

# INTRODUCTION

## *Empowerment Through Employment: An Introduction to No Barriers*

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In his book “The Eternal Return of Fascism”, Rob Riemen (2012, p. 66) wrote: “Education has bowed to the dictates of what is useful to business and the state”. It may sound like a digression, but much of what this book sets out to question involves the ideas of productivity, functionality and usefulness. What physical and cognitive configuration does a person have to have to be considered a “perfect” employee in the light of contemporary canons? Do we have to fit people to canons, canons to people, or both? What role do teaching resources, mediation strategies and technology play in this dilemma?

Returning to the beginning and the quote from Riemen (2012), it’s worth emphasising that the mention of fascism doesn’t appear here in vain. The idea of “normality” is itself totalitarian. So this book, nor any other, can or should provide recipes for “normalising” People with Intellectual Disability (PwID) so that they remain indistinguishable from the crowd of workers. What they can and should do is initiate strategies for understanding their diverse characteristics so that this

diversity becomes part of what contemporary society understands as work.

Workplace inclusion for People with Disabilities (PwD) is a critical aspect underscored by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). According to General Comment No. 8 (2022) on the right of persons with disabilities to work and employment, the CRPD clarifies the obligations of States parties regarding this right as enshrined in Article 27 of the Convention. It emphasises that meaningful work and employment – emphasising the meaningfulness of it – are essential for the economic security, physical and mental health, personal well-being, and sense of identity of individuals, including PwD. The CRPD highlights that ableism – a value system that devalues individuals based on their physical and mental characteristics (Nario-Redmond, 2020) – adversely affects the opportunities for PwD to have meaningful work and employment. It calls for the removal of barriers to the right to work and employment for PwD in the open labour market, on an equal basis with others, highlighting issues such as high unemployment rates, lower wages, and lack of accessibility in the work environment (United Nations, 2022).

We can now adopt the more neoliberal language used by Mor Barak (2017), and continue along an economic path in justifying the importance of the inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities in the labour market. In general, organisational diversity represents advantages in the economic sphere, since by reducing employee turnover, absenteeism, and boosting productivity, companies save costs. They gain a competitive edge in attracting talent by appealing to women, minorities, and diverse individuals. Utilising diversity drives growth through targeted marketing to different demographics and enhances the corporate image, positively affecting stock valuation. Furthermore, embracing a global workforce from various nationalities expands market opportunities and global talents.

Above all, as the title suggests, “employment empowers” or, in other words, promotes self-determination, and this book aims to support everyone in a more inclusive path to do so.

Bell (2019) suggests that EU labour law can play a role in fostering

inclusion, particularly in the context of sheltered employment, while, through a local lens, Carnemolla et al. (2021) underscore the role of connecting individuals with their communities. Therefore, and as a first step, the international team of No Barriers to Employment (2022-1-SE01-KA220-ADU-000089826) jointly developed the chapter **“Transnational Legal Frameworks and Context of Employment and Intellectual Disability”**, to explore the different legal and social conditions that PwID experience in Italy, Portugal, Sweden, and Türkiye – the consortium countries. Afterwards, in the second chapter of part I, research on the perceptions regarding the main barriers and hindrances to the professional inclusion of PwID in these countries is presented, through the chapter **“Contextual Perceived Needs for Inclusive Employment of People with Intellectual Disability”**.

These first two chapters complete a need analysis that serves as a pillar for a training programme, developed in the second part of the book. In the first chapter of this part – **“Empowerment through Language, Inclusive Models, and Activism: Nurturing Inclusion for Individuals with Intellectual Disability”**, Cátia Casimiro, João Léste, and Carla Sousa explore how language is performative, and how this can be either an inclusion or exclusion pillar. Aligned with this, in the next chapter, titled **“Accessible and Inclusive Communication in the Workplace”**, Stefano Cobello and Elena Milli, approach specific strategies to enhance accessible communication in inclusive workplaces. In the third chapter of this training **“Employment Models and Best Practices for the Inclusion of Individuals with Intellectual Disability”**, Gülce Güner and Emre Hüseyin Yiğit approach the contemporary employment models to support PwID in their job contexts. Moreover, Gulben Cura and Şenay Kızılkum further explore these models in the chapter **“Recruitment and Job Coaching for and with Intellectual Disability”**, focusing on how people can be inclusively recruited to different businesses. In chapter 5, the No Barriers to Employment Project joins a-STEP (CA19104), a COST Action aimed at building an interdisciplinary, intersectoral Pan European and beyond, network which will enhance social inclusion and empowerment of PwID and individuals on the autism spectrum, to develop a comprehensive view of the potential of assistive technologies for employment

inclusion. In this sense, May Agius, Tali Heiman, Gerda Sula, Paulina Tsevetkova, Benjamin Nanchen, Alan H. Tkaczyk, and Carla Sousa, developed the chapter “**Supporting Workplace Inclusion: Reasonable Accommodations and Assistive Technologies for Individuals with Intellectual Disability**”. Lastly, and due to the need for more pedagogical approaches documented in part I of the book, chapter 6 explores the potential of analogue game-based learning in the development of employment skills by PwID. Written by João Léste and Carla Sousa, “**Analogue Game-Based Learning to address underemployment of People with Intellectual Disabilities: Resources and Best Practices**” is, therefore, a conceptual and practical approach to this training need. All chapters of the training programme includes, besides the traditional abstract and keywords, a short statement on their pedagogical goals, and relevance for PwID.

I would like to conclude by saying that the inclusion of PwID into the labour market not only contests ableist norms but also embraces diversity as a driver of economic and, above all, social justice. The collaborative work of the No Barriers to Employment project further elucidates the complex legal, social, and pedagogical landscapes that shape the professional inclusion of PwID across different countries, and reflects a commitment to redefining work in a way that values everyone.

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## **References**

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