



**BeST
Inclusion**
Better Sport Through Inclusion

***THE EMPLOYEMENT OF PEOPLE WITH
DISABILITIES IN SPORT IN EUROPE***



**Co-funded by
the European Union**

Munster Technological University

UNESCO Chair



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Executive Summary

The sport sector in Europe plays a vital role in society and the economy, contributing to various aspects such as health, employment, social cohesion, and youth development. However, there are barriers that hinder the employment of people with disabilities within the sport sector. This study seeks to address the issue.

The literature review emphasizes the social and economic significance of the sport sector in Europe, highlighting its contribution to the European Union's policies and its recognition as an essential economic activity. According to studies by the European Commission, the sport sector contributes significantly to the EU's GDP and provides employment to millions of individuals, making it a vital source of jobs in the EU.

People with disabilities face various challenges when it comes to employment. The review provides an overview of the profile of people with disabilities from an employment perspective, highlighting that a significant portion of the European population has a disability. The review also examines the facilitators of employment for people with disabilities, exploring factors at the organizational, individual, and institutional levels. It emphasizes the importance of inclusive organizational cultures, leadership commitment, human resource practices, reasonable accommodations, and collaboration between stakeholders to promote the inclusion of people with disabilities in the workforce. In this line, four projects are presented to illustrate how specific initiatives in the sport sector can effectively promote inclusion and create more employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities.

A survey of 63 sport-related employers in Europe conducted by the BeST Inclusion Consortium revealed inclusive attitudes towards hiring people with disabilities, but limited implementation of inclusive practices and policies. The findings indicated that while employers demonstrated openness, their organizational frameworks fell short of full inclusivity.

Finally, the main findings of the EU roundtable on the employment of people with disabilities in the sport sector will be outlined - these align with the findings of the literature review. While research on the employment of people with disabilities in the sport sector is limited, existing studies indicate that inclusive organizational cultures, top management support, and qualifications are essential factors that influence the employment of individuals with disabilities in sports organizations. However, more research is needed to explore this topic further and identify specific barriers and facilitators within the sport sector.

In conclusion, promoting the employment of people with disabilities in the sport sector is crucial for achieving greater inclusion and reaping the social and economic benefits associated with diversity. Addressing barriers, fostering inclusive cultures, and implementing supportive policies and practices can create opportunities for individuals with disabilities to contribute their unique talents and skills to the sport sector while benefiting organizations and society as a whole.

Introduction

The Better Sport Through Inclusion project (BeST Inclusion) is a 3-year initiative (2022-2025) aimed at promoting inclusivity in the European sports industry workforce. This project was developed after the ESSA-Sport project findings from the European Observatoire of Sport and Employment (EOSE), which highlighted the need to address this issue. The European Association of Sport Employers (EASE), a non-profit organization and independent membership association of national sport and active leisure employer organizations, is leading the initiative and aims to enhance the representation of sport employers and promote social dialogue in Europe.

The overall objective of BeST Inclusion is to create a guide of best practices and recommendations that can be applied across the European Union to improve inclusivity in the sports sector workforce. The focus will be on three aspects: gender, age, and disability. To achieve this objective, the project brings together sports employers, research and academic institutions, and expert partners.



The project aims to promote the exchange of knowledge and good practices by bringing together experts, researchers, and sports employers. **Each partner will provide their own perspective to enhance inclusivity in the sports sector, contributing to the development of best practices and recommendations as needed.**

A working group has been established for each topic covered in the project. Initially, the partners were tasked with organizing **3 European roundtables** to assess the current state of inclusivity in sports. Then, **3 studies** have been conducted on the inclusivity of the European sports sector workforce, each overseen by an academic partner.

The next step involves organizing **9 national roundtables** to identify inclusive national best practices. Based on the results of these roundtables, the expert partners will create **a guide to best practice**. Finally, a set of recommendations for a more inclusive workforce across the sports industry will be presented for trial and review by sports employers.

Literature Review

The sport sector in Europe is of significant social and economic importance. It contributes to a range of factors which impact on the lived experience of citizens, including, health, employment, quality of life, social cohesion and youth development (Coalter 2013).

As part of the BeST Inclusion Erasmus + European project, being led by European Association of Sport Employers (EASE), a review of literature has been undertaken to explore the barriers to the employment of people with disabilities in the sport sector. This review is part of the process of the project which aims to *contribute to the work for greater inclusion within the sport sector*. In an ideal world, each employment sector would reflect the profile of the working-age population of the community.

The review will explore the social and economic significance of the sport sector in Europe, with an emphasis on the employment profile of the sector. An overview of the profile of people with disabilities from an employment perspective will be outlined and finally, the review will consider the barriers and facilitators to the employment of people with disabilities in the workplace. The business case for inclusion of people with disabilities will be discussed, finally, some research that looks specifically at the employment of people with disabilities in the sport sector will be outlined.

Social and Economic Significance of the Sport Sector in Europe

Sport is part of a wider European policy agenda. Article 165 of the 2009 Treaty of Lisbon on the Functioning of the European Union states that “The Union shall contribute to the promotion of European sporting issues”. It also acknowledges the social and educational functions of sport. In tandem, sport is also recognised as being of significant economic importance within the Union and indeed it has been the subject of a number of legal disputes, with EU courts intervening to pass judgements based on EU internal market rules, as well as on EU competition rules. Such is the economic importance of sport, the European Commission set up the EU Working Group “Sport and Economics” in 2006, which developed the Vilnius definition for sport, to identify economic activities in goods and services associated with sport. Since 2011 a number of workplans have been agreed between the European Commission and member states, which identify policy priorities and principles of cooperation. The most recent one (2021-2024) has a stated commitment to sport as a force for sustainable development.

Two studies on the economic value of sport have been undertaken by the European Commission (2012 and 2018). The definition of employment in sport used by the European Commission is based on the Vilnius definition of sport and is thus very broad, including people indirectly employed such as people involved in sports broadcasting and people working in hotels accommodating guests doing sport, etc. Using data from 2012, the more recent study reported that *‘sport related Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was €279.7 bn or*

2.12% of total GDP within the EU' (pg. 9). In addition, they found that 5.67 million employees (which includes people who are self-employed) work within the broader sport sector, constituting 2.72% of workers in the EU. Sport is described as an 'employment-intensive' economic activity, generating a greater sport share in employment than in GDP. Sectors which employ people with a sport remit include education, public administration, retail and accommodation and restaurant services. Thus, sport employees are multisectoral. The share of sport-related employment varies across the member states, with Austria at the upper end with 5.63% of workers being assigned as sports workers, while it falls to 1.22% in Romania.

Using a more precise definition of sports employment, which includes sport-related occupations in the sports sector e.g., professional athletes, professional coaches in fitness centres, non-sport occupations in the sports sector, e.g., receptionists in fitness centres, and sport-related jobs outside the sports sector, e.g., school sport instructors, the latest report from Eurostat (2023) puts the numbers employed in the sport sector at 1.51 million people, representing 0.8% of total EU employment. While Covid 19 was found to have adversely effected employment in the sector (Eurostat, 2022) there was a 10.9% increase in the numbers working in sport in Europe between 2021 and 2022 (Eurostat, 2023). Again, Romania (0.2%) is reported to have the lowest proportion of sports employees, while Sweden (1.4%) has the highest. The 2023 Eurostat report found that 39.5% of people working in the sport sector had completed tertiary education, which is higher than the number of tertiary education graduates in total employment (37.1 %). Meanwhile, Deloitte and GHFA and IHSA (2022), with a focus on the fitness industry, estimate that almost a half a million people are employed in this subsection of the wider sports industry, across twenty-one countries in Europe. Thus, while numbers differ between reports due to differences in the definitions and parameters used, the sport sector is a significant source of employment in the European Union.

From a social perspective, sport is associated with a myriad of individual and collective benefits (Coalter 2013). However, the focus in this paper will be its potential to be a force for social inclusion, with a particular emphasis on employment opportunities in the sector for people with disabilities. Sport is a social activity that can be shared by people across divides such as age, gender, ethnicity and disability. Article 30.5 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) specifies that States must ensure that persons with disabilities are able to participate in leisure and sporting activities on an equal basis. This includes having access to educational opportunities to facilitate this end. While it does not specifically mention employment in sport, this may be presumed as an extension of the human rights afforded to all people with disabilities. The 2017 Interinstitutional Proclamation on the European Pillar of Social Rights affirms the right of people with disabilities to '*income support that ensures living in dignity, services that enable them to participate in the labour market and in society, and a work environment adapted to their needs*'.

The 2006 UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) defines persons with disabilities as ‘those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others’. In the view of the World Health Organisation (2011) people with disabilities are the world’s largest minority group. In March 2021, the European Commission adopted the Strategy for the rights of persons with disabilities 2021-2030 which aims to improve the lives of persons with disabilities in Europe and around the world. The European Council states that 87 million Europeans have some form of disability, this represents one in every four people in Europe. According to the European Parliamentary Research Service (2020), when focusing on working aged people, the number with a long-standing health problem or disability is one in six people. Age and gender are both associated with disability, as aging is a risk factor, while women (26.1%) are more likely than men (21.8%) to be classified as having disabilities.

The European Commission has compiled a range of statistics to highlight the realities of living with disabilities in Europe (<https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1137>) . Despite decades of legal and social developments, employment opportunities are less available to people with disabilities, with 51.3% of working

age people with disabilities being in employment, compared with 75.6% of people without disabilities (European Disability Forum 2023). This may be partially explained by the finding that people with disabilities are twice as likely to leave school early as non-disabled counterparts while 29.4% of people with disabilities attain a third level degree, compared with 43.8% of those without disabilities. The cumulative effect of all of this is that 28.4% of persons with disabilities are at risk of poverty or social exclusion, compared to 17.8% of persons without disabilities. A report by the European Disability Forum (2023) found that 47% of people with disabilities in the EU cannot pay their bills, compared with 34% of people without a disability.

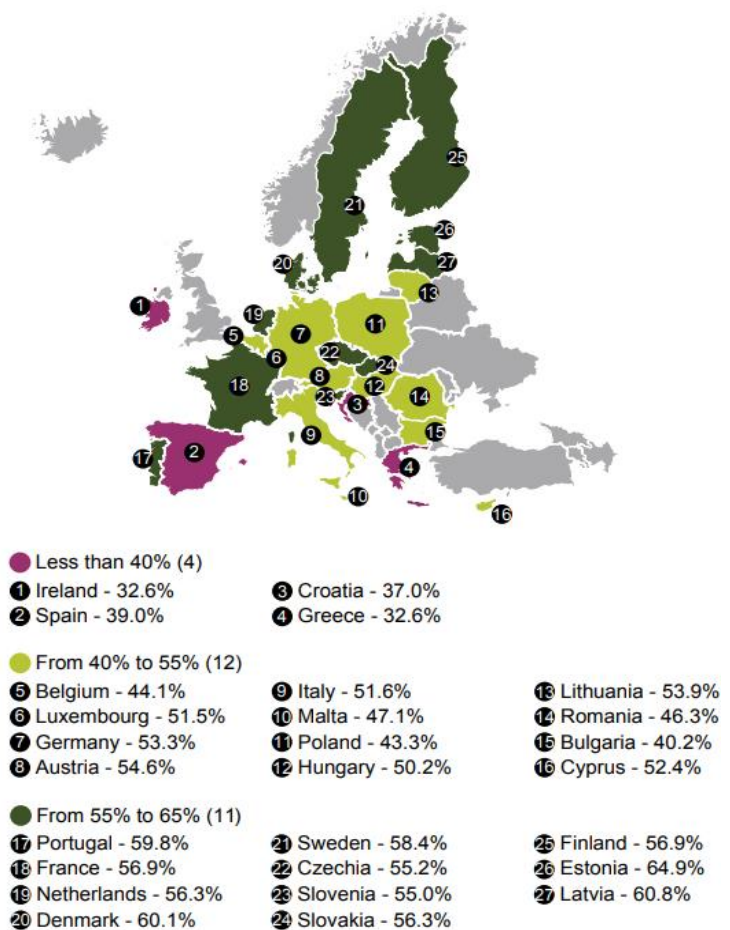


Figure 1. Employment rates of persons with disabilities in the EU member states. **Source:** the European Disability Forum (2023, p.31)

Furthermore, people with more severe disabilities are at an increased risk of social exclusion. An OECD (2022) report also found that people with disabilities ‘had fragile and interrupted employment experiences’. Figure 1 outlines the employment rates of people with disabilities across Europe.

Overview of Research on the Employment of People with Disabilities

The paucity of research on the employment facilitators and barriers for people with disabilities was recognised by the editors of the *Journal of Human Resource Management*, who, in May 2016, dedicated a special edition to research in the area. Since then, the human resource management related journals have published a wider number of articles related to this topic. There is widespread acknowledgement of the underrepresentation of people with disabilities in workplaces and attempts have been made to identify both barriers and facilitators to employment to navigate improved equality of opportunity.

Patrini and Ahrendt, (2021) contend that successful integration into work relies on the dynamic interaction of three factors, organisational (demand side), personal (supply side) and contextual (institutional). They also assert that policymakers need to be mindful to tackle job creation, labour demand and supply, and contextual factors. The dynamic nature of the situation evolves from the entry of a small number of young people with disabilities into the general workforce, who are later joined by people who have acquired a disability, returning to the workforce. There is no universal solution to the dilemma of unequal opportunities, as context will vary between countries and their institutions. This was highlighted in research by Grzeskowiak, et al. (2021) who found differences in the attitudes of employers and co-workers in Poland and Finland. Thus, openness to inclusion has a significant cultural dimension that must be factored into any national initiatives.

The following sections will explore barriers and facilitators to the employment of people with disabilities. These will be discussed at the organisational, individual and institutional levels. Discussion of the evidence supporting a business case for employing people with disabilities will also be outlined.

Barriers to the Employment of People with Disabilities

The literature is replete with details of the barriers to the employment of people with disabilities (Kulkarni, 2016, Aichner 2021, Nelissen et al 2016, Rana et al 2022). At **organisational level** the most significant one is employer attitudes and beliefs. This is mainly based on the belief that people with disabilities lack sufficient competencies and/or that the cost of reasonable accommodations is prohibitive. This stereotypes of people with disabilities has been found to be challenging to surmount. Not alone do the resulting beliefs and attitudes limit access to hiring opportunities, but discriminatory attitudes and the resulting lack of reasonable accommodations, often negatively impact other aspects of employment such as pay, job security, promotion and training (Schur, Colella and Adya 2016). Kulkarni (2016) pinpoints human resource practices such as the crafting of ‘ideal’ job profiles and the use of unreliable appraisal instruments as unhelpful in promoting

diversity in the workplace. Other organisational variables that negatively impact the employment of people with disabilities are harsh work schedules and intense and pressurised expectations (Patrini, and Ahrendt, 2021, Nelissen et al 2016). Finally, the lack of physical access to some workplaces also impairs opportunities to participate in the workforce (Rana et al 2022, Patrini, and Ahrendt, 2021).

At the **level of the individual**, Rana et al (2022) also found that the nature of social networks can be an influencing variable. Over-protective family dynamics can hinder the scope of people with disabilities to develop a sufficient level of independence to thrive in the workplace – an essential precursor to successful employment. These authors also noted the lack of access to information on employment opportunities among many people with disabilities because of limited social networks. People with disabilities are often conscious of the beliefs and attitudes of employers and co-workers and this in turn, may negatively influence their decisions about seeking accommodations needed to allow them to function optimally in the workplace (Patrini, and Ahrendt, 2021). People who experience intersectional challenges e.g., ethnic minorities with disabilities or women with disabilities encounter even greater challenges (Hanlon and Taylor 2022, European Disability Forum 2023).

Patrini, and Ahrendt (2021) discuss the **institutional factors** that can impact the employment opportunities and experiences of people with disabilities. Ableism, which they define as a *'cultural and systemic preference in society for a set of physical, cognitive and sensory abilities, and the consideration of people with differing abilities as impaired'* (pg. 14) is a significant barrier. This phenomenon has been identified in a variety of workplace situation including academia (Lindsay and Fuentes 2022) and financial services (Jammears, Zanoni and Williams 2021). The need for education and vocational training aligned with the needs of children and young people, in order to optimise their development, has been highlighted by Patrini, and Ahrendt, (2021). The need for strong, evidence-based legislation is also imperative to ensure that employers are incentivised to provide opportunities for all citizens, through the lifespan (European Commission 2020, Rana et al 2022, Patrini, and Ahrendt 2021).

Facilitators of Employment of People with Disabilities

Looking at the factors that promote the inclusion of people with disabilities in sport, a number of articles report that culture or climate reflecting inclusive values at **organisational level** is crucial (Thomas and Ely 1996, Moore, Konrad and Hunt 2010, Kulkarni 2016, Nelissen et al 2016, Grze'skowiak, et al 2021, Hanlon and Taylor 2022). Moore, Konrad and Hunt (2010) specifically highlight the impact of top management vision for an organisation on the provision of supporting practice for people in the context of sports organisations. They assert that top-level managers are key agents of organizational change. A related finding by Grze'skowiak et al (2021) was that knowledge of disability possessed by employers is an important factor in increasing their openness towards employing people with disabilities. Kensbock & Boehm (2016) highlight

the importance of transformational leadership to the mental health and job performance of employees with disabilities. They emphasise the empowering nature of transformational leadership and the benefits of this to the esteem and self-concept of employees with disabilities. The 4I's of transformational leadership (inspirational motivation, idealised influence, intellectual stimulation, and individualised consideration) are outlined in terms of leadership behaviours that are inclusive. Patrini, and Ahrendt, (2021) assert that there is a need for truly committed leadership that promotes an inclusive organisational culture and work ethic, rather than one driven merely by compliance. Schloemer-Jarvis, Bader, & Böhm (2022) identified four broad human resource (HR) approaches that can enhance an organisation's inclusiveness for people with disabilities. They are under the following broad headings,

- Selection and staffing
- Training and development
- Performance appraisal, promotion and career management
- Compensation and benefits

Kulkarni (2016) outlines a range of HR practices that are essential for driving an inclusive workplace. These include:

- the use of positive terminology e.g. differently abled,
- the delivery of sensitization programmes outlining norms of inclusion and what reasonable accommodation implied in their workplace context,
- the universal provision of accommodations and assistive technologies for all employees,
- publicising success stories and
- targeted ability-building programs made available to all employees to signal that ability was critical for career success.

The European Commission (2020) proposes a range of technical solutions to facilitate reasonable accommodations. These include the following.

- Installing elevators or ramps.
- Putting office furniture at an appropriate height.
- Installing computer software such as screen readers, screen magnifiers or speech, recognition software, etc.
- Providing Braille terminals.
- Installing real-time interpretation via telecommunications.

They also advocate the use of flexible working arrangements, training in the use of assistive technology as well as measures indicated by Kulkarni (2016).

Many of the suggestions above will also address **individual factors**, due to their potential to change mindset and behaviours. Wright and Cunningham (2017) promote the idea of people with disabilities being able to accumulate human capital in terms of personal and professional development. Thus, the attainment of qualifications, vocational experience, social networking opportunities is as important for people with disabilities as anyone else. Rana et al (2022) linked the development of human capital to people being accepting of their disability and using it to motivate themselves for financial independence in the long term. The importance of family support and a quality education is also emphasised by Rana et al (2022). Patrini, and Ahrendt, (2021) propose that all supports for individuals would be done through consultation with people with disabilities and their representative organisations.

At **institutional level** Patrini, and Ahrendt, (2021) offer a comprehensive overview of measures that are available across Europe to support people with disabilities to gain employment. The European Disability Forum (2023) reports that twenty-three of the EU twenty-seven countries have quota systems (between 1% and 10%) promoting the employment of persons with disabilities, with Denmark, Finland, Latvia and Sweden leveraging other approaches. Most countries have quotas of 2-5%. Failure to meet quotas results in an employer being fined in all but eight of the twenty-three countries using quotas to promote inclusion. These eight are Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Ireland, Luxembourg, Portugal and Spain. Many of these countries are also at the lower end of employment rates for people with disabilities as highlighted in Figure 1 above. A range of different supports are endorsed by governments across member states. In Hungary and Finland some support is offered from personal assistants. In Ireland, a workplace equipment adaptation grant is available for persons with disabilities who have been offered or are already in employment in the private sector. Germany offers its citizens with disabilities a range of supports, including, an allowance for assistive devices and workplace adaptations, mobility support, assistance in the workplace, and training. Sign language interpreters are supported in three countries, namely Belgium, Cyprus and the Netherlands for a maximum of 15% of the employee's work hours. Thus, while there is no coherency between member states, with good quality monitoring and evaluation, there is significant scope for shared learning. The European Disability Forum (2023) report a range of working arrangements that are delivered across the EU as outlined below.

- **Sheltered employment** – this is most widespread and comes under Regulation (EU) No 651/2014 (European Parliamentary Research Service 2020). In this case, at least 30% of workers in an organisation have disabilities. The range of the minimum number of workers with disabilities varies in different states, rising to 70% in Spain. Issues have been identified around levels of remuneration,

the lack of career progression and the exclusionary nature of some of these settings (May-Simera 2018).

- **Work Integration Social Enterprises (WISEs)** – These organisations work within the scope of the social economy, where their economic activity is secondary to their social purposes. Social support is offered in the context of employment to promote personal and professional development, to prepare for inclusion in the productive, competitive open labour market.
- **Supported employment** – This entails supporting people through their employment journey from job application, through the selection process and then offering wrap-around supports in the workplace to the worker, the employer and to co-workers.
- **Work enclaves** – These mix a protected environment with the open labour market. It involves a trainee process with full labour rights and wages.
- **Job design** – This involves creating a new position through the rearrangement of tasks and workplaces to accommodate individuals with disabilities, together with training for both the employee and employers. This reflects the concept articulated by Thomas and Ely (1996) as the *learning-and-effectiveness* paradigm.

Collaboration between different stakeholders is strongly advocated by many authors in order to ensure that inclusion policies are as robust as possible at any given point in time (Rana et al 2022, Richards and Sang 2015, Patrini, and Ahrendt, 2021)

The Business Case for the Employment of People with Disabilities

The employment of people with disabilities is clearly a social justice issue. However, there are also solid business justifications for promoting access to more workers in every economy (European Commission 2020, Aichner 2021, Schloemer-Jarvis, Bader & Böhm 2022). The European Commission (2020) published a guide to reasonable accommodations in which they outline the business case for the employment of people with disabilities, outlining sample cases from both the public and private sectors. They outline the following arguments for employing people with disabilities (pg. 9):

- Gives the opportunity to recruit from a broader pool of talent
- Reduces staff turnover
- Reduces costs of occupational health
- Reduces staff absences
- Improves staff morale
- Improves understanding of customers leading to more customers
- Positive impact on corporate image
- Minimises legal risks
- 1.48 Euros return on every 1 Euro spent
- Increasing requirement of partner organisations
- Growing market size as 1 in 3 people acquire a disability between age 50 and 65

Aichner (2021) echoes many of these points reporting research that finds that people with disabilities have higher motivational levels, higher job satisfaction and higher employer loyalty. This all results in lower turnover, thus yielding a higher return on investments in training and development. Almany, and Vermeulen (2023) condense the rationale for the employment of people with disabilities to four points as follows (pg. 109)

- (1) Disabilities often confer unique talents that make people better at particular jobs.
- (2) The presence of employees with disabilities elevates the culture of the entire organization, making it more collaborative and boosting productivity.
- (3) A reputation for inclusiveness enhances a firm's value proposition with customers, who become more willing to build long-term relationships with the company.
- (4) Being recognized as socially responsible gives a firm an edge in the competition for capital and talent.

A number of authors (Aichner 2021, Almany, and Vermeulen 2023, Kulkarni, 2016, Kensbock and Boehm 2016, Moore, Konrad and Hunt 2010, Zolyomi and Birtha, 2020) highlight that people with disabilities are a much under-utilised resource for enterprises and employers. As far back as 1996 Thomas and Ely identified an emerging paradigm of diversity which they called the *learning-and-effectiveness* paradigm, which transcended the two more traditional approaches to inclusion, namely assimilation and differentiation. This emerging paradigm involves acknowledging and crucially, valuing differences in people. It requires organisations to reimagine their processes to make them more universal and thus more truly inclusive.

Employment of People with Disabilities in the Sports Sector

While there has been a growing body of research on people with disabilities in sport in recent decades, these studies have primarily focused on barriers and facilitators to the participation of people with disabilities in sport, as opposed to the sports sector offering employment opportunities. Furthermore, while studies such as in the Eurostat research mentioned earlier offer insight into the age, gender and educational profile of workers in the sport sector, it does not address the disability status of employees. A review of literature found that there is little research on the employment of people with disabilities in the broader sport sector. This section will outline, in chronological order, published research related to the employment of people with disabilities in the sport sector and will identify overlap with other non-sport research. The findings are a mixture of positives and negatives. As with the research outlined above, similar themes emerged.

Moore, Konrad and Hunt (2010) examined the effect of top management vision on top management support, practice, and the employment of managers with disabilities within the sports industry in the United States. The sample population were organisations involved in elite sport. They found that *'practice embodies the values of the organization and it is through its vision that top management is able to link practices to*

organizational values'. Thus, senior management potentially has an important role to play in the inclusion of people with disabilities in sporting organisations. This echoes the findings of Kensbock & Boehm (2016).

Research undertaken in the United States by Jasper and Waldhart (2013) which examined the leisure and hospitality industry found that there is considerable reluctance of behalf of employers to hire people with disabilities, with larger organisations being more likely to do so. Their reluctance stems from similar beliefs and attitudes reported about the inability of people with disabilities to competently do the job and the onerous cost of accommodations (Schur, Colella and Adya 2016, Grze'skowiak et al. 2021, Nelissen et al 2016). However, an acknowledged limitation of this research by Jasper and Waldhart is that it does not disaggregate the business types in this expansive sector. Hence, data for sports-related employers is unknown. Thus, this review will have to extrapolate findings from broader research on the employment of people with disabilities to apply to the sport sector.

More research from the United States (Wright and Cunningham, 2017) used the stereotype content model (Cuddy et al., 2008; Fiske and Tablante, 2015; Fiske et al., 2002) to examine the influence of disability status among job applicants for personal trainer positions, on stereotype attributions and personnel decisions. Positively, in this limited context, they found that within sport and fitness organisations, people with disabilities were rated as warmer than their able-bodied peers and unusually, relative to research in other contexts, there was no difference in the competence rating relative to disability status (able bodied or having a disability). Qualifications and skill levels were strong determinants of hiring intentions. These authors assert that the sports sector could be open to the employment of people with disabilities who have high qualifications, because of the warmth stereotype that accompanies them.

In an Australian context, Hanlon and Taylor (2022) explored the workplace experiences of women with disabilities in sports organisations. Reflecting the findings of Rana et al (2022) the centrality of their disability to their identity was highlighted by women in the study and the need for this to be matched with an openness by others in the workplace. A trusting relationship with their manager was crucial to enhancing their confidence in their professional duties, as well as influencing their sense of 'otherness'. A key position of those interviewed for the study is that they should be seen as employee first and foremost, with a similar likelihood for promotion ambitions and desire for workplace belonging to other employees. Reflecting the findings of the European Disability Forum (2023) the intersectionality of gender and disability was an additional complication in their lived experience.

Active Alliance in the UK published a research report in February 2023 entitled '*Developing Inclusive Leaders in Haringey*' in which they explored the topic of encouraging and supporting disabled people into the physical activity workforce. They assert that there is strong support for a more diverse workforce that includes people with disabilities taking leadership roles in the sector. Many of the identified barriers align with those that

inhibit the engagement of more people with disabilities in sport and physical activity in a participation context, namely, physical access barriers, transport and a lack of support personnel. Filtering out the perspectives of people with disabilities, the lack of personal assistants or other support personnel, as well as a lack of money/finance (63%) are the primary barriers to progressing into both volunteer and paid roles in the sector. Communication barriers (56%) were also identified as problematic.

Case Studies

In this section, four projects will be showcased to exemplify the positive impact that targeted initiatives in the sports and employment sectors can have on enhancing inclusion and employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities. Through their innovative approaches and collaborative efforts, they contribute to build a more inclusive society where individuals with disabilities can thrive professionally and enjoy the benefits of active participation in sports.

1. Employability Leisure Guides (UK)

EmployAbility is an innovative project aimed at promoting inclusion and empowering individuals with disabilities in the realm of employment. With a strong focus on the leisure and fitness industry, EmployAbility offers a comprehensive range of resources, guidance, and support through their online platform (<https://www.instructability.org.uk/employability-leisure-guides>). The project recognizes the immense potential and valuable contributions that individuals with disabilities can make in the workforce, particularly in leisure and fitness settings. By providing tailored training programs, mentorship opportunities, and practical advice, EmployAbility equips participants with the skills and knowledge needed to pursue successful careers in these sectors. Through their platform, individuals can access comprehensive leisure guides, gain insights from industry professionals, and access employment opportunities within the leisure and fitness industry. EmployAbility stands as a transformative initiative, bridging the gap between disability and employment, and fostering an inclusive society where everyone has the opportunity to thrive professionally.



2. The Special Olympics Athlete Leadership (Worldwide)

The Special Olympics Athlete Leadership project is a remarkable initiative that empowers individuals with intellectual disabilities to develop their leadership skills and make a positive impact in their communities. Through this project, Special Olympics provides comprehensive training and support to athletes, enabling them to take on leadership roles, advocate for inclusion, and contribute to the organization's mission. The project's focus on athlete empowerment is evident through their [online platform](#) where athletes can access resources, training materials, and opportunities to engage in leadership activities.

For instance, in this [article](#), Ian Harper, an Special Olympics GB athlete shares his personal story. This clearly shows the project's impact, showcasing the determination and potential of individuals with intellectual disabilities when given understanding and support. The Athlete Leadership project serves as a catalyst for creating a more inclusive society, where



individuals with intellectual disabilities are empowered to fulfil their potential, break barriers, and contribute meaningfully to the workforce and their communities.

3. The UGR- Vivagym- Fundación Adecco Chair for the Employment Integration of People with Disabilities through Sports (Spain)

The UGR - Vivagym - Fundación Adecco Chair for the Employment Integration of People with Disabilities through Sports was established within the framework of collaboration between the University of Granada , Vivagym and Fundación Adecco to further research in areas related to the employment integration of people with disabilities through sports. Its main objective is to promote and work on the employability of students with disabilities.

Objectives of the Chair:

- Development of collaboration strategies to deepen research on topics related to the employment integration of people with disabilities through sports.
- Support for job placement through the integration of students for external internships.
- Publication of articles on topics of interest within the scope of the Chair.

Through this collaboration, the project aims to enhance knowledge, research, and awareness regarding disability and employment. By providing specialized training, workshops, and resources, the project equips individuals with disabilities with the skills and support they need to enter the workforce successfully. The partnership between Fundación Adecco and the University of Granada ensures a comprehensive approach to addressing the challenges faced by individuals with disabilities in the job market.

4. Job dating for Paris 2024 (France)

This initiative was planned in the frame of the Paris 2024 Olympic Games preparations. A job dating event was organized specifically to recruit individuals with disabilities, aiming to promote their inclusion in the workforce. This event provided a unique platform for job seekers with disabilities to connect with potential employers who were actively seeking



diverse and inclusive talent. By focusing on their abilities rather than disabilities, this job dating event exemplified the commitment of Paris 2024 to foster equal opportunities and break down employment barriers for individuals with disabilities. The event not only opened doors to new employment prospects but

also showcased the transformative power of major sporting events in promoting social inclusion and creating a more inclusive society.

Best Inclusion Survey

The Best Inclusion Consortium designed a questionnaire to assess the current state of employment for people with disabilities in the sport sector. This study involved a total of 63 participants from various European countries (see figure below).



Figure 2. Geographic location of respondents

When examining the participants' affiliations, it was found that the majority of respondents were employed by a national sport governing body / sport federation (37%), followed by those working in a sport club (30%) and national Sports Organizations such as National Olympic committees or national sport agencies (10%). This diverse representation of participants provided valuable insights into the perspectives and experiences of individuals from different countries and various sectors within the sports industry.

Main findings

The results of the questionnaire will be explored around three main topics:

1. Attitudes towards hiring people with disabilities.
2. Organizational policies and practices.
3. Awareness of disability-related concepts and supports.

Attitudes towards hiring people with disabilities.

The first part explores beliefs and attitudes surrounding the hiring of individuals with disabilities. The perspectives examined include notions such as the belief that people with disabilities can bring significant

benefits to an organization; the belief in equal opportunities for individuals with disabilities within one's own organization; the belief that individuals with disabilities possess the potential to take on leadership roles within an organization; and the acceptance that hiring of people with disabilities is not solely driven by public relations considerations.

The survey findings, depicted in Figure 3, reveal that most respondents (42%) exhibit an inclusive mindset, while 29% demonstrate a high level of acceptance towards hiring people with disabilities. Encouragingly, none of the respondents displayed an exclusionary mindset and only 10% showed limited acceptance.

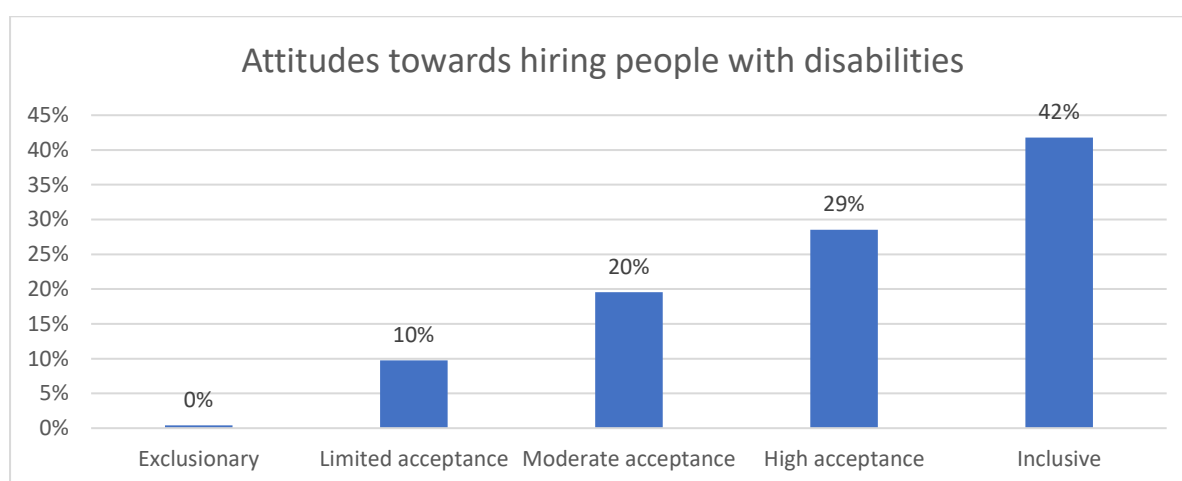


Figure 3. Attitudes towards hiring people with disabilities

Organizational policies and practices

The second area of exploration focuses on organizational policies that support and facilitate the hiring of individuals with disabilities. This section will examine the specific policies and practices implemented by sport organizations that contribute to the creation of an inclusive and welcoming workplace environment. By delving into these topics, we aim to gain insights into the measures taken by organizations to foster diversity, promote inclusivity, and ensure equal opportunities for individuals with disabilities.

According to Figure 4, respondents' perceptions of organizational policies and practices on employing individuals with disabilities follow a comparable trend. The majority (34%) view their organization as having a moderate level of inclusive policies, including recruitment, support for disabilities, and diversity training. 22% consider their policies good, and 17% perceive them as excellent. However, 6% find their policies inadequate or still in development (10%). In terms of a welcoming workplace, respondents' perceptions are slightly higher, with 34% recognizing a moderate level of inclusivity, 28% acknowledging good practice, and 24% perceiving an excellent level. Only 6% find their practice inadequate or in development (10%). The findings emphasize the importance of additional education and training for sport employers in order to

establish and implement inclusive policies and practices that can improve employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities.

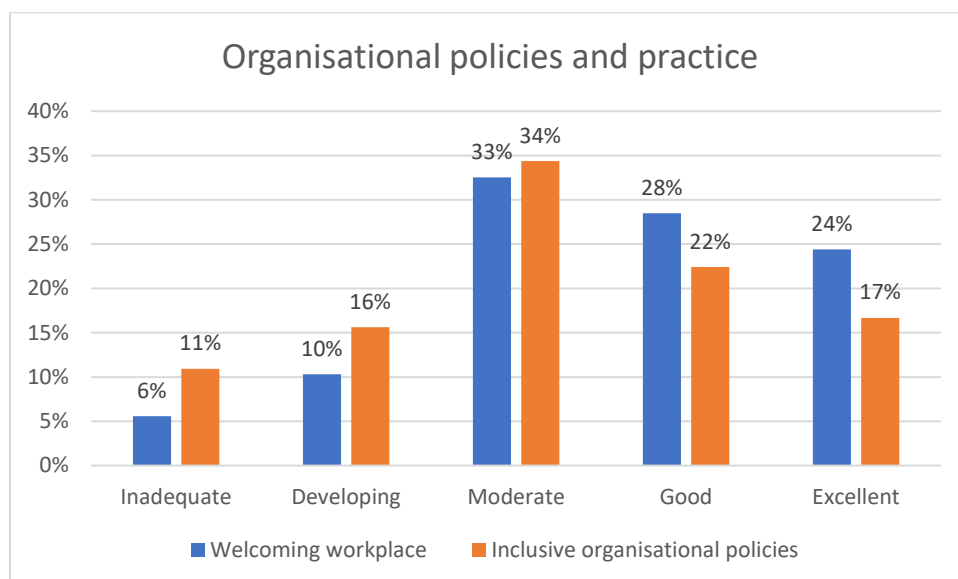


Figure 4. Organisational policies and practice

Awareness of disability-related concepts and supports.

Lastly, this third theme explores the extent to which participants are knowledgeable about providing reasonable accommodations in the workplace and their awareness of the resources and assistance offered by the government to facilitate the inclusion of people with disabilities in employment.

It is worth highlighting that a significant portion of respondents reported that they are not aware of these concepts (16%) or demonstrated basic awareness (25%). Another 20% had a moderate level of awareness, whereas 23% of the respondents showed a high level of awareness and an excellent level of awareness (16%), suggesting extensive knowledge and comprehension of disability-related concepts and supports. These results highlight the need for continued education and awareness-building efforts to enhance the understanding of disability-related concepts and supports among the surveyed population.

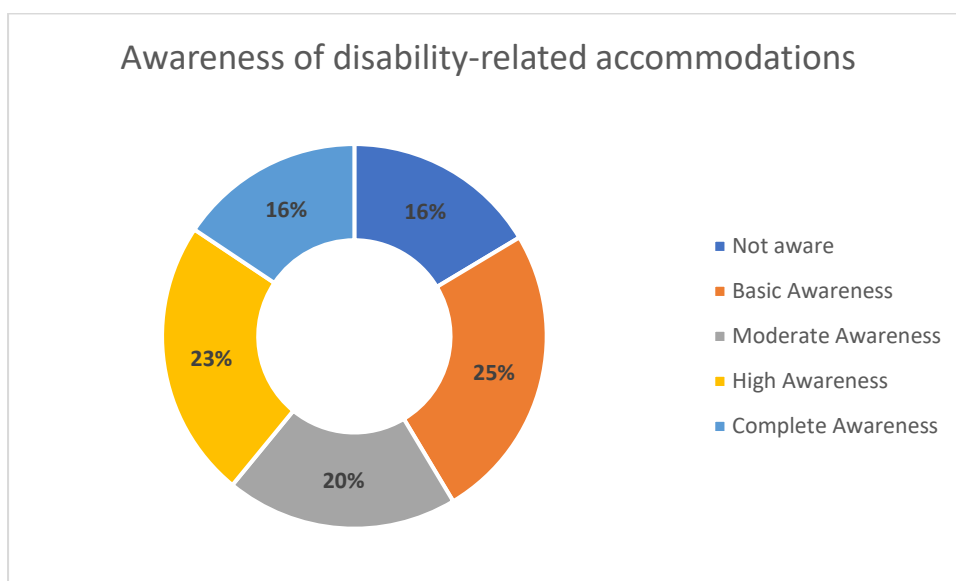


Figure 5. Awareness of disability-related accommodations

BeST Inclusion Roundtables

Three European roundtables 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 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.

The objective of roundtable on disability 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. For this reason, the key research questions explored were:

- 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.

Five themes emerged as key areas to be considered for addressing the barriers to employment in the sport sector for people with disabilities:

- Diversity is not welcome
- Education about intersectional inclusion
- Inclusive workplaces

- Awareness raising
- Role models

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.

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 about intersectional inclusion in the sport sector.
3. Raise awareness towards inclusive employment.
4. Promote Role Models.
5. Nurture Inclusion at the Workplace.

Conclusion

The employment of people with disabilities, both in general and within sporting organizations, is a complex and multifaceted issue that requires further exploration. It is essential to recognize that people with disabilities are not a homogenous group, and there are still significant gaps in our understanding of the policies and procedures required to make workspaces inclusive and valuing of diversity.

Several key questions remain unanswered, such as the role of leadership in promoting inclusion (Moore, Konrad, and Hunt 2010; Kensboch and Boehm 2016), the influence of cultural dimensions (Grzeskowiak et al. 2021), and the factors affecting career progression for individuals with disabilities (Kulkarni 2016). While some evidence suggests that sports organizations may exhibit a culture of acceptance of differences (Moore, Konrad, and Hunt 2010; Wright and Cunningham 2017), the limited number of studies in this sector prevents definitive conclusions.

Creating sustainable employment pathways for people with disabilities is not only morally and legally important but also makes business sense. However, the challenge lies in designing evidence-based policies that make inclusive employment attractive to sports organizations. There is a need for further research and guidance to support these organizations in effectively employing people with disabilities.

The Best Inclusion questionnaire revealed inclusive attitudes towards hiring people with disabilities, but limited implementation of inclusive practices and policies. The findings indicated that while employers demonstrated openness, their organizational frameworks fell short of full inclusivity. In a similar line, the EU roundtable on the employment of people with disabilities in the sport sector identified several current barriers, including the lack of diversity, issues related to education, the need for inclusive workplaces, the importance of awareness-raising, and the significance of role models. However, these barriers can be transformed into facilitators if they are adequately addressed. Based on these discussions, five recommendations are proposed:

- 1) Welcome Diversity,
- 2) Encourage education about intersectional inclusion in sport,
- 3) Raise awareness towards inclusive employment,
- 4) Promote Role Models, and
- 5) Nurture Inclusion at the Workplace.

Advocacy efforts must be intensified to ensure the rights of people with disabilities to employment in the sport sector are fulfilled. Additionally, further research is needed to provide guidance and support to sport organisations on implementing policies and procedures to ensure that their workplaces attract and retain people with disabilities to employment opportunities on an equitable basis.

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