



# **From Awareness to Action** Impacting Ireland's Disability Employment Gap

**Workshop Summary Report**

January 2026



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# Introduction

The ODI Roundtable series has been designed to examine some of the biggest issues impacting Irish society and the business community. Through 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 intends to move beyond the question of “Why does this matter?” to “How do we fix this?”.

In January 2026, two complementary workshops brought together business inclusion leaders and people with lived experience of disability to examine why the disability employment gap in Ireland persists and what can be done to close it.

While both groups approached the discussion from a different perspective there were synergies in their conclusions. Ireland's disability employment gap is not driven by lack of intent or capability. Instead it is driven by flaws in:

- Workplace Structures
- Systematic Failures
- Narrow Cultural and Societal Assumptions

Many businesses have inclusion values, policies and strategies in place. However, exclusion occurs at critical moments in the employee journey. At these moments, individuals often encounter uncertainty, inconsistency and reliance on individual advocacy rather than predictable, inclusive systems that are embedded in the everyday.

This gap is not primarily a policy problem, it is a design, leadership and execution challenge. Closing it requires moving from intention to implementation by embedding accessibility and accountability.

Over two sessions, the ODI Roundtable attendees deconstructed the full employee lifecycle, from recruitment to retention, to pinpoint where inclusion systems fail. They also explored where national systems have opportunity for improvement and the role leadership must play. Attendees were organised into groups where they shared their thoughts, suggestions and insights on post its. All of this information was downloaded and noted and finally used to inform this report as well as the structure of our Leaders Roundtable.

If you would like to read the supporting materials that were shared ahead of both sessions, they can be downloaded from the following links:

- [Tuesday 27th of January 2026](#)
- [Wednesday 28th of January 2026](#)

## Thank You

We would like to thank all who attended the ODI Roundtable and their shared insights and personal experience to inform this report. We appreciate your time and expertise in this area. We are grateful to those who continue to advocate for change in disability inclusive employment and beyond. We hope this report will further support this work.

## Roundtable Report: Key Themes

There were a number of themes that appeared across both sessions. We have organised the findings under three core themes and have laid these out below.

### 1. Workplace Structures: Moving from Intention to Embedment

These are the things employers, managers and business leaders can control and change in the everyday running of workplaces.

The consensus across both roundtables was that the everyday workplace structures are currently designed for a narrow non-disabled norm, resulting in a “one-size-fits all” environment where productivity isn’t necessarily measured by impact but visibility and physical presence. The workshops revealed that while many businesses have inclusive values and strategies, exclusion occurs at critical points in the employee journey. The breakdown is driven by systems designed for “standard” norms rather than human variation. Within an organisation’s control is how these systems are designed and implemented:

- **Shift to Equitable Arrangements:** Reasonable accommodations can sometimes be viewed as favours or concessions, rather than supportive, proactive supports. Reframing of these supports can help how they embed in the everyday.
- **Recruitment as a Barrier:** Processes often look for candidates who are “excellent at everything all the time.” Inaccessible screening tools and interview formats that privilege speed and verbal performance exclude talent before employment begins.
- **“Luck of the Draw” Manger:** Inclusion currently depends on individual manager capability and confidence rather than system design. Support varies widely between teams and managers often lack the practical tools, guidance and clear ownership needed to lead inclusive teams.
- **Rigid Productivity Norms:** Workplace expectations around presence and pace are often inflexible. Performance is frequently measured by “standard” expectations rather than outcomes and sustainability.
- **Conditional Progression:** Career growth is often incompatible with fluctuating capacity. Promotion processes often ignore equitable arrangements, leading to a perception that disabled employees are “risky” investments for leadership roles.
- **The Role of Meaningful Data:** There are gaps in understanding the extent of the issue as there are gaps in data gathering across employers.

Employers and organisations must move to embedding inclusion, not viewing it as an add on. This can start with:

- refreshing job descriptions
- offering alternative assessments pathways
- equipping managers with practical steps rather than leaving support to individual interpretation.

## 2. Systematic Failures: From Individual Advocacy to Institutional Accountability

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Both groups that took part in our roundtable highlighted an exhausting “administrative and emotional burden” placed on individuals. Currently, the national system works if the individual has the resilience to navigate the various systems. It cannot be overstated the number of times the impact of fear of loss of supports arose in discussions across the room, with some attendees describing situations where individuals were unable to accept promotions due to the negative impact it would have on their supports such as medical card and travel.

- **The “Benefits Trap” & Financial Risk:** Welfare rules and tax treatments can penalise disabled people for earning or progressing in their career. This creates a “poverty trap” where individuals are forced to choose between the stability of welfare supports or the opportunity of a career and professional progression.
- **Fragmented Government Approaches:** There is no single, joined-up journey for a disabled person in Ireland, from education to transport to social welfare. This leaves individuals to navigate complex national systems.
- **Medical Model Dominance:** Eligibility for supports are often viewed through a medical or deficit lens. This requires excessive documentation and medical validation, rather than trusting the individual.

Government has the opportunity to co-ordinate and support the disabled community, who are at high risk of poverty. This involves strengthening cross-departmental accountability, protecting income supports so employment doesn't create financial risk, and creating a “single front-door” for workplace adjustments.

## 3. Cultural and Societal Assumptions: Challenging Narrow Perceptions of Ability

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At the highest level, the disability employment gap is sustained by narrow cultural assumptions that frame disability as something to “manage” rather than a natural part of human variation.

- **The Deficit Lens:** Society continues to view disability through a medical lens. Strengths, skills and lived experience are consistently undervalued, while disabled people are expected to adapt to a world not built for them.

- **The Narrative of “Risk”:** There is a persistent assumption that disability equals decreased productivity or increased organisational risk. This results in “disabled hires” being framed as compromised solutions rather than a vital pipeline of talent.
- **Performative Inclusion:** There is a visible gap between public messaging and reality. Disability inclusion is often visible in storytelling or campaigns but is not reflected in how societal systems actually operate, such as transport, online spaces and office design.
- **Lack of Representation:** A lack of disabled people in senior, visible leadership roles reinforces the assumption that high-level success is incompatible with disability.

Shifting from the cultural default takes a whole of society step change. We must move toward the social model of disability that values lived experience at the decision-making table and treats accessibility not as an exception or an add on, but as a baseline requirement for a functioning society.

## Key Recommendations:

### Inclusion by Default:

- **Refresh Job Descriptions:** Remove unnecessary requirements and focus on core competencies. Describe the job, not the person we assume is the right “fit”.
- **Standardise Options:** Offer multiple assessment formats (written, practical, task-based) as a standard choice for all candidates, rather than waiting for a reasonable accommodation request.
- **Challenge Norms:** Explicitly train interviewers to disregard traditional “social performance” metrics like eye contact or speed of response.
- **Embed Equitable Arrangements:** Ensure accommodations are offered as standard throughout the recruitment process, on advertisement, job description and communication to candidates.
- Disability Inclusion on Leaders Agenda

### Equip Managers with Practical Tools:

- **Move Beyond Training:** Provide managers with clear guidance such as checklists to ensure adjustment requests are handled confidently.
- **Reasonable Accommodation Passport:** Introduce this practical tool to support smooth implementation of adjustments and schedule a review window.
- **Embed into Reviews:** Include “equitable arrangement prompts” in all performance and promotion discussions to ensure disability is considered proactively rather than reactively.

## Embed Adjustments into the Everyday:

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- **Clear Progression Pathway:** Establish a clear pathway for workplace adjustments to remove the need for employees to navigate multiple HR or IT teams.
- **Build Manager's Confidence:** Ensure all managers have clarity on how the reasonable accommodation and equitable adjustment process works by providing a step-by-step guide.
- **Predictable Timelines:** Clearly outline the exact steps and timeframes that follow once an employee discloses a request for an adjustment.

## Progressing National Supports

### Reform of Welfare & Income Supports:

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- **Decouple Supports from Employment Status:** Ensure that essential medical cards, travel cards and other supports are not lost immediately upon entering employment or accepting a promotion.
- **Address the "Financial Cliff":** Implement a permanent "Cost of Disability" payment to mitigate the high costs of living that make employment feel like a financial risk.
- **Create Clear Implementation Across Government Agencies:** There are inconsistencies in implementation supports across government agencies which leads to uncertainty and stress for individuals.

### National Accountability:

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- **Unified Employment Journey:** A national action plan where there is opportunity for cross-departmental engagement to share data and goals to prevent "siloed" support.
- **Transparency in Progress:** Empower employers, private as well as public, to share disability data and inclusion successes.

### Institutional Rights-Based Approach:

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- **Fund DPOs:** Directly fund and resource Disabled People's Organisations (DPOs) to participate in policy co-design.
- **Shift the Burden of Proof:** Move toward a system where accessibility is baseline and embedded in all public services and transport, rather than an exception to be negotiated.

# Effecting Cultural & Societal Assumptions

## Visibility and Representation:

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- **Diverse Leadership:** Actively appoint people with lived experience to senior, visible decision-making roles to challenge the assumption that “high performance” is incompatible with disability.
- **Authentic Storytelling:** Move away from “performative inclusion” toward sharing real-world examples of how systems have been successfully redesigned.

## Adopting the Social Model of Disability:

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- **End the Medical Lens:** Stop requiring excessive “medical validation” for workplace supports. Trust the individual.
- **Baseline Awareness:** Invest in long-term, society-wide education that frames disability as human variation rather than a deficit to be “fixed” or “managed.”



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