PERCEPTIONS OF INCLUSION PROFESSIONALS ON EMPLOYABILITY OF INDIVIDUALS WITH INTELLECTUAL AND DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES: A TRANSNATIONAL STUDY

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Abstract

Individuals with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDD) face significant employment barriers, driven by societal biases, a lack of recognition of their abilities, and inadequate institutional policies. Addressing this requires transforming training professionals and the education system to embrace inclusive and adaptive practices. This transnational study aims to explore the perceptions of professionals in the field of inclusion of people with IDD about employability, investigating three specific aspects: (a) the pedagogical needs of trainers in this field; (b) reasonable accommodation as a structuring factor for a more inclusive world of work; and (c) the assessment and monitoring models in the labour context for people with IDD. With these objectives in mind, 43 professionals working daily with people with IDD in Italy, Portugal, Sweden and Türkiye were surveyed using an online questionnaire, with a set of multiple-choice questions based on previous comprehensive research on the employability of individuals with IDD. The obtained results highlight the importance of social skills and interpersonal communication in vocational training for individuals with IDD, particularly in Türkiye, while also noting Sweden's focus on problem-solving skills and Italy's emphasis on adaptive and self-care skills. The research reveals a preference for adaptive and personalized learning plans, especially in Portugal, Italy, and Sweden, indicating a shift towards customized educational strategies for learners with IDD. Furthermore, the study underscores the challenges in workplace accommodation due to a lack of employer awareness and the need for targeted training in countries like Türkiye, Italy, and Portugal, advocating for a broader adoption of assistive technologies to foster inclusive work and learning environments.

Keywords: Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, employment barriers, social inclusion, professional perceptions, reasonable accommodations.

1. Introduction

Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDD) encompass a range of conditions that involve substantial limitations in intellectual functioning and adaptive behaviour, which impact various skills necessary for daily life (Schalock et al., 2021). Being millions of people affected by IDD, this constitutes a global issue. Equally urgent in Europe, namely in Portugal (PT), Italy (IT), Türkiye (TR) and Sweden (SE), a study has shown that their limitations pose an obstacle to accessing work opportunities. Mainly due to the emergence of a highly skilled and technological work environment, this group's linguistics and digital literacy levels, lower training levels and hurdles in accessing and usage of assistive technologies are major obstacles (APD, 2012; ISFOL, 2014). This has led countries to develop a robust legal system to protect them. Securing work as a right for people with IDD, through the establishment of a proactive quota system, recognizing reasonable accommodations as essential and providing them training programs designed to facilitate the transition to employment.

However, individuals with IDD still face substantial obstacles that greatly hinder their ability to secure employment due to systemic barriers (AlFozan, & AlKahtani, 2021; Hall et al., 2017). An important barrier is a widespread failure to acknowledge their skills and potential in the labour market (AlFozan, & AlKahtani, 2021). This problem is worsened by insufficient institutional policies and practices that do not adequately consider the distinct requirements and abilities of this particular group (Baker et al., 2018). This oversight not only restricts job prospects for individuals with IDD but also deprives society of the advantages that come from their varied contributions.

To tackle these challenges, it is imperative to undergo a significant overhaul of the training and educational systems, considered a priority for future research in the field of employment for people with IDD (AlFozan, & AlKahtani, 2021). The primary objective of this change should be to establish a more comprehensive and flexible setting that is open to accommodate the unique requirements of individuals with IDD, based on the adoption of practical adjustments and the incorporation of assistive technologies (Boot et al., 2018; Chandola, & Rouxel, 2021; Sula, 2023). These interventions have the potential to greatly improve the learning and development experiences of individuals with IDD, thus enhancing their chances of finding employment (AlFozan, & AlKahtani, 2021; Almaky, 2020).

1.1. Design and objectives

The present study adopts a primarily quantitative approach through surveys, situated within the broader context of action research, as a preparatory step for the development of a training program for professionals working in the employment of people with IDD. This methodological choice underscores the study's commitment to not only understanding but also actively contributing to the enhancement of inclusion practices in the workplace.

This transnational study aims to explore the perceptions of professionals in the field of inclusion of people with IDD about employability, investigating three specific aspects: (a) the pedagogical needs of trainers in this field; (b) reasonable accommodation as a structuring factor for a more inclusive world of work; and (c) and monitoring models in the labour context for people with IDD.

The selection of Portugal (PT), Italy (IT), Türkiye (TR), and Sweden (SE) as the countries for this study is intentional and stems from a funded project conducted in the respective field – No Barriers to Employment (2022-1-SE01-KA220-ADU-000089826). This selection demonstrates a deliberate focus on geographical distribution and capitalizes on the consortium's abilities. Therefore, the study seeks to include a wide variety of European regions to examine a broad range of practices and perspectives, hopefully enhancing the current understanding of the challenges individuals with IDD face in different socio-cultural settings.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

This study included a non-probabilistic convenience sample, collected from the network of partners of a project in the area of labour inclusion, in four countries – PT, IT, TR, and SE. A total of 43 professionals working on the field of inclusion, namely with individuals with IDD were included in the sample, 13 from TR (30,20%), 12 from PT (27,90%), 10 from IT (23,30%), and 8 from SE (18,60%). Most participants identified as females ($n = 28$; 65,10%), while 12 identified as males (27,90%), and three as non-binary (7,00%). Their ages ranged between 31 and 66 years old ($M = 40,67$; $SD = 10,34$).

Most professionals identified as "trainers and/or educators" ($n = 11$; 25,60%), followed by: "teachers" ($n = 10$; 23,30%); "other professionals working in the field of intellectual disability" ($n = 8$; 18,60%); "staff from an NGO" ($n = 7$; 16,30%); "health professional and/or therapist" ($n = 6$; 14,00%); and "person with intellectual disability" ($n = 1$; 2,3%).

2.2. Instruments and procedure

The online form aimed to collect crucial insights from professionals in the field of IDD and inclusion. The first section gathered demographic data including gender, country of origin, and whether respondents identified primarily as professionals, individuals with disabilities, or both. The second part delved into specific topics related to inclusion, allowing respondents to select a maximum of three options among several choices. These options included necessary skills and teaching methods in vocational training for individuals with IDD, accommodations required for their employment, and the effectiveness of monitoring and evaluation processes. The questionnaire was developed based on previous research on the employability of people with IDD in the labour market, and the main faced challenges, including the findings from Athamanah et al. (2022) and Nord & Hepperlen (2016). The questionnaire was disseminated through an online form, with the support of the No Barriers to Employment consortium and the obtained data was subjected to statistical analysis.

3. Results

Analyzing the questionnaires applied, it was found that the two most important skills in the vocational training of people with IDD are related to social skills and interpersonal communication ($n = 32$; 74,41%), verified specifically in TR ($n = 12$; 92,31%) and SE ($n = 4$; 50,00%), and communication skills

($n = 22$; 51,16%). Besides this, the results from IT show that the adaptive and self-care skills ($n = 9$; 90,00%) are the most important, for PT are the technical and job-specific skills ($n = 9$; 75,00%). SE also considers that the problem-solving skills ($n = 4$; 50,00%) are important in the vocational training.

Regarding the most suitable pedagogical approach, it was found that the two most important skills in the vocational training of people with IDD are related to adaptive and personalized learning plans ($n = 27$; 62,79%), which were verified in PT ($n = 11$; 91,67%), IT ($n = 8$; 80,00%), and SE ($n = 5$; 62,50%) and peer-assisted learning and collaboration ($n = 23$; 53,49%), represented only in IT ($n = 8$; 80,00%). Besides this, the results from IT also show that hands-on training and experiential learning ($n = 8$; 80,00%) are the most important, for TR individualized instruction ($n = 10$; 76,92%) is the most important approach.

About the main challenges in integrating people with IDD into training, we found that although the two main challenges identified were related to the lack of trained instructors and support personnel ($n = 19$; 44,19%) and the social isolation and interaction challenges ($n = 18$; 41,86%), only in IT were the main challenges identified ($n = 6$; 60,00%, in both). In the rest of the countries, the main challenge identified was unequal access to resources and support in PT ($n = 7$; 58,33%) and SE ($n = 4$; 50,00%) and communication barriers in TR ($n = 9$; 69,23%).

On the other hand, the two most important key challenges for people with IDD in accessing reasonable accommodation and assistive technology in the workplace, according to the participants, were related to the lack of awareness and understanding among employers ($n = 23$; 53,49%). This was also verified in TR ($n = 9$; 69,23%), IT ($n = 6$; 60,00%) and PT ($n = 7$; 58,33%). The other key challenge identified was the lack of training for employees and HR staff, which was verified in PT ($n = 9$; 75,00%), IT ($n = 6$; 60,00%) and SE ($n = 4$; 50,00%). In addition, TR had two other key challenges: inadequate legal protection and enforcement ($n = 9$; 69,23%) and stigma and prejudice at work ($n = 9$; 69,23%). The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. The main challenges in accessing reasonable accommodations and assistive technologies in the work context of people with IDD, according to the sample.

In your opinion, what are the main challenges that people with IDD face in accessing reasonable accommodations and assistive technologies in the work context?

	IT		PT		SE		TR		TOTAL	
	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*
Lack of Awareness and Understanding Among Employers	60,00	6	58,33	7	12,50	1	69,23	9	53,49	23
Financial Constraints for Providing Assistive Technologies	50,00	5	25,00	3	0,00	0	23,08	3	25,58	11
Inadequate Legal Protection and Enforcement	20,00	2	8,33	1	37,50	3	69,23	9	34,88	15
Stigmatization and Bias in the Workplace	20,00	2	25,00	3	37,50	3	69,23	9	39,53	17
Limited Availability of Customized Accommodations	40,00	4	33,33	4	25,00	2	23,08	3	30,23	13
Communication Barriers to Requesting Accommodations	0,00	0	25,00	3	37,50	3	15,38	2	18,60	8
Insufficient Training for Employees and HR Personnel	60,00	6	75,00	9	50,00	4	15,38	2	48,84	21
Bureaucratic Hurdles in the Accommodation Approval Process	30,00	3	25,00	3	37,50	3	7,69	1	23,26	10
Total	100,00	10	100,00	12	100,00	8	100,00	13	100,00	43

According to the sample, the three best strategies to assess an organization's inclusion environment are focus groups and inclusive workplace committees ($n = 25$; 58,14%), confirmed in SE ($n = 5$; 62,50%), employee surveys and feedback ($n = 23$; 53,49%), confirmed in TR ($n = 11$; 84,62%), and external audits and assessments by diversity and inclusion experts, confirmed in IT ($n = 7$; 70,00%) and PT ($n = 8$; 66,67%). Inclusion metrics and KPI tracking were also found to be an important assessment strategy by SE participants ($n = 5$; 62,50%).

Finally, it was identified that the two best strategies to assess the organizational inclusion of people with IDD are related to conducting inclusive focus groups and workshops with these employees ($n = 28$; 65.12%), identified as best in TR (n = 76.92%), IT ($n = 6$; 60.00%) and SE ($n = 4$; 4.60%). It is also important to have performance reviews and career tracking ($n = 20$; 46.51%). Whereas, for PT respondents, the best strategy is to have focus groups and feedback from employees with intellectual disabilities ($n = 9$; 75%). SE participants also identified working with disability organizations for assessment as one of the best strategies.

4. Discussion

This international study, conducted to investigate professional perspectives in the area of inclusion for individuals with IDD, has produced valuable results in four distinct domains: pedagogical needs, vocational training skills, workplace accommodation, and monitoring models in the labour context for people with IDD.

The study focuses on the crucial significance of social skills and interpersonal communication in vocational training for individuals with IDD, with a specific emphasis on the Turkish context. Sweden and Italy, although following the overall pattern, also presented distinct viewpoints; Sweden accented on the importance of problem-solving abilities, while Italy highlighted the significance of adaptive and self-care skills. These differences demonstrate the wide range of cultural and educational environments in which the professionals work and are aligned with the findings of Jansen-van Vuuren & Aldersey (2020), regarding the experiences of stigma for people with IDD and their families across diverse cultures.

An identified trend is the paramount importance of social skills and interpersonal communication in vocational training for people with IDD was also noted, with a specific focus on Türkiye. On the other hand, Sweden respondents also highlighted the significance of problem-solving skills, and Italy underscored the importance of adaptive and self-care skills. These results reflect findings which focus on training vocational social skills which are crucial for enhancing the prospects of obtaining employment, positive health outcomes, and social and economic well-being (Helbig et al., 2023).

Our findings also shed light on the pedagogical approaches preferred in vocational training. Adaptive and personalised learning plans were widely preferred, especially in Portugal, Italy, and Sweden. This indicates an increasing acknowledgement of the necessity for customised educational approaches that address the specific requirements of learners with IDD (Casale-Giannola et al., 2023). Italy demonstrated a notable inclination towards hands-on training and experiential learning, suggesting a practical focus on their teaching methods.

Concerning workplace accommodation, there was a notable agreement regarding the difficulties arising from employers' lack of knowledge and the necessity for more focused training for employees and HR personnel, particularly in Türkiye, Italy, and Portugal, indicating a widespread need to improve the comprehension and abilities of employers and HR professionals to establish more inclusive workplaces. The included participants highlighted the role of assistive technologies in the vocational training and employment of people with IDD, noting their potential to make learning and working environments more inclusive and accessible. The study's findings call for a concerted effort to embrace these technologies across countries, with a focus on training and awareness, to ensure their effective implementation and to maximize their impact on the inclusion of people with IDD in the workforce.

In terms of monitoring models for the inclusion of people with IDD in the labour market, the study revealed a preference for inclusive focus groups and workshops, as well as performance reviews and career tracking. Nevertheless, in Portugal, the emphasis was on gathering direct feedback from employees with IDD, which can provide invaluable insights into the effectiveness of inclusion strategies.

4.1. Limitations and future directions

Although this study is extensive in its coverage, it does have some limitations. Primarily, the findings heavily rely on the perspectives of experts in the domain, potentially overlooking the firsthand experiences and requirements of people with IDD.

Moreover, the study encompasses multiple countries, but the diverse socio-cultural and economic contexts may impact the applicability of the results, namely considering the variations in policy frameworks and levels of technology adoption among them.

The study also lacked a comprehensive investigation into the utilisation of particular categories of assistive technologies, thereby restricting the comprehension of how these technologies can be optimally incorporated into vocational training and workplace adaptation.

Besides enhancing the cultural framing of the research, future studies should aim to include the direct input and experiences of individuals with IDD, since this would provide a more holistic

understanding of the effectiveness and relevance of the vocational training and employment strategies being employed.

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