

From Awareness to Action

Ireland's Roadmap to Closing the Disability Employment Gap

The Open Doors Initiative
Leaders' Summit
April 2026





We would like to thank all those who attended and took part in the ODI Roundtable Series in Q1 of 2026. We would especially like to acknowledge the work and support from the EY team in facilitating these sessions. We are grateful to work alongside partners who are committed to inclusion and equity.

Foreword

Is príomhfhócas agus tosaíocht don rialtas feabhas a chur ar shaol daoine faoi mhíchumas agus iad a chumasú chun a lánacmhainneacht a bhaint amach.

We are committed to closing the disability employment gap under the Programme for Government and the new National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025–2030. This reflects our shared ambition to build a society in which everyone who wants to work is supported to do so. We are taking tangible action to advance this goal, including important reforms to disability employment support schemes in Budget 2026, ongoing work to strengthen inclusion within the public service, and continued investment in training and employment supports.

Employment matters for many reasons. It provides financial security and independence, but also supports confidence, wellbeing, social connection, and a sense of purpose and identity.

Accessible and inclusive workplace practices not only benefit disabled people but also strengthen organisational performance, supporting the attraction and retention of talent, the fostering of innovation, and helps businesses to reach underserved groups and markets.

Addressing the challenge of closing the disability employment gap requires sustained and coordinated action. No single organisation, policy, or programme can deliver this change in isolation. Progress depends on a joined-up approach that brings together Departments, working across employment, social protection, education, health, and enterprise policy, working in partnership with employers, education and training providers, and, importantly, the disability community.

I welcome the publication of this roadmap by the Open Doors Initiative as an important contribution for how we can shift from awareness to action. Informed by evidence and by the lived experiences of disabled people, it sets out practical actions that can improve pathways into and through employment.

Government, employers, and disabled people, working collaboratively, can make real progress in closing the disability employment gap, ensuring Ireland's labour market is inclusive, accessible, and reflective of the diversity of our people.



Micheál Martin
An Taoiseach



Executive Summary

Ireland is experiencing a unique paradox, we are operating at near full employment, however we have a substantial disability employment gap. National data suggests a gap of approximately 21.5%¹, however, EU-comparable data presents a more acute picture. The European Disability Forum highlights that Ireland has one of the lowest disability employment rates in the EU at 32.6% and a disability employment gap of approximately 38.6%, significantly above the EU average of 24.4%². This divergence reflects differences in measurement and definitions across datasets but consistently points to the same conclusion: Ireland performs below our EU peers and continues to face significant barriers to inclusive employment.

Over the last number of years, there have been several national strategies, adjustments to social welfare supports as well as a commitment to a “step change” in the provision of disability services in the most recent Programme for Government³. In the business sector, we have seen a movement that acknowledges the value of diversity and equity in the workplace. Despite these efforts toward change, we are still yet to see the desired impact and results when it comes to the employment of people with disabilities, which is at about half the rate of those without a disability⁴.

Ireland is facing a stark reality, inaction in tackling this paradox further increases the risk of poverty and social exclusion for members of the disabled community. We can no longer view disability inclusion as a “social issue” to be managed by the state through only welfare supports. It is a systemic failure within the labour market and a missed economic opportunity for Irish businesses.

Historically, disability initiatives fell under Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), sometimes viewed as “charity” or “giving back.” We are moving towards Corporate Social Justice (CSJ). CSJ recognises that inequity is systemic, and it demands that businesses not only “do good” but actively dismantle barriers within their core operations to ensure equity, dignity and justice.

We can no longer view disability inclusion as a “social issue” to be managed by the state through only welfare supports. It is a systemic failure within the labour market and a missed economic opportunity for Irish businesses.

¹ NDA (2024): [Factsheet Employment and Disability](#)

² European Disability Forum (2023) The Right to Work: [The employment situation of persons with disabilities in Europe](#)

³ Programme for Government (2025): [Securing Ireland's Future](#)

⁴ OECD (2021): [Disability, Work and Inclusion in Ireland](#)

The Open Doors Initiative (ODI) champions collaboration within the business community, and is focused on moving from awareness to action to close the disability employment gap. We are committed to working alongside those with lived experience, businesses, stakeholder groups and government to ensure Ireland is no longer a member of the “hall of shame” but a leader in disability inclusion amongst our European peers.

In partnership with EY, ODI hosted a number of roundtables with inclusion leaders, Disabled Persons’ Organisations (DPOs), policy experts, people with lived experience, business leaders and CEOs to discuss the disability employment gap in Ireland. Our goal was to co-create a roadmap that moves Irish business from passive awareness to active, measurable structural change. The following collates the findings and recommendations from this roundtable series and further research.

Key Recommendations

Closing Ireland’s disability employment gap requires a collaborative approach with business and whole government support. It calls for workplace redesign, system reform and leadership accountability.

1. Design workplaces for human diversity, not a “standard employee.”
2. Build trust through transparent disability data.
3. Provide managers with the tools to deliver equity in practice.
4. Ensure employment never puts essential supports at risk.
5. Place disability representation at the leadership table.

Our goal was to co-create a roadmap that moves Irish business from passive awareness to active, measurable structural change

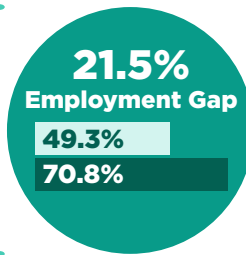
The Context in Ireland



1 in 5 People: According to Census 2022, 22% of the Irish population (over 1.1 million people) are living with a disability⁵.



21.5% Employment Gap: 49.3% of people with disabilities, of working age in Ireland, are in employment, compared to 70.8% of people without disabilities⁶.



€8,700 - €12,300 Cost of Disability: The additional cost of living, per year, experienced by a person with a disability⁷. These are 2021 figures that have not been adjusted for inflation.



Closing the Disability Employment Gap Matters

Closing Ireland's disability employment gap is not a charitable initiative, it is a strategic economic, business and societal imperative. Evidence from research and stakeholder insights reveals a disconnect between labour market needs, available talent and the design of current systems. The disability employment gap is not driven by lack of talent or willingness to work, but by structural barriers that limit participation. Addressing these barriers presents a significant opportunity for Irish businesses and wider society.

⁵ Census (2022): [Disability Census of Population 2022](#)

⁶ NDA (2024): [Factsheet Employment and Disability](#)

⁷ Indecon & Dept. Of Social Protection (2021): [The Cost of Disability in Ireland- Research Report](#)

- **Unlocking Untapped Talent in a Constrained Labour Market:** At a time of skills shortages⁸, Irish businesses are underutilising a significant pool of talent. Many people with disabilities are ready and able to work yet are excluded due to rigid role expectations and workplace design. Closing the gap is an opportunity to increase labour market participation and productivity.

- **Reducing Risk of Poverty:** In Ireland, a disabled person is twice as likely to experience poverty⁹ with lower employment rates contributing to this. Current national support systems can make employment feel financially risky, particularly where delivery of essential supports are uncertain. Increasing permanent and reliable supports regardless of income can lead to long-term stability and independence, which has positive implications for wider society.

- **Driving Better Organisational Performance:** Inclusive workplaces are more adaptive, innovative and resilient. Designing roles and systems that support a diversity of needs leads to better outcomes for all employees, not just those with disabilities. Disability inclusion is not just an equity issue, it is a business performance imperative. Research found that companies leading in disability inclusion were 28% more productive and had twice a higher net income¹⁰.

The disability employment gap could be viewed as a measure of how effectively Ireland's systems, across employment, welfare, education and infrastructure, support inclusive participation. Closing it requires moving from fragmented supports to coordinated, user-centred systems that reduce risk and enable access to work. The need for collaboration across all sectors, business, public and civil society, is vital to ensure a practical and holistic approach.

Many people with disabilities are ready and able to work yet are excluded due to rigid role expectations and workplace design. Closing the gap is an opportunity to increase labour market participation and productivity.

⁸ Silicon Republic (2026): [Ireland facing skills wall as hiring demand remains strong](#)

⁹ IHREC (2025) [Adjusting Estimates of Poverty for the Cost of Disability](#)

¹⁰ Accenture & Disability: [IN \(2023\) The Disability Inclusion Imperative](#)

Why is Disability Employment Low?

Ireland's disability employment rate is among the lowest in Europe, around 32.6% of people with disabilities are in employment. The employment gap between disabled people and their non-disabled peers is at 38.6%, which is significantly higher than the EU average of 24.4%¹¹.

Research has identified several structural causes, rather than a single explanation, for Ireland's low disability employment rate.

Job Role Design

The current recruitment market is still structured around the concept of standard full-time employment, which excludes many people who need flexible arrangements such as those with caring responsibilities, returning to work and people with disabilities.

A 2021 OECD report¹² describes the Irish labour market as "...a labour market geared towards mainstream full-time employment and offering limited work time and work place flexibility."

However, we know people with disabilities may need flexibility in their working day including reduced hours, flexible schedules and modified tasks. In one study, 46% of disabled people said flexible working hours and adjustments would improve their experience of seeking and finding employment¹³. From this we understand the lack of flexible job design reduces participation within the labour market.



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¹¹ European Disability Forum (2023): [European Human Rights Report](#)

¹² OECD (2021) pp.12: [Disability, Work and Inclusion in Ireland](#)

¹³ HR Zone (2025): [Almost half of disabled workers say it's harder to hold down a job due to their disability](#)

Employer Attitudes, Recruitment Bias and Exclusion

Employer's rigid perceptions and hiring practices have been identified as barriers to inclusive disability employment. This can include assumptions about a candidate's productivity or capability within a role, a reluctance to provide reasonable accommodations or equitable adjustments and a lack of inclusive recruitment processes.

Inaccessible Workplaces, Transport and Infrastructure

Physical and digital accessibility barriers prevent many people from accepting employment opportunities or even applying for the role. These barriers have prevented people from taking job offers because buildings or systems were not accessible.

Research on disability employment in Ireland identifies inaccessible workplaces and transport as major labour-market barriers¹⁴. This signals that employment policy alone cannot solve this issue, housing, transport and infrastructure matter, therefore a whole of government commitment is essential.

Poverty and Social Welfare Risks

For many people with a disability who are in receipt of a social welfare payment, the risk and fear associated with losing vital supports is a huge deterrent to accepting employment or a promotion in their role. Concerns range from the impact of losing supports if employment doesn't work out, the complexity of reporting income and the lack of security during employment transitions.



Physical and digital accessibility barriers prevent many people from accepting employment opportunities or even applying for the role

¹⁴ Ahead (2025): [WIDE Framework: Findings](#)

Educational Attainment and Early School Exit

One key driver is unequal access to education and training. People with disabilities in Ireland are more likely to leave education early. Around 17% missed school because of disability and 15% left school earlier than they wanted¹⁵.

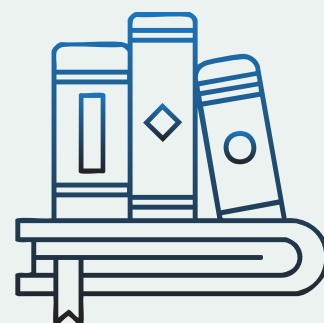
A 2021 OECD report links Ireland's disability employment gap to low educational attainment among disabled people¹⁶.

This experience can vary for many, and we know there has been a 364% rise in number of disabled students registering for disability support at third level in the last 15 years¹⁷. However, even among those with third-level education, graduates with disabilities in Ireland are significantly less likely to be employed than their non-disabled peers¹⁸.

The transition from education to employment for the disabled community is fractured and disconnected. There is a need for stronger policy supports in this area.

Many roles in the labour-market require formal qualifications and unfortunately fewer qualifications can reduce access to stable and higher-paid employment.

We have developed a research paper that discusses disability employment in Ireland in more depth, if you would like access to this paper, please do reach out to Claire at info@opendoorsinitiative.ie.



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¹⁵ ESRI (2015): [Educational and Employment Experiences of People with a Disability in Ireland: An Analysis of the National Disability Survey](#)

¹⁶ OECD (2021): [Disability, Work and Inclusion in Ireland](#)

¹⁷ Ahead (2024): [Report on Disabled Students Uptake of Services](#)

¹⁸ HEA (2023) [Graduate Outcomes and Disability Report](#)

ODI Roundtable Series

From Awareness to Action: Closing Ireland's Disability Employment Gap

The ODI Roundtable series has been designed to explore key issues impacting Irish society and the business community, in partnership with EY. Through our brainstorming sessions we bring together stakeholders, experts, thought leaders, those with lived experience and policy makers to collaborate on meaningful and practical strategies to solve some of Ireland's most pressing issues.

The ODI Roundtable Series is designed to move beyond the question of *"Why does this matter?"* to *"How do we fix this?"*.

In early 2026, the Open Doors Initiative facilitated a series of roundtables bringing together business leaders, inclusion practitioners, policymakers and people with lived experience of disability. The goal was to move the conversation beyond awareness toward practical solutions that will move the dial and impact Ireland's disability employment gap. Across these sessions, attendees examined why the gap persists despite clear intentions within business and government. While perspectives and experience varied across the groups, there was strong alignment on some central themes.

Roundtable Report

Analysis of the roundtable discussions, supported by existing research and stakeholder insights, identified three interconnected elements that continue to affect the disability employment gap in Ireland:

- Workplace structures and design
- National systems and supports
- Wider cultural narratives and understanding of disability and employment



The goal was to move the conversation beyond awareness toward practical solutions that will move the dial and impact Ireland's disability employment gap

While awareness of disability inclusion and diversity has increased significantly in recent years, structural barriers remain embedded across organisational systems, public policy frameworks and societal expectations. The persistence of the employment gap doesn't reflect a lack of capability among disabled people, or a lack of intent among employers, but the cumulative impact of systems that continue to function within a prescriptive and narrow concept. Across the employment lifecycle, from recruitment to career progression, exclusion frequently arises at points where processes rely on individual advocacy rather than inclusive design that is embedded.

Across all roundtables, one message was clear, closing the disability employment gap will not be achieved through good will alone. It requires redesigning systems, so inclusion is the default rather than an exception or add on.

When accessibility, flexibility and equitable arrangements are embedded into everyday processes, organisations reduce the need for individual advocacy and unlock a wider pool of talent. The challenge now is moving from awareness to action.

Priority Recommendations

Based on the roundtable discussions, five priority actions emerged for employers, business and government leaders.

1. Redesign Recruitment and Workplace Systems for Inclusion by Default



The recruitment process generally is the first place a disabled individual might experience barriers to progressing in their professional life. Employers should regularly review recruitment and workplace processes to remove structural barriers.

The persistence of the employment gap doesn't reflect a lack of capability among disabled people, or a lack of intent among employers, but the cumulative impact of systems that continue to function within a prescriptive and narrow concept.

- Refresh job descriptions to focus on core competencies rather than rigid requirements.
- Offer multiple assessment formats as standard (written, practical, task-based).
- Provide interview questions in advance and remove unnecessary time-pressure elements.
- Review the use of automated screening tools to remove bias.
- Embed equitable arrangements into recruitment communications rather than waiting for individual requests.
- Inclusion should be embedded into systems from the outset rather than a later addition based on candidate advocacy.

2. Build Employer and Business Trust Through Transparent Data and Communication



The lack of clear and informed data poses a problem for all businesses, we cannot measure what we do not know. There is a need for better data on disability representation and employee experience in the workplace. However, disclosure will only increase where employees trust that the information will be used to improve systems and feedback is taken seriously. The onus is on the employer to build this trust.

- Clearly explain why disability data is being collected and how it will be used.
- Share the supports already available within the organisation.
- Create predictable pathways for requesting and implementing adjustments.
- Track progression and retention of disabled employees, not only recruitment.
- Trust grows when organisations demonstrate action, not simply intent. Ensure there is a clear feedback loop following data gathering exercises.

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3. Equip Managers with Practical and Proactive Tools, Not Just Awareness Training



Many managers want to ensure disabled employees are supported and thrive in their roles but lack in confidence in how to do so as well as proactive tools to implement such support. Organisations should move beyond awareness training by providing practical tools. Embedding these tools into everyday management systems reduces reliance on individual interpretation or employee advocacy.

- Reasonable accommodation passports to ensure continuity and review of adjustments¹⁹.
- Step-by-step guidance for responding to adjustment requests.
- Clear timelines and accountability for implementing supports.
- Inclusion prompts in performance and promotion discussions.
- Database of readily available supports such as accessible tech that is already compatible with IT systems.

4. Reduce Financial Risk Associated with Employment



Government has a key role in ensuring employment does not create financial instability for disabled people. Reducing financial uncertainty is essential to supporting labour market participation.

- Decouple essential supports such as medical cards and travel passes from employment status.
- Implement a permanent, non-means tested Cost of Disability payment that is detached from an individual's employment status. We are pleased that work has begun in this area.
- Simplify employer support schemes and improve communication around them.
- Ensure consistent implementation across government departments.

Organisations should move beyond awareness training by providing practical tools. Embedding these tools into everyday management systems reduces reliance on individual interpretation or employee advocacy.

¹⁹ EFC (2022): [Reasonable Accommodation Passport](#)

5. Increase Visibility of Disability Leadership



Organisations, public bodies and institutions should actively ensure that people with lived experience of disability are present in leadership and decision-making roles. Visible disabled leadership shifts the narrative and reframes potentially preconceived ideas of what disability looks like.

- Appointing leaders with lived experience to senior roles.
- Involve disability support organisations in policy design.
- Ensure disability inclusion is a priority point on leadership agendas.

This a snapshot of the insightful discussions that took place over three days. To learn more about the ODI Roundtable Series or to for a full analysis report, please email Claire at info@opendoorsinitiative.ie.

Implementation Roadmap

We are delighted to have the opportunity to speak with so many individuals who have a diversity of perspectives and deep commitment to closing the disability employment gap in Ireland. While there has been some positive progress over the last number of years, systems and processes are trying to catch up with culture changes that have taken place.

Closing the disability employment gap calls for phased, coordinated action across business, civil society and government. The need for action is imperative. The roadmap below sets out a practical sequence for implementation.

Visible disabled leadership shifts the narrative and reframes potentially preconceived ideas of what disability looks like.

Phase One: Foundation



A key focus is to build trust, establish baselines and remove immediate barriers in processes.

For Business:

- Have all employees informed on disability, differing types and supports required through training
- Carry out an accessibility and inclusion audit across recruitment processes, workplace systems and policies
- Begin disability data collection with clear communication on purpose and use
- Introduce inclusive recruitment practices by providing interview questions in advance and offer alternative assessment formats as standard
- Equip managers with clear guidance on reasonable accommodations and simple checklists
- Communicate existing and preapproved supports clearly to all employees
- Develop supports aimed at SMEs in particular, as the largest employers in Ireland

For Government

- Issue clear guidance on how employment impacts benefits (medical card, travel pass, etc.)
- Simplify and digitalise access to employer supports (e.g. Wage Subsidy Scheme, Work and Access Programme)
- Begin design of a Cost of Disability payment
- Establish cross-departmental working group on disability employment with employer representation

Key Output of Phase One:

- ✓ Establish a baseline of where they are today
- ✓ Employees begin to see visible, practical changes
- ✓ Trust-building begins

Introduce inclusive recruitment practices by providing interview questions in advance and offer alternative assessment formats as standard

Phase Two: Embedment



During this phase business and public bodies move from pilots to standard practice that is embedded in everyday systems and structures.

For Business

- Embed inclusive design into recruitment systems, performance management, promotion pathways by ensuring the reasonable accommodation process is part of all processes
- Introduce reasonable accommodation passports, standardised adjustment processes with clear timelines
- Track and measure hiring, retention, progression
- Set and publish disability representation targets, including in leadership and managerial positions
- Ensure disability inclusion is a board-level agenda item

For Government

- Implement reforms to decouple key supports from employment status
- Reduce financial “cliff edges” which can force people to give up career progression, changing roles or taking up certain employment in the first instance
- Roll out a joined-up employment pathway across services
- Improve consistency across all services agencies
- Increase funding and engagement with Disabled People’s Organisations (DPOs)

Key Output of Phase Two

- ✓ Inclusion becomes embedded in organisational systems
- ✓ Policy begins to reduce structural disincentives
- ✓ Measurable progress is visible

Embed inclusive design into recruitment systems, performance management, promotion pathways by ensuring the reasonable accommodation process is part of all processes

Phase Three: Transformation



This phase goes beyond our immediate workplaces and professional ecosystems, and focuses on larger system-wide change and cultural shift

For Business

- Achieve sustained increases in disability representation, including at leadership level
- Normalise flexible and inclusive job design across all roles
- Position disability inclusion as part of core talent strategy

For Government

- Fully implement a permanent, non-means tested Cost of Disability payment with coordinated, whole of government support
- Establish Ireland as a leader in disability inclusive employment amongst our European peers

Society-Level Outcome Shift from:

- ✓ Accommodation to inclusion by design
- ✓ Risk narrative to talent and capability narrative

Fully implement a permanent, non-means tested Cost of Disability payment with coordinated, whole of government system

Measurement Framework: Tracking Progress and Driving Accountability

To ensure action, measurement must be simple, consistent and visible.

The below framework includes three levels of measurement:

Workforce Metrics for Business Level

These track real outcomes inside organisations.

Representation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">% of employees who identify as disabled% at leadership level
Hiring	<ul style="list-style-type: none">% of new hires identifying as disabledconversion rates through recruitment stages
Retention & Progression	<ul style="list-style-type: none">retention rates vs overall workforcepromotion ratesinternal mobility
Employee Experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none">employee engagement scores% of employees comfortable disclosing disability

System Metrics for National Level

These track whether policy and systems are working.

- National disability employment rate
- Disability employment gap (percentage points)
- Number of people transitioning from supports into employment
- Retention and promotion in employment after 12-24 months
- Detailed breakdown of the uptake of employer supports (e.g. WSS, Work and Access Scheme)

Process Metrics for Leading Indicators

These measure whether organisations are taking action, not just outcomes. The number of organisations with:

- inclusive recruitment practices in place
- manager training and toolkits implemented
- reasonable accommodation processes standardised

Time taken to implement workplace adjustments and the number of employees aware of available supports. These are critical because outcomes lag however behaviour change does not.

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Measurement Framework

Measurement alone is not enough, visible accountability and commitment is vital in ensuring Ireland is no longer the worse performing country in Europe when it comes to the employment of people with disabilities.

- **Annual Progress Reporting:** continue to support this work and contribute to a national report with organisational participation, progress against key metrics and case studies.
- **Leadership Coalition:** join ODI's Inclusive Employment Leadership Group and share progress and challenges.
- **Set a Benchmarking Index:** support the development of a Disability Inclusion Index based on businesses data collection, recruitment practices, workplace supports and leadership accountability.
- **Continuous Feedback Loop:** engage with regular feedback and ongoing engagement with civil society and partner groups to support the improvement of systems

Inclusion is not dependent on individual goodwill, but is embedded, measured and accountable.

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The Open Doors Initiative

The Open Doors Initiative's (ODI) vision is of an Inclusive Ireland, where diversity in business thrives and equitable measures are adopted to eliminate inequality so that everyone has fair access meaningful employability. Our purpose is to enable equitable access to employability for marginalised people and support business leaders on their Corporate Social Justice and Inclusion journey.

ODI PURPOSE

Our PURPOSE is to enable equitable access to employability for all marginalised people

VISION

Our VISION is of an inclusive Ireland, where diversity in business thrives and equitable measures are adopted to eliminate inequality so that everyone has fair access meaningful employability

MISSION

Our MISSION is to guide those who are facing barriers to employability and to support companies through collaboration and innovation

ODI provides advice, training and support in the area of inclusive disability employment. Through our advocacy, research, employer guidance and support for people with disabilities we are committed to closing the disability employment gap in Ireland.

ODI has two key programmes that are focused on disability inclusion:



Employers for Change is an employer disability information service that empowers employers with all the information and advice needed to hire, employ, manage and retain staff with disabilities.



A programme of the Open Doors Initiative

Towards Work is the central point for people with disabilities in Ireland to access resources and support in your journey towards employment or entrepreneurship.



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