



Pathways to  
Employment

2025  
October

## Research report

WP2- Research Knowledge Acquisition

# Pathways to Employment

Developed by:

Proportional Message

Project Number:

2024-2-NO02-YOU-000287089



Co-funded by  
the European Union



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**Project Title:** Pathways to employment: Supporting autistic youth in overcoming employment barriers

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## Introduction

The **Pathways to Employment (PTE)** project is dedicated to fostering employment inclusion for young people on the autism spectrum (TG1) within the European job market. **Work Package 2 “Research Knowledge Acquisition”** (WP2) serves as a foundational phase aimed at bridging the gap between the skills and expectations of young people on the autism spectrum (aged 18 to 29) and the demands of the labour market, particularly within Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs). This work involves partners from 6 EU countries: Norway (**Spir Oslo**), Italy (**ASCAE**), Portugal (**Proportional Message**), Ireland (**The Rural Hub**), Sweden (**Impact Hub**), and Spain (**Kogui Hub**), each contributing to the comprehensive research and analysis.

This research began with **desk research** in which partners identified and analysed **2 best practices per country** - successful national strategies and solutions adopted by companies and organisations for the employment inclusion of youth on the autism spectrum. These desk findings provided a contextual and strategic framework for the subsequent primary research. Following the desk research phase, **field research** was conducted involving **surveys and interviews** with youth on the autism spectrum (**TG1.1**), youth workers (**TG1.2**), and SME employers/HR managers (**TG2**). This phase sought to uncover concrete challenges and needs related to workforce inclusion, mapping employment barriers and identifying specific professional and interpersonal competences gaps.

Together, these research components offer a robust evidence base that identifies at least **10 key employment barriers** and **6 professional and interpersonal skills gaps**. These insights are critical for the overall project success, since they will inform the design and implementation of a tailor-made training programme in WP3, directed to the real needs of **TG1.1** and **TG2**. The report also aims to **raise awareness** among employers about inclusive hiring practices and provides practical recommendations to overcome cultural and organisational barriers. The Report is available in all partner languages and will be disseminated widely to maximise impact through project and Erasmus+ platforms, as well as dedicated events.

## Accessibility and Formatting Statement

Inclusion and accessibility are core principles of this project - **Pathways to Employment**. strive to ensure that all project outputs are accessible for all audiences. This document has been formatted with accessibility in mind, following inclusion guidelines from the **European Disability Forum** (EDF). The text is left-aligned to support ease of reading for youth on the autism spectrum and others with neurodiverse profiles. Verdana font has been selected as it is widely regarded as one of the most accessible typefaces, promoting clear letterforms and spacing. The font size is set at 11 points to ensure optimal visibility without compromising layout. Additionally, emphasis is applied using bold text exclusively, avoiding underlining or italics, which can reduce readability for individuals with cognitive or visual processing differences. Furthermore, all images, including logos, include alternative text to ensure accessibility for screen reader users. These formatting choices aim to make the report as accessible and user-friendly as possible for all readers.

## PTE WP2 Methodology

	<b>Methodology</b>	<b>Expected Objectives</b>
<b>Desk Research</b>	Partners applied a common keyword strategy, adapted to national languages, consulting academic databases, European and national reports, grey literature, and recent company case studies. Initial research focused on mapping national contexts of inclusive employment, especially for young people on the autism spectrum, aged 18 to 29. Subsequently, 2 best practices per country were identified, prioritising autism-specific initiatives for youth.	Identify successful national strategies and solutions for the employment of young people on the autism spectrum (18–29 years).
<b>Field Research</b>	Surveys and interviews conducted with young people on the autism spectrum, youth workers, and SME employers/HR managers across partner countries. Data collection aimed to understand employment barriers and map professional and interpersonal competence gaps.	Survey/Interview at least 120 respondents (60 TG1, 60 TG2). Identify 10 main barriers and 6 key competency gaps affecting employment inclusion among TG1.1
<b>Ethical Considerations</b>	All activities incorporated informed consent from participants. Surveys/interviews provide clear information on data processing and usage. All data was anonymised to protect the identity of the participants and their organisations. Research materials/methods were designed inclusively, ensuring accessible language and formats tailored to participants with ASD, with inclusive design principles developed under the PM's guidance.	

## Desk research Findings: Analysis Best Practices

### Methodology Summary

The desk research employed a rigorous and standardised protocol across all partner countries - Norway, Italy, Portugal, Ireland, Sweden, and Spain - to ensure robust, comparable findings. Each partner began by investigating the national context of employment inclusion for youth on the autism spectrum (aged 18–29), using a uniform search strategy. A broad spectrum of sources was consulted, including **academic databases** (Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR), **peer-reviewed literature, European and national reports** (from bodies such as the EU and Eurofound), **official government policies**, as well as **grey literature** (NGO reports, project evaluations). In addition, employer and project websites were used to capture recent case studies and initiatives not yet represented in scientific research.

The screening process involved several stages to maintain quality and relevance:

- **Screening:** Titles and abstracts were systematically reviewed against predefined inclusion criteria.
- **Inclusion and Extraction:** For each country, 2 best practices were selected (prioritising at least one autism-specific initiative), and comprehensive information was extracted using a shared template. This captured the type of initiative (policy, company, or programme), target group, operational mechanisms (such as mentoring, job coaching, recruitment adaptation), evidence of impact (quantitative or qualitative), major success factors, challenges encountered, and potential for broader application.

#### Inclusion Criteria

Published in the last 15 years (2009– 2024) Lacked credibility, such as opinion blogs or unverifiable claims, Addressing employment inclusion of youth with ASD aged 18–29, Addressed initiatives outside the target age group,

#### Exclusion Criteria

With at least one practice autism-specific (the second could be broader neurodiversity, if relevant),

Supported by evidence of concrete implementation and outcomes.

All practices identified were compiled in a central “Analysis Best Practices Report”. **Kogui Hub**, following agreed project guidelines, validated each entry/best practice to ensure uniqueness, comparability, and absence of duplication before the final selection and developing the report.

## National Contexts Summary

Across partner countries, diverse policy environments and frameworks shape the employment inclusion landscape for youth with ASD. **Norway** combines strong anti-discrimination legislation with an active welfare-to-work system led by NAV (The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration), including Supported Employment and Adapted Work programmes, but persistent employment gaps remain, especially among young disability benefit recipients diagnosed with autism. **Portugal** applies disability hiring quotas (1–2% for firms with >75 staff) supplemented by incentives; however, **TG1.1** are still underrepresented in the labour market. **Italy** enforces employment quotas via Law 68/1999 and supports autism services through Law 134/2015, though youth employment rates are very low with significant regional disparities. **Ireland** features one of the widest disability employment gaps in Europe despite a comprehensive legal framework including the Employment Equality Act and the first autism-specific Autism Innovation Strategy (2024). **Sweden’s** comprehensive disability rights laws and proactive public employment service contend with challenges of limited employer awareness and insufficient transition supports, leaving inclusive adult employment rates far below the general population average. **Spain** mandates a 2% quota for medium-to-large companies and has a National Autism Strategy alongside Special Employment Centres, yet youth employment rates remain around 25%.

## Best Practices

Country	Best Practice Name	Type	Key Features	Impact / Added Value
Norway	Spesialistbedriften (Ålesund)	Social enterprise	Strengths-based employment, individual assessment, NAV collaboration, mentoring, online study	Replicable strengths-first model linking inclusion to market value; needs stable funding
	Job Seekers with Asperger's Syndrome (NAV handbook)	National guidance	Practical manual translating clinical knowledge for inclusive counselling and accommodations	Scalable system-level resource standardising inclusion across services
Portugal	Specialisterne	Corporate programme	Adapted recruitment, combined technical/social training, ongoing mentoring	Scalable, internationally recognised corporate-led initiative; >85% retention
	Valor T (SCML)	National platform	Multidisciplinary candidate evaluation, employer matching, long-term support (18 months)	National scale coordination of jobseekers, employers, and support services
Italy	PizzAut Onlus	Social enterprise	Restaurants staffed by <b>TG1.1</b> , job coaching, awareness-raising, training	Combines real jobs with cultural advocacy to reduce stigma

	Coopservice x Casa Gioia (HR Inclusion)	Corporate pilot	ABA-based job coaching, structured onboarding, staff training, monitoring	Shows mainstream companies can include employees with ASD when they have the right supports
<b>Ireland</b>	Comprehensive Employment Strategy (2015–2024)	Policy framework	Cross-government policy, supported employment, public sector hiring targets	Rights-based approach integrating autism inclusion into mainstream labour policy
	Same Chance Toolkit (AsIAm & IrishJobs.ie)	Toolkit for SMEs	Checklists, awareness training, guidance on accommodations	Accessible, actionable inclusion for SMEs lacking HR expertise
<b>Sweden</b>	TRANSITION (KIND, Karolinska Institutet)	Pilot programme	Goal attainment scaling, individual coaching, group sessions	Evidence-based, person-centred model adopted by municipalities
	Unicus Sweden (Auticon Group)	Social enterprise	Skills-based recruitment, continuous coaching, client company training	Positions ASD strengths as business asset; builds employer awareness
<b>Spain</b>	Specialisterne Spain	Corporate programme	Training, social coaching, employer enablement, strengths-based placement	Proven model bridging candidates with ASD to employers through tailored support
	CaixaBank Diversity & Inclusion Plan (2022–2024)	Corporate initiative	VR training, adapted workstations, family support	Embeds autism inclusion into large corporate governance for visibility and institutionalisation

## What works and why?

The initial research indicates that the employment inclusion of **TG1.1** is most effective when interventions are designed in an integrated manner, combining **strong policy frameworks, active employer engagement, and personalised coaching mechanisms**. Evidence from the field reinforces that a dual-customer approach - simultaneously supporting employees with ASD and employers - results in higher job retention rates, as it enables tailored workplace adaptations that respond to both sides' needs.

In addition, the reliance on **conventional interviews** often represents a **barrier** for candidates with ASD, highlighting the **need for alternative recruitment pathways**. Effective alternative of methods could be portfolio reviews, task-based assessments, and job trials, which allow candidates to demonstrate skills in a more authentic and equitable way. Another critical factor identified is the provision of **structured transition supports**. **School-to-work plans** and **supported internships** play a key role in preventing early disengagement and ensuring smoother entry into the labour market.

Finally, the importance of **continuous monitoring** cannot be understated: tracking outcomes such as retention, job satisfaction, and overall well-being enables evidence-based adjustments, ensuring both the sustainability and scalability of inclusion practices.

## Persistent Gaps

Despite progress, several persistent gaps continue to undermine the effectiveness and equity of employment inclusion initiatives. According to PTE Desk Research, current efforts remain heavily concentrated in the **IT sector** and in **major urban centres**, which leaves rural areas and other economic sectors underserved. Small and medium-sized (**SME**) **enterprises** (SMEs), which constitute the majority of employers, frequently **lack the HR capacity and expertise to implement inclusion practices**, often depending on simplified toolkits rather than comprehensive strategies.

In addition, coordination between public employment services, NGOs, and private employers remains limited, reducing the potential for systemic impact and sustainable pathways. A further challenge lies in the scarcity of long-term, longitudinal data on career progression and employment trajectories of **TG1.1**, which restricts the ability to measure impact, identify trends, and inform evidence-based policy development.

## Strategic Recommendations

Based on the synthesis and conclusions gathered from this Best Practices Analysis, we propose the following strategic recommendations to support inclusive employment practices for **TG1.1**. These recommendations reflect practical success examples across partner countries and aim to inform policy makers, service providers, employers, and stakeholders involved in designing, implementing, and scaling employment inclusion initiatives.

- **Institutionalise Dual Support Systems:** Ensure dedicated job coaching budgets and frameworks serve both employees with ASD and employers, fostering retention and enabling tailored workplace adaptations.
- **Standardise Inclusive Recruitment Practices:** Promote adoption of task-based assessments, sensory-aware evaluations, and interview alternatives as formal standards.
- **Invest in Transition Mechanisms:** Public entities can develop structured school-to-work modules, micro-internships, and career liaison roles to reduce early unemployment and disengagement among **TG1.1**.
- **Expand Inclusion Beyond IT:** Create pathways in sectors such as hospitality, logistics, public administration, and the green transition/economy.
- **Support SMEs:** Provide condensed inclusion toolkits, micro-learning packages, and local mentor networks to help SMEs implement inclusive practices without high administrative burden.
- **Develop Long-Term Monitoring:** Establish outcome tracking at 6, 12, and 24 months focusing on retention, well-being, income progression, and employer satisfaction.

- **Bridge Micro and Macro Levels:** Combine enterprise-level pilot programmes with national system-level policies. This dual pathway ensures innovative local approaches are embedded within scalable, sustainable national frameworks. Prioritise knowledge translation to convert clinical expertise into practical guidance for counsellors and employers.

## Field Research Findings: Surveys & Interviews

Following the desk research phase, a rigorous field research was undertaken to gather direct insights from key stakeholders involved in the employment of **TG1.1**. This phase employed **qualitative** and **quantitative methods**, primarily involving **surveys** and **semi-structured interviews** conducted across all partner countries, to understand the challenges and needs related to the inclusion of young people on the autism spectrum in the labour market.

### Target Groups

The methodology targeted three main respondent groups:

- **Young people on the autism spectrum & youth workers (TG1):** At least 60 respondents (10 per partner country), with a minimum of 50% (5 per partner) being **TG1.1** aged 18 to 29. Each partner ensured at least 2 stakeholders completed interviews rather than only surveys.
- **SME workers & HR managers (TG2):** At least 60 respondents (10 per partner country), also with at least 2 interviews per partner to complement survey responses.

### Data Collection Methods

**Surveys:** 3 distinct online questionnaires were deployed, each tailored to one of the **TGs**. These surveys, created and provided by **PM**, via Google Forms, included both quantitative and qualitative questions to capture a broad range of data.

**Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews offered deeper insights into individual experiences and perspectives. Interview guidelines and scripts were developed by **PM** to ensure consistency, while allowing partners to adapt questions as needed to local contexts.

## Privacy and Anonymity

In alignment with ethical standards, partners ensured that all data were collected anonymously. Both surveys and interviews included clear privacy statements explaining data handling in accordance with the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Participants provided informed consent via mandatory checkboxes before interview participation, and personal identifiers were not collected. Additionally, participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any point without consequence.

## Feedback and Evaluation

To assess the relevance and user experience of the research instruments, satisfaction questions were included at the end of surveys and interviews. These captured qualitative feedback alongside quantitative ratings, with the aim (KPI) of achieving at least 80% positive responses regarding the usefulness, and relevance of the research content.

### TG1.1 – Youth on the Autism Spectrum

Country	Survey Responses	Interview Responses	Outcome Vs. Objective (KPIs)
Italy	3	2	Met all KPIs.
Norway	0	2	Met interview target; shortfall in survey responses.
Portugal	4	2	Met/exceed KPIs.
Sweden	0	1	Met interview target; shortfall in survey responses.
Ireland	7	1	Met/exceed KPIs.

Spain	3	1	Met interview target; shortfall in survey responses.
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### Participants Profile

**Italy:** 3 survey respondents aged 22-29 (2 male, 1 female), predominantly employed part-time or unemployed. All on the high-functioning autism spectrum. 2 interviewed participants (both male, 20-25 years old) with work experience or education-related job preparation.

**Norway:** 2 interviewed participants, both in vocational training with prior work placements; no survey responses. Both identify persons with ASD.

**Portugal:** 4 male survey respondents aged 18-25, mostly in education/training with one part-time employed. 2 interviewed male university students, unemployed but engaged in varied academic and extracurricular activities.

**Sweden:** 1 interview with an advocate representing **TG1.1**'s systemic challenges; 0 survey responses.

**Ireland:** 7 survey respondents aged 19-29, majority male with some female and 1 participant identifying as non-binary, mostly unemployed or in training. 1 interviewee aged 20, attending a disability support programme, diagnosed with high-functioning autism and social anxiety.

**Spain:** 3 male survey respondents aged 18-28, mostly in full-time employment or vocational training. 1 interviewee employed in logistics after vocational preparation.

### **Profile Summary**

This data highlights difficulties in reaching survey targets in some countries yet consistently meeting or approaching interview goals. Profiles illustrate a diverse but predominantly high-functioning **TG1.1** demographic engaged variably with education, training, and employment. As expected from desk research findings, the majority of participants are either not currently employed or have limited experience with full-time jobs, indicating lower labour market engagement overall. It is also notable that most participants are male, with a persistent difficulty in reaching young women on the

autism spectrum. This may reflect the lower diagnosis rates historically associated with girls, though the precise reasons are unclear.

### Key barriers

#### **Anxiety and Stress During Recruitment and Work**

A consistent barrier identified in multiple countries is **anxiety** and **stress** related to recruitment processes and workplace expectations:

- **Job interviews** are commonly reported as stressful, inducing fear of failure and performance anxiety.
- **Communication** with employers and navigating unwritten workplace norms with colleagues generates additional stress.
- Online application processes can be overwhelming, particularly when platforms are complex and unclear.

#### **Lack of Understanding and Awareness**

Young people frequently reported a lack of understanding from employers, supervisors, and colleagues:

- **Limited awareness of neurodiverse needs** leads to inappropriate expectations and exclusionary practices.
- Negative feedback and rigid workplace norms can exacerbate stress and lower self-confidence.

#### **Confidence and Self-Advocacy**

Low self-confidence and limited self-advocacy are common challenges:

- Many participants struggle to speak up about work/school-related issues or to represent themselves effectively in professional settings.
- Experiences of persistent negative feedback or **failure to fit neurotypical expectations** can result in long-term impacts on self-esteem.
- In Sweden, experiences within the education system create long-lasting pressures to conform, leading to burnout, mental health difficulties, and low confidence before even entering the job market.



## Sensory and Environmental Challenges

Sensory sensitivities and workplace environment factors were highlighted as significant barriers:

- Sensory overload from **noise, smells, or fast-paced work** demands can hinder performance and engagement.
- Variable or unstructured environments can be challenging for youth with ASD.

## Systemic and Societal Factors

Several systemic issues influence employability:

- Limited rural job opportunities restrict access to suitable work, particularly for those sensitive to social or sensory demands.
- Non-inclusive recruitment processes and selection criteria remain barriers in several countries.

### Skills Gaps

The research highlights a combination of hard (technical) and soft skills (interpersonal) gaps among **TG1.1**. While technical skills are generally adequate or easily trainable, soft skills appeared to present more consistent challenges affecting long-term employability and workplace integration.

### Hard Skills: Technical and Job-Specific Competencies

Job-specific technical (**hard**) **skills** are generally seen as important but not always a major barrier. Some participants experience difficulties when instructions are unclear, or processes are not explicitly explained. Digital and IT skills are generally strong, and participants report competence in technical and/or repetitive tasks, including using digital tools and social media management.

### Soft Skills: Interpersonal and Self-Management Competencies

On the other hand, **soft skills** gaps are consistently more pronounced across countries, impacting confidence, self-advocacy, and workplace interactions:

- **Time management** and **organisational skills** are recurring gaps, particularly for structuring tasks and managing deadlines.
- **CV writing** and **interview preparation** remain areas where **TG1.1** appear to struggle.
- **Communication** and **social skills**: Respondents declared to struggle with interactions, interviews, small talk, teamwork, and conflict resolution.
- **Emotional regulation** and **stress management**: High stress in dynamic or unclear situations is common, with some participants needing structured and continued support to manage anxiety and adapt to workplace expectations.
- **Teamwork** and **collaboration**: Shyness, limited initiative, or difficulty engaging in group dynamics can restrict participation and successful workplace integration.
- **Self-advocacy** and **confidence**: Many young people with ASD find it difficult to express needs, clarify instructions, or request support, often due to fear of making mistakes or low self-confidence.
- **Adaptability** and **coping with change**: Flexibility in work pace, schedules, and non-stable routines are challenging for some, particularly when workplace norms are unclear.

### Perceptions of workplace dynamics

#### **Importance of Structure and Clarity**

- **Clear and well-defined tasks, structured roles, and explicit instructions** are consistently highlighted as key to successful workplace participation for **TG1.1**.
- Structured support during transitions, such as onboarding or project handovers, helps reduce stress and build confidence.
- Flexibility in work schedules is valued, particularly when combined with predictable expectations.

#### **Mentoring, Support, and Training**

Mentoring or buddy systems provide crucial support, allowing young people to ask for help and navigate challenging tasks.

- Training for colleagues on autism inclusion is widely recognised as necessary to foster understanding, reduce misunderstandings, and create a supportive environment.
- Peer support and teamwork help integrate TG1.1 into workplace dynamics, although informal social integration remains a challenge.

## Social Dynamics and Inclusion

- Social expectations (e.g., small talk, eye contact, spontaneous conversations) can create feelings of exclusion, stress, or anxiety for youth with ASD.
- Misinterpretation of communication, **literal understanding**, or stereotypes - both positive (e.g., assumptions that persons with ASD are "geniuses") and negative (e.g., being perceived as antisocial, strange, or incapable) - can generate added pressure or fear of disappointing others.
- Acceptance of different working styles, such as being quiet or introverted, is critical. Productivity should not be measured solely through verbal interactions or social participation.

## Workplace Culture and Environmental Factors

- Lack of awareness among managers or colleagues about autism disorder contributes to feelings of being an outsider or poorly integrated.
- Noisy, unpredictable, or unsustainable workplace environments exacerbate stress and can negatively impact performance and inclusion.
- Experiences of bullying, power abuse, or gossip in previous workplaces highlight the importance of monitoring and responding to conflicts (Sweden).

Across Europe, young people on the autism spectrum perceive workplace dynamics as a mix of enabling and challenging factors. Structured tasks, mentoring, and colleague training support inclusion, while social expectations, miscommunication, and unsupportive cultures hinder it. Therefore, workplaces that accommodate diverse communication styles,

provide structured support, and promote awareness of neurodiverse needs are essential for enhancing engagement, confidence, and productivity.

### Support Mechanisms and Experiences of Inclusion and Exclusion

Across countries, respondents identified a combination of structural, social, and emotional supports that meaningfully enhance their inclusion at work. At the same time, the absence or inconsistency of these mechanisms often results in exclusion, misunderstanding, and disengagement from employment opportunities.

### **Effective Support Mechanisms and Inclusive Practices**

- **Job coaching, mentoring, and peer support** were among the most valued mechanisms. In Italy, mentoring from other autistic adults and job coaching were reported as highly effective. Portugal and Spain also emphasised the importance of peer support, particularly having colleagues who patiently explain tasks or initiate interactions, as this reduces anxiety and builds confidence. In Ireland, mentoring and mock interviews were considered very useful in preparing for employment.
- **Clear communication & structured feedback:** Youth in Norway and Sweden benefited from visual schedules, and clear workplace rules, and regular, direct. Additionally, predictable feedback systems that allow issues to be addressed calmly and constructively, without confrontation, and step-by-step demonstrations of tasks facilitate understanding and autonomy of these individuals.
- **Sensory and environmental adaptations:** Access to quiet or sensory-friendly spaces, adaptations of work equipment (e.g., noise cancelling headphones), flexible hours, possibility of remote work, opportunities to take breaks, and access to quiet spaces or sensorially inclusive environments support concentration and reduce stress.
- **Training and workplace readiness:** Mock interviews, CV workshops, and practical training focusing on real-life workplace dynamics are considered useful. Training should also address workplace boundaries and social dynamics.

- **Positive team culture:** Patience, kindness, and proactive social inclusion from colleagues significantly improve feelings of belonging and comfort at work. Colleague-led guidance is often more effective than top-down management instructions, fostering both inclusion and peer understanding.
- **Emotional and mental health support** - such as check-ins, empathetic supervisors, or awareness among colleagues - helped prevent stress escalation and improved workplace confidence.
- Autonomy and skill development through hands-on practice (e.g., learning to use public transport, structured guidance in new environments) increased confidence and employability of some respondents.

### **Lacking Mechanisms and Exclusionary Experiences**

Despite the suggestions of positive examples, several weaknesses were identified by **TG1.1** in current workplace/educational settings:

- **Post-hiring** and **long-term support** remain the most critical missing element. Respondents complained that sustained mentoring or follow-up after employment is rare, leaving many youth feeling unsupported when difficulties arise.
- **System inefficiency** and overreliance on unpaid internships were highlighted in Sweden, where Employment Services often fail to provide adequate or timely assistance.
- **Social exclusion** and **stigma** continue to pose significant challenges. Participants from Norway and Portugal described being misunderstood or judged for their communication styles, while others experienced subtle exclusion or stereotypes in team dynamics. In Ireland and Spain, several reported bullying, lack of feedback, and being overlooked during recruitment.
- **Attitudinal barriers** and **lack of autism awareness** among managers and colleagues were common. Youth expressed that their quieter, more introverted behaviours were often misinterpreted as disinterest or incompetence. Misinterpretations of communication, literal understanding, or **stereotypes** - both positive (e.g., "autistic

people are geniuses") and negative (e.g., "antisocial", "weird", "useless")—can generate added pressure or fear of disappointing others.

- **Limited emotional safety** and **conflict resolution mechanisms**

lead to anxiety and withdrawal from teamwork. Several participants noted that colleagues' impatience or misunderstanding during mistakes increased stress and reduced their sense of belonging.

### Feedback from Participants

Overall, feedback gathered through national surveys and interviews demonstrates a high level of satisfaction among **TG1.1** regarding the **relevance** and **usefulness** of the topics addressed during the research process. Across all participating countries, responses indicate that the content resonates strongly with participants' lived experiences, with the vast majority rating both relevance and usefulness between 4 and 5 out of 5, exceeding the project's target of 80% positive satisfaction.

Across the consortium, youth expressed appreciation for being consulted to express their own experiences. The most valued aspects were the opportunity to share personal experiences, the practical focus on workplace realities, and the attention to emotional wellbeing and resilience. They urged for continued dialogue and advocacy, noting that "no one talks about these topics enough."

The main improvement suggestions included exploring negative or challenging experiences more deeply (e.g., exclusion in schools and workplaces) and ensuring that findings translate into tangible actions or training outcomes.



## TG1.2 – Youth Workers (YW)

Country	Survey Responses	Interview Responses	Outcome vs. Objective (KPIs)
Italy	6	2	Met all KPIs.
Norway	7	1	Exceeded survey; met interview goal.
Portugal	9	2	Met/exceeded KPIs.
Sweden	5	0	Met survey; did not meet interview goal.
Ireland	5	1	Met survey; met interview goal.
Spain	5	5	Met/exceeded KPIs.

### Participants Profile

**Italy:** 6 survey respondents evenly split by gender, working predominantly in social services and youth centres; 2 interviews with experienced youth workers supporting **TG1.1** towards independence.

**Norway:** 7 - mostly female - survey respondents from social services; 1 interviewee working with neurodivergent youth in apprenticeship and vocational training programmes - not specifically identified in gender.

**Portugal:** 9 survey respondents (5 men, 4 women) from NGOs, schools, and institutions supporting **TG1.1**; 2 interviews with 3 specialists promoting inclusive employment – all women.

**Sweden:** 5 survey respondents spanning social and educational support roles in the autism ecosystem – 3 female, 2 male; 0 interviews conducted.

**Ireland:** 5 survey respondents with 4-16 years' experience in youth centres, NGOs, and social services – 3 female, 2 male; 1 interviewee focused on employability and confidence-building for youth on the autism spectrum.

**Spain:** 5 survey (3 male, 2 female) and 5 interview participants from NGOs, social services, and cooperatives with extensive autism-related professional expertise.

### Profile Summary

The combined data reflects a strong engagement among youth workers across partner countries, with a generally balanced gender representation and diverse organisational roles. Interviews provided valuable depth, especially in countries with fewer survey respondents.

#### Key barriers

**Youth workers (TG1.2)** across participating countries identified a consistent set of barriers preventing youth on the autism spectrum from entering and thriving in the labour market. These barriers are closely aligned with those reported by the youth themselves, highlighting shared recognition of systemic, social, and structural challenges.

#### **Lack of Employer Awareness and Non-Inclusive Recruitment**

A dominant issue across all reports is the limited understanding of autism within workplaces and recruitment systems:

- Employer awareness was repeatedly rated as the most critical barrier.
- **Stereotypes** and **misinformation** persist, often leading employers to underestimate autistic candidates or to avoid hiring them altogether due to fear or uncertainty.
- Non-inclusive recruitment processes, such as **conventional interviews** requiring strong social performance, systematically exclude qualified candidates.
- YWs in several countries noted that employers are unsure how to communicate about autism during interviews, often avoiding the topic entirely to prevent discomfort.

#### **Emotional and Social Regulation Challenges**

YWs consistently identified difficulties with emotional regulation, communication, and social norms as central challenges for youth with ASD. These factors were rated as highly relevant with many YWs observing that

stress, anxiety, and difficulty navigating informal workplace dynamics can hinder performance. Moreover, misunderstandings often arise from literal communication styles and limited awareness among colleagues, which may reinforce exclusion. In some cases, bullying or rigid expectations exacerbated anxiety and self-doubt.

### **Low Self-Confidence and Motivation**

Low confidence was widely recognised as both a consequence and a barrier to inclusion:

- Youth workers in Sweden, Portugal, Norway, and Spain linked diminished confidence to previous negative experiences in education, social isolation, or failed job attempts.
- **Overprotective parenting** - reported in Portugal and Spain – is also a limiting factor to autonomy, preventing young people from developing independence and self-advocacy skills.
- Many professionals stressed the need to rebuild self-esteem before entering the job market.

### **Insufficient and Fragmented Support Systems**

A recurring concern across national contexts is the lack of coordinated and sustained support for autistic youth transitioning into employment:

- Fragmentation between education systems, employment services, and companies leaves young people “falling through the cracks” – as a YW from Sweden described.
- YWs cited short-term or project-based support that ends once initial job placement occurs, without follow-up or long-term mentoring.
- Limited institutional resources, time, and staffing capacity were common in Portugal, Italy, and Ireland, restricting continuous support.

### **Structural and Policy Barriers**

Beyond interpersonal and institutional gaps, broader **systemic factors** continue to limit inclusion:

- Rigid **benefit systems** in Portugal and Spain discourage some autistic individuals from taking jobs, as employment can result in losing essential state subsidies.
- High entry-level requirements (e.g., advanced degrees, English fluency, or experience) were criticised in Portugal and Spain as exclusionary, particularly for first-time jobseekers.
- Several YWs emphasised the need for policy-level advocacy and financial incentives for employers to promote inclusive hiring practices.

### Skills Gaps

Across all participating countries, YWs identified distinct gaps in both hard and soft skills among TG1.1, professionals supporting them, and employers. Similarly to TG1.1, although technical or job-related competencies were generally assessed positively, significant gaps remain in communication, emotional regulation, adaptability, and interpersonal collaboration.

### **Hard Skills: Technical and Job-Specific Abilities**

While not the primary barrier, certain technical or procedural competencies still emerge as relevant.

Among Youth with ASD:

- **Digital and professional literacy** (e.g., managing workplace tools, understanding formal procedures).
- Task-specific proficiency, where clear instructions and structured routines significantly improve performance.
- Job-readiness training, including understanding workplace expectations and formal processes.

Overall, most respondents agree that TG1.1 generally possess **solid technical potential** and are highly capable of performing structured or repetitive tasks when the environment provides predictability and clarity.

Among Youth Workers:

- Strong demand for specialised training in autism and specific inclusive practices.

- Need for practical knowledge of workplace adaptations, recruitment strategies, and partnership-building with employers.
- Some professionals reported limited awareness of national or EU-level inclusion frameworks.

Among Employers/HR Managers (SMEs):

- Insufficient know-how for implementing inclusive recruitment and adjusting physical or procedural conditions for employees with ASD.
- Gaps in understanding formal procedures for job integration and available institutional supports.

In summary, hard skill gaps stem less from individual ability and more from a lack of structured preparation and institutional alignment between youth, professionals, and companies.

### **Soft Skills: Interpersonal and Self-Management Competencies**

Soft skills emerged as the most critical developmental area for youth with ASD, cited in every national report as the main factor affecting employability and workplace retention.

Among Autistic Youth:

- Persistent challenges in communication and social interaction, particularly **interpreting feedback, informal communication, and non-verbal cues**.
- Difficulties with **emotional regulation** and **stress management**, leading to anxiety and withdrawal during recruitment or job integration.
- **Limited adaptability** to new routines or changing schedules, and difficulty with teamwork or conflict resolution.
- Need for greater self-advocacy and autonomy, especially in navigating workplace expectations.

Among Youth Workers:

- Growing **need for emotional support skills** and relationship-building techniques tailored to TG1.1.

- Gaps in effective communication strategies, including how to adapt approaches to individual profiles.
- Importance of bridging both these realities: supporting youth while also educating employers about neurodiversity and inclusive management.

Among Employers:

- Deficits in **empathy, active listening, and open communication** were widely reported.
- Many employers are unfamiliar with literal communication styles and may use **figurative** or **ambiguous language** that creates misunderstandings.
- Low flexibility and discomfort around neurodiversity persist, particularly in traditional corporate or rural contexts.

Across all countries, the findings reinforce that TG1.1 are not primarily lacking in competence, but in opportunity to apply it within environments that understand and adapt to their communication and emotional profiles.

YWs highlighted that interventions should prioritise **soft skill development** and **mutual adaptation** - preparing both TG1.1 and TG2 to engage effectively. Hard skills training remains important but should be embedded within a relational and systemic inclusion strategy.

### Perceptions of workplace dynamics

YWs across countries highlighted a complex interplay of organisational culture, employer awareness, and social expectations that shape the experiences of TG1.1 in the workplace.

### **Communication and Understanding**

- Misalignment between how TG1.1 communicate and how employers interpret their behaviours is a recurrent issue.
- Effective two-way communication is essential: youth need to express their needs clearly, and employers must understand and respond appropriately.

- Lack of autism literacy among colleagues and managers can lead to misinterpretation of behaviours as rudeness, disinterest, or incompetence.

## Teamwork and Social Integration

- Social expectations, such as **small talk**, can create tensions.
- Youth with ASD are often **excluded** from **informal networks** and **decision-making processes** in environments designed for neurotypical staff – highlighted in the Swedish report.
- Positive inclusion experiences are more common in large or structured organisations, whereas SMEs may struggle to implement consistent practices. In Portugal, the vast majority (99%) of businesses are characterised as SMEs

## Employer Awareness and Attitudes

- Some organisations proactively accommodate and recognise neurodiverse strengths. Others display inconsistent or superficial inclusion practices due to limited knowledge, time, staff, or budget constraints.
- Positive stereotypes (e.g., being highly focused or talented) can create unrealistic expectations, adding pressure for youth with ASD.
- Youth workers report that companies are often familiar with inclusion regulations but lack practical application and structured strategies, leading to partial or inconsistent implementation.

## Unique Country Insights

**Italy:** Discrimination can occur when TG1.1 outperform neurotypical colleagues, highlighting relational challenges beyond structural barriers.

**Portugal:** Positive bias exists towards youth with ASD (perceived as highly intelligent), but this can paradoxically increase pressure and undermine authentic inclusion.

**Norway:** Awareness-building among peers is an effective strategy to prevent conflicts and improve integration.

**Sweden:** Most workplaces are perceived as designed for neurotypical staff, systematically excluding youth with ASD from informal networks and overall work experiences.

**Spain:** Attitudes vary widely; some managers are eager to learn and adapt, while others prefer to avoid disability-related issues entirely.

### Support Mechanisms and Experiences of Inclusion and Exclusion

YWs consistently emphasised that effective support systems and inclusive practices are critical to enabling youth on the autism spectrum to successfully integrate into the workplace. Conversely, when these support mechanisms lack often exclusion, stress, or premature job exits can occur.

#### **Effective Support Mechanisms**

##### Training Programmes:

- Continuous professional development, including ABA-based programmes, specialised courses, and employment projects, improves youth understanding and practical skills.
- **Practical pre-employment training** covering workplace etiquette, communication styles, task management, and transversal skills.

##### Mentoring and Peer Support:

- **Buddy or mentorship systems** to foster confidence, facilitate task learning, and provide safe spaces for questions or guidance.
- Peer education and seminars to raise awareness among colleagues, improve social integration and reduce conflicts.

##### Structured Guidance and Visual Supports:

- Early mapping of strengths and needs, using **visual schedules**, **concrete rules**, and **structured work processes** to enhance clarity and reduce stress for TG1.1.
- **Clear task allocation** aligned with individual skills and profiles to supports confidence and independence.

##### Emotional and Mental Health Support:

- Addressing anxiety, emotional regulation, and mental health challenges from previous experiences is critical for sustained workplace participation.
- **Flexible communication channels** and ongoing structured (possibly anonymous) feedback mechanisms enabling youth to voice concerns.

Organisational Preparedness:

- Preparation of teams and managers, awareness campaigns, and inclusion-focused training for staff ensuring smoother onboarding and integration.

Practical Accommodations:

- Adjustments such as **adapted equipment, predictable schedules, quiet spaces, or flexible hours** (e.g., part-time jobs) have significant positive impacts on engagement, inclusion, and prevention of burnout/dropout.

## Lacking or Inadequate Support Mechanisms

Post-Hire Support Gaps:

- Limited ongoing support once youth secure employment leads to high dropout rates and difficulties adapting.

Insufficient Training and Awareness:

- Many mainstream workplaces lack autism literacy among managers and colleagues, causing misinterpretation of behaviours and exclusion.
- Education and awareness campaigns for staff are often insufficient or purely theoretical.

Structural and Resource Limitations:

- Companies frequently lack dedicated HR, financial, and personnel resources to ensure personalised adaptation and inclusion (especially in Portugal and Spain).

## Direct Experiences of Inclusion

- **Practical Training and Mentoring:** Mock interviews, CV workshops, and mentoring from youth workers or peers were reported as highly useful for supporting young people on the autism spectrum in preparing for employment (Ireland).
- **Conflict Resolution through Awareness:** Examples of conflict due to social misunderstandings were effectively resolved by peer education and seminars. In one case, a small seminar on neurodiversity allowed colleagues to learn about autism, while the young person on the autism spectrum shared their own experiences. This increased understanding and improved the social climate (Norway).
- **Workplace flexibility** and small, tailored adjustments (e.g., adapted equipment, reduced sensory exposure) promote autonomy and engagement. For example, one company reduced light intensity inside of the shop to accommodate for an employer with ASD, and for future customers with neurodiversity (Portugal).
- **Flexible, Personalised Inclusion Strategies:** Companies should adopt flexible approaches, adapting to each young person on the autism spectrum's individual needs and abilities, and providing personalised accommodations, fostering authentic inclusion (Portugal).
- **Long-term support:** Valor T (Inclusive Employment company) accompanies candidates for up to 18 months—from the interview to the first day on the job and beyond. This sustained presence gives individuals greater confidence to share doubts, fears, and challenges as they arise, nurturing a trusting environment (Portugal).
- **Structured Environments:** Employers providing clear, written instructions, predictable schedules, and designated quiet spaces enabled young people on the autism spectrum to achieve successful long-term employment (Sweden). Tailored adjustments (e.g., adapted equipment, reduced sensory exposure) promote autonomy and engagement. For example, one company reduced light intensity

inside of the shop to accommodate for an employer with ASD, and for future customers with neurodiversity (Portugal).

## Direct Experiences of Exclusion

- **Interview Failures:** Numerous cases were reported of qualified young people on the autism spectrum being rejected due to poor performance in traditional interviews, despite having relevant skills (Sweden).
- **Workplace Bullying:** TG1.1 were sometimes targeted for their different communication styles or need for routine (Sweden).
- **Sudden Termination:** Instances occurred where employers terminated young people on the autism spectrum without attempting to understand or accommodate their needs (Sweden).
- Inadequate post-hire support, insufficient colleague training, or lack of structured pathways contribute to early disengagement.

### Feedback from Participants

Overall, feedback gathered through national surveys and interviews demonstrates a high level of satisfaction among youth workers regarding the **relevance** and **usefulness** of the topics addressed during the research process. Across all participating countries, responses indicate that the content resonates strongly with participants' professional experiences, with the vast majority rating both relevance and usefulness between 4 and 5 out of 5, exceeding the project's target of 80% positive satisfaction.

Key themes highlighted by participants include:

- **Importance of Practical Support:** Training sessions, mentoring, and internal workshops were praised.
- **Systemic and Collaborative Approaches:** Participants emphasised the need for closer cooperation between schools, NGOs, employers, and support systems to facilitate inclusive employment pathways.
- **Practical Recommendations:** Calls were made for concrete tools for companies, including guidelines, adaptation models, and structured pathways for mentoring and post-placement follow-up.

## TG2 – SME workers & HR managers

Country	Survey	Interview	Outcome vs. Objective (KPIs)
	Responses	Responses	
<b>Italy</b>	8	1	Met survey target; shortfall in interview responses.
<b>Norway</b>	8	3	Met/exceeded KPIs.
<b>Portugal</b>	5	3	Short on survey; met interview goals.
<b>Sweden</b>	5	2	Short on survey; met interview goals.
<b>Ireland</b>	11	2	Met/exceed KPIs.
<b>Spain</b>	8	1	Met survey target; shortfall in interview responses.

### Participants Profile

**Italy:** Survey respondents mainly work in very small companies (<10 employees), across diverse sectors (administration, food, business consulting, construction, restaurant, sports, tourism). Most have HR departments, but none have hired young people on the autism spectrum. The interviewee is a co-manager of a social cooperative restaurant employing young people with disabilities.

**Norway:** Participants represent companies varying in size, mostly with HR departments. 7 out of 8 respondents have experience hiring employees on the autism spectrum. Sectors include IT, media, consulting, catering, retail, and social services. Interviews include HR professionals with inclusive recruitment experience.

**Portugal:** Participants mainly from medium SMEs (50-249 employees) with HR departments, across social, financial, transport, retail, and consulting sectors. Some companies have hired persons with ASD, including a social enterprise actively supporting inclusion. Interviewees bring expertise in inclusive recruitment and mental health support.

**Sweden:** Survey and interview participants include HR and management professionals from technology, construction, marketing, and design sectors. Experience ranges from no prior employment of persons with disabilities to experience to active inclusion advocacy.

**Ireland:** Respondents represent SMEs in training, hospitality, recruitment, retail, and waste management. Many lack formal HR departments and autism inclusion knowledge, though some have experience hiring employees with ASD. Interviewees provide insights on practical adaptations and training supports.

**Spain:** Survey and interview participants work in NGOs, social services, cooperatives, and SMEs that engage with autism inclusion, though interview numbers are limited.

## Profile Summary

This data reflects a varied but engaged group of SME workers and HR managers, with room to improve interview response rates in some countries and ongoing opportunities to enhance autism inclusion expertise.

### Inclusive practices in recruitment and employment

Across participating countries, SME workers and HR managers demonstrate varying levels of experience and implementation of inclusive practices for youth on the autism spectrum. While large companies often have formal policies and structured initiatives, smaller enterprises generally rely on case-by-case adaptations. For micro businesses, inclusive employment practices are practically non-existent.

## Italy

All respondents reported having no prior experience hiring young persons with autism. Despite this, they recognised that with appropriate measures - such as **personalised** onboarding processes, **mentoring**, and **staff training** - recruitment could succeed. Managers highlighted the importance of training staff on how to interact and collaborate with neurodiverse employees and the value of tailored support in complex or noisy environments.

## Norway

Norwegian companies demonstrated a strong openness to hiring young persons with autism, often using welfare agencies (Nav) and task adjustments to support inclusion. **Formal training in Supported Employment** and IPS was present in some organisations, and managers reported that autism-specific knowledge among staff was generally positive. However, the capacity to implement personalised accommodations varied across workplaces.

## Portugal

Portuguese SMEs showed notable flexibility in adapting workspaces and work arrangements to individual needs. Inclusion was enhanced through explicit job advertisements highlighting accessibility, close support via buddy systems, and regular feedback mechanisms. Initiatives such as **Inclusion Week** and visible employment of individuals with disabilities in daily operations helped normalise neurodiversity in the workplace. Interviewees emphasised that flexible, personalised inclusion strategies - tailored to each employee's strengths and needs - were crucial for authentic integration.

## Sweden

Traditional Swedish SMEs largely **lacked formal inclusive practices**, relying on spontaneous (as needed) adjustments. Specialised SMEs completely redesigned their processes, using **skills-based assessments**, adapting the work environment, and implementing **structured digital workflows** - showing that thoughtful, targeted changes can create truly inclusive workplaces.

## Ireland

Irish workplaces reported high openness to hiring youth on the autism spectrum, but **autism-specific knowledge was limited**. Inclusion practices were mostly informal and adapted case by case, often through **task adjustments, role-playing, interview coaching, and clearer instructions**. Managers identified the need for structured pathways, mentoring, and autism-awareness training to support consistent inclusion.

## Spain

Spanish SMEs showed mixed experiences. While 60% reported adopting inclusive recruitment practices, only 40% had implemented workplace accommodations like **sensory-friendly spaces** or **flexible hours**. Larger companies led in implementing structured inclusion policies, whereas SMEs were slower to adopt them. Mentoring and **personalised support** policies were cited as effective inclusion strategies.

In Summary:

- Formal inclusive practices are more prevalent in larger organisations; SMEs often rely on spontaneous strategies rather than well-planned inclusive plans.
- Common practices include mentorship/buddy programmes, environmental adjustments (sensory-friendly spaces, flexible schedules), and proactive feedback mechanisms – which had already been identified by TG1.1 and TG1.2.
- Staff training and autism-specific knowledge are essential to bridge gaps in awareness and facilitate successful inclusion.
- **Early mapping of individual strengths**, personalised onboarding, and clear communication are consistently highlighted as critical for positive employment outcomes.

### Common barriers faced by employers when hiring TG1.1

SMEs and HR managers highlighted several recurring challenges that hinder the inclusion of youth on the autism spectrum:

- Lack of Knowledge and Understanding: Employers often lack fundamental awareness of autism, including the characteristics, needs, and practical accommodation strategies required to support neurodiverse employees. Misconceptions about abilities and workplace behaviour persist, leading to hesitation or reluctance to hire.
- Resource Constraints: Time, staff, and financial limitations were consistently cited as barriers. Employers worry that implementing adaptations or providing additional support may be costly or disrupt workflows.

- Recruitment Challenges: Traditional hiring processes, such as **CV-based applications** and **face-to-face interviews**, were seen as exclusionary, failing to assess candidates' true capabilities. Interviews and social expectations (e.g., small talk, self-promotion) were particularly stressful for candidates, often deterring employers from pursuing inclusion.
- Mismatch of Expectations: Differences between employer expectations and candidate preferences can create tension. For instance, some candidates expect rapid and full adaptation of the workplace, while companies may have limits in the early stages of employment – due to fear of the candidate dropping out.
- Sensory and Environmental Barriers: Busy, noisy, or highly social workplaces - common in retail, hospitality, or open-plan offices - create sensory challenges for youth on the autism spectrum. Without targeted adjustments, these settings can undermine job retention.
- Social Factors: **Overprotective family attitudes** were noted as a barrier in some contexts (especially Portugal), limiting autonomy and independence in work transitions.

#### Country-Specific Notes:

**Italy:** Resource constraints and legal concerns were highlighted, along with difficulties integrating employees into environments not designed for their needs.

**Norway:** Transition to independence at work and systemic disincentives were emphasised, alongside communication and sensory challenges.

**Portugal:** Low representation of candidates, mismatch between expectations and reality, and parental overprotection were notable.

**Sweden:** Perfectionism clashes (high-quality work vs. speed/efficiency), resource concerns, and knowledge deficits were key issues.

**Ireland:** Busy workplaces and sensory overload, coupled with limited SME capacity and intimidating recruitment practices, created barriers.

**Spain:** Misconceptions about suitability, low candidate representation, bureaucratic hurdles, and fear of integration were highlighted.

### Skills and competencies expected from TG1.1 by employers

Across the consortium countries, employers and HR managers consistently identified a combination of technical and soft skills as essential for successful employment of TG1.1, according to their perspectives.

#### **Key Technical/Practical Skills:**

- Attention to Detail & Reliability: Valued across multiple countries (Italy, Sweden, Ireland, Spain), youth on the autism spectrum are often seen as precise, methodical, and dependable once routines are established.
- Technical/Job-Specific Skills: Employers highlighted logical thinking, pattern recognition, digital literacy, and understanding workplace structures and processes (Norway, Sweden). In some contexts (Italy), manual dexterity or task execution skills were noted as relevant for certain roles.
- Practical Work Experience: As expected, employers in Spain noted that prior hands-on experience in professional environments strengthens employability, as lack of experience can create barriers.

#### **Key Soft/Interpersonal Skills:**

- Communication: Clear and direct communication is crucial, particularly for teamwork and understanding instructions.
- Teamwork and Collaboration: Employers across Norway, Portugal, Ireland, and Italy emphasised the importance of working effectively with colleagues, contributing to group goals, and integrating into the organisational culture.
- **Adaptability:** While youth on the autism spectrum may struggle with last-minute changes or ambiguous instructions (Sweden, Spain, Ireland), employers highlighted adaptability to tasks and schedules as a **desired competency**.

- Reliability & Punctuality: **Consistency** in attendance, **commitment**, and meeting deadlines was repeatedly valued (Portugal, Ireland, Sweden, Spain).
- Self-Advocacy & **Autonomy**: Youth are encouraged to express their needs, manage workloads independently, and progressively develop autonomy, reducing reliance on continuous support (Portugal, Spain, Sweden).
- **Problem-Solving & Initiative**: Employers in Norway and Italy highlighted the importance of applying logical thinking, taking initiative, and resolving issues proactively in daily tasks.

### Examples of successful inclusion strategies and outcomes

Multiple examples collected from the National Reports highlight how targeted inclusion strategies can lead to sustainable employment, improved well-being, and long-term retention of TG1.1. Common success factors include **personalised support systems, awareness-raising among staff, structured routines, and leadership committed to inclusion**.

More specific examples could be:

### **Italy**

- Training and support in **soft skills** have a significant impact on successful inclusion.
- A notable example of inclusion is the restaurant "ASSURD," which has integrated several young employees with disabilities over the past 11 years. Its model - centred on equal rights, structured support, and inclusive team culture - has gained European recognition as a best practice in inclusive employment.

### **Norway**

- Employers highlighted the importance of mentoring, clear routines, and structured feedback. **Breaking tasks into smaller steps**, offering explicit recognition, and **building trust** before increasing responsibilities were seen as essential. Physical and organisational adjustments (quiet spaces, peer learning between companies, and staff training) further reinforced inclusion and employee confidence.

## Portugal

Surveys and interviews revealed a wide range of good practices being practiced in larger companies in Portugal:

- Awareness campaigns and team training: Initiatives like “Formação Liderança para a Diferença” (Jerónimo Martins) promote empathy, flexibility, and understanding among colleagues.
- Partnerships with specialist organisations: Collaboration with experts in inclusive employment (Valor T) ensures effective recruitment and ongoing support tailored to individual needs.
- Buddy and mentoring programmes: **New employees paired with experienced colleagues** who provide consistent support, facilitating smoother adaptation.
- Structured feedback and communication: Transparent feedback channels and **direct, simple communication** build trust and make it easier to request adjustments.
- Flexible working policies: Examples such as Cofidis' **part-time** or **hybrid options** demonstrate how flexibility enhances retention and satisfaction.
- **Inclusion Week initiatives:** Events featuring personal testimonies foster empathy and shift workplace attitudes more effectively than standard training.
- Sensory-friendly spaces: Adjustments like reduced lighting and noise (Pingo Doce, Madeira Island) help employees manage sensory overload and maintain well-being.
- Targeted training programmes: Focused on **interview preparation**, communication, and **CV development**, these initiatives strengthen candidate confidence and employability.

## Sweden

2 SMEs presented strong models for inclusive employment:

- SME 1: Adopted full transparency regarding **autism diagnoses** (not being afraid to discuss this topic with the employee), **alternative recruitment** through question-based forms - focused on skills, interests, and preferred work environments rather than professional

experience or verbal performance. Outcomes included high employee retention, client satisfaction, and business growth.

- SME 2: Implemented a digital structure (internal Microsoft 365 “Wikipedia”) outlining every process and expectation, reducing task ambiguity. Leadership focused on patience, respect, and individualised guidance, resulting in sustainable inclusion and enhanced employee confidence.

## Ireland

Successful approaches included soft skills coaching, confidence-building programmes, and informal adjustments such as buddy systems and quiet workspaces. Awareness-raising sessions, mentoring schemes, and collaboration with local partners like EmployAbility and vocational training centres were particularly valued. Employers also appreciated peer-learning opportunities with other SMEs, fostering a community of shared practice and continuous improvement.

## Spain

Both survey and interview results underscored the impact of inclusive measures such as:

- Mentoring programmes for new hires.
- Flexible working hours and sensory spaces.
- Personalised adaptations, including assistive tools like noise-cancelling headphones.
- Annual Inclusion Week events were noted as highly effective in raising awareness, reducing prejudice, and normalising disability in workplace culture.

## Feedback from Participants

Overall, feedback gathered through national surveys and interviews shows a high level of satisfaction among **SME workers and HR managers (TG2)** regarding the relevance and usefulness of the topics explored in the research. Across all participating countries, respondents consistently rated both dimensions between 4 and 5 out of 5, confirming that the content

resonates strongly with their professional realities and exceeds the project's target of 80% positive satisfaction.

Participants highlighted that the research themes address genuine challenges faced by companies seeking to implement inclusive recruitment and employment practices, particularly concerning youth on the autism spectrum.

In Italy, interviewees emphasised that inclusion is achievable when training, flexibility, and willingness to adapt are combined, noting successful experiences where autistic employees performed well **in administrative and structured roles**. Norwegian respondents stressed the need for practical HR training and realistic inclusion guidelines, warning against over-accommodation that could undermine autonomy. In Portugal, HR managers from large companies agreed that these discussions are essential to foster societal and workplace awareness, with all interviewees rating the topics as highly relevant and useful. Swedish SMEs offered rich qualitative feedback: traditional companies expressed uncertainty and resource concerns but showed strong openness to learn; meanwhile, specialised SMEs demonstrated that inclusion can deliver measurable business benefits and argued for systemic change rather than individual adaptation. In Ireland, awareness-raising activities, practical guides, and local partnerships were rated highly, and examples were shared from the security sector, where structured environments have proven effective for autistic employees. Spanish participants also confirmed the importance of training staff to better manage neurodiversity in the workplace, with the majority rating both relevance and usefulness as high.

Overall, feedback across countries confirms a strong ambition for practical, actionable tools to bridge the gap between intention and implementation. Employers are motivated to include autistic youth but require concrete guidance, training, and peer learning opportunities to translate awareness into actionable change.

## Key Insights

The following barriers and competence gaps were identified through a comparative synthesis of the 6 national reports developed under WP2. Each item was selected based on its recurrence across national contexts and its alignment with the objectives of Pathways to Employment, ensuring that the final list represents the most common and significant challenges experienced by youth on the autism spectrum and employers across Europe.

### 10 Main barriers to Employment:

#### 1. Limited employer awareness and understanding of Autism

Employers often show willingness to include TG1.1 but lack the knowledge to implement inclusive practices effectively.

#### 2. Non-inclusive recruitment processes

Reliance on traditional CVs and interviews disadvantages candidates who communicate or perform differently from neurotypical individuals.

#### 3. Difficulties in social interaction and communication

Misunderstandings in workplace interactions, team dynamics, and unspoken social norms remain a core barrier.

#### 4. High anxiety and emotional stress during recruitment and employment

Fear of failure and performance anxiety undermine self-confidence and participation.

#### 5. Lack of work experience and practical opportunities

Many young persons with autism struggle to obtain their first experience, creating a self-perpetuating barrier.

#### 6. Low self-esteem and limited self-advocacy

Repeated negative experiences throughout education and work reduce confidence and initiative.

## 7. Insufficient support during school-to-work transition

Fragmented pathways and weak coordination between schools, employment agencies, and SMEs hinder inclusion.

## 8. Unsuitable or sensory-overloading work environments

Open-plan offices, unpredictable noises, or lack of quiet spaces directly impact comfort and performance of TG1.1.

## 9. Resource and structural constraints within SMEs

Small enterprises often lack HR departments, time, and budget to adapt recruitment or workplaces.

## 10. Bureaucratic and systemic disincentives

Administrative complexity, rigid benefit systems, and unclear policy guidance discourage both hiring and job-seeking.

# 6 professional/operational competence gaps:

## 1. Communication and self-advocacy skills

Many young persons with ASD struggle to articulate their needs or adapt communication to different workplace contexts.

## 2. Emotional regulation and stress management

Coping with stress, criticism, or change remains a recurrent development area.

## 3. Social interaction and teamwork competencies

Collaborative work and interpreting social expectations are key difficulties.

## 4. Understanding workplace culture and routines

Youth need explicit guidance on informal norms, hierarchies, and expected behaviours.

## 5. Time management, organisation, and executive functioning

Planning, prioritising, and managing multiple tasks independently are recurring training needs.

## 6. Job-specific and technical skill development

While many demonstrate strong technical potential, structured vocational training and hands-on experience are often missing.

## Recommendations WP3

### General Recommendations for Employment Inclusion

The combined insights from field research (surveys and interviews) and desk research confirm that employment inclusion for TG1.1 requires structured, continuous, and individualised support. Inclusion is most effective when it addresses both the needs of youth and the wider employment ecosystem, promoting mutual understanding, skill development, and sustained guidance. Key recommendations:

- **Systemic coordination:** Align education, employment, and social services to ensure smooth transitions from school to work.
- **Inclusive workplaces:** Use structured recruitment, flexible procedures, sensory-friendly environments, and predictable routines.
- **Mentoring and post-hire support:** Offer sustained guidance through mentoring/buddy systems to support workplace integration.
- **Organisational capacity building:** Train HR, managers, and colleagues in neurodiversity and inclusive practices.
- **Soft skills development:** Prioritise communication, teamwork, self-advocacy, emotional regulation, and adaptability; embed technical skills within an inclusive approach.
- **Stakeholder collaboration:** Foster partnerships between SMEs, youth workers, specialist organisations, and policymakers to share good practices.
- **Monitoring and evaluation:** Collect and use employment outcome data to inform evidence-based policies.

### Recommendations for WP3

WP3 outputs should directly address the barriers and competence gaps identified in WP2 research, translating them into practical, scalable, and transferable solutions across national contexts.

#### Youth on the Autism Spectrum (TG1.1)

- Soft skills and self-advocacy: communication, teamwork, emotional regulation, adaptability, confidence.

- Workplace readiness: CV writing, interview simulations, workplace etiquette, and managing feedback.
- Scenario-based and role-play learning: model real-life workplace situations.
- Mentoring schemes: pair youth with trained mentors or peers for sustained support.

### Youth Workers (TG1.2)

- Autism-specific inclusion training, combining theory with practical case studies.
- Toolkits for personalised support and career planning.
- Employer engagement modules: guidance to mediate effectively between youth and workplaces.
- Transnational community of practice: share experiences, good practices, and solutions.

### SME Workers and HR Managers (TG2)

- Autism awareness and practical inclusion strategies.
- Toolkits for inclusive recruitment and workplace adaptations.
- Managerial guidance on communication, feedback, and sensory considerations.
- Short digital micro-learning modules for continuous professional development.
- Structured collaboration with autism-focused organisations.

### **Cross-cutting principles for WP3**

The cross-cutting principles for WP3 emphasise co-creation and validation of training materials with representatives from all target groups, ensuring that content is relevant, practical, and grounded in real needs. The outputs should be designed for sustainability and adaptability, allowing them to be easily applied across different national contexts. Finally, WP3 should include integrated monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess both learning progress and longer-term employment outcomes, ensuring continuous improvement and impact.

## Conclusion

This report sets out practical recommendations to support the employment inclusion of youth on the autism spectrum, drawing on both field and desk research. The evidence shows that inclusion works best when support is structured, consistent, and personalised, while also considering the wider work environment.

The research also highlighted 6 skills gaps - both professional and interpersonal – and 10 main barriers, which will feed directly into WP3. The result will be the PTE Training Curriculum (PR2), a hands-on programme designed to tackle the barriers identified in WP2 and help young people on the autism spectrum (18-29) gain skills and confidence to thrive at work.

Inclusion works when there's structure and understanding: clear communication, predictable routines, consideration of sensory needs, and ongoing mentoring help young people feel confident and able to work independently. Exclusion happens when support ends after hiring, there's little flexibility, or negative attitudes and stigma are not addressed.

The research points to one clear lesson: long-term, relational support works. Peer mentoring, structured feedback, and awareness-raising for teams are simple but powerful ways to make workplaces genuinely inclusive and sustainable for youth on the autism spectrum.

# PTE Research Report

Compiled by

Date

**Proportional Message**

**October 2025**



## Pathways to Employment



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