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Focus Group Report of IDEA-VET: Inclusion, Diversity, and EmployAbility in Vocational Education and Training

ERASMUS +

Cooperation partnerships in vocational education and training (KA220-VET)

Project number: 2024-1-IT01-KA220-VET-000247168





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This report has been developed within the framework of the IDEA-VET: Inclusion, Diversity and EmployAbility in Vocational Education and Training project, co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union.

It presents a comparative qualitative analysis based on multinational focus group discussions exploring the employment and vocational education of individuals with intellectual disabilities in Türkiye, Italy, and the Netherlands, serving as a practical reference for educators, policymakers, and stakeholders seeking to enhance inclusion and collaboration in vocational education and employment systems.

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ChatGPT was used during the preparation of this module to improve clarity, readability, and language, and as an initial step in the translation process. The authors subsequently reviewed and edited all content.



INTRODUCTION

Inclusive employment for individuals with intellectual disabilities (ID) is increasingly recognized as a cornerstone of social inclusion, human rights, and sustainable development. Participation in meaningful work promotes economic self-sufficiency, enhances self-esteem, and strengthens social belonging. Yet, despite international frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), persistent barriers, including stigma, limited educational preparation, and fragmented institutional systems, continue to restrict employment opportunities for people with ID. These challenges manifest differently across countries, reflecting variations in welfare systems, cultural attitudes, and policy implementation.

Italy has long been considered a pioneer in inclusive education and community-based support for individuals with disabilities. Inclusive schooling has been mandatory since the 1970s, and local cooperatives and social enterprises have provided valuable pathways to employment, particularly in the hospitality and service sectors. Nevertheless, the transition from school to work remains uneven. Bureaucratic procedures, limited job coaching capacity, and insufficient visibility of successful models continue to hinder large-scale progress. Families, educators, and employers often fill the gaps left by policy and institutional inaction, forming localized networks that sustain inclusion through solidarity and practical innovation.

Türkiye has made significant advances in expanding special and vocational education and promoting employment policies for individuals with disabilities. However, inclusive employment remains constrained by structural and cultural barriers. Stigmatizing attitudes, inconsistent enforcement of legal regulations, and weak coordination between schools, municipalities, and employers limit effective school-to-work transitions. Despite these challenges, promising local initiatives—such as municipal disability employment units and workplace support programs—demonstrate growing awareness and commitment. These developments suggest a policy environment in transition, where inclusive practices are gaining recognition but require stronger systemic integration and public visibility.

The Netherlands, characterized by a decentralized welfare and employment system, offers a strong legislative base for inclusion through frameworks such as the Participatiewet, Wet Passend Onderwijs, and Banenafspraak. These laws encourage participation and employment for individuals with disabilities within mainstream labor markets. Yet, implementation gaps persist, particularly at municipal levels where bureaucratic complexity and limited job coach availability create barriers. Inclusive vocational education (VSO, MBO, praktijkonderwijs) and partnerships with NGOs and employers provide solid foundations, but scaling and



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sustainability remain key challenges. Dutch experiences underscore that policy strength alone is insufficient without coordinated local action and employer engagement.

This study adopts Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory as a conceptual lens to analyze the dynamic interactions shaping inclusive employment across these contexts. The framework enables an understanding of how individual characteristics, family and school environments, institutional collaboration, societal attitudes, and temporal changes collectively influence employment outcomes.

Using qualitative focus group discussions held in Italy, Türkiye, and the Netherlands, the research captures the perspectives of individuals with intellectual disabilities, family members, educators, employers, NGO representatives, and policymakers. The comparative analysis reveals both convergences and contextual nuances, emphasizing that sustainable inclusion depends on multi-level coordination, cultural transformation, and consistent policy support.

Rather than presenting a systematic literature review, this report synthesizes empirical focus group evidence from real-world experiences. It offers actionable insights and policy-relevant recommendations for educators, employers, and decision-makers seeking to strengthen inclusive vocational education and employment systems. By bringing together three distinct yet interrelated national experiences, the study contributes to an international understanding of how inclusive employment ecosystems can evolve toward greater equity, participation, and sustainability.



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Abstract

Aim:

This multinational qualitative study explores stakeholder perspectives on the employment of individuals with intellectual disabilities (ID) within the framework of **Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory**. The study compares the experiences, challenges, and enabling factors observed in **Italy, Türkiye, and the Netherlands**—three countries differing in welfare models, policy implementation, and inclusive employment practices.

Method:

Focus group discussions were conducted in **Veneto (Italy), Izmir (Türkiye), and Rotterdam (Netherlands)** during September 2025. Participants (N=38) included individuals with intellectual disabilities and their families, educators, employers, NGO representatives, local authorities, and policymakers. Data were audio-recorded or minuted, transcribed, and analyzed thematically based on the ecological systems model, identifying key themes and subthemes across individual, micro, meso, exo, macro, and chronosystem levels.

Results:

Despite contextual differences, several cross-national patterns emerged.

At the **individual level**, communication skills, responsibility, and motivation were common strengths, while anxiety and low self-confidence persisted as challenges.

Within the **microsystem**, family involvement, educational continuity, job coaching, and supportive employer attitudes were critical enabling factors.

At the **meso- and exosystem levels**, all countries emphasized the need for stronger coordination between schools, employers, and public institutions. Italy and the Netherlands particularly highlighted bureaucratic barriers and the shortage of job coaches, while Türkiye underscored fragmented institutional coordination and limited local support mechanisms.

At the **macrosystem level**, inclusive education policies were strongest in Italy and the Netherlands but less effectively implemented in employment transition stages. In Türkiye, limited public awareness and weaker policy enforcement remained barriers to sustained inclusion.

Across all contexts, **COVID-19** and economic instability shaped opportunities and adaptation processes, representing key **chronosystem dynamics**.

Proposed solutions included structured school-to-work transition programs, employer



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incentives, regional coordination hubs, public awareness campaigns, and the systematic use of digital tools for coordination and training.

Conclusion:

Inclusive employment for individuals with intellectual disabilities is a multidimensional process requiring synergy between individuals, families, institutions, and governments. While **Türkiye** needs stronger inter-institutional coordination and public awareness, **Italy** and the **Netherlands** face challenges of bureaucracy, scalability, and sustainability. The cross-country analysis demonstrates that **collaborative governance, continuous job coaching, and visibility of successful models** are central to advancing equitable and sustainable inclusion in the labor market.

Keywords: intellectual disabilities, inclusive employment, ecological systems, cross-country comparison, vocational education, qualitative research, Italy, Türkiye, Netherlands.



REPORT INTRODUCTION

Creating an inclusive employment ecosystem for individuals with intellectual disabilities (ID) is increasingly recognized as essential for promoting quality of life, social participation, and equity. Across Europe, policy advances have expanded educational access and awareness, yet significant barriers—particularly stigma, fragmented systems, and insufficient institutional coordination—continue to limit access to meaningful employment. Research underscores that addressing these challenges requires **multi-level, cross-sector collaboration** that integrates education, employment, and social policy domains.

Barriers to Inclusive Employment

Stigma and Attitudinal Barriers:

Negative assumptions, stereotypes, and low expectations from employers and colleagues persist, creating discrimination and exclusion from competitive employment (Morris et al., 2024; Bialik & Mhiri, 2022; Shaw et al., 2022; Pedersen et al., 2024). In all three countries, the perception of individuals with ID as “less productive” or “requiring excessive support” undermines opportunities for inclusion. While Italy and the Netherlands show increasing social acceptance through visibility and advocacy, prejudice remains a latent obstacle in both private and public sectors.

Structural and Policy Challenges:

Rigid funding schemes, fragmented coordination between educational and labor systems, and uneven implementation of inclusion laws constrain transitions to open employment (Joyce et al., 2024; Garrels & Sigstad, 2021; Wendelborg et al., 2022). In **Italy**, bureaucratic procedures and the absence of a structured school-to-work pathway limit scalability of successful local initiatives. **Türkiye** continues to face weak inter-institutional coordination and inconsistent enforcement of existing regulations. In **the Netherlands**, despite robust legislation (e.g., *Participatiewet* and *Banenafspraak*), municipal-level fragmentation and administrative delays reduce the effectiveness of inclusive employment measures.

Educational and Support Gaps:

Limited access to individualized vocational education and insufficient job coaching remain persistent challenges across contexts (Bialik & Mhiri, 2022; Ducett et al., 2024; Joyce et al., 2024). Family engagement and teacher involvement play decisive roles in supporting employment, yet continuity between school-based training and workplace integration remains inconsistent. In **Italy**, strong inclusive schooling contrasts with weak employment transitions; **Türkiye** faces underdeveloped vocational guidance mechanisms; and **the Netherlands** struggles with scaling up pilot programs and ensuring sufficient coaching capacity.

Facilitators and Best Practices

Ecosystem-Based Approaches:

Collaborative partnerships between schools, employers, municipalities, and NGOs have shown strong potential for systemic reform (Morris et al., 2024; Shaw et al., 2022). In Italy, local family-led cooperatives and inclusive hospitality initiatives (e.g., Casa Vittoria) demonstrate community-based inclusion. In Türkiye, municipal disability employment units and workplace support programs show how local action can compensate for policy gaps. In the Netherlands, partnerships between MBO/VSO schools, NGOs, and employers (e.g., Brownies & DownieS cafés, inclusive logistics teams) highlight the role of social enterprise models.

Inclusive HR and Workplace Practices:

Across all settings, inclusive recruitment, structured mentoring, and clear team roles are associated with better adaptation and job sustainability (Sigstad et al., 2025; Fajardo-Castro et al., 2024). Employers who adopt flexible scheduling, peer mentoring, and inclusive communication strategies report improved morale and productivity among all employees.

Innovative Employment Models and Technology:

Customized employment, job carving, and the integration of digital coordination tools (such as scheduling apps and video-based learning materials) enhance accessibility and engagement. Italy and the Netherlands show progress in using technology to support work routines, while Türkiye demonstrates growing adoption of online job matching and training systems through municipal initiatives.

In conclusion, building an inclusive employment ecosystem for individuals with intellectual disabilities requires coordinated policy reform, organizational commitment, and sustained community engagement. The integration of education, employment, and social services, supported by awareness campaigns, accessible technology, and continuous family and employer involvement, emerges as the foundation for long-term, equitable inclusion in all three countries.

Results

As a result of the analysis, **eight main themes** were identified across the **Italian, Turkish, and Dutch focus groups**, representing the key dimensions of inclusive employment for individuals with intellectual disabilities. While the thematic structure was consistent across countries, the **subthemes and participant perspectives** reflected distinct contextual nuances.

The themes, subthemes, and representative participant statements for each country are summarized in **Table 1** below.

Table 1. Socio-demographic Characteristics of Participants and Representation Status

Table 1a: Türkiye

ID	G/Age	Edu.	Profession / Role	Repr. Type	Exp.	Role
P1-TR	M/34	Voc.Tr.	Woodworker	Ind.	5 yrs (Food)	Ind./Part.
P2-TR	F/40	BA	Career Counselor	Inst.Rep.	6 mo	Inst.Rep.
P3-TR	F/43	BA	Career Counselor	Inst.Rep.	10 yrs	Inst.Rep.
P4-TR	M/57	Grad.	Workplace Physician	Prof. Chamber	10 yrs	Inst.Rep.
P5-TR	F/44	BA	Disability Unit Mgr	Municipality	2 mo	Inst.Rep.
P6-TR	M/19	Voc.Tr.	Agric. Student	Ind.	—	Ind./Part.
P7-TR	F/31	BA	Teacher / Job Coach	Municipality	9 yrs	Inst.Rep.
P8-TR	F/73	BA	Nurse / NGO Off.	NGO	15 yrs	Inst.Rep.
P9-TR	F/25	HS	Warehouse Emp.	Ind.	3 yrs	Ind./Part.
P10-TR	F/51	BA	Spec. Educ. Teacher	Educ. Inst.	14 yrs	Inst.Rep.
P11-TR	F/50	BA	HR Manager	Priv. Sector	20+ yrs	Employer Rep.
P12-TR	F/61	HS	Retired (Family Rep.)	Family	—	Fam. Part.
P13-TR	F/49	HS	Retired (Family Rep.)	Family	—	Fam. Part.
P14-TR	F/35	BA	Disab. Employ. Unit	Municipality	15 yrs	Inst.Rep.

Table 1b: Italy

ID	G/Age	Edu.	Profession / Role	Repr. Type	Exp.	Role
P1-IT	M/52	BA	Dir., Casa Vittoria	Employer	20 yrs	Employer Rep.
P2-IT	M/57	BA	Legal Rep., Cooperative	Cooperative	20 yrs	Inst.Rep.
P3-IT	F/52	BA	Volunteer / Parent of PwID	Parent	—	Parent Part.
P4-IT	M/73	BA	Coop. Representative	Cooperative	—	Inst.Rep.
P5-IT	F/52	BA	Volunteer / Parent of PwID	Parent	—	Parent Part.
P6-IT	F/61	BA	Volunteer / Parent of PwID	Parent	—	Parent Part.
P7-IT	F/22	BA	Young Person w/ ID	Ind.	—	Part.
P8-IT	M/62	BA	Volunteer / Parent of PwID	Parent	—	Parent Part.
P9-IT	M/21	BA	Young Person w/ ID	Ind.	—	Part.
P10-IT	F/24	BA	Educator	Educ. Inst.	5 yrs	Inst.Rep.
P11-IT	F/35	BA	Young Person w/ ID	Ind.	—	Part.
P12-IT	F/19	BA	Young Person w/ ID	Ind.	—	Part.

Table 1c: Netherlands

ID	G/Age	Edu.	Profession / Role	Repr. Type	Exp.	Role
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P1-NL	M/51	BA	Municipal Officer, Social Affairs Dept. (Rotterdam)	Policy/Employer Rep.	15 yrs (Incl. Employment)	Org. Rep.
P2-NL	F/46	BA	Job Coach (UWV / Municipal Service)	Support Staff	12 yrs	Org. Rep.
P3-NL	M/39	BA	Employer (Café Owner)	Employer	10 yrs (Hospitality)	Org. Rep.
P4-NL	F/49	MA	Teacher, Special Education (VSO)	Educator	20 yrs	Org. Rep.
P5-NL	F/44	MA	NGO Rep. (Disability Inclusion Rotterdam)	NGO/Public	15 yrs	Org. Rep.
P6-NL	F/41	BA	Vocational Education Specialist (MBO)	Educator	14 yrs	Org. Rep.
P7-NL	M/52	BA	Employer (Retail Store Manager)	Employer	8 yrs (Retail)	Org. Rep.
P8-NL	F/47	BA	Social Worker (Municipal Disability Support)	Social Services	18 yrs	Org. Rep.
P9-NL	M/35	BA	Job Coach (Sheltered Employment Org.)	Support Staff	10 yrs	Org. Rep.
P10-NL	F/55	MA	NGO Rep. (National Disability Council)	NGO/Public	22 yrs	Org. Rep.
P11-NL	M/50	MA	Municipal Officer (Employment & Participation)	Policy Rep.	20 yrs	Org. Rep.
P12-NL	F/42	BA	Employer (HR Manager, Logistics Co.)	Employer	12 yrs	Org. Rep.

Abbr. G; Gender, Edu.; Education, Ind.; Individual, Inst.Rep.; Institutional Representative

Table 2 presents a cross-country synthesis of the main themes and subthemes derived from the focus group discussions conducted in **Italy, Türkiye, and the Netherlands**. Organized according to **Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems model**, the table illustrates how factors at the individual, microsystem, meso/exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem levels collectively shape inclusive employment experiences for individuals with intellectual disabilities. It also summarizes **common challenges, proposed solutions, and examples of good practices** identified by participants in each country, providing a comparative overview of how inclusive employment ecosystems operate across different sociocultural and policy contexts

Table 2. Ecosystem of Inclusive Employment for Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities: Themes

Table 2a: Türkiye

Theme	Sub-Themes
1. Individual Characteristics	Communication skills, Responsibility, Self-confidence, Anxieties, Motivation, Job skills, Independence, Social adaptation, Personal care
2. Microsystem (Close Environment)	Family support, School-teacher contribution, Job coaches, Employer attitudes, Peer support
3. Meso & Exosystem	Family-school cooperation, Inter-institutional coordination, Education-business connection, Social support networks, Local government policies, Employer policies, State incentives, Social perception
4. Macrosystem	Social awareness, Cultural norms, Legal regulations, Economic conditions, Social services
5. Chronosystem	Societal changes, Evolution in education, Technological advancements, Social movements, Economic crises
6. Problems	Stigma, Inadequate education, Employer ignorance, Policy deficiencies, Lack of social support
7. Proposed Solutions	Awareness programs, Vocational training, Employer support, Legal regulations, Social guidance, Adaptation processes, Technology use, Social responsibility projects
8. Good Practices	Special education vocational schools, Workplace support programs, Social responsibility projects, Local government supports, Technology use

Table 2b: Italy

Theme	Sub-Themes
1. Individual Characteristics	Socialization and customer communication; sense of responsibility; hands-on/on-the-job learning, use of checklists; adapting to service rhythm and managing anxiety; self-confidence from visible achievements (sport/work); motivation (family and guest feedback); goal of independence; self-care/hygiene; adherence to work discipline.
2. Microsystem (Close Environment)	Family logistics and transport (car-pooling, hosting); mutual support and social bonds among families; continuity of support teachers and school insistence; employer leadership and explicit team rules; peer mentoring and team spirit; integrating volunteer/family help into the workplace; family flexibility with irregular hours.
3. Meso & Exosystem	Ongoing family–school–employer communication; event-based shift scheduling; gaps in inter-institutional coordination; internships mediated by SIR/OSL; insufficient job-coach function; disconnection in the education–business bridge; lack of local government support for promotion/scale-up; bureaucratic burden and waiting times; employer internal policies (checklists, mixed teams); opportunities from the region’s tourism/hospitality ecosystem.
4. Macrosystem	Strength of inclusive education legislation (in schools); policy gap in the transition to work; misalignment between national and local policies; disability employment quota framework; cultural ethos of “doing/making”; progress in public attitudes yet persistent distance; effect of media and word-of-mouth; Veneto’s service/hospitality-oriented economy; role of social services (SIR).
5. Chronosystem	COVID disrupting routines then triggering recovery; lasting use of digital tools (WhatsApp scheduling, tablet/POS ordering); smaller groups and shorter shifts; paradigm shift from “protection” to “autonomy and rights”; diffusion of inclusive business models; sport’s contribution to self-confidence and work readiness.
6. Problems	Transport and spatial distance; lack of job coaches/personalized matching; bureaucracy and difficulty accessing funding; absence of institutional promotion/scale-up support; prejudice and speed/productivity stereotypes; lack of a structured school-to-work transition pipeline.



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7. Proposed Solutions	School-to-work “bridge programs” (with coaching, 6–12 months); simplified funding processes and a single point of contact; a regional office for inclusive employment in hospitality; transport supports and car-pool coordination; publicly supported visibility/media campaigns; ongoing in-service training for teachers and job coaches; shared school–employer data network; workplace learning kits (role cards, short videos, checklists); sport-work integration; systematic use of technology.
8. Good Practices	Casa Vittoria model and introductory waiter courses; partnerships with hotel schools; family solidarity networks; mixed teams and explicit rules; social marketing through live customer contact; digital scheduling; event-based flexible planning; making success stories visible.



Table 2c: Netherland

Theme	Sub-Themes
1. Individual Characteristics	Development of social and communication skills in structured work environments; responsibility fostered through task assignment and supervision; practical learning using visual supports, checklists, and step-by-step guidance; managing workplace stress with coaching; confidence building through visible achievements (e.g., completing tasks, earning wages); motivation supported by positive feedback from supervisors, colleagues, and customers; focus on independence and employability; importance of maintaining personal hygiene and self-care in professional contexts; adherence to routines and workplace discipline.
2. Microsystem (Close Environment)	The enabling role of teachers, job coaches, and mentors in bridging education and work (praktijkonderwijs, MBO, VSO); structured leadership by employers with clear team rules and supportive managers; peer mentoring within workplaces to create inclusion; collaboration with NGOs and volunteers to provide supplementary support; need for coordination with families highlighted by professionals, but family voices represented indirectly rather than directly.
3. Meso & Exosystem	Regular communication channels between schools, UWV/job coaches, employers, and NGOs; flexible scheduling practices used by inclusive employers; coordination difficulties between institutions (municipalities, UWV, schools, NGOs); reliance on Werkgeversservicepunt Rijnmond and inclusive social enterprises for internships and supported placements; persistent shortage of job coaches and capacity for intensive support; mismatch between education curricula and actual labor market needs; lack of scaling-up of successful pilots by municipal authorities; administrative delays in UWV/doelgroepregister registrations; inclusive workplace practices such as mixed teams, task simplification, and visual role division; sectoral opportunities in Rotterdam's logistics, port economy, and hospitality industries.
4. Macrosystem	Strong legislative base (Wet passend onderwijs, WGBH/CZ, Participatiewet) but inconsistent implementation; transitional gap between inclusive education and sustainable employment pathways; limited impact of the national Banenafpraak quota system due to uneven employer engagement; cultural norms in the Netherlands emphasizing participation, self-reliance, and independence; gradual improvement in public perception, though stereotypes about intellectual disability persist; media coverage and awareness campaigns play a role in normalization; Rotterdam's economic structure (ports, logistics, services) provides both opportunities and challenges for inclusive employment.

5. Chronosystem	COVID-19 disruption of training, placements, and employment pathways, followed by partial recovery; continued use of digital scheduling tools (WhatsApp groups, employer apps, municipal platforms); shift toward smaller teams and flexible working hours post-pandemic; policy discourse moving from protective care toward autonomy and rights-based approaches; growing visibility of inclusive business models (e.g., Brownies & DownieS cafés, inclusive logistics teams); sports and community initiatives seen by professionals as indirectly strengthening employability and resilience.
6. Problems	Structural barriers in transport (esp. beyond city center areas); insufficient number of trained job coaches; complexity and slowness of UWV/municipal administrative procedures; lack of systematic scaling-up of inclusive practices; ongoing employer prejudice about productivity, flexibility, and costs; weak and fragmented transition-to-work mechanisms from education; insecurity due to reliance on internships, short-term or subsidized contracts.
7. Proposed Solutions	Establish structured school-to-work transition programs (6–12 months) with integrated job coaching; simplify bureaucratic processes at UWV and municipalities with one-stop access points; create a regional coordination office for inclusive employment in Rotterdam; expand transport support (travel allowances, car-pooling, shared mobility solutions); implement public campaigns to normalize employment of people with ID; provide continuous training for educators and job coaches on workplace inclusion; introduce digital data-sharing systems linking schools, employers, and services; equip workplaces with learning kits (visual guides, checklists, microlearning videos); promote integration of sports and leisure programs with work readiness training; scale use of accessible digital tools for recruitment and training.
8. Good Practices	Inclusive café/restaurant models (e.g., Brownies & DownieS) employing workers with ID; partnerships between vocational schools (MBO) and inclusive employers; NGO networks like MEE Rotterdam Rijnmond supporting professionals and employers; use of peer-to-peer mentoring systems in workplaces; inclusive team management with clear role division; social marketing via everyday customer contact in retail/hospitality; digital platforms (scheduling, communication apps) supporting workplace adaptation; flexible and adaptive shift planning; visibility campaigns highlighting successful placements in Rotterdam's logistics and services sectors.

In Table 3, the findings for Theme 1: Individual Strengths and Barriers in Italy, Türkiye, and the Netherlands are summarized. The table presents key subthemes, stakeholder groups, and quotes illustrating how personal traits—such as communication skills, motivation, responsibility, and self-confidence—influence employment outcomes, alongside the emotional and social challenges that may limit workforce participation.

Table 3. Theme 1 — Individual Strengths and Barriers (Sub-Themes, Participants, and Representative Quotes)

Table 3. Theme 1a: Türkiye

Sub-Theme	Participants	Representative Quote
Communication Skills	P9, P3, P11 (3)	P11: "Communication skills increase the chances of finding a job."
Respect & Responsibility & Helpfulness	P9, P3, P7, P11 (4)	P9: "Being respectful is important. After that, they need to respect you too." P3: "Employers' perspectives... being responsible, respectful, helpful... communication."
Self-confidence	P10, P4 (2)	P10: "If students lack self-confidence, even if they have talent, you can't trigger it."
Fear & Anxieties	P4, P10 (2)	P4: "Generally, due to intellectual disability, self-confidence is low; there are fears and anxieties... What is the anxiety level while working?"
Motivation	P7 (1)	P7: "If the individual adopts the job during the learning phases, their motivation increases, and they can perform better."
Job Skills & Abilities	P11, P9, P4 (3)	P7: "If the skills are suitable for the job, it can become more sustainable." P9: "You are already doing your job... You are disciplined... You own your work."
Independence	P7, P13 (2)	P7: "They need to gain independence, but very protective families don't want that."
Social Adaptation & Interaction	P11, P10, P9 (3)	P9: "They were happy with me... We are like siblings." P4 (question): "Are they susceptible to abuse? Do these individuals face abuse at work?"
Personal Care	P4, P1 (2)	P4: "How is personal care? Do they take care of themselves (dressing, hair, eyes), or not? Because that is also important." P1: "Personal hygiene is important when going for a job interview."

Table 3. Theme 1b: Italy

Sub-Theme	Participants	Representative Quote
Socialization & customer communication	P2, P7 (2)	<i>SPK_3: "Young people... have a very important ability to socialize... the hotel and restaurant environment is very suitable for them."</i>
Sense of responsibility when wearing the uniform	P6 (1)	<i>P6: "They come in wearing their uniforms and they come in to work."</i>
Hands-on / on-the-job learning (use of checklists/tools)	P1 (Employer), P4 (Coop Rep 2) (2)	<i>P1: "They learn a lot here, they learn a lot here too."</i>
Adapting to service rhythm & managing anxiety	P1 (Employer), P8 (Parent 5) (2)	<i>P1: "We receive the opposite compliments here... we are very on the ball with our service."</i>
Self-confidence from visible achievements (sport/work)	P11 (Young person with ID) (1)	<i>P11: "I'm a swimmer, was a... and I work, too. When people see me... they understand that we are strong."</i>
Motivation (family & guest feedback)	P3 (Parent-1) (1)	<i>P3: "Our children... are more motivated when they see their parents pitching in."</i>
Goal of independence	P1 (Employer) (1)	<i>P1: "Bring them here, train them, and then help them become independent so they can be integrated into the outside world."</i>
Self-care / hygiene	P6 (Parent) (1)	<i>P6: "They come in wearing their uniforms and they come in to work." (indicator of grooming/standards on shift)</i>
Adherence to work discipline	P1 (Employer), P6 (Parent) (2)	<i>P1: "Today the kids who work here are considered part of the workforce... we are able to create work teams."</i>

Table 3. Theme 1c: Netherland

Sub-Theme	Participants	Representative Quote
Socialization & customer communication	P4, P7	<i>P4: “We notice that once supported, employees with intellectual disabilities are excellent in welcoming customers — they bring warmth that makes hospitality stronger.”</i>
Sense of responsibility when wearing the uniform	P3, P12	<i>P12: “When they arrive in uniform and with their badge, you see pride — it signals they are part of the team.”</i>
Hands-on / on-the-job learning (use of checklists/tools)	P2, P6	<i>P2: “Learning improves most when tasks are broken down into steps with checklists or visual supports — practice is more effective than theory.”</i>
Adapting to service rhythm & managing anxiety	P4, P8	<i>P8: “Some struggle with fast-paced environments, but with coaching and clear routines they manage stress much better.”</i>
Self-confidence from visible achievements (sport/work)	P5, P10	<i>P5: “Success in small steps — finishing a task, completing training, or getting paid — builds real confidence that transfers to other areas of life.”</i>
Motivation (family & guest feedback)	P6, P9	<i>P9: “Positive customer or manager feedback motivates them hugely — recognition is as important as the paycheck.”</i>
Goal of independence	P1, P11	<i>P1: “Our aim is not just placement but helping them become independent workers who contribute to the labor market.”</i>
Self-care / hygiene	P2, P6	<i>P2: “We emphasize personal presentation — arriving clean, on time, and in uniform is part of building workplace identity.”</i>
Adherence to work discipline	P3, P7	<i>P7: “Once routines are clear, they follow schedules and rules with real discipline — sometimes even better than other employees.”</i>

In Table 4, the findings related to Theme 2 — Microsystem are presented for Italy, Türkiye, and the Netherlands. This theme captures the immediate social environments that directly influence the employment experiences of individuals with intellectual disabilities, including family support, peer relationships, educators, job coaches, and employer attitudes. The subthemes, number of participants, and representative quotes illustrate how close interpersonal dynamics and day-to-day interactions shape motivation, adaptation, and workplace inclusion across different cultural and institutional contexts.

Table 4. Theme 2- Microsystem (Sub-Themes, Number of Participants, Quotes)Table

Table 4. Theme 2a: Türkiye

Sub-Theme	Participants	Representative Quote
Family Support	P12, P13, P10 (3)	P12: "The family plays a significant role in the education of these children." P13: "I want my child to get a job. I want them to stand on their own feet."
School & Teacher Contribution	P10, P8, P11 (3)	P10: "In the 9th grade, we introduce our students to different professions... 14 types of education are provided in special education vocational schools."
Job Coaches	P3, P7, P8 (3)	P12: "If we do not present the job coach as a guarantee to the employer... we expect the state to train job coaches." P8: "Job analysis is done; the job coach reduces prejudice."
Employer Attitude & Relations	P2, P11, P4, P14 (4)	P14: "The employer's attitude is very decisive in the employment of individuals with intellectual disabilities."
Friends & Peer Support	P11, P12 (2)	P11: "Social support means friends, loved ones... They can be abused."

Table 4. Theme 2b: Italy

Sub-Theme	Participants	Representative Quote
Family logistics & transport (car-pool, hosting)	P1, P5 (2)	<i>P1: "You take her, I'll pick her up... there's an important exchange... in organizing the children's transportation."</i>
Mutual support & social bonds among families	P3, P6, P2 (3)	<i>P3: "We also feel like a family, we understand each other, we are united by the same... mess."</i>
Continuity of support teachers & school insistence	P1, P3, P6 (3)	<i>P6: "They have always supported them... and insisted that they be included in a work context."</i>
Employer leadership & explicit team rules	P1, P2 (2)	<i>P1: "Today the kids who work here are considered part of the workforce... we are able to create work teams."</i>
Peer mentoring & team spirit	P7, P3, P1 (3)	<i>P7: "I really like my colleagues... we help each other a lot... we enjoy being together and working as a team."</i>
Integrating volunteer/family help into the workplace	P1, P3 (2)	<i>P1: "Concetta helps with the cleaning, while her husband provides the tools... work integration, but in a nice way."</i>
Family flexibility with irregular hours	P2(Coop/Parent), P1 (Employer) (2)	<i>SPK_3: "It's not like 8 a.m., 2 p.m., 6 p.m.... families have to be flexible."</i>

Table 4. Theme 2c: Netherlands

Sub-Theme	Participants	Representative Quote
Transport & daily logistics (public transport, cycling, support for commuting)	P2, P8	P8: “Transport remains a daily challenge — if they can’t get to work independently, participation drops. Support with public transport or cycling training is crucial.”
Mutual support networks (schools, NGOs, employers)	P5, P6, P9	P6: “We try to build networks around each individual — when schools, NGOs, and employers collaborate, the support feels like a community.”
Continuity of educational support (praktijkonderwijs, VSO, MBO)	P4, P2, P6	P4: “Teachers push for work placements and insist on continuity — their insistence often makes the difference between staying at home and moving into work.”
Employer leadership & clear team rules	P3, P7	P7: “Strong leadership and clear rules help everyone — when expectations are explicit, inclusive teams function smoothly.”
Peer mentoring & workplace team spirit	P3, P9, P10	P3: “Colleagues step up — they show tasks, repeat instructions, and help create a team spirit that reduces isolation.”
Involvement of NGOs & volunteers	P6, P10	P10: “NGOs often provide that extra layer of support — volunteers or staff fill gaps that employers cannot always cover.”
Flexibility in working hours & scheduling	P1, P12	P12: “Not every employee with an intellectual disability can work standard shifts — flexible hours make inclusion possible.”

In Table 5, the findings related to Theme 3 — Meso & Exosystem are presented for Italy, Türkiye, and the Netherlands. This theme explores the broader relational and institutional networks that connect individuals and families with educational, occupational, and community systems. The subthemes, number of participants, and representative quotes highlight issues such as inter-institutional coordination, family–school–employer collaboration, local government involvement, and social support networks. Collectively, these findings emphasize the importance of cross-sector partnerships and policy alignment in ensuring effective school-to-work transitions and sustainable inclusive employment practices across the three countries.

Table 5. Theme 3- Meso & Exosystem (Sub-Themes, Number of Participants, Quotes)

Table 5. Theme 3a: Türkiye

Sub-Theme	Participants	Representative Quote
Family-School Cooperation	P13, P12, P10 (3)	<i>P10: "Without the family, it doesn't work. We start with the family."</i>
Inter-Institutional Coordination	P14, P7, P8 (3)	<i>P14: "There is no coordination between institutions."</i>
Education-Business Connection	P11, P7, P10 (3)	<i>P11: "...the master in the firm, the section manager, HR... they can acquire positive traits while working."</i>
Social Support Networks	P12, P13, P11, P4, P8 (5)	<i>P13: "Some families do not want to accept that their child is disabled." P8: "Acceptance increases for those applying through references or connections."</i>
Local Government Policies	P14, P7, P8 (3)	<i>P8: "Local governments need to take a more active role in this."</i>
Employer Policies & Attitudes	P4, P11, P7, P2, P14 (5)	<i>P4: "Does the employer want to employ the disabled in the first place? Is it a legal obligation? The workplace arrangements required for employing the disabled are challenging."</i>
Government Supports & Incentives	P4, P11, P5 (3)	<i>P4: "There should be government incentives, minimum wage plus insurance support."</i>
Social Perception & Sensitivity	P5, P6, P14, P8, P10 (5)	<i>P5: "The perception of individuals with intellectual disabilities in society is very important." P10: "We see good examples in the media, positive discrimination exists, but there should be more."</i>

Table 5. Theme 3b: Italy

Sub-Theme	Participants	Representative Quote
Family–school–employer communication	P1, P3, P6 (3)	<i>P1: “It’s a continuous dialogue... with the cooperative, the families, and the young people.”</i>
Event-based shift scheduling & family flexibility	P2, P1 (2)	<i>SPK_3: “It’s not like 8 a.m., 2 p.m., 6 p.m.... families have to be flexible.”</i>
Inter-institutional coordination gaps	P2, P1 (2)	<i>SPK_3: “Institutionally we have no relations... there is a lack of support, not only assistance but also promotion.”</i>
SIL/ULSS-mediated internships & limited job-coach function	P1, P2 (2)	<i>SPK_3: “There isn’t a job coach as you mean it... they try things out; if lucky it’s the right place, otherwise not.”</i>
Education–business connection (hotel schools ↔ workplace training)	P4, P2 (2)	<i>P4: “We organized courses for waiters... almost all had attended hotel school, but we added training here at Casa Vittoria.”</i>
Social support networks (families/associations)	P2, P3 (2)	<i>SPK_3: “First you need to create a core group of families who share the same idea.”</i>
Local government promotion / scale-up support (lack)	P2 (1)	<i>SPK_3: “If Casa Vittoria is successful, why don’t institutions talk about it... promoting it could be very helpful.”</i>
Bureaucratic burden & waiting for permissions/funds	P1 (1)	<i>P1: “We had bureaucratic difficulties... had to go through a whole different procedure to get the permits.”</i>
Employer internal policies (mixed teams, rules, quality focus)	P1, P2 (2)	<i>P1: “Today the kids who work here are considered part of the workforce... we are able to create work teams.”</i>
Social perception & word-of-mouth effects	P1, P5 (2)	<i>P1: “They come already aware... then in person the impact is very important—‘we didn’t think it would be like this.’”</i>
State incentives & quotas	P2 (1)	<i>SPK_3: “Every disadvantaged person can hire three able-bodied people. The percentage is 33%.”</i>
Regional hospitality/tourism ecosystem opportunities	P2 (1)	<i>SPK_3: “We live in an area with three hotel schools within a few kilometers... mountain and seaside tourism.”</i>

Table 5. Theme 3c: Netherlands

Sub-Theme	Participants	Representative Quote
Inter-agency coordination between schools, municipalities, and employers	P1, P3, P5 (3)	P3: “It only works when schools, municipalities, and employers keep in touch — otherwise young people just get lost after graduation.”
Job-coach mediation and follow-up	P2, P4 (2)	P4: “The job coach is the link — they check in with the company and the family, making sure expectations are realistic on both sides.”
Municipal employment services and inclusion policies	P1, P3 (2)	P1: “The municipality supports us with wage subsidies and guidance; without that, most employers would hesitate to hire.”
Family involvement through professional mediation	P2, P6 (2)	P2: “Parents are not always directly involved, but we inform them regularly through the school or the coach.”
Employer collaboration networks and awareness actions	P1, P5 (2)	P1: “We have local meetings with inclusive employers; they share experiences and encourage others to participate.”
Regional labour-market partnerships (WSP / social firms)	P3, P4 (2)	P3: “The Work Service Point connects us with suitable companies — it’s a regional network that really helps.”
Funding and administrative complexity	P5 (1)	P5: “Every scheme has its own paperwork — municipalities differ, and that’s frustrating for employers.”
Sustainability and continuity of placements	P1, P2 (2)	P1: “After six months of subsidy, some placements stop — we need a longer-term view.”
Positive spill-over effects and social perception	P4 (1)	P4: “Other companies see it working and start asking how they can do the same.”

In Table 6, the findings related to Theme 4 — Macrosystem are presented for Italy, Türkiye, and the Netherlands. This theme examines the societal, cultural, legal, and economic contexts that shape inclusive employment opportunities for individuals with intellectual disabilities. The subthemes, number of participants, and representative quotes demonstrate how national legislation, public awareness, economic conditions, and social norms influence both the availability and quality of inclusive work environments. Comparative insights reveal that

while all three countries share commitments to inclusion, variations in policy enforcement, cultural attitudes, and systemic support continue to affect the depth and sustainability of employment participation.

Table 6. Theme 4- Macrosystem (Sub-Themes, Number of Participants, Quotes)

Table 6. Theme 4a: Türkiye

Sub-Theme	Participants	Representative Quote
Social Awareness & Education	P5, P14, P11 (3)	<i>P14: "Awareness should be raised that individuals with intellectual disabilities can be employable."</i>
Cultural Norms & Values	P4, P13, P3 (3)	<i>P4: "As long as cultural norms do not change, problems will continue."</i>
Legal Regulations & Policy	P7, P2, P11 (3)	<i>P2: "Legal regulations for the disabled should be enforced more strictly."</i>
Economic Conditions	P4, P10, P14 (3)	<i>P4: "Economic conditions affect the preferences of employers."</i>
Social Services & Support	P5, P12 (2)	<i>P5: "Guidance services should be offered to families."</i>

Table 6. Theme 4b: Italy

Sub-Theme	Participants	Representative Quote
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Strength of inclusive education legislation (in schools)	P10 (1)	<i>P10: "Italy has made great progress, especially in inclusion at school. We've had integration laws since the 1970s, and in Veneto, schools are usually quite open."</i>
Policy gap in the transition from school to work	P10 (1)	<i>P10: "There is still a gap between school inclusion and work inclusion... the connection between school, local services, and employers is not systematic."</i>
Misalignment between national and local policies	P2 (1)	<i>P2: "Sometimes the national policies don't match local realities... hotel schools could be official training centers for inclusive employment, but that's not recognized by law yet."</i>
Disability employment quota framework	P2 (1)	<i>P2: "Every disadvantaged person can hire three able-bodied people. The percentage is 33%."</i>
Cultural ethos of 'doing/making' (operosità)	P2 (1)	<i>P2: "Here, generationally, doing things is very important. You have to do things. The important thing is to do things."</i>
Public attitudes: progress yet persistent distance	P5, P2 (2)	<i>P5: "People often say, 'It's wonderful what you do,' but they don't imagine their own child working next to a person with Down syndrome."</i>
Media & word-of-mouth influence	P1 (1)	<i>P1: "They come here already aware... from their neighbor, social media, or TV. Then in person the impact is very important."</i>
Regional hospitality/tourism economy as an enabler	P2 (1)	<i>P2: "We live in an area with three hotel schools within a few kilometers... because we have mountain tourism and seaside tourism."</i>
Role of social services (SIL/ULSS) in internships and support	P2, P3 (2)	<i>P1: "There are social workers who follow each young person... committed to finding suitable facilities where young people can be placed on this path."</i>

Table 6. Theme 4c: Netherlands

Sub-Theme	Participants	Representative Quote
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Communication between schools, job coaches, and employers	P2, P4, P12	P4: “It only works if schools, job coaches, and employers talk regularly — otherwise young people fall through the cracks.”
Flexible shift scheduling & employer adaptation	P3, P12	P12: “We can’t expect everyone to work a standard 9-to-5. Flexibility in shifts and tasks is the key to success.”
Coordination gaps between institutions (UWV, municipalities, schools, NGOs)	P1, P5	P1: “We often work in silos — the municipality, UWV, and schools don’t always coordinate, and families end up confused.”
Internships & limited job coach capacity	P2, P9	P2: “We try to arrange placements, but without enough job coaches, it’s hit or miss whether the match is sustainable.”
Education–business connection (MBO / praktijkonderwijs ↔ workplaces)	P4, P7	P7: “We need more structured collaboration with vocational schools — practical learning at school should connect directly to real jobs.”
Support networks via NGOs and associations	P6, P10	P6: “NGOs often build bridges, linking families and employers. Without them, many young people would be left out.”
Local government promotion / lack of scale-up support	P11	P11: “There are great small initiatives in Rotterdam, but the city isn’t promoting them enough to scale them up.”
Bureaucratic burden (UWV, doelgroepregister, funding delays)	P1, P8	P8: “Registering in the doelgroepregister takes months — by the time approvals come, motivation is often lost.”
Employer internal policies (mixed teams, task clarity)	P3, P12	P3: “We use mixed teams and clear role division — it helps everyone know what is expected.”
Social perception & awareness through direct contact	P5, P7	P7: “Customers are surprised at how well it works — seeing inclusion in practice changes their perception immediately.”
State incentives & quotas (Participatiewet, Banenafspraak)	P1, P11	P11: “The Banenafspraak quotas exist, but many employers don’t understand them — we need clearer communication and stronger incentives.”
Opportunities from Rotterdam’s logistics & port economy	P12	P12: “The port and logistics sector has real opportunities, but we need training programs that actually prepare people with ID for these jobs.”

In Table 7, the findings for Theme 5 — Chronosystem (The Impact of Time) in Italy, Türkiye, and the Netherlands are summarized. This theme shows how historical, social, and technological changes—including COVID-19, evolving education systems, and shifting

attitudes—have influenced inclusive employment. Participants highlighted that inclusion is a dynamic process, shaped by ongoing social, economic, and policy transformations.

Table 7. Theme 5- Chronosystem (The Impact of Time)

Table 7. Theme 5a: Türkiye

Sub-Theme	Participants	Representative Quote
Societal Changes	P8, P14, P5 (3)	<i>P14: "In the past, the perception was negative, but it has changed over time."</i>
Evolution in Education	P11, P7, P13 (3)	<i>P11: "Changes in our education system have provided opportunities for individuals with disabilities."</i>
Technological Advancements	P3, P4, P11 (3)	<i>P3: "Technology is an important tool that facilitates the lives of individuals with disabilities."</i>
Social Movements & Awareness	P8, P12, P5 (3)	<i>P8: "Social movements are important for raising awareness."</i>
Impact of Economic Crises	P4, P10, P14 (3)	<i>P4: "Economic crises negatively affect the employment of individuals with disabilities."</i>

Table 7. Theme 5b: Italy

Sub-Theme	Participants	Representative Quote
COVID-19 disruption & post-pandemic rebuild	P2, P1 (2)	<i>P2: “The pandemic... restaurants closed, training stopped, and many young people lost their rhythm. After COVID, we saw stronger collaboration among families and teachers to rebuild.”</i>
Flexible organization: smaller groups & shorter shifts	P1 (1)	<i>P1: “We learned to organize smaller groups, shorter shifts...”</i>
Digitalization of coordination & teaching	P10, P1 (2)	<i>P10: “Digitization has also changed education... new digital materials—videos, photos, practical tutorials. Now we use them regularly in class.”</i>
Shift from ‘protection’ to ‘autonomy & rights’	P5 (1)	<i>P5: “Twenty years ago, inclusion was mostly about protection... Now, it’s about autonomy and rights. Casa Vittoria is proof of that change.”</i>
Diffusion of inclusive business models in Veneto	P2 (1)	<i>P2: “When we started, there were almost no local examples... after ten years, several small NGOs in Veneto are following similar models.”</i>
Sport as a driver of confidence & work readiness	P11 (1)	<i>P11: “For me, things are changing... Now, I can train, work, and study.”</i>

Table 7. Theme 5c: Netherland

Sub-Theme	Participants	Representative Quote
COVID-19 disruption & post-pandemic rebuild	P2, P1	<i>P2: “During COVID, many training and work placements stopped — young people lost routine. Afterward, we rebuilt step by step, with schools and municipalities working more closely.”</i>
Flexible organization: smaller groups & shorter shifts	P3, P12	<i>P3: “We reduced team sizes and shortened shifts — it made the work more manageable and supported inclusion.”</i>
Digitalization of coordination & training	P4, P8	<i>P4: “We now use WhatsApp groups, online municipal portals, and short video tutorials. Digital tools have become standard in coordination and training.”</i>
Shift from ‘protection’ to ‘autonomy & rights’	P5, P11	<i>P5: “Ten years ago, the focus was mostly on protection. Today, inclusion is about autonomy, rights, and participation — the Participatiewet reflects this cultural shift.”</i>
Diffusion of inclusive business models in the Netherlands	P7, P10	<i>P7: “Models like Brownies & DownieS cafés or logistics firms hiring via the Banenafspraak show how inclusive business can spread — these examples inspire other employers.”</i>
Sport and leisure as drivers of confidence & work readiness	P6, P9	<i>P9: “Sports and structured leisure activities give young people confidence — that energy carries into work, especially in teamwork and discipline.”</i>

In Table 8, the findings related to Theme 6 — Problems are presented for Italy, Türkiye, and the Netherlands. This theme outlines the key barriers and recurring challenges identified by participants that hinder the full inclusion of individuals with intellectual disabilities in the

labor market. The subthemes, number of participants, and representative quotes highlight persistent issues such as stigma and prejudice, inadequate vocational preparation, limited employer awareness, bureaucratic and policy deficiencies, and insufficient social or transportation support. Across all three contexts, these challenges reflect the structural and attitudinal constraints that continue to obstruct the transition from education to sustainable employment.

Table 8. Theme 6- Problems (Sub-Themes, Number of Participants, Quotes)

Table 8. Theme 6a: Türkiye

Sub-Theme	Participants	Representative Quote
Societal Stigma & Prejudices	P14, P5 (2)	<i>P5: "Stigma undermines the self-confidence of individuals with disabilities."</i>
Inadequate Education & Skills	P4, P3 (2)	<i>P4: "The education system does not meet the needs of individuals with disabilities."</i>
Employer Ignorance & Insensitivity	P11, P7 (2)	<i>P7: "Most employers overlook the potential of these individuals."</i>
Policy & Support Deficiencies	P2, P8 (2)	<i>P2: "Government policies are insufficient."</i>
Lack of Social Support	P10, P12 (2)	<i>P10: "Social support networks do not meet the needs."</i>

Table 8. Theme 6b: Italy

Sub-Theme	Participants	Representative Quote
Stigma / Persistent social distance	P5, P2, P1 (3)	<i>P5: "People often say, 'It's wonderful what you do,' but they don't imagine their own child working next to a person with Down syndrome." P2 "We are very far from experiencing disability as normal."</i>
Inadequate / uneven education for work transition	P2, P10 (2)	<i>P2: "Other schools are not as well prepared as hotel schools." P10: "There is still a gap between school inclusion and work inclusion."</i>
Employer ignorance / lack of disability-specific training	P1, P2, P5, P8 (4)	<i>P1: "No, I have to say no to training for disability... You have to have a predisposition and sensitivity." P2: "Those who don't have it don't stay." P8: "Most employers look at turnover and production. Speed is very difficult to manage..."</i>
Policy deficiencies / bureaucracy & weak promotion	P1, P2 (2)	<i>P1: "We had bureaucratic difficulties... had to go through a whole different procedure to get the permits." P2: "Institutionally we have no relations... there is a lack of support, not only assistance but also promotion."</i>
Lack of social support (transport, job coaching)	P5, P2, P1 (3)	<i>P5: "San Polo is far from everything, so it's difficult to bring them here." P2: "There isn't a job coach as you mean it... they try things out; if lucky it's the right place, otherwise not."</i>

Table 8. Theme 6c: Netherlands

Sub-Theme	Participants	Representative Quote
Stigma / Persistent social distance	P5, P2, P7	P5: “People still say, ‘It’s wonderful what you’re doing,’ but they don’t imagine their own child working next to someone with an intellectual disability.” P2: “We are still far from seeing disability as something normal in the workplace.”
Uneven education-to-work transition (MBO / praktijkonderwijs)	P4, P6	P4: “Some schools are excellent at preparing students for work, others struggle — the transition is still uneven.” P6: “There is a clear gap between inclusion at school and inclusion at work.”
Employer ignorance / lack of disability-specific training	P3, P7, P8, P10	P3: “We don’t get any structured training on disability — most of us learn by trial and error.” P8: “Employers focus on productivity and speed. They often don’t understand that adaptation makes performance possible.”
Policy deficiencies / bureaucracy & weak promotion	P1, P11	P1: “The UWV procedures and doelgroepregister take too long — by the time approval comes, employers lose interest.” P11: “Great initiatives exist in Rotterdam, but there’s no strong promotion or scaling-up from the municipality.”
Insufficient social support (transport, job coaching)	P2, P8, P6	P2: “There are not enough job coaches for personalized placements — we can’t cover the demand.” P8: “Transport remains a barrier, especially for jobs outside the city center.”

In Table 9, the findings for Theme 7 — Proposed Solutions and Strategies in Italy, Türkiye, and the Netherlands are summarized. The theme highlights participants’ recommendations,

including awareness campaigns, school-to-work transition programs, training for educators and employers, stronger job coaching, and simplified procedures. The use of digital tools, family involvement, and institutional coordination was also emphasized as key to achieving sustainable inclusion.

Table 9. Theme 7- Proposed Solutions and Strategies

Table 9. Theme 7a: Türkiye

Sub-Theme	Participants	Representative Quote
Awareness & Education Programs	P5, P11, P8 (3)	<i>P5: "Educational programs should be organized to raise awareness in society."</i>
Vocational Training & Development	P3, P4, P8 (3)	<i>P3: "Vocational training programs increase participation in the workforce."</i>
Employer Training & Support	P7, P14 (2)	<i>P7: "Employers should be trained, and their potentials should be explained."</i>
Legal Regulations & Incentives	P2, P8 (2)	<i>P2: "The government should provide more effective legal regulations and incentives."</i>
Social Support & Guidance	P10, P12, P5 (3)	<i>P12: "Guidance and support services should be increased."</i>
Workplace Adaptation & Support	P11, P14, P4 (3)	<i>P11: "A supportive environment should be created in workplaces."</i>
Technology Use	P3, P8, P2 (3)	<i>P2: "Technological tools enable them to be more active in work life."</i>
Social Responsibility Projects	P8, P7, P5 (3)	<i>P8: "Social responsibility projects are effective in raising awareness."</i>
Participation of Local Governments	P4, P11, P14 (3)	<i>P14: "The efforts of local governments can improve the quality of life."</i>

Table 9. Theme 7b: Italy

Sub-Theme	Participants	Representative Quote
Awareness & visibility (show success stories)	P1, P2 (1)	<i>P1: "Give more visibility to success stories. Media can help a lot." P2: "If Casa Vittoria is successful, why don't institutions talk about it... promoting it could be very helpful."</i>
Bridge education to work (shared pathways)	P10, P4, P1 (1)	<i>P10: "There should be shared databases or networks between schools and employers — to follow students even after graduation."</i>
Streamline funding & cut bureaucracy	P1, P2 (5)	<i>P1: "Regional funding is available, but you need ten different forms and wait months... Small cooperatives can't always handle that."</i>
Transport & logistics support	P5, P1 (2)	<i>P5: "Support transportation. Sometimes it's the only barrier left."</i>
Continuous training (teachers, job coaches, staff)	P10 (1)	<i>P10: "We should invest in continuous training for teachers and job coaches. Not just once, but regularly."</i>
Strengthen SIL/ULSS job-coach function	P2, P10 (2)	<i>P2: "There isn't a job coach as you mean it... they try things out." (Implied solution: formalize/strengthen the role.)</i>
Regional coordination hub for hospitality inclusion	P2 (1)	<i>P2: "Create one regional office dedicated to inclusive employment in hospitality and services."</i>
Use digital tools (coordination & training content)	P1, P10 (2)	<i>P1: "We learned... to use digital tools — online coordination with teachers and families." • P10: "New digital materials — videos, photos, tutorials — now used regularly."</i>
Leverage sport to build confidence/work skills	P11 (1)	<i>P11: "Don't forget sports! It helps to learn teamwork and confidence for work too."</i>
Family-led networks & peer mentoring	P2, P3 (2)	<i>P2: "First you need to create a core group of families who share the same idea."</i>
Scale-up & replication support by institutions	P2 (1)	<i>P2: "Why don't institutions talk about it as far away as Palermo? They already have a network — promotion would help replication."</i>
Clear team rules & mixed teams (internal policy)	P1 (1)	<i>P1: "The kids who work here are considered part of the workforce... we are able to create work teams."</i>

Table 9. Theme 7c: Netherlands

Sub-Theme	Participants	Representative Quote
Awareness & visibility (show success stories)	P5, P7	P5: “We need more visibility for success stories — the media and municipalities could highlight inclusive workplaces more actively.” P7: “When customers see it works, their perceptions change. That should be promoted.”
Bridge education to work (shared pathways)	P4, P6, P9	P6: “We need structured pathways from VSO and MBO schools into real jobs, not a drop-off after graduation.” P9: “A shared database between schools and employers would help track young people after they leave school.”
Streamline funding & reduce bureaucracy	P1, P11	P1: “Employers get lost in UWV paperwork — funding exists but is too complex and too slow.” P11: “Small NGOs and firms don’t always have the capacity to navigate all the procedures.”
Transport & commuting support	P2, P8	P8: “Transport is often the only barrier left — without subsidies or mobility training, many can’t take jobs outside the city center.”
Continuous training (teachers, job coaches, employers)	P4, P2, P10	P10: “We should invest in continuous training — not just one-off, but regular refreshers for teachers, job coaches, and employers.”
Strengthen job coach role (UWV/municipality)	P2, P9	P2: “We need more job coaches and a clearer professional role — right now it’s too fragmented and underfunded.”
Regional coordination hub for inclusive employment	P1, P5	P1: “Rotterdam should have a dedicated coordination office for inclusive employment — a single point of contact for schools, employers, and NGOs.”
Use digital tools (coordination & training content)	P4, P10	P4: “WhatsApp groups, scheduling apps, and video tutorials are now part of our toolkit — they should be systematically integrated.”
Leverage sport to build confidence & work skills	P6, P9	P6: “Sports and teamwork build confidence — we see the same discipline translate into workplace success.”



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Employer engagement (clear rules, mixed teams)	P3, P12	<i>P3: “Mixed teams with clear rules work best — it creates structure and mutual respect for everyone.”</i>
Scale-up & replication support by institutions	P11, P10	<i>P11: “There are strong pilots in Rotterdam, but without institutional promotion and scaling, they remain isolated.”</i>



In Table 10, the findings related to Theme 8 — Good Practices are presented for Italy, Türkiye, and the Netherlands. This theme highlights successful models, initiatives, and practical examples that demonstrate how inclusive employment for individuals with intellectual disabilities can be effectively implemented and sustained. The subthemes, number of participants, and representative quotes showcase diverse approaches such as inclusive vocational schools, workplace support programs, social enterprises, NGO and municipal collaborations, and the innovative use of technology. These examples illustrate how localized, participatory, and context-sensitive practices contribute to creating equitable employment ecosystems, offering valuable lessons for policymakers, educators, and employers seeking to replicate or scale inclusive models.

Table 10. Theme 8- Good Practices

Table 10. Theme 8: Türkiye

Sub-Theme	Participants	Representative Quote
Special Education Vocational Schools	P11, P3 (2)	<i>P11: "Young people who intern at special education vocational schools can find jobs."</i>
Workplace Support Programs	P4, P12 (2)	<i>P4: "Support programs in the workplace facilitate adaptation."</i>
Social Responsibility Projects	P8, P7, P5 (3)	<i>P5: "Social responsibility projects are effective in raising awareness."</i>
Local Government Supports	P4, P11 (2)	<i>P11: "Local governments developing projects for the needs of individuals with disabilities are beneficial (e.g., Supported Employment Office, İzmir Municipality)."</i>
Technology Use	P3, P8, P2 (3)	<i>P3: "Technology supports their independent living... They can apply for jobs and register with İŞKUR from home."</i>

Table 10. Theme 8b: Italy

Sub-Theme	Participants	Representative Quote
Special education vocational schools	P2, P1 (2)	<i>P2: "Hotel schools were originally created as a refuge... From this... a reality was born... very attentive to these children." P1: "The school suggested a work experience placement... it was recognized as if she were at school doing practical training."</i>
Workplace support programs (on-the-job training, mixed teams, clear rules)	P4, P1 (2)	<i>P4: "We organized courses for waiters... almost all had attended hotel school, but we added this training here at Casa Vittoria." P1: "Today the kids who work here are considered part of the workforce... we are able to create work teams."</i>
Social responsibility projects (family-led cooperative, volunteering)	P1, P3 (2)	<i>P2: "Six families... formed the cooperative." P3: "We also feel like a family... we help each other out; everyone contributes their skills."</i>
Local government supports (SIL/ULSS internships, quota framework)	P1, P2 (2)	<i>P1: "Placement of young people in internships... managed financially by social services." P2: "Every disadvantaged person can hire three able-bodied people. The percentage is 33%."</i>
Technology use (digital coordination & learning materials)	P10, P1 (2)	<i>P10: "Digitization has... new digital materials—videos, photos, practical tutorials... Now we use them regularly in class." P1: "We learned... to use digital tools—online coordination with teachers and families."</i>
Quality-first hospitality culture & live demonstration	P1, P4 (2)	<i>P1: "We receive the opposite compliments... we are very on the ball with our service." Moderator: "We had a wedding here... all the guests saw and experienced it... we created the project."</i>
Sport as inclusion enabler (confidence & teamwork)	P11 (1)	<i>P11: "Don't forget sports! It helps to learn teamwork and confidence for work too."</i>

Table 10. Theme 8c: Netherlands

Sub-Theme	Participants	Representative Quote
Special/vocational education schools (VSO, MBO, praktijkonderwijs)	P4, P6	P6: “Practical education and MBO schools provide structured pathways — placements are treated as part of training, which helps employers accept them.” P4: “Schools often initiate first work experiences, making the step into employment smoother.”
Workplace support programs (on-the-job training, mixed teams, clear rules)	P3, P12	P3: “We run training directly in the workplace. Clear rules and mixed teams help young people feel like real colleagues.” P12: “Structured onboarding and teamwork policies are essential for sustainable inclusion.”
Social responsibility projects (NGO/municipality-led initiatives, inclusive cafés)	P5, P7	P5: “Projects like Brownies & DownieS cafés or NGO-led initiatives show how inclusion can be combined with business.” P7: “Retail chains in Rotterdam are beginning to see inclusion as part of their social responsibility.”
Local government support (Werkgeversservicepunt, Participatiewet, Banenafspraak)	P1, P11	P1: “Werkgeversservicepunt Rijnmond finances internships and helps employers with subsidies.” P11: “The Banenafspraak quotas are important, but support from the municipality makes them practical.”
Technology use (digital coordination & training materials)	P4, P10	P4: “We use WhatsApp groups, scheduling apps, and video tutorials daily — digital tools make learning and coordination easier.” P10: “Short videos and photos are now standard in teaching workplace routines.”
Hospitality & logistics inclusion (quality-first, customer visibility)	P3, P12	P3: “Customers see inclusion in action every day — it changes perceptions more than any campaign.” P12: “In logistics, inclusion works when quality standards are kept clear and consistent.”
Sport as inclusion enabler (confidence & teamwork)	P2, P9	P2: “Sports build discipline and teamwork — the same skills that make someone reliable at work.” P9: “Confidence gained on the sports field often carries directly into the workplace.”

Discussion (Cross-Country Synthesis)

The employment of individuals with intellectual disabilities (ID) is influenced by a dynamic interplay of individual, familial, institutional, and societal factors that vary across cultural and policy contexts. Drawing on focus group data from Italy, Türkiye, and the Netherlands, this discussion synthesizes key cross-country findings using Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, highlighting both shared challenges and context-specific dynamics.

Individual-Level Findings

Across all three countries, participants emphasized that personal attributes such as self-confidence, communication skills, responsibility, and motivation are crucial for successful employment among individuals with ID. In Italy, social and emotional competence was linked to empowerment and self-expression, supported by inclusive educational traditions and cooperative work environments. Türkiye participants highlighted the importance of structured training and practical skill development to overcome low self-efficacy and limited vocational exposure. Dutch discussions similarly stressed independence and responsibility, yet pointed out that excessive reliance on formal support could inadvertently reduce self-determination.

These findings align with recent research showing that individualized skill-building and experiential learning significantly improve employment outcomes (Almalky, 2020; Garrels & Sigstad, 2021; Taubner et al., 2021). The comparative data underline that psychosocial empowerment, communication training, and individualized job coaching remain universal priorities.

Microsystem: Family, School, and Workplace Environments

Family and educational environments emerged as central pillars of inclusion across all three contexts. In Italy, family engagement and the historical integration of inclusive schooling promote smoother transitions into adulthood, though post-school guidance remains inconsistent. Türkiye demonstrated the critical role of family advocacy and teacher involvement, but overprotective attitudes and limited school-based career counseling constrain independence. In the Netherlands, a balance between autonomy and structured support was viewed as optimal, with schools, job coaches, and families collaborating within formalized transition pathways.

Employer and colleague attitudes also play a defining role at this level. Positive workplace experiences in Italy and the Netherlands were linked to social enterprises and inclusive HR practices, while Turkish participants stressed the need for employer awareness training and

sensitivity workshops. These findings confirm prior evidence that interpersonal support and workplace inclusion cultures enhance both job satisfaction and retention (Carter et al., 2023; Fajardo-Castro et al., 2024; Sigstad et al., 2025).

Meso- and Exosystem: Institutional Coordination

Inter-institutional collaboration—or the lack thereof—was identified as a major determinant of inclusion. In Italy, cooperative networks between municipalities, NGOs, and employers foster innovation but are limited in reach due to bureaucratic delays. Türkiye revealed fragmented communication between education, employment, and social service institutions, with limited follow-up once individuals graduate. In the Netherlands, despite strong frameworks, municipal-level fragmentation and insufficient job coach availability constrain the effectiveness of inclusion policies.

Across contexts, participants called for stronger coordination mechanisms connecting schools, vocational training centers, employers, and public authorities. Institutional bridges such as transition programs, regional coordination hubs, and shared data systems were suggested to improve accountability and communication (Joyce et al., 2024; Wendelborg et al., 2022; Schall et al., 2024).

Macrosystem: Policy, Culture, and Society

The macrosystem perspective revealed both strengths and persistent gaps in all three countries. Italy benefits from deeply rooted inclusive education policies and cultural acceptance of diversity but faces bureaucratic rigidity and uneven regional implementation. Türkiye continues to expand its policy base and local inclusion programs but struggles with limited awareness, weak enforcement, and enduring stigma. The Netherlands possesses strong legislative frameworks (e.g., *Participatiewet*) and progressive employer engagement, yet the complexity of local administration hinders efficiency.

Stigma and societal attitudes remain major obstacles across all three countries. Public awareness, inclusive media representation, and positive role models were repeatedly mentioned as catalysts for changing perceptions. As previous studies confirm, cultural transformation and policy enforcement must go hand in hand to achieve sustainable inclusion (Bennett & Vijaygopal, 2025; Taubner et al., 2021; Bialik & Mhiri, 2022).

Chronosystem: The Role of Time and Change

Participants across all contexts emphasized the impact of time, crisis, and policy evolution on employment inclusion. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted vocational training and

employment continuity but also accelerated digital adaptation and remote work opportunities. The ongoing evolution of technology, inclusive education reforms, and intergenerational attitude shifts were viewed as long-term drivers of change. Cross-nationally, these findings underscore that inclusive employment ecosystems are dynamic and adaptive, responding to broader socio-economic and technological transformations.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This multinational study highlights that inclusive employment for individuals with intellectual disabilities requires multi-level coordination, sustained commitment, and context-sensitive strategies. Although Italy, Türkiye, and the Netherlands differ in welfare models and implementation capacity, their shared experiences reveal common priorities for policy and practice.

Individual Level

- Strengthen personal skill development, focusing on communication, social competence, and self-confidence.
- Expand vocational and life skills programs that combine experiential learning with job coaching.
- Provide personalized support plans promoting autonomy and gradual independence.

Family and School Level

- Foster collaboration between families, educators, and vocational services from early school years onward.
- Offer family counseling and empowerment programs to reduce overprotective attitudes and encourage self-advocacy.
- Integrate career guidance and transition planning systematically into school curricula.

Institutional Level

- Establish structured transition-to-work programs linking schools, training centers, and employers.
- Strengthen the job coaching system and ensure sustainable funding.
- Create local coordination hubs or inter-agency platforms to streamline communication between education, labor, and social services.

Societal and Policy Level

- Conduct nationwide awareness campaigns to challenge stereotypes and highlight successful employment stories.
- Provide financial incentives and recognition schemes for inclusive employers.
- Simplify administrative procedures and ensure effective monitoring of inclusion policies at regional and national levels.
- Encourage public–private partnerships and inclusive social enterprises to scale best practices.

Final Remark

In conclusion, inclusive employment is not solely the responsibility of individuals with disabilities—it is a collective societal endeavor. The synthesis of findings from Italy, Türkiye, and the Netherlands demonstrates that sustainable inclusion emerges when personal empowerment, family engagement, institutional cooperation, and policy commitment operate in harmony. Building on this evidence, each country can strengthen its ecosystem by integrating localized good practices into cohesive national strategies, ensuring that individuals with intellectual disabilities can fully and meaningfully participate in the labor market.



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Title of the Research: Evaluation of Stakeholder Perspectives on Inclusive Vocational Education and Employment Pathways for Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities: A Multinational Focus Group Study

Focus Group Session Information: Case of Italy

Country: Italy

Date: September, 30 2025

Location: Casa Vittoria

Duration: 20:30 - 22:30

Participants

System Level	Participants	Number
Microsystem	Individuals with intellectual disabilities (4) and their families (5)	9
Mesosystem	Educators (special/vocational), social service specialists	1
Exosystem	Employers, NGO/public representatives	2
Macrosystem	Policymakers, regulatory agency representatives (optional)	0
Total		12

Moderator:

Handan Akarsu Scarabello

Observers:

Rosita Paro (Reporter, Observer); Giuseppe Scarabello (Observer)

Recording Type: Audio recording

Transcription Completed By: Handan Akarsu Scarabello

Data Analyzed and Reported By: Handan Akarsu Scarabello

Transcription Date: October 1, 2025





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The Ecosystem of Inclusive Employment for Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities: The Case of Turkey, A Focus Group Study

Abstract

Aim: This study aims to examine the challenges, enabling factors, and solution proposals regarding the employment of individuals with intellectual disabilities within the framework of the ecological systems approach.

Method: A qualitative research design was adopted, and a focus group study was conducted on September 30, 2025, at Casa Vittoria in Italy. Twelve participants were included: individuals with intellectual disabilities and their families, educators, employers, representatives of civil society organizations. Data were collected through audio recordings and analyzed using thematic analysis. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory was employed as the analytical framework.

Results: Eight main themes emerged from the analysis: (1) individual characteristics (strengths and barriers), (2) microsystem (family, school, employers, peer support), (3) meso- and exosystem (inter-institutional cooperation, local government policies, employer attitudes), (4) macrosystem (social awareness, legal regulations, economic conditions), (5) chronosystem (the effect of time), (6) challenges, (7) solution proposals, and (8) best practices.

Conclusion: Results indicate that inclusive employment is not solely an individual issue but a multidimensional process requiring coordination at family, institutional, and societal levels. Employer attitudes, family support, vocational education, and local government policies are critical determinants of employment sustainability.

Keywords: individuals with intellectual disabilities, inclusive employment, ecological systems, qualitative research, Turkey



Results

As a result of the analysis, eight main themes were obtained. Below are the themes, sub-themes, and participant quotes.

Table 1. Socio-demographic Characteristics of Participants and Representation Status

Participant	Country	Age	Gender	Education Level	Profession / Role	Representation Type	Work Experience	Participant Role
P1	IT	52	M	Bachelor	Director of Casa Vittoria	Employer	20 years as manager	Organizational representation
P2	IT	57	M	Bachelor	Legal Representative of Cooperative	Cooperative Representative	20 years	Organizational representation
P3	IT	52	F	High school	Volunteer of Cooperative/ Parent of person with ID	Parent	-	Organizational representation
P4	IT	73	M	Bachelor	Cooperative Representative	Cooperative Representative		Organizational representation
P5	IT	52	F	High school	Volunteer of Cooperative/ Parent of person with ID	Parent		Organizational representation
P6	IT	61	F	High school	Volunteer of Cooperative/ Parent of person with ID	Parent		Organizational representation
P7	IT	22	F	Bachelor	Young person with ID	Participant		Organizational representation



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P8	IT	62	M	Bachelor	Volunteer of Cooperative/ Parent of person with ID	Parent		Organizational representation
P9	IT	21	M	High school	Young person with ID	Participant		Organizational representation
P10	IT	24	F	Bachelor	Educator	Educator	2 years	Organizational representation
P11	IT	35	F	High school	Young person with ID	Participant		Organizational representation
P12	IT	19	F	High school	Young person with ID	Participant		Organizational representation



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Table 2. Ecosystem of Inclusive Employment for Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities: Themes

Theme	Sub-Themes
1. Individual Characteristics	Socialization and customer communication; sense of responsibility; hands-on/on-the-job learning, use of checklists; adapting to service rhythm and managing anxiety; self-confidence from visible achievements (sport/work); motivation (family and guest feedback); goal of independence; self-care/hygiene; adherence to work discipline.
2. Microsystem (Close Environment)	Family logistics and transport (car-pooling, hosting); mutual support and social bonds among families; continuity of support teachers and school insistence; employer leadership and explicit team rules; peer mentoring and team spirit; integrating volunteer/family help into the workplace; family flexibility with irregular hours.
3. Meso & Exosystem	Ongoing family–school–employer communication; event-based shift scheduling; gaps in inter-institutional coordination; internships mediated by SIR/OSL; insufficient job-coach function; disconnection in the education–business bridge; lack of local government support for promotion/scale-up; bureaucratic burden and waiting times; employer internal policies (checklists, mixed teams); opportunities from the region’s tourism/hospitality ecosystem.
4. Macrosystem	Strength of inclusive education legislation (in schools); policy gap in the transition to work; misalignment between national and local policies; disability employment quota framework; cultural ethos of “doing/making”; progress in public attitudes yet persistent distance; effect of media and word-of-mouth; Veneto’s service/hospitality-oriented economy; role of social services (SIR).
5. Chronosystem	COVID disrupting routines then triggering recovery; lasting use of digital tools (WhatsApp scheduling, tablet/POS ordering); smaller groups and shorter shifts; paradigm shift from “protection” to “autonomy and rights”; diffusion of inclusive business models; sport’s contribution to self-confidence and work readiness.
6. Problems	Transport and spatial distance; lack of job coaches/personalized matching; bureaucracy and difficulty accessing funding; absence of institutional promotion/scale-up support; prejudice and speed/productivity stereotypes; lack of a structured school-to-work transition pipeline.
7. Proposed Solutions	School-to-work “bridge programs” (with coaching, 6–12 months); simplified funding processes and a single point of contact; a regional office for inclusive employment in hospitality; transport supports and car-pool coordination; publicly supported visibility/media campaigns; ongoing in-service training for teachers and job coaches; shared school–employer data network; workplace learning kits (role cards, short videos, checklists); sport-work integration; systematic use of technology.
8. Good Practices	Casa Vittoria model and introductory waiter courses; partnerships with hotel schools; family solidarity networks; mixed teams and explicit rules; social marketing through live customer contact; digital scheduling; event-based flexible planning; making success stories visible.

Table 3. Theme 1 — Individual Strengths and Barriers (Sub-Themes, Participants, and Representative Quotes)

Sub-Theme	Participants	Representative Quote
Socialization & customer communication	P2, P7 (2)	<i>SPK_3: “Young people... have a very important ability to socialize... the hotel and restaurant environment is very suitable for them.”</i>
Sense of responsibility when wearing the uniform	P6 (1)	<i>P6: “They come in wearing their uniforms and they come in to work.”</i>
Hands-on / on-the-job learning (use of checklists/tools)	P1 (Employer), P4 (2)	<i>P1: “They learn a lot here, they learn a lot here too.”</i>
Adapting to service rhythm & managing anxiety	P1, P8 (2)	<i>P1: “We receive the opposite compliments here... we are very on the ball with our service.”</i>
Self-confidence from visible achievements (sport/work)	P11 (1)	<i>P11: “I’m a swimmer, was a... and I work, too. When people see me... they understand that we are strong.”</i>
Motivation (family & guest feedback)	P3 (1)	<i>P3: “Our children... are more motivated when they see their parents pitching in.”</i>
Goal of independence	P1 (1)	<i>P1: “Bring them here, train them, and then help them become independent so they can be integrated into the outside world.”</i>
Self-care / hygiene	P6 (1)	<i>P6: “They come in wearing their uniforms and they come in to work.” (indicator of grooming/standards on shift)</i>
Adherence to work discipline	P1 , P6 (2)	<i>P1: “Today the kids who work here are considered part of the workforce... we are able to create work teams.”</i>

Table 4. Theme 2 — Microsystem (Sub-Themes, Number of Participants, Quotes)

Sub-Theme	Participants	Representative Quote
Family logistics & transport (car-pool, hosting)	P1, P5 (2)	<i>P1: “You take her, I’ll pick her up... there’s an important exchange... in organizing the children’s transportation.”</i>
Mutual support & social bonds among families	P3, P6, P2 (3)	<i>P3: “We also feel like a family, we understand each other, we are united by the same... mess.”</i>
Continuity of support teachers & school insistence	P1, P3, P6 (3)	<i>P6: “They have always supported them... and insisted that they be included in a work context.”</i>
Employer leadership & explicit team rules	P1, P2 (2)	<i>P1: “Today the kids who work here are considered part of the workforce... we are able to create work teams.”</i>
Peer mentoring & team spirit	P7, P3, P1 (3)	<i>P7: “I really like my colleagues... we help each other a lot... we enjoy being together and working as a team.”</i>
Integrating volunteer/family help into the workplace	P1, P3 (2)	<i>P1: “Concetta helps with the cleaning, while her husband provides the tools... work integration, but in a nice way.”</i>
Family flexibility with irregular hours	P2(Coop/Parent), P1 (Employer) (2)	<i>SPK_3: “It’s not like 8 a.m., 2 p.m., 6 p.m.... families have to be flexible.”</i>

Table 5. Theme 3 — Meso & Exosystem (Sub-Themes, Number of Participants, Quotes)

Sub-Theme	Participants	Representative Quote
Family–school–employer communication	P1, P3, P6 (3)	P1: “It’s a continuous dialogue... with the cooperative, the families, and the young people.”
Event-based shift scheduling & family flexibility	P2, P1 (2)	SPK_3: “It’s not like 8 a.m., 2 p.m., 6 p.m. ... families have to be flexible.”
Inter-institutional coordination gaps	P2, P1 (2)	SPK_3: “Institutionally we have no relations... there is a lack of support, not only assistance but also promotion.”
SIL/ULSS-mediated internships & limited job-coach function	P1, P2 (2)	SPK_3: “There isn’t a job coach as you mean it... they try things out; if lucky it’s the right place, otherwise not.”
Education–business connection (hotel schools ↔ workplace training)	P4, P2 (2)	P4: “We organized courses for waiters... almost all had attended hotel school, but we added training here at Casa Vittoria.”
Social support networks (families/associations)	P2, P3 (2)	SPK_3: “First you need to create a core group of families who share the same idea.”
Local government promotion / scale-up support (lack)	P2 (1)	SPK_3: “If Casa Vittoria is successful, why don’t institutions talk about it... promoting it could be very helpful.”
Bureaucratic burden & waiting for permissions/funds	P1 (1)	P1: “We had bureaucratic difficulties... had to go through a whole different procedure to get the permits.”
Employer internal policies (mixed teams, rules, quality focus)	P1, P2 (2)	P1: “Today the kids who work here are considered part of the workforce... we are able to create work teams.”
Social perception & word-of-mouth effects	P1, P5 (2)	P1: “They come already aware... then in person the impact is very important—‘we didn’t think it would be like this.’”
State incentives & quotas	P2 (1)	SPK_3: “Every disadvantaged person can hire three able-bodied people. The percentage is 33%.”
Regional hospitality/tourism ecosystem opportunities	P2 (1)	SPK_3: “We live in an area with three hotel schools within a few kilometers... mountain and seaside tourism.”

Table 6. Theme 4 — Macrosystem (Sub-Themes, Number of Participants, Quotes)

Sub-Theme	Participants	Representative Quote
Strength of inclusive education legislation (in schools)	P10 (1)	<i>P10: “Italy has made great progress, especially in inclusion at school. We’ve had integration laws since the 1970s, and in Veneto, schools are usually quite open.”</i>
Policy gap in the transition from school to work	P10 (1)	<i>P10: “There is still a gap between school inclusion and work inclusion... the connection between school, local services, and employers is not systematic.”</i>
Misalignment between national and local policies	P2 (1)	<i>P2: “Sometimes the national policies don’t match local realities... hotel schools could be official training centers for inclusive employment, but that’s not recognized by law yet.”</i>
Disability employment quota framework	P2 (1)	<i>P2: “Every disadvantaged person can hire three able-bodied people. The percentage is 33%.”</i>
Cultural ethos of ‘doing/making’ (operosità)	P2 (1)	<i>P2: “Here, generationally, doing things is very important. You have to do things. The important thing is to do things.”</i>
Public attitudes: progress yet persistent distance	P5, P2 (2)	<i>P5: “People often say, ‘It’s wonderful what you do,’ but they don’t imagine their own child working next to a person with Down syndrome.”</i>
Media & word-of-mouth influence	P1 (1)	<i>P1: “They come here already aware... from their neighbor, social media, or TV. Then in person the impact is very important.”</i>
Regional hospitality/tourism economy as an enabler	P2 (1)	<i>P2: “We live in an area with three hotel schools within a few kilometers... because we have mountain tourism and seaside tourism.”</i>
Role of social services (SIL/ULSS) in internships and support	P2, P3 (2)	<i>P1: “There are social workers who follow each young person... committed to finding suitable facilities where young people can be placed on this path.”</i>

Table 7. Theme 5 — Chronosystem (The Impact of Time)

Sub-Theme	Participants	Representative Quote
COVID-19 disruption & post-pandemic rebuild	P2, P1 (2)	P2: “The pandemic... restaurants closed, training stopped, and many young people lost their rhythm. After COVID, we saw stronger collaboration among families and teachers to rebuild.”
Flexible organization: smaller groups & shorter shifts	P1 (1)	P1: “We learned to organize smaller groups, shorter shifts...”
Digitalization of coordination & teaching	P10, P1 (2)	P10: “Digitization has also changed education... new digital materials—videos, photos, practical tutorials. Now we use them regularly in class.”
Shift from ‘protection’ to ‘autonomy & rights’	P5 (1)	P5: “Twenty years ago, inclusion was mostly about protection... Now, it’s about autonomy and rights. Casa Vittoria is proof of that change.”
Diffusion of inclusive business models in Veneto	P2 (1)	P2: “When we started, there were almost no local examples... after ten years, several small NGOs in Veneto are following similar models.”
Sport as a driver of confidence & work readiness	P11 (1)	P11: “For me, things are changing... Now, I can train, work, and study.”

Table 8. Theme 6 — Problems (Sub-Themes, Number of Participants, Quotes)

Sub-Theme	Participants	Representative Quote
Stigma / Persistent social distance	P5, P2, P1 (3)	P5: “People often say, ‘It’s wonderful what you do,’ but they don’t imagine their own child working next to a person with Down syndrome.” P2: “We are very far from experiencing disability as normal.”
Inadequate / uneven education for work transition	P2, P10 (2)	P2: “Other schools are not as well prepared as hotel schools.” P10: “There is still a gap between school inclusion and work inclusion.”
Employer ignorance / lack of disability-specific training	P1, P2, P5, P8 (4)	P1: “No, I have to say no to training for disability... You have to have a predisposition and sensitivity.” P2: “Those who don’t have it don’t stay.” P8: “Most employers look at turnover and production. Speed is very difficult to manage...”
Policy deficiencies / bureaucracy & weak promotion	P1, P2 (2)	P1: “We had bureaucratic difficulties... had to go through a whole different procedure to get the permits.” P2: “Institutionally we have no relations... there is a lack of support, not only assistance but also promotion.”
Lack of social support (transport, job coaching)	P5, P2, P1 (3)	P5: “San Polo is far from everything, so it’s difficult to bring them here.” P2: “There isn’t a job coach as you mean it... they try things out; if lucky it’s the right place, otherwise not.”

Table 9. Theme 7 — Proposed Solutions and Strategies

Sub-Theme	Participants	Representative Quote
Awareness & visibility (show success stories)	P1, P2 (1)	P1: “Give more visibility to success stories. Media can help a lot.” P2: “If Casa Vittoria is successful, why don’t institutions talk about it... promoting it could be very helpful.”
Bridge education to work (shared pathways)	P10, P4, P1 (1)	P10: “There should be shared databases or networks between schools and employers — to follow students even after graduation.”
Streamline funding & cut bureaucracy	P1, P2 (5)	P1: “Regional funding is available, but you need ten different forms and wait months... Small cooperatives can’t always handle that.”
Transport & logistics support	P5, P1 (2)	P5: “Support transportation. Sometimes it’s the only barrier left.”
Continuous training (teachers, job coaches, staff)	P10 (1)	P10: “We should invest in continuous training for teachers and job coaches. Not just once, but regularly.”
Strengthen SIL/ULSS job-coach function	P2, P10 (2)	P2: “There isn’t a job coach as you mean it... they try things out.” (Implied solution: formalize/strengthen the role.)
Regional coordination hub for hospitality inclusion	P2 (1)	P2: “Create one regional office dedicated to inclusive employment in hospitality and services.”
Use digital tools (coordination & training content)	P1, P10 (2)	P1: “We learned... to use digital tools — online coordination with teachers and families.” • P10: “New digital materials — videos, photos, tutorials — now used regularly.”
Leverage sport to build confidence/work skills	P11 (1)	P11: “Don’t forget sports! It helps to learn teamwork and confidence for work too.”
Family-led networks & peer mentoring	P2, P3 (2)	P2: “First you need to create a core group of families who share the same idea.”
Scale-up & replication support by institutions	P2 (1)	P2: “Why don’t institutions talk about it as far away as Palermo? They already have a network — promotion would help replication.”
Clear team rules & mixed teams (internal policy)	P1 (1)	P1: “The kids who work here are considered part of the workforce... we are able to create work teams.”

Table 10. Theme 8 — Good Practices

Sub-Theme	Participants	Representative Quote
Special education vocational schools	P2, P1 (2)	<i>P2: “Hotel schools were originally created as a refuge... From this... a reality was born... very attentive to these children.” P1: “The school suggested a work experience placement... it was recognized as if she were at school doing practical training.”</i>
Workplace support programs (on-the-job training, mixed teams, clear rules)	P4, P1 (2)	<i>P4: “We organized courses for waiters... almost all had attended hotel school, but we added this training here at Casa Vittoria.” P1: “Today the kids who work here are considered part of the workforce... we are able to create work teams.”</i>
Social responsibility projects (family-led cooperative, volunteering)	P1, P3 (2)	<i>P2: “Six families... formed the cooperative.” P3: “We also feel like a family... we help each other out; everyone contributes their skills.”</i>
Local government supports (SIL/ULSS internships, quota framework)	P1, P2 (2)	<i>P1: “Placement of young people in internships... managed financially by social services.” P2: “Every disadvantaged person can hire three able-bodied people. The percentage is 33%.”</i>
Technology use (digital coordination & learning materials)	P10, P1 (2)	<i>P10: “Digitization has... new digital materials—videos, photos, practical tutorials... Now we use them regularly in class.” P1: “We learned... to use digital tools—online coordination with teachers and families.”</i>
Quality-first hospitality culture & live demonstration	P1, P4 (2)	<i>P1: “We receive the opposite compliments... we are very on the ball with our service.” Moderator: “We had a wedding here... all the guests saw and experienced it... we created the project.”</i>
Sport as inclusion enabler (confidence & teamwork)	P11 (1)	<i>P11: “Don’t forget sports! It helps to learn teamwork and confidence for work too.”</i>

Discussion

Inclusive employment for people with intellectual disabilities (ID) in Veneto emerges from the interaction of individual capabilities, family–school–employer collaboration, local service design (e.g., S.I.L.), and the broader legal–cultural environment.

Individual level. Participants repeatedly highlighted communication, teamwork, reliability, rule-following, and growing self-confidence as decisive for success in hospitality roles. This mirrors recent evidence showing that soft skills, supportive supervision, and structured routines enable sustainable employment for persons with disabilities, especially in service settings where customer interaction and team coordination are central. Hospitality-specific reviews also note that visible, high-quality service by workers with disabilities can positively shape guest perceptions and brand reputation when inclusion is well organized. [Scand. J. Dis. Res.+1](#)

Family & school (microsystem). In the Veneto case, families are pivotal for transport, schedule flexibility, and ongoing motivation, while schools (notably hotel/vocational institutes) provide the initial technical base and orientation. Italy’s long-standing inclusive schooling framework—dating back to the abolition of special schools and reinforced by more recent inclusion decrees—creates strong conditions for participation during education; however, the group’s experience underscores a persistent “school-to-work” gap after graduation without structured bridges. This pattern aligns with national analyses that praise inclusive schooling yet call for stronger transition mechanisms to employment. [Bdl+1](#)

Institutional & employer level (meso/exosystem). The group described two concrete levers: (a) a competent professional core team that can scaffold young workers with ID and (b) collaboration with local employment supports (e.g., internships funded via social services/S.I.L.). Veneto’s health–social system indeed runs Servizi di Integrazione Lavorativa that broker internships and on-the-job support, but capacity and continuity vary, and access can be bureaucratic. Evidence suggests employer-focused interventions (e.g., disability awareness, workflow redesign, and on-site coaching) can improve hiring and retention—precisely the practices Casa Vittoria has routinized. [AULSS 2 Veneto+1](#)

Legal–policy & societal context (macrosystem). Law 68/1999 (“collocamento mirato”) provides quotas and targeted placement supports, and remains the backbone of disability employment policy. Yet national assessments report that outcomes lag—administrative complexity, uneven enforcement, and limited employer readiness depress employment rates for people with disabilities relative to OECD peers. The focus group’s call for simpler procedures, stronger promotion of successful models, and recognition of hotel schools as inclusive training hubs closely tracks these national findings. [Erickson](#)

Chronosystem (change over time). Participants described COVID-19 as a shock that temporarily broke learning and work rhythms, but also catalyzed smaller teams, flexible shifts, and digital coordination among families, schools, and employers. European analyses similarly document severe pandemic disruptions to employment for persons with disabilities, alongside a push toward blended/remote practices that can be adapted into ongoing supports. [Università Politecnica delle Marche](#)

Conclusion

Drawing on the Veneto focus group and the literature, we propose the following:

Individual level. Continue to cultivate soft skills (communication, teamwork, time management) alongside task proficiency. Sports and extracurriculars that build confidence and self-regulation (e.g., competitive swimming) can transfer directly to workplace performance and resilience. [Scand. J. Dis. Res.](#)

Family & school level. Formalize transition-to-work pathways from hotel/vocational schools into internships and paid roles, using shared student profiles and follow-up after graduation. Maintain strong family engagement for logistics and motivation, but pair it with independence-building goals to avoid overprotection. National analyses indicate this school–work “bridge” is the missing middle. [Erickson](#)

Institutional & employer level. Leverage and strengthen S.I.L. brokerage with clearer role definitions for job coaching and easier access for SMEs and social enterprises. Embed employer-focused interventions—brief disability awareness, workflow mapping, and on-the-job coaching—to improve retention and service quality in hospitality settings. [AULSS 2 Veneto+1](#)

Policy & society. Reduce administrative friction in Law 68/1999 implementation (single digital front door; faster reimbursement) and publicly recognize “living labs” like Casa Vittoria and regional hotel schools as accredited inclusive training sites. Pair legal compliance with proactive campaigns that showcase concrete success stories to shift attitudes at scale. [Erickson](#)

Sustained progress in Veneto will depend on aligning everyday practice (teams, shifts, coaching) with the legal framework and on turning proven local collaborations into standardized regional pathways. When these layers work together, inclusive employment in hospitality can be both business-viable and socially transformative—as participants’ experiences already demonstrate.

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Title of the Research: Evaluation of Stakeholder Perspectives on Inclusive Vocational Education and Employment Pathways for Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities: A Multinational Focus Group Study

Focus Group Session Information: Case of Turkey

Country: Turkey

Date: September 19, 2025

Location: Ege University Faculty of Nursing Meeting Room

Duration: 14:30 - 19:00, conducted in two sessions

Participants

System Level	Participants	Number
Microsystem	Individuals with intellectual disabilities (3) and their families (2)	5
Mesosystem	Educators (special/vocational), social service specialists	2
Exosystem	Employers, NGO/public representatives	4
Macrosystem	Policymakers, regulatory agency representatives (optional)	3
Total		14

Moderator:

Satı Doğan

Büşra Alpayım (Assistant Moderator)

Observers:

Cansu Güler (Reporter, Observer), Gizem Beycan Ekitli (Reporter, Observer), Cansu Gökçe Bozkurt (Reporter, Observer), Haydar Albayrak (Observer)

Recording Type: Audio and video recording

Transcription Completed By: Sati Dogan, Cansu Güler, Cansu Gökçe Bozkurt

Data Analyzed and Reported By: Sati Dogan, Cansu Gökçe Bozkurt

Transcription Date: September 21, 2025



The Ecosystem of Inclusive Employment for Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities: The Case of Turkey, A Focus Group Study

Abstract

Aim: This study aims to examine the challenges, enabling factors, and solution proposals regarding the employment of individuals with intellectual disabilities within the framework of the ecological systems approach.

Method: A qualitative research design was adopted, and a focus group study was conducted on September 19, 2025, at Ege University Faculty of Nursing in Turkey. Fourteen participants were included: individuals with intellectual disabilities and their families, educators, employers, representatives of public institutions/local authorities, and civil society organizations. Data were collected through audio–video recordings and analyzed using thematic analysis. Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory was employed as the analytical framework.

Results: Eight main themes emerged from the analysis: (1) individual characteristics (strengths and barriers), (2) microsystem (family, school, employers, peer support), (3) meso- and exosystem (inter-institutional cooperation, local government policies, employer attitudes), (4) macrosystem (social awareness, legal regulations, economic conditions), (5) chronosystem (the effect of time), (6) challenges, (7) solution proposals, and (8) best practices.

Conclusion: Results indicate that inclusive employment is not solely an individual issue but a multidimensional process requiring coordination at family, institutional, and societal levels. Employer attitudes, family support, vocational education, and local government policies are critical determinants of employment sustainability.

Keywords: individuals with intellectual disabilities, inclusive employment, ecological systems, qualitative research, Turkey

Introduction

Creating an inclusive employment ecosystem for individuals with intellectual disabilities (ID) is widely recognized as essential for improving quality of life, social participation, and equity. Despite policy progress, persistent barriers, especially stigma, structural rigidity, and insufficient support, continue to limit access to meaningful employment for people with ID. Research highlights the need for coordinated, multi-level interventions to address these challenges.

Barriers to Inclusive Employment

Stigma and Attitudinal Barriers: Negative assumptions, prejudice, and low expectations from employers and colleagues remain pervasive, leading to discrimination and exclusion from competitive employment (Morris et al., 2024; Bialik & Mhiri, 2022; Shaw et al., 2022; Pedersen et al., 2024). Employers often focus on perceived limitations rather than abilities, reinforcing exclusion (Shaw et al., 2022; Morris et al., 2024).

Structural and Policy Challenges: Rigid funding models, inflexible employment policies, and binary employment systems (segregated vs. open) hinder transitions to inclusive work environments (Joyce et al., 2024; Garrels & Sigstad, 2021; Morris et al., 2024). Centralized and impersonal recruitment processes, lack of workplace accommodations, and insufficient coordination between education and labor markets further restrict opportunities (Wendelborg et al., 2022; Garrels & Sigstad, 2021; Joyce et al., 2024).

Educational and Support Gaps: Limited access to inclusive education, vocational training, and individualized supports restricts employment preparation and sustainability (Bialik & Mhiri, 2022; Readhead & Owen, 2020; Ducett et al., 2024; Joyce et al., 2024). Families and social networks play a critical but often under-recognized role in supporting employment (Bialik & Mhiri, 2022; Carter et al., 2023; Schwartzman et al., 2023).

Facilitators and Best Practices

Holistic, Ecosystem Approaches: Cross-sector collaboration among policymakers, employers, families, and community organizations is essential for systemic reform and sustainable inclusion (Morris et al., 2024; Shaw et al., 2022; Readhead & Owen, 2020). Participatory, action-oriented strategies that address power dynamics and stakeholder relationships are recommended (Shaw et al., 2022; Morris et al., 2024).

Inclusive HR and Workplace Practices: Inclusive recruitment, job customization, structured mentoring, and supportive workplace relationships improve participation, satisfaction, and retention (Sigstad et al., 2025; Fajardo-Castro et al., 2024; Morris et al., 2024; Joyce et al., 2024). Organizational cultures that value social belonging, trust, and meaningful contributions foster work inclusion (Hafsteinsdóttir & Hardonk, 2023; Fajardo-Castro et al., 2024).



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Innovative Employment Models. Customized employment and social enterprises can significantly improve employment outcomes, though overall rates remain low and require scaling (Martínez-Tur et al., 2025; Joyce et al., 2024). Technology and digital tools, when designed inclusively, can enhance job matching and accessibility (Martínez-Tur et al., 2025; Readhead & Owen, 2020).

In conclusion, building a truly inclusive employment ecosystem for individuals with intellectual disabilities requires coordinated action at policy, organizational, and community levels. Reducing stigma, reforming structural systems, and embedding inclusive practices are essential. Leveraging technology, fostering cross-sector collaboration, and investing in education and support systems can create equitable opportunities for all individuals with ID to participate meaningfully in the workforce.



Results

As a result of the analysis, eight main themes were obtained. Below are the themes, sub-themes, and participant quotes.

Table 1. Socio-demographic Characteristics of Participants and Representation Status

Participant	Country	Age	Gender	Education Level	Profession / Role	Representation Type	Work Experience	Participant Role
P1	TR	34	M	Vocational Training	Woodworking	Individual	Food sector, 5 years	Individual / Participant
P2	TR	40	F	Bachelor	Career Counselor	Institutional Representative	6 months	Institutional Representative
P3	TR	43	F	Bachelor	Career Counselor	Institutional Representative	10 years	Institutional Representative
P4	TR	57	M	Graduate	Workplace Physician	Chamber of Physicians	10 years	Institutional Representative
P5	TR	44	F	Bachelor	Disability Unit Manager	Municipality	2 months	Institutional Representative
P6	TR	19	M	Vocational Training	Agriculture Student	Individual	No work experience	Individual / Participant
P7	TR	31	F	Bachelor	Teacher / Job Coach	Municipality	9 years	Institutional Representative
P8	TR	73	F	Bachelor	Nurse / NGO Official	NGO	15 years	Institutional Representative
P9	TR	25	F	High School	Warehouse / Market Employee	Individual	3 years	Individual / Participant



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P10	TR	51	F	Bachelor	Special Education Teacher	Educational Institution	14 years	Institutional Representative
P11	TR	50	F	Bachelor	Human Resources Manager	Private Sector	20 years+	Employer Representative
P12	TR	61	F	High School	Retired, Family Representative	Family	Family Participant	Individual / Participant
P13	TR	49	F	High School	Retired, Family Representative	Family	Family Participant	Individual / Participant
P14	TR	35	F	Bachelor	Municipality Disability Employment Unit	Municipality	15 years	Institutional Representative



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Figure 1: Concept Map of the Ecosystem of Inclusive Employment for Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities

Table 2. Ecosystem of Inclusive Employment for Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities: Themes

Theme	Sub-Themes
1. Individual Characteristics	Communication skills, Responsibility, Self-confidence, Anxieties, Motivation, Job skills, Independence, Social adaptation, Personal care
2. Microsystem (Close Environment)	Family support, School-teacher contribution, Job coaches, Employer attitudes, Peer support
3. Meso & Exosystem	Family-school cooperation, Inter-institutional coordination, Education-business connection, Social support networks, Local government policies, Employer policies, State incentives, Social perception
4. Macrosystem	Social awareness, Cultural norms, Legal regulations, Economic conditions, Social services
5. Chronosystem	Societal changes, Evolution in education, Technological advancements, Social movements, Economic crises
6. Problems	Stigma, Inadequate education, Employer ignorance, Policy deficiencies, Lack of social support
7. Proposed Solutions	Awareness programs, Vocational training, Employer support, Legal regulations, Social guidance, Adaptation processes, Technology use, Social responsibility projects
8. Good Practices	Special education vocational schools, Workplace support programs, Social responsibility projects, Local government supports, Technology use

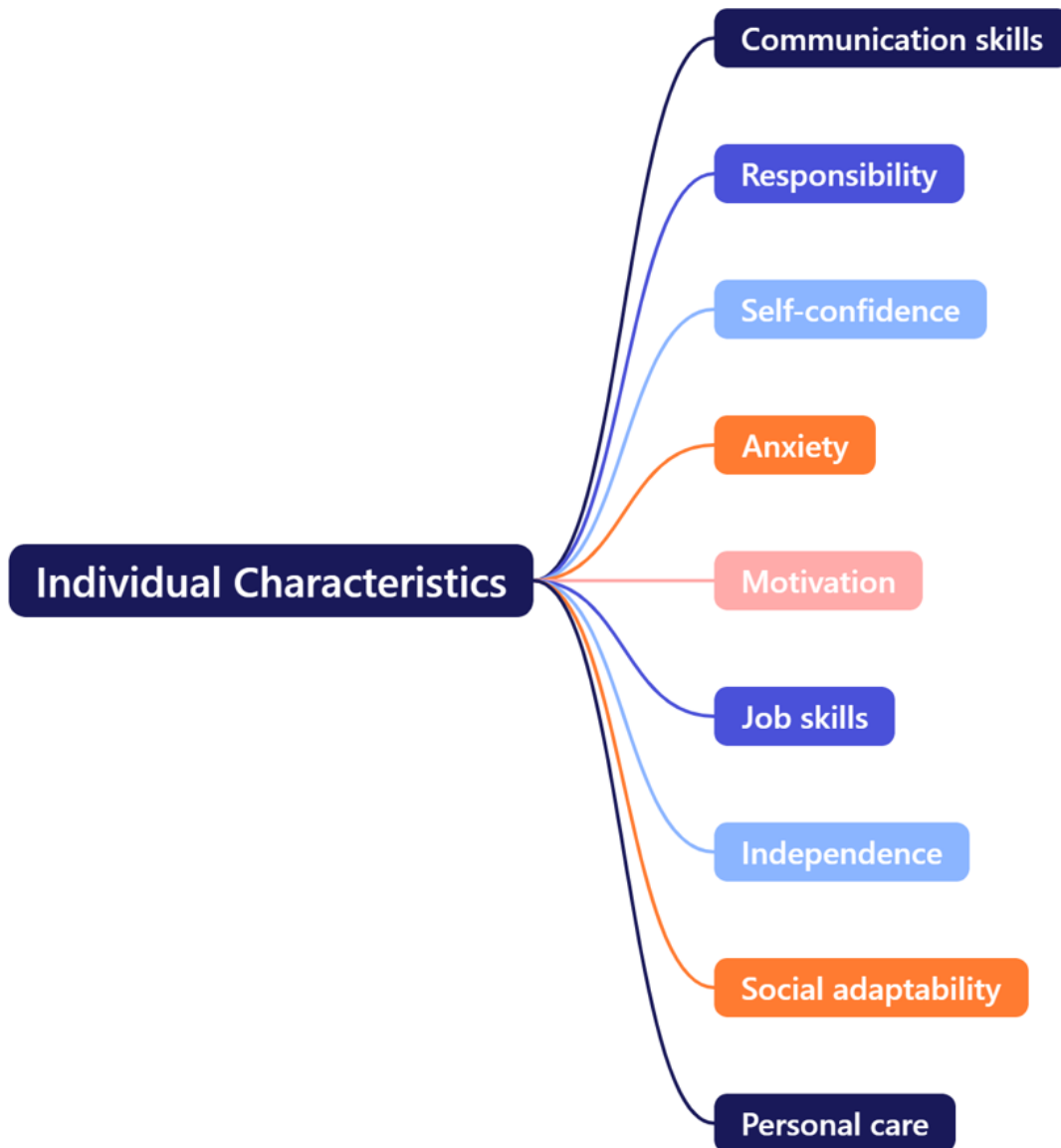


Figure 2: Concept Map of the Individual Strengths and Barriers

Table 3. Theme 1 — Individual Strengths and Barriers (Sub-Themes, Participants, and Representative Quotes)

Sub-Theme	Participants	Representative Quote
Communication Skills	P9, P3, P11 (3)	P11: "Communication skills increase the chances of finding a job."
Respect & Responsibility & Helpfulness	P9, P3, P7, P11 (4)	P9: "Being respectful is important. After that, they need to respect you too." P3: "Employers' perspectives... being responsible, respectful, helpful... communication."
Self-confidence	P10, P4 (2)	P10: "If students lack self-confidence, even if they have talent, you can't trigger it."
Fear & Anxieties	P4, P10 (2)	P4: "Generally, due to intellectual disability, self-confidence is low, there are fears and anxieties... What is the anxiety level while working?"
Motivation	P7 (1)	P7: "If the individual adopts the job during the learning phases, their motivation increases, and they can perform better."
Job Skills & Abilities	P11, P9, P4 (3)	P7: "If the skills are suitable for the job, it can become more sustainable." P9: "You are already doing your job... You are disciplined... You own your work."
Independence	P7, P13 (2)	P7: "They need to gain independence, but very protective families don't want that."
Social Adaptation & Interaction	P11, P10, P9 (3)	P9: "They were happy with me... We are like siblings." P4 (question): "Are they susceptible to abuse? Do these individuals face abuse at work?"
Personal Care	P4, P1 (2)	P4: "How is personal care? Do they take care of themselves (dressing, hair, eyes), or not? Because that is also important." P1: "Personal hygiene is important when going for a job interview."

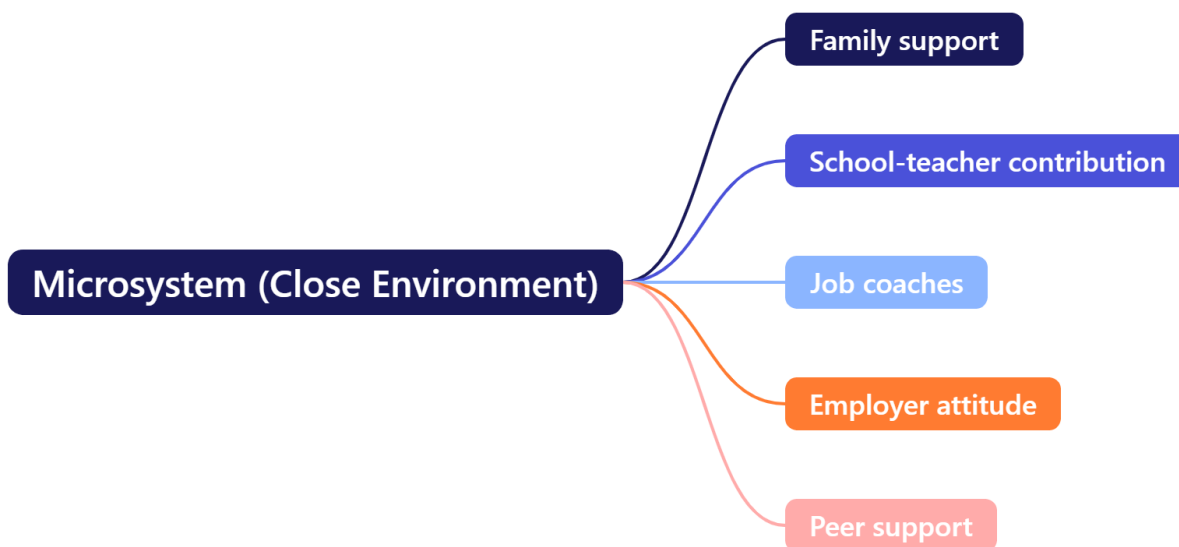


Figure 3: Concept Map of the Microsystem

Table 4. Theme 2 — Microsystem (Sub-Themes, Number of Participants, Quotes)

Sub-Theme	Participants	Representative Quote
Family Support	P12, P13, P10 (3)	P12: "The family plays a significant role in the education of these children." P13: "I want my child to get a job. I want them to stand on their own feet."
School & Teacher Contribution	P10, P8, P11 (3)	P10: "In the 9th grade, we introduce our students to different professions... 14 types of education are provided in special education vocational schools."
Job Coaches	P3, P7, P8 (3)	P12: "If we do not present the job coach as a guarantee to the employer... we expect the state to train job coaches." P8: "Job analysis is done; the job coach reduces prejudice."
Employer Attitude & Relations	P2, P11, P4, P14 (4)	P14: "The employer's attitude is very decisive in the employment of individuals with intellectual disabilities."
Friends & Peer Support	P11, P12 (2)	P11: "Social support means friends, loved ones... They can be abused."



Figure 4: Concept Map of the Meso & Exosystem

Table 5. Theme 3 — Meso & Exosystem (Sub-Themes, Number of Participants, Quotes)

Sub-Theme	Participants	Representative Quote
Family-School Cooperation	P13, P12, P10 (3)	P10: "Without the family, it doesn't work. We start with the family."
Inter-Institutional Coordination	P14, P7, P8 (3)	P14: "There is no coordination between institutions."
Education-Business Connection	P11, P7, P10 (3)	P11: "...the master in the firm, the section manager, HR... they can acquire positive traits while working."
Social Support Networks	P12, P13, P11, P4, P8 (5)	P13: "Some families do not want to accept that their child is disabled." P8: "Acceptance increases for those applying through references or connections."
Local Government Policies	P14, P7, P8 (3)	P8: "Local governments need to take a more active role in this."
Employer Policies & Attitudes	P4, P11, P7, P2, P14 (5)	P4: "Does the employer want to employ the disabled in the first place? Is it a legal obligation? The workplace arrangements required for employing the disabled are challenging."
Government Supports & Incentives	P4, P11, P5 (3)	P4: "There should be government incentives, minimum wage plus insurance support."
Social Perception & Sensitivity	P5, P6, P14, P8, P10 (5)	P5: "The perception of individuals with intellectual disabilities in society is very important." P10: "We see good examples in the media, positive discrimination exists, but there should be more."

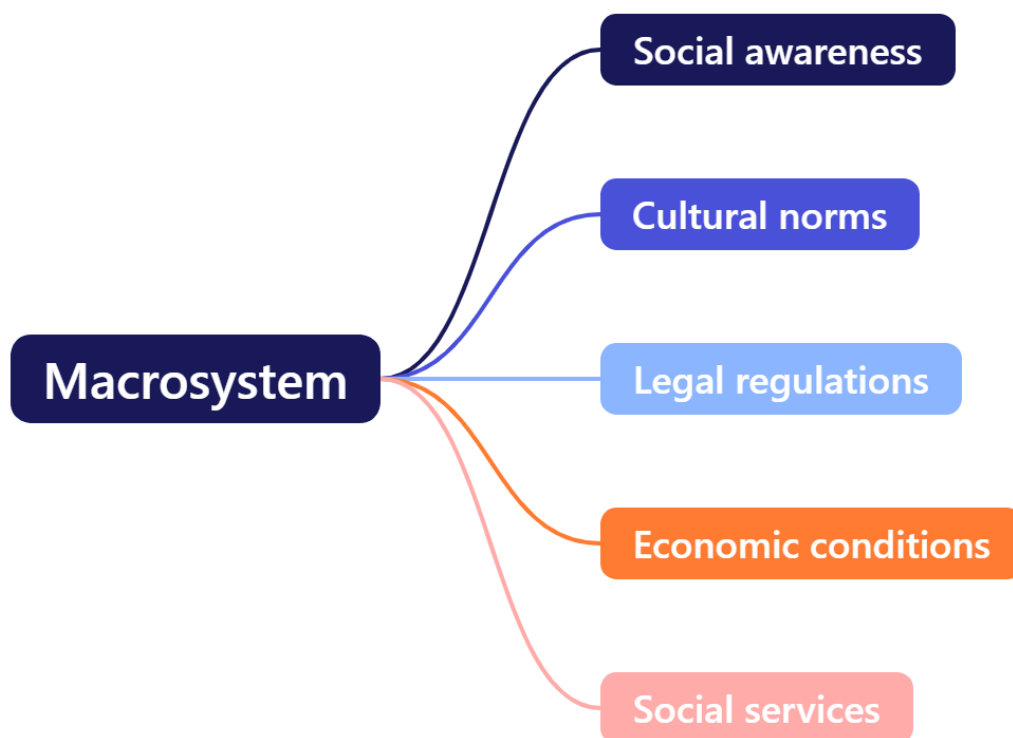


Figure 5: Concept Map of the Macrosystem

Table 6. Theme 4 — Macrosystem (Sub-Themes, Number of Participants, Quotes)

Sub-Theme	Participants	Representative Quote
Social Awareness & Education	P5, P14, P11 (3)	P14: "Awareness should be raised that individuals with intellectual disabilities can be employable."
Cultural Norms & Values	P4, P13, P3 (3)	P4: "As long as cultural norms do not change, problems will continue."
Legal Regulations & Policy	P7, P2, P11 (3)	P2: "Legal regulations for the disabled should be enforced more strictly."
Economic Conditions	P4, P10, P14 (3)	P4: "Economic conditions affect the preferences of employers."
Social Services & Support	P5, P12 (2)	P5: "Guidance services should be offered to families."

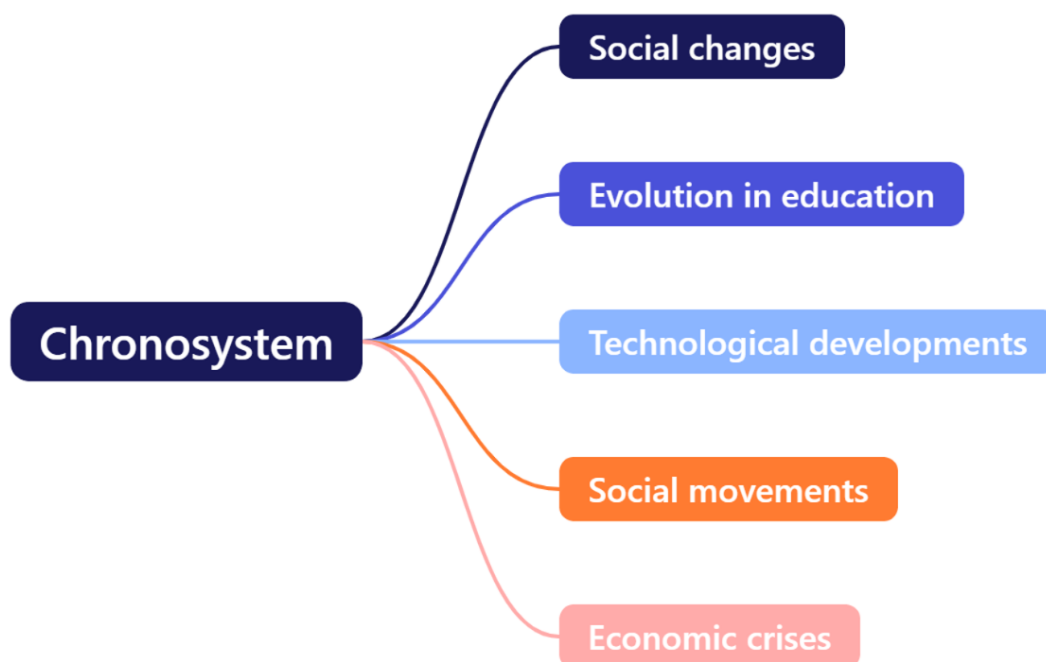


Figure 6: Concept Map of the Chronosystem

Table 7. Theme 5 — Chronosystem (The Impact of Time)

Sub-Theme	Participants	Representative Quote
Societal Changes	P8, P14, P5 (3)	P14: "In the past, the perception was negative, but it has changed over time."
Evolution in Education	P11, P7, P13 (3)	P11: "Changes in our education system have provided opportunities for individuals with disabilities."
Technological Advancements	P3, P4, P11 (3)	P3: "Technology is an important tool that facilitates the lives of individuals with disabilities."
Social Movements & Awareness	P8, P12, P5 (3)	P8: "Social movements are important for raising awareness."
Impact of Economic Crises	P4, P10, P14 (3)	P4: "Economic crises negatively affect the employment of individuals with disabilities."

Table 8. Theme 6 — Problems (Sub-Themes, Number of Participants, Quotes)

Sub-Theme	Participants	Representative Quote
Societal Stigma & Prejudices	P14, P5 (2)	P5: "Stigma undermines the self-confidence of individuals with disabilities."
Inadequate Education & Skills	P4, P3 (2)	P4: "The education system does not meet the needs of individuals with disabilities."
Employer Ignorance & Insensitivity	P11, P7 (2)	P7: "Most employers overlook the potential of these individuals."
Policy & Support Deficiencies	P2, P8 (2)	P2: "Government policies are insufficient."
Lack of Social Support	P10, P12 (2)	P10: "Social support networks do not meet the needs."

Table 9. Theme 7 — Proposed Solutions and Strategies

Sub-Theme	Participants	Representative Quote
Awareness & Education Programs	P5, P11, P8 (3)	P5: "Educational programs should be organized to raise awareness in society."
Vocational Training & Development	P3, P4, P8 (3)	P3: "Vocational training programs increase participation in the workforce."
Employer Training & Support	P7, P14 (2)	P7: "Employers should be trained, and their potentials should be explained."
Legal Regulations & Incentives	P2, P8 (2)	P2: "The government should provide more effective legal regulations and incentives."
Social Support & Guidance	P10, P12, P5 (3)	P12: "Guidance and support services should be increased."
Workplace Adaptation & Support	P11, P14, P4 (3)	P11: "A supportive environment should be created in workplaces."
Technology Use	P3, P8, P2 (3)	P2: "Technological tools enable them to be more active in work life."
Social Responsibility Projects	P8, P7, P5 (3)	P8: "Social responsibility projects are effective in raising awareness."
Participation of Local Governments	P4, P11, P14 (3)	P14: "The efforts of local governments can improve the quality of life."

Table 10. Theme 8 — Good Practices

Sub-Theme	Participants	Representative Quote
Special Education Vocational Schools	P11, P3 (2)	<i>P11: "Young people who intern at special education vocational schools can find jobs."</i>
Workplace Support Programs	P4, P12 (2)	<i>P4: "Support programs in the workplace facilitate adaptation."</i>
Social Responsibility Projects	P8, P7, P5 (3)	<i>P5: "Social responsibility projects are effective in raising awareness."</i>
Local Government Supports	P4, P11 (2)	<i>P11: "Local governments developing projects for the needs of individuals with disabilities are beneficial (e.g., Supported Employment Office, İzmir Municipality)."</i>
Technology Use	P3, P8, P2 (3)	<i>P3: "Technology supports their independent living... They can apply for jobs and register with İŞKUR from home."</i>

Discussion

The employment of individuals with intellectual disabilities (ID) is shaped by a complex interplay of individual, familial, institutional, and societal factors. The following discussion and conclusion sections are supported by recent, peer-reviewed research.

Individual Level Findings: Self-confidence, communication skills, and social competencies are critical for employment success among individuals with ID. These personal attributes are linked to higher self-esteem, independence, and job retention, especially in integrated employment settings (Almalky, 2020; Taubner et al., 2021). However, limited access to skill development and vocational training programs remains a barrier, underscoring the need for more diverse and accessible training opportunities (Taubner et al., 2021; Garrels & Sigstad, 2021; Jacob & Pillay, 2023).

Family and School Level Findings: Active family involvement and vocational guidance during school years significantly enhance employment outcomes for individuals with ID. Family support is associated with lower job turnover and greater employment retention (Park, 2021; Carter et al., 2023). Conversely, overprotective family attitudes can hinder independence and workforce participation (Carter et al., 2023; Bialik & Mhiri, 2022). Early and ongoing collaboration between schools, families, and employment services is essential for a successful transition to work (Garrels & Sigstad, 2021; Joyce et al., 2024; Taubner et al., 2021).

Institutional and Employer Level Findings: Employer attitudes and lack of awareness are major barriers to inclusive employment. Positive employer experiences and targeted training can improve attitudes and increase hiring rates (Milanović-Dobrota et al., 2025; Elahdi & Alnahdi, 2022; Morris et al., 2024). Institutional coordination—such as job coaching, workplace accommodations, and inter-agency collaboration—facilitates sustainable employment and smoother transitions from education to work (Joyce et al., 2024; Wendelborg et al., 2022; Taubner et al., 2021; Schall et al., 2024).

Societal and Political Level Findings: Societal stigma, insufficient policy implementation, and low public awareness continue to limit employment opportunities for individuals with ID. While legal frameworks exist, their impact is often undermined by poor enforcement and persistent prejudice (Garrels & Sigstad, 2021; Bennett & Vijaygopal, 2025; Taubner et al., 2021; Bialik & Mhiri, 2022). National awareness campaigns, effective employer incentives, and robust monitoring of policy implementation are necessary to bridge the gap between policy and practice (Joyce et al., 2024; Taubner et al., 2021; Bialik & Mhiri, 2022).

A multi-level, coordinated approach is essential for advancing inclusive employment for individuals with intellectual disabilities. Enhancing individual skills, fostering family and school engagement, improving institutional supports, and addressing societal barriers will collectively increase employment rates and promote social integration (Almalky, 2020; Garrels & Sigstad, 2021; Joyce et al., 2024; Park, 2021; Taubner et al., 2021; Carter et al., 2023; Bialik & Mhiri, 2022).

Conclusion

This study presents comprehensive findings regarding the employment ecosystem for individuals with intellectual disabilities. The results yield the following recommendations at various levels:

Individual Level: Developing self-confidence, communication, and social skills is critical. Supporting individuals in these areas will enhance their employment opportunities.

Family and School Level: Guidance services and vocational counseling should be strengthened. Families should be encouraged to take a more active role in their children's educational processes.

Institutional Level: The coaching system should be widely implemented, and inter-institutional coordination should be increased. This will reduce the challenges faced by individuals with intellectual disabilities in their job search processes.

Societal Level: Awareness campaigns, employer incentives, and effective legal practices should be implemented. Understanding the potential of individuals with intellectual disabilities in society will positively influence employment processes.

In conclusion, the sustainability of inclusive employment requires the joint efforts of individuals, families, employers, educational institutions, local governments, and policymakers. This multidimensional approach will enhance the participation of individuals with intellectual disabilities in the workforce and support their social integration.

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Co-funded by
the European Union

Title of the Research: Evaluation of Stakeholder Perspectives on Inclusive Vocational Education and Employment Pathways for Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities: A Multinational Focus Group Study

Focus Group Session Information: Case of The Netherlands

Country: The Netherlands

Date: September, 26 2025

Location: Rotterdam

Duration: 16:30 – 20:00

Participants

System Level	Participants	Number
Mesosystem	Educators (special/vocational), social service specialists	9
Exosystem	Employers, NGO/public representatives	3
Total		12

Moderator:

Christina Eirini Karvouna

Recording Type: Minutes recording

Transcription Completed By: Christina Eirini Karvouna

Data Analyzed and Reported By: Christina Eirini Karvouna

Transcription Date: September 29, 2025



The Ecosystem of Inclusive Employment for Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities: The Case of The Netherlands, A Focus Group Study

Abstract

This report presents the findings of a focus group held in Rotterdam with key stakeholders on the employment of young people with intellectual disabilities (ID). The aim was to explore barriers, opportunities, and support mechanisms that influence labor market participation, while gathering insights from young people, families, employers, NGOs, and institutions involved in inclusive employment.

The Netherlands has a robust legal framework for disability rights (Participatiewet, Wet Gelijke Behandeling Handicap/Chronische Ziekte, UN CRPD ratification), yet individuals with intellectual disabilities remain underrepresented in the workforce. The Rotterdam region offers important good practices—such as Brownies & DownieS cafés, Werkgeversservicepunt Rijnmond initiatives, and social enterprises—while also facing challenges in sustainability, employer awareness, and long-term support.



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Results

As a result of the analysis, eight main themes were obtained. Below are the themes, sub-themes, and participant quotes.

Table 1. Socio-demographic Characteristics of Participants and Representation Status

Participant	Country	Age	Gender	Education Level	Profession / Role	Representation Type	Work Experience	Participant Role
P1	NL	51	M	Bachelor	Municipal Officer, Dept. of Social Affairs (Rotterdam)	Policy/Employer Representative	15 years in inclusive employment policy	Organizational representation
P2	NL	46	F	Bachelor	Job Coach (UWV / municipal service)	Support Staff	12 years	Organizational representation
P3	NL	39	M	Bachelor	Employer (Café Owner)	Employer	10 years in hospitality	Organizational representation
P4	NL	49	F	Master	Teacher, Special Education (VSO)	Educator	20 years	Organizational representation
P5	NL	44	F	Master	NGO Representative (Disability Inclusion Rotterdam)	NGO/Public	15 years	Organizational representation





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P6	NL	41	F	Bachelor	Vocational Education Specialist (MBO school)	Educator	14 years	Organizational representation
P7	NL	52	M	Bachelor	Employer (Retail Store Manager)	Employer	8 years in retail	Organizational representation
P8	NL	47	F	Bachelor	Social Worker (Municipal disability support team)	Social Services	18 years	Organizational representation
P9	NL	35	M	Bachelor	Job Coach (sheltered employment organization)	Support Staff	10 years	Organizational representation
P10	NL	55	F	Master	NGO Representative (National Disability Council)	NGO/Public	22 years	Organizational representation
P11	NL	50	M	Master	Municipal Officer (Employment & Participation)	Policy Representative	20 years	Organizational representation
P12	NL	42	F	Bachelor	Employer (Logistics company HR manager)	Employer	12 years	Organizational representation



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Table 2. Ecosystem of Inclusive Employment for Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities: Themes

Theme	Sub-Themes
1. Individual Characteristics	Development of social and communication skills in structured work environments; responsibility fostered through task assignment and supervision; practical learning using visual supports, checklists, and step-by-step guidance; managing workplace stress with coaching; confidence building through visible achievements (e.g., completing tasks, earning wages); motivation supported by positive feedback from supervisors, colleagues, and customers; focus on independence and employability; importance of maintaining personal hygiene and self-care in professional contexts; adherence to routines and workplace discipline.
2. Microsystem (Close Environment)	The enabling role of teachers, job coaches, and mentors in bridging education and work (praktijkonderwijs, MBO, VSO); structured leadership by employers with clear team rules and supportive managers; peer mentoring within workplaces to create inclusion; collaboration with NGOs and volunteers to provide supplementary support; need for coordination with families highlighted by professionals, but family voices represented indirectly rather than directly.
3. Meso & Exosystem	Regular communication channels between schools, UWV/job coaches, employers, and NGOs; flexible scheduling practices used by inclusive employers; coordination difficulties between institutions (municipalities, UWV, schools, NGOs); reliance on Werkgeversservicepunt Rijnmond and inclusive social enterprises for internships and supported placements; persistent shortage of job coaches and capacity for intensive support; mismatch between education curricula and actual labor market needs; lack of scaling-up of successful pilots by municipal authorities; administrative delays in UWV/doelgroepregister registrations; inclusive workplace practices such as mixed teams, task simplification, and visual role division; sectoral opportunities in Rotterdam's logistics, port economy, and hospitality industries.
4. Macrosystem	Strong legislative base (Wet passend onderwijs, WGBH/CZ, Participatiewet) but inconsistent implementation; transitional gap between inclusive education and sustainable employment pathways; limited impact of the national Banenafspraak quota system due to uneven employer engagement; cultural norms in the Netherlands emphasizing participation, self-reliance, and independence; gradual improvement in public perception, though stereotypes about intellectual disability persist; media coverage and awareness campaigns play a role in normalization; Rotterdam's economic structure (ports, logistics, services) provides both opportunities and challenges for inclusive employment.

5. Chronosystem	COVID-19 disruption of training, placements, and employment pathways, followed by partial recovery; continued use of digital scheduling tools (WhatsApp groups, employer apps, municipal platforms); shift toward smaller teams and flexible working hours post-pandemic; policy discourse moving from protective care toward autonomy and rights-based approaches; growing visibility of inclusive business models (e.g., Brownies & DownieS caf��s, inclusive logistics teams); sports and community initiatives seen by professionals as indirectly strengthening employability and resilience.
6. Problems	Structural barriers in transport (esp. beyond city center areas); insufficient number of trained job coaches; complexity and slowness of UWV/municipal administrative procedures; lack of systematic scaling-up of inclusive practices; ongoing employer prejudice about productivity, flexibility, and costs; weak and fragmented transition-to-work mechanisms from education; insecurity due to reliance on internships, short-term or subsidized contracts.
7. Proposed Solutions	Establish structured school-to-work transition programs (6–12 months) with integrated job coaching; simplify bureaucratic processes at UWV and municipalities with one-stop access points; create a regional coordination office for inclusive employment in Rotterdam; expand transport support (travel allowances, car-pooling, shared mobility solutions); implement public campaigns to normalize employment of people with ID; provide continuous training for educators and job coaches on workplace inclusion; introduce digital data-sharing systems linking schools, employers, and services; equip workplaces with learning kits (visual guides, checklists, microlearning videos); promote integration of sports and leisure programs with work readiness training; scale use of accessible digital tools for recruitment and training.
8. Good Practices	Inclusive caf��/restaurant models (e.g., Brownies & DownieS) employing workers with ID; partnerships between vocational schools (MBO) and inclusive employers; NGO networks like MEE Rotterdam Rijnmond supporting professionals and employers; use of peer-to-peer mentoring systems in workplaces; inclusive team management with clear role division; social marketing via everyday customer contact in retail/hospitality; digital platforms (scheduling, communication apps) supporting workplace adaptation; flexible and adaptive shift planning; visibility campaigns highlighting successful placements in Rotterdam's logistics and services sectors.

Table 3. Theme 1 — Individual Strengths and Barriers (Sub-Themes, Participants, and Representative Quotes)

Sub-Theme	Participants	Representative Quote
Socialization & customer communication	P4, P7	<i>P4: “We notice that once supported, employees with intellectual disabilities are excellent in welcoming customers — they bring warmth that makes hospitality stronger.”</i>
Sense of responsibility when wearing the uniform	P3, P12	<i>P12: “When they arrive in uniform and with their badge, you see pride — it signals they are part of the team.”</i>
Hands-on / on-the-job learning (use of checklists/tools)	P2, P6	<i>P2: “Learning improves most when tasks are broken down into steps with checklists or visual supports — practice is more effective than theory.”</i>
Adapting to service rhythm & managing anxiety	P4, P8	<i>P8: “Some struggle with fast-paced environments, but with coaching and clear routines they manage stress much better.”</i>
Self-confidence from visible achievements (sport/work)	P5, P10	<i>P5: “Success in small steps — finishing a task, completing training, or getting paid — builds real confidence that transfers to other areas of life.”</i>
Motivation (family & guest feedback)	P6, P9	<i>P9: “Positive customer or manager feedback motivates them hugely — recognition is as important as the paycheck.”</i>
Goal of independence	P1, P11	<i>P1: “Our aim is not just placement but helping them become independent workers who contribute to the labor market.”</i>
Self-care / hygiene	P2, P6	<i>P2: “We emphasize personal presentation — arriving clean, on time, and in uniform is part of building workplace identity.”</i>
Adherence to work discipline	P3, P7	<i>P7: “Once routines are clear, they follow schedules and rules with real discipline — sometimes even better than other employees.”</i>

Table 4. Theme 2 — Microsystem (Sub-Themes, Number of Participants, Quotes)

Sub-Theme	Participants	Representative Quote
Transport & daily logistics (public transport, cycling, support for commuting)	P2, P8	P8: <i>“Transport remains a daily challenge — if they can’t get to work independently, participation drops. Support with public transport or cycling training is crucial.”</i>
Mutual support networks (schools, NGOs, employers)	P5, P6, P9	P6: <i>“We try to build networks around each individual — when schools, NGOs, and employers collaborate, the support feels like a community.”</i>
Continuity of educational support (praktijkonderwijs, VSO, MBO)	P4, P2, P6	P4: <i>“Teachers push for work placements and insist on continuity — their insistence often makes the difference between staying at home and moving into work.”</i>
Employer leadership & clear team rules	P3, P7	P7: <i>“Strong leadership and clear rules help everyone — when expectations are explicit, inclusive teams function smoothly.”</i>
Peer mentoring & workplace team spirit	P3, P9, P10	P3: <i>“Colleagues step up — they show tasks, repeat instructions, and help create a team spirit that reduces isolation.”</i>
Involvement of NGOs & volunteers	P6, P10	P10: <i>“NGOs often provide that extra layer of support — volunteers or staff fill gaps that employers cannot always cover.”</i>
Flexibility in working hours & scheduling	P1, P12	P12: <i>“Not every employee with an intellectual disability can work standard shifts — flexible hours make inclusion possible.”</i>

Table 5. Theme 3 — Meso & Exosystem (Sub-Themes, Number of Participants, Quotes)

Sub-Theme	Participants	Representative Quote
Inter-agency coordination between schools, municipalities, and employers	P1, P3, P5 (3)	<i>P3: “It only works when schools, municipalities, and employers keep in touch — otherwise young people just get lost after graduation.”</i>
Job-coach mediation and follow-up	P2, P4 (2)	<i>P4: “The job coach is the link — they check in with the company and the family, making sure expectations are realistic on both sides.”</i>
Municipal employment services and inclusion policies	P1, P3 (2)	<i>P1: “The municipality supports us with wage subsidies and guidance; without that, most employers would hesitate to hire.”</i>
Family involvement through professional mediation	P2, P6 (2)	<i>P2: “Parents are not always directly involved, but we inform them regularly through the school or the coach.”</i>
Employer collaboration networks and awareness actions	P1, P5 (2)	<i>P1: “We have local meetings with inclusive employers; they share experiences and encourage others to participate.”</i>
Regional labour-market partnerships (WSP / social firms)	P3, P4 (2)	<i>P3: “The Work Service Point connects us with suitable companies — it’s a regional network that really helps.”</i>
Funding and administrative complexity	P5 (1)	<i>P5: “Every scheme has its own paperwork — municipalities differ, and that’s frustrating for employers.”</i>
Sustainability and continuity of placements	P1, P2 (2)	<i>P1: “After six months of subsidy, some placements stop — we need a longer-term view.”</i>
Positive spill-over effects and social perception	P4 (1)	<i>P4: “Other companies see it working and start asking how they can do the same.””</i>

Table 6. Theme 4 — Macrosystem (Sub-Themes, Number of Participants, Quotes)

Sub-Theme	Participants	Representative Quote
Communication between schools, job coaches, and employers	P2, P4, P12	P4: “It only works if schools, job coaches, and employers talk regularly — otherwise young people fall through the cracks.”
Flexible shift scheduling & employer adaptation	P3, P12	P12: “We can’t expect everyone to work a standard 9-to-5. Flexibility in shifts and tasks is the key to success.”
Coordination gaps between institutions (UWV, municipalities, schools, NGOs)	P1, P5	P1: “We often work in silos — the municipality, UWV, and schools don’t always coordinate, and families end up confused.”
Internships & limited job coach capacity	P2, P9	P2: “We try to arrange placements, but without enough job coaches, it’s hit or miss whether the match is sustainable.”
Education–business connection (MBO / praktijkonderwijs ↔ workplaces)	P4, P7	P7: “We need more structured collaboration with vocational schools — practical learning at school should connect directly to real jobs.”
Support networks via NGOs and associations	P6, P10	P6: “NGOs often build bridges, linking families and employers. Without them, many young people would be left out.”
Local government promotion / lack of scale-up support	P11	P11: “There are great small initiatives in Rotterdam, but the city isn’t promoting them enough to scale them up.”
Bureaucratic burden (UWV, doelgroepregister, funding delays)	P1, P8	P8: “Registering in the doelgroepregister takes months — by the time approvals come, motivation is often lost.”
Employer internal policies (mixed teams, task clarity)	P3, P12	P3: “We use mixed teams and clear role division — it helps everyone know what is expected.”
Social perception & awareness through direct contact	P5, P7	P7: “Customers are surprised at how well it works — seeing inclusion in practice changes their perception immediately.”
State incentives & quotas (Participatiewet, Banenafspraak)	P1, P11	P11: “The Banenafspraak quotas exist, but many employers don’t understand them — we need clearer communication and stronger incentives.”
Opportunities from Rotterdam’s logistics & port economy	P12	P12: “The port and logistics sector has real opportunities, but we need training programs that actually prepare people with ID for these jobs.”

Table 7. Theme 5 — Chronosystem (The Impact of Time)

Sub-Theme	Participants	Representative Quote
COVID-19 disruption & post-pandemic rebuild	P2, P1	<i>P2: “During COVID, many training and work placements stopped — young people lost routine. Afterward, we rebuilt step by step, with schools and municipalities working more closely.”</i>
Flexible organization: smaller groups & shorter shifts	P3, P12	<i>P3: “We reduced team sizes and shortened shifts — it made the work more manageable and supported inclusion.”</i>
Digitalization of coordination & training	P4, P8	<i>P4: “We now use WhatsApp groups, online municipal portals, and short video tutorials. Digital tools have become standard in coordination and training.”</i>
Shift from ‘protection’ to ‘autonomy & rights’	P5, P11	<i>P5: “Ten years ago, the focus was mostly on protection. Today, inclusion is about autonomy, rights, and participation — the Participatiewet reflects this cultural shift.”</i>
Diffusion of inclusive business models in the Netherlands	P7, P10	<i>P7: “Models like Brownies & DownieS cafés or logistics firms hiring via the Banenafspraak show how inclusive business can spread — these examples inspire other employers.”</i>
Sport and leisure as drivers of confidence & work readiness	P6, P9	<i>P9: “Sports and structured leisure activities give young people confidence — that energy carries into work, especially in teamwork and discipline.”</i>

Table 8. Theme 6 — Problems (Sub-Themes, Number of Participants, Quotes)

Sub-Theme	Participants	Representative Quote
Stigma / Persistent social distance	P5, P2, P7	P5: “People still say, ‘It’s wonderful what you’re doing,’ but they don’t imagine their own child working next to someone with an intellectual disability.” P2: “We are still far from seeing disability as something normal in the workplace.”
Uneven education-to-work transition (MBO / praktijkonderwijs)	P4, P6	P4: “Some schools are excellent at preparing students for work, others struggle — the transition is still uneven.” P6: “There is a clear gap between inclusion at school and inclusion at work.”
Employer ignorance / lack of disability-specific training	P3, P7, P8, P10	P3: “We don’t get any structured training on disability — most of us learn by trial and error.” P8: “Employers focus on productivity and speed. They often don’t understand that adaptation makes performance possible.”
Policy deficiencies / bureaucracy & weak promotion	P1, P11	P1: “The UWV procedures and doelgroepregister take too long — by the time approval comes, employers lose interest.” P11: “Great initiatives exist in Rotterdam, but there’s no strong promotion or scaling-up from the municipality.”
Insufficient social support (transport, job coaching)	P2, P8, P6	P2: “There are not enough job coaches for personalized placements — we can’t cover the demand.” P8: “Transport remains a barrier, especially for jobs outside the city center.”

Table 9. Theme 7 — Proposed Solutions and Strategies

Sub-Theme	Participants	Representative Quote
Awareness & visibility (show success stories)	P5, P7	P5: “We need more visibility for success stories — the media and municipalities could highlight inclusive workplaces more actively.” P7: “When customers see it works, their perceptions change. That should be promoted.”
Bridge education to work (shared pathways)	P4, P6, P9	P6: “We need structured pathways from VSO and MBO schools into real jobs, not a drop-off after graduation.” P9: “A shared database between schools and employers would help track young people after they leave school.”
Streamline funding & reduce bureaucracy	P1, P11	P1: “Employers get lost in UWV paperwork — funding exists but is too complex and too slow.” P11: “Small NGOs and firms don’t always have the capacity to navigate all the procedures.”
Transport & commuting support	P2, P8	P8: “Transport is often the only barrier left — without subsidies or mobility training, many can’t take jobs outside the city center.”
Continuous training (teachers, job coaches, employers)	P4, P2, P10	P10: “We should invest in continuous training — not just one-off, but regular refreshers for teachers, job coaches, and employers.”
Strengthen job coach role (UWV/municipality)	P2, P9	P2: “We need more job coaches and a clearer professional role — right now it’s too fragmented and underfunded.”
Regional coordination hub for inclusive employment	P1, P5	P1: “Rotterdam should have a dedicated coordination office for inclusive employment — a single point of contact for schools, employers, and NGOs.”
Use digital tools (coordination & training content)	P4, P10	P4: “WhatsApp groups, scheduling apps, and video tutorials are now part of our toolkit — they should be systematically integrated.”
Leverage sport to build confidence & work skills	P6, P9	P6: “Sports and teamwork build confidence — we see the same discipline translate into workplace success.”
Employer engagement (clear rules, mixed teams)	P3, P12	P3: “Mixed teams with clear rules work best — it creates structure and mutual respect for everyone.”

Scale-up & replication support by institutions	P11, P10	<i>P11: “There are strong pilots in Rotterdam, but without institutional promotion and scaling, they remain isolated.”</i>
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Table 10. Theme 8 — Good Practices

Sub-Theme	Participants	Representative Quote
Special/vocational education schools (VSO, MBO, praktijkonderwijs)	P4, P6	<i>P6: “Practical education and MBO schools provide structured pathways — placements are treated as part of training, which helps employers accept them.” P4: “Schools often initiate first work experiences, making the step into employment smoother.”</i>
Workplace support programs (on-the-job training, mixed teams, clear rules)	P3, P12	<i>P3: “We run training directly in the workplace. Clear rules and mixed teams help young people feel like real colleagues.” P12: “Structured onboarding and teamwork policies are essential for sustainable inclusion.”</i>
Social responsibility projects (NGO/municipality-led initiatives, inclusive cafés)	P5, P7	<i>P5: “Projects like Brownies & DownieS cafés or NGO-led initiatives show how inclusion can be combined with business.” P7: “Retail chains in Rotterdam are beginning to see inclusion as part of their social responsibility.”</i>
Local government support (Werkgeversservicepunt, Participatiewet, Banenafspraak)	P1, P11	<i>P1: “Werkgeversservicepunt Rijnmond finances internships and helps employers with subsidies.” P11: “The Banenafspraak quotas are important, but support from the municipality makes them practical.”</i>
Technology use (digital coordination & training materials)	P4, P10	<i>P4: “We use WhatsApp groups, scheduling apps, and video tutorials daily — digital tools make learning and coordination easier.” P10: “Short videos and photos are now standard in teaching workplace routines.”</i>
Hospitality & logistics inclusion (quality-first, customer visibility)	P3, P12	<i>P3: “Customers see inclusion in action every day — it changes perceptions more than any campaign.” P12: “In logistics, inclusion works when quality standards are kept clear and consistent.”</i>
Sport as inclusion enabler (confidence & teamwork)	P2, P9	<i>P2: “Sports build discipline and teamwork — the same skills that make someone reliable at work.” P9: “Confidence gained on the sports field often carries directly into the workplace.”</i>

Discussion

Inclusive employment for people with intellectual disabilities (ID) in Rotterdam emerges from the interaction of individual capabilities, school–employer–service collaboration, local program design (e.g., UWV and Werkgeversservicepunt Rijnmond), and the broader Dutch legal–cultural environment.

Individual level. Participants consistently emphasized communication, teamwork, reliability, following clear rules, and gaining self-confidence as decisive for successful labor market inclusion. Employers and job coaches underlined that individuals with ID thrive when routines are structured and expectations explicit. This is particularly visible in hospitality and retail, where customer interaction provides immediate feedback and reinforces motivation. International evidence confirms that soft skills, supported supervision, and structured environments are strong predictors of job sustainability for persons with ID, while in the Dutch context, visible high-quality service—as in the case of Brownies & Downies cafés—also helps shift public perceptions of disability toward competence and value.

Education & microsystem (schools, families, mentors). While families were not present in this focus group, professionals pointed out that schools (VSO, praktijkonderwijs, MBO) and mentors play a central role in preparing young people with ID for employment. Teachers often push for internships and insist on continuity of learning after graduation, but participants highlighted a persistent **school-to-work gap**: once education ends, young people often lose structured support. This aligns with Dutch studies that recognize the strength of inclusive schooling but underline the weakness of transition pathways. Some NGOs and vocational programs attempt to fill this void, but systematic bridging remains underdeveloped in Rotterdam.

Institutional & employer level (meso/exosystem). Two concrete levers were identified: (a) the availability of skilled job coaches and educators who can scaffold workers with ID, and (b) collaboration between employers, municipalities, and agencies such as the **Werkgeversservicepunt Rijnmond**. While inclusive employers in Rotterdam (hospitality, retail, logistics) experiment with clear team rules, peer mentoring, and structured onboarding, the shortage of job coaches and bureaucratic procedures were seen as significant barriers. The group stressed that employer-focused interventions—like disability awareness training, workflow redesign, and on-the-job coaching—improve hiring and retention. These findings echo broader Dutch evaluations of the Participatiewet, which emphasize employer engagement as critical to inclusion.

Legal-policy & societal context (macrosystem). The Dutch legal framework, especially the **Participatiewet (2015)** and the **Banenafspraken**, provides a rights-based foundation for disability employment. However, participants stressed that quota compliance remains uneven, bureaucratic complexity discourages small and medium employers, and institutional promotion of successful initiatives is weak. Municipal representatives acknowledged that although Rotterdam hosts innovative practices, there is insufficient scaling or systematic visibility at the national level. Culturally, Dutch society emphasizes participation and independence, yet stigma toward intellectual disability persists—employers and the public are often more comfortable with physical disabilities than with intellectual ones.

Chronosystem (change over time). COVID-19 was described as a major disruption: internships were halted, work placements suspended, and routines lost. Yet it also triggered adaptations that have persisted—smaller work teams, shorter shifts, and a stronger reliance on **digital tools** (WhatsApp scheduling, online portals, video tutorials). These practices now form part of the inclusive employment toolkit in Rotterdam. More broadly, participants emphasized a cultural shift: from a “protective” model of disability inclusion to a “rights and autonomy” model, with greater recognition of persons with ID as active citizens and contributors to the labor market.

Conclusion

The focus group in Rotterdam highlights that inclusive employment for people with intellectual disabilities (ID) in the Netherlands is progressing but remains uneven. At the individual level, the strengths of workers with ID—reliability, teamwork, communication skills, and growing self-confidence—demonstrate their capacity to contribute meaningfully when provided with structure, coaching, and clear expectations. Employers who invest in inclusive practices report positive outcomes for both workplace culture and customer perception.

At the institutional level, schools (VSO, praktijkonderwijs, MBO) and job coaches are crucial in preparing and supporting young people with ID, yet the persistent gap between education and employment remains the system’s weakest link. Rotterdam employers and service providers stressed the need for **bridging programs** that extend support beyond graduation into real jobs. Municipal and national agencies, such as UWV and Werkgeversservicepunt Rijnmond, provide financial and procedural frameworks, but participants highlighted ongoing shortages of job coaches, bureaucratic delays, and inconsistent enforcement of the Banenafspraken.

From a societal and policy perspective, the Dutch framework is well aligned with international rights standards (CRPD), but implementation challenges—particularly around quotas, awareness, and scaling of good practices—limit its effectiveness. Stigma toward intellectual disabilities, while slowly diminishing, still acts as a barrier in many workplaces.



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COVID-19 further revealed vulnerabilities, but it also accelerated innovations such as digital coordination, smaller work teams, and more flexible scheduling, which now offer valuable lessons for sustainable inclusion.

Overall, the Rotterdam case suggests that inclusive employment is not only a matter of policy compliance but also of **cultural change and organizational innovation**. Success depends on coordinated efforts across education, employers, municipalities, NGOs, and national agencies. To move forward, three priorities emerge: (1) structured school-to-work bridges with intensive job coaching; (2) simplification of bureaucratic procedures and stronger promotion of success stories; and (3) long-term investment in inclusive business models that normalize the presence of people with ID in mainstream workplaces.

Inclusive employment should therefore be seen not as an act of charity, but as a **mutual investment**—enhancing dignity, independence, and social participation for people with ID, while enriching Dutch workplaces and communities through diversity, resilience, and shared value.



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