

UPWORK – FACTSHEET

Social Inclusion and Employment of SN (Special Needs) and Mentally Vulnerable People

1. Introduction and Purpose

This factsheet presents a concise overview of the labour market participation of people with Special Needs (SN) and mentally vulnerable individuals in five EU countries — Greece, Italy, Poland, Denmark, and Spain — based on the research conducted by UPWORK partners.

The data demonstrate that while employment opportunities for people with disabilities and psychosocial vulnerabilities are slowly improving, significant barriers persist. Employers remain key actors in bridging the gap between policy and practice.

2. European Overview

Across Europe, employment rates for people with disabilities remain far below those of the general population. According to EU averages, only around **50%** of persons with disabilities are in employment compared to **75%** of non-disabled persons. The gap widens further for individuals with psychosocial or mental health challenges, whose labour force participation often drops below **30%**.

Common trends observed by UPWORK partners:

- **Low awareness among employers** about existing incentives and accommodations.
- **Persistent stigma** around psychosocial disabilities and mental vulnerability.
- **Limited accessibility and flexibility** in workplaces and recruitment procedures.
- **Positive results** from targeted support measures (e.g., Flexjob in Denmark, Supported Employment in Poland, hiring incentives in Italy and Greece).

3. Country Snapshots

GREECE (Oloklirosi)

- Employment rate for people with disabilities (15–64): **26.2%** (ELSTAT, 2023).
- Unemployment rate: **19.4%**, double that of the general population.
- Barriers include health limitations, lack of accessibility, insufficient training, and employer bias.
- The **National Strategy for the Social Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities (2024–2030)** promotes incentives, accessible workplaces, and digital inclusion.

Key takeaway: Despite progress in legislation, implementation gaps and limited employer engagement hinder inclusion.

ITALY (CSCI Novara / Soro Tori)

- Employment rate (18–64): **32.5%** (ISTAT, 2023).
- Around **48%** of companies comply fully with **Law 68/99**, which mandates the hiring of people with disabilities.
- **+14% increase** in firms using hiring incentives (ANPAL data, 2023).
- The main obstacles identified: skill mismatches, bureaucratic rigidity, and limited employer sensitivity.

Key takeaway: Incentive schemes work, but cultural change and administrative simplification are needed to expand inclusion.

POLAND (Stella Virium)

- **477,400** persons with disabilities employed (mid-2023).
- Employment rate: **31.2%** (EU average: 50.7%).
- **Supported Employment model** has assisted over **13,000** persons during the last two decades; about **40%** transitioned into open labour market positions.
- The majority of employees with disabilities work in the service sector or sheltered workshops.

Key takeaway: Supported employment is an effective pathway for transition, but integration into open markets remains limited.

DENMARK (FO Aarhus)

- More than **80,000** individuals work under the **Flexjob scheme**, which offers part-time or adapted employment with wage subsidies.
- National employment rate for people with disabilities: **~53%**, compared to **76%** for non-disabled people.
- Only **1 in 4 employers** actively consider candidates with disabilities in their hiring processes.
- Psychosocial disabilities remain under-represented even within inclusion schemes.

Key takeaway: Denmark's adapted employment model is successful, but mainstream employer practices must evolve beyond formal schemes.

SPAIN (Gureak)

- Record **538,717** persons with disabilities employed in 2023 (+55% since 2013).

- Labour force participation rate: **35.0%**, with only **29%** among those with psychosocial disabilities.
- Working-age population with disabilities: **1.95 million (6.2%)**.
- Most employees with disabilities hold **full-time, permanent contracts**, primarily in services, hospitality, and manufacturing.
- Supported companies like **GUREAK** play a critical role in bridging social and economic inclusion.

Key takeaway: Spain demonstrates that strong regional ecosystems and social enterprises can dramatically increase employment opportunities.

4. Cross-Country Insights

| Indicator | Greece | Italy | Poland | Denmark | Spain |
|---|-----------------------------|------------------------|----------------------|----------------|----------------------------|
| Employment rate of PwD (%) | 26.2 | 32.5 | 31.2 | 53.0 | 35.0 |
| General population (%) | ~60 | ~63 | ~65 | 76 | ~70 |
| Gap (percentage points) | ~34 | ~30 | ~34 | 23 | ~35 |
| Psychosocial disability participation (%) | — | — | — | Low | 29 |
| Main policy / scheme | National Inclusion Strategy | Law 68/99 + Incentives | Supported Employment | Flexjob Scheme | Supported Employment + CEE |
| Active employer engagement | Low | Medium | Low | Medium | High (social enterprises) |

5. Barriers and Enablers

Barriers:

- Limited employer awareness of SN and mental vulnerability issues.
- Inadequate workplace adaptations and accessibility.
- Stereotypes and social stigma.
- Fragmented services and regional inequalities.

Enablers:

- Public subsidies and incentive systems (GR, IT).
- Supported and adapted employment schemes (PL, DK).
- Social enterprises and regional networks (ES).
- Training and upskilling pathways like **UPWORK**, linking personal empowerment with employer engagement.

6. Policy and Employer Recommendations

1. **Promote inclusive recruitment** – advertise positions openly to SN candidates and review selection criteria.
2. **Use available incentives** – e.g., ANPAL schemes in Italy, national programmes in Greece.
3. **Partner with support organisations** – collaborate with associations and employment services for vulnerable groups.
4. **Offer workplace accommodations** – flexible hours, job carving, adapted roles.
5. **Monitor and share success stories** – visibility of inclusive employers drives cultural change.

7. Conclusion

The analysis across five European countries highlights a clear message: **employment inclusion of SN and mentally vulnerable people is possible, measurable, and beneficial** — not only socially but economically.

When employers embrace inclusive recruitment, supported pathways, and workplace flexibility, they gain access to motivated, loyal, and skilled workers.

UPWORK continues to build bridges between **mental health, skills development, and labour inclusion**, empowering both individuals and employers to unlock potential.

Sources

- Oloklirosi – *Statistical and Data Collection Report – Greece, 2025*
- CSCI Novara / Soro Tori – *Statistical and Data Collection Report – Italy, 2025*
- Stella Virium – *Statistical and Data Collection Report – Poland, 2025*
- FO Aarhus – *Statistical and Data Collection Report – Denmark, 2025*
- Gureak – *Statistical and Data Collection Report – Spain, 2025*