

Prevailing values in the sport sector:

Another factor influencing the sense of appreciation for people with disabilities as employees in the sport sector are the prevailing values. Some participants pointed out that the sport sector has a different scale of priorities because it's very much driven on profit. Thus, aspects related to equality, diversity and inclusion are less important.

I would like to emphasise one thing that I think most of the European countries are lacking. So, we really think that inclusion and our working places they are very, very narrow, very homogeneous. So we should try to get more people involved. We have to be more open, we need to get more knowledge about difference not only people with disabilities, but different minorities, so we just need to get more people in the sector.

Also, some comments were made on the prevailing values of sport – specifically on elite sport, which enhances excellence and competition, for instance – and the notion of masculinization of a sport and how this has influenced to or has led to the marginalization of certain groups. Some participants advocated for the capabilities approach, which focuses on people's capabilities and functioning in communities.

And it's the picture we portray from sports - it's about capabilities, it's about abilities, it's about competition, excellence, so, if you do not fit into this picture, then you might be excluded. Just because we really don't understand that people with different capabilities could sort of apply for these positions. So it's, again, a big, kind of negative loop or vicious circle. I don't know whether we're talking about that accessibility, but I would say that it's one of the problems and sometimes it's small things that make the difference.

Education

Education is the second theme that emerged from the roundtables. This category refers to life-long learning opportunities for those with disabilities to avail the competences to work in the sport sector. Some participants highlighted that careers in the sport sector are not being offered to those living with a disability. Young people who have an interest in sport, physical education, are not being encouraged to take on a course around sport. One of the participants commented:

It's not only the problem of those educational paths, that they are limited and maybe there are not enough but also the school system where the kids grow up and where they get advice for their future careers from the career counsellors, but those persons there, they really don't know that you can do a sports career. So, these kids even though they might be interested in sports, to become a professional or seek for entry into university, they are not encouraged to apply there. So, it comes from the start. There are stereotypes, not only among the school personnel but also the parents may not know that their kid could do a career in sport.

Likewise, people with disabilities who are already working in the sector would like to see more of their peers working in the industry. For this reason, a deepest analysis of the educational system at national level as well as the local structures of sport clubs is required. A coach with a disability declared:

I have a rehabilitation license, and we need every second year to get some courses that the license will be valid in the next two years. And when I'm at such courses, though, I'm always the only one with a disability. And I always think about why are there not more people in it? So I think it's very important to discuss, really the main structure in the country is. Also, to the local structures of sports clubs to find out why we don't find employment for people with disability. We have also a problem there.

Finally, another decisive aspect influencing the career path of those living with a disability is the lack of opportunities and to participate in sport. The sport sector employs many former athletes and sport enthusiasts. But, as a couple of participants commented, if participants with disabilities do not take part in sport, is unlikely that they become employees later.

The lack of knowledge within the clubs and local places hinder people with disabilities to come into sport. And this issue goes up the hierarchy - if there are no participants with disabilities in sport clubs, there aren't employees either. So, these two facts go together.

For this reason, education should consider not only aspects relating to employment but also a general overview of the benefits of engaging in sport at any level (i.e., participant, volunteer, employee, coach, etc.).

Inclusive workplaces

Creating inclusive work environments for people with disabilities is another key factor identified in the roundtable. In order to create an environment that fosters inclusion and where everyone feels welcome and free – as identified in the first theme – the following aspects were considered necessary:

Attitudes

Changing attitudes and beliefs of those shaping the sport sector is one of the biggest challenges to promote inclusive employment. For instance, a participant commented thus:

Attitudes and knowledge are really important. We need to be targeting people's belief systems and their mindsets around diversity in the workplace. Full stop. It should be broader than disabilities and it's just to target people, their belief systems and career guidance.

Flexibility

The inclusion of employees with disabilities requires a certain degree of flexibility by the employer and the organisation. Flexibility refers to the adaptations needed for the physical space. But also, it includes those procedures and policies to facilitate the fulfilment of the job requirements for those with disabilities. The following comment exemplify the view of participants:

We will always think about full time working but could we, it would make sense that you have some people who could also work part time or to make like, not 100% but 75 or 50, so that should be like one option on what you think about it more as an employer.

Time

Related to flexibility, there is also time. It takes time to make adaptations to the workplace for an employee with a disability. It also requires time and knowledge to fill out forms and apply for grants or funding opportunities.

It costs a lot of time to organize all the things someone with a disability requires to do his/her job. And I think this is also sometimes a really big question and a really big problem about that. Also the government give the money for a lot of things people need to work. This could be very complicated. Sometimes I need a lot of time and also money for organizations like sports organizations, but also for companies for example.

Also, changing mindsets and values at organisational level requires time. It is an educative process where individuals need to appreciate the added value - for individuals, the organisation and society. Once there is an appreciation of the need, then it is needed to take action towards achieving this goal.

Some of the organisations, they have people with disabilities on boards, or they are volunteers, but it takes time until people in different organisations see that people with disabilities can also be employees

Awareness raising

Awareness raising refers to the process of informing people about the benefits of employing people with disabilities with the aim of changing attitudes, behaviours and beliefs among those shaping the sport sector. One participant expressed that regardless of the increasing advocacy efforts to promote equality, inclusion and diversity at the workplace, people with disabilities are being left behind.

There's a growing advocacy for gender and racial diversity within organizations, but we're lacking in awareness raising regarding people with disabilities, and this is a minority there is still not very well addressed.

One participant suggested showing the sport sector examples of environments where people with disabilities are fully employed, and let them witness first-hand and let them gain their own experience.

Show what it works in an organization regarding the employment of people with disabilities. Show what is working, the benefits to the individuals, to the business, to the community. And tell this to the others

so that people can see what is happening. In this way, we can change the attitudes, the beliefs that the sports sector may have regarding the employment of people with disabilities, and the whole society.

Role models

Following the previous theme, having role models for people with disabilities in the sport sector was one specific strategy remarked by many participants. Participants referred to the lack of people with disabilities in strategic positions, which could bring more inclusive decision-making and a quicker shift towards enabling the employment of people with disabilities. This aspect is of paramount importance, as it would operationalise the principle of “nothing about us, without us”.

To get more people with disabilities and increase their visibility in sports clubs. If you see this, in most projects about employment, there is only people without disability. A lot of things are happening from people without disability, for doing good things about inclusion and structure for sports. So, it's more about nothing about us without us.

Having role models in various aspects of social life can be inspiring for some. As one participant stated:

If you don't see people like you, within your community, you don't feel that you have a place in there and you don't necessarily think yourself as able to do things.



1. Welcome Diversity

2. Encourage Education in sport

3. Raise awareness towards inclusive employment

4. Promote Role Models

5. Nurture Inclusion at the Workplace

Conclusions

The EU roundtable on the employment of disabilities in the sport sector brought together a group of sport-professionals – with and without disabilities.

Five themes emerged in the discussions as current barriers:

- Diversity is not welcome
- Education
- Inclusive workplaces
- Awareness raising
- Role models

However, factors which are currently considered as barriers - as they hinder the employment of people with disabilities – can become facilitators if these are duly addressed. For this reason, in this report we advocate for the following 5 recommendations

1. Welcome Diversity
2. Encourage Education in sport
3. Raise awareness towards inclusive employment
4. Promote Role Models
5. Nurture Inclusion at the Workplace

Increasing advocacy work to fulfil the rights of people with disabilities to employment in the sport sector is required. Also, further research to provide guidance and support to sport organisations in the process of employing people with disabilities is needed.

**“It's about
willingness,
openness to look for
solutions rather
than focusing on
problems”**

Participant of the EU Roundtable on the employment of people with disabilities