

# GOOD PRACTICE BRIEF

## EMPLOYING PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES IN CROATIA: Intersectoral public health action for an inclusive labour market

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### Summary

In Croatia, like in many countries in the WHO European Region, people with disabilities are an underemployed group in the workforce, which significantly impacts their welfare and contributes to social inequalities. To address this, Croatia implemented the Law on Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities in 2013 with the aim to increase employment in this group. Key regulatory mechanisms included quotas related to the number of people with disabilities and incentives for employers. Another mechanism was the development of integrative workshops and working centres where the skills of people with disabilities are tested for participation in the labour market or in sheltered and integrative workshops. The Law also regulates reasonable accommodation of the workplace including physical barriers, working equipment and personal assistance. The Law resulted in more people with disabilities employed in the labour market in Croatia.

### People with disabilities are a valuable resource in the workforce

People with disabilities account for about 12% of the total population in Croatia or about half a million people, of which 60% are men and 48% are of working age (19–64 years). Strengthening employment opportunities for people with disabilities has received growing attention as it is seen as a civil rights issue, essential to citizens and a practical benefit for businesses and government budgets. For people with disabilities, employment means greater economic self-sufficiency, an opportunity to use their skills and more active

### Key Messages

- The creation of an inclusive labour market is a priority public health concern.
- The National Institute of Public Health has a crucial role in promoting intersectoral action and in producing an evidence briefing to shed light on the impact of employment policies on the health of people with disabilities and the economy.
- Political stakeholders can contribute to an inclusive labour market.
- Employers have an important role when it comes to the work integration of people with disabilities.
- For the person with a disability, a quota system primarily provides an opportunity for employment.
- Integrating relevant information from different sources is the basis for work ability judgments.

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participation in community life. Employment in this group is particularly important, because having a disability often leads to social isolation and harms health outcomes over time (1). Due to the expected decline of the working-age population, people with disabilities are now increasingly recognized as a valuable resource in the workforce in both the private and public sectors.

## The law on vocational rehabilitation and employment of people with disabilities

The policy towards people with disabilities has been marked by prominent regulatory activity in Croatia between 2001 and 2015 (Table 1). The legal system for people with disabilities has been implemented through more than 250 laws, sub-legal acts and decisions, as well as applicable international documents.

The role of the National Institute of Public Health has been essential in developing the Law and related intersectoral action. As part of the different working groups established to prepare the Law, it produced an evidence briefing to shed light on the impact of employment policies on the health of people with disabilities. It also coordinated preparatory action between the various stakeholders to highlight the importance of civil rights and health issues to people with disabilities.

**Table 1. Key regulatory instruments for people with disabilities in Croatia, 2001–2015**

Year	Regulatory instrument
2001	Law on Croatian Register of Persons with Disabilities
2007	Ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
2007	National Strategy for the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities (2007–2015)
2009	Anti-Discrimination Act
2009	Monitoring and Evaluation Framework of the 2007 National Strategy
2010	Deinstitutionalization Plan
2013	Law on Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities
2014	Operational Plan for Deinstitutionalization and Transformation of Social Welfare Homes
2014	Decision on the Network of Social Services
2014	Strategy for Combatting Poverty and Social Exclusion (2014–2020)
2015	National Strategy for the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities (2017–2020)

The Law on Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities came into force in 2013 with the key objective to encourage private employers to hire, recruit and retain this population (2). This Law provides a strong incentive to professional rehabilitation and employment. It stipulates that employers who employ at least 20 workers are obliged

to employ, in a reasonable job position of their own choice and with appropriate working conditions, a certain number of people with disabilities. The most common professions among employed people with disabilities in Croatia are shop assistant, unskilled worker, economic technician, car mechanic, farm worker, waiter, driver and chef.

The quota ranges between 2% and 6% (but not less than 2%), depending on the number of employees and the activities carried out by the employers. Employers who fulfil the quota are eligible for a financial compensation of 30% of the minimum wage per month for each person with a disability. The Law enables people with disabilities to work without the loss of family pensions, and gives them the right to choose either their work-based or family pension. In addition, the Law allows for the development of integrative workshops and working centres where the skills of people with disabilities are tested for participation in the open labour market or in sheltered and integrative workshops. The Law also regulates reasonable accommodation of the workplace including physical barriers, working equipment and personal assistance.

An administrative process is carried out for each disabled person applying for a job. First, an assessment is conducted to verify whether the criteria for disability are fulfilled. Eligibility disability criteria for employment of people with disabilities are:

- 60% physical disability due to loss of function in lower extremities;
- 70% physical disability due to loss of function in upper extremities;
- 70% physical disability due to hearing loss;
- 80% physical disability due to injury of any other kind; and
- 90% total physical disability, in case of multiple injuries, provided there is 60% physical disability of lower extremities, 70% physical disability of upper extremities or 70% physical disability due to other types of injury.

If eligibility criteria are met, an employment certificate is provided through the National Disabilities Registry, run by the National Institute of Public Health. Regulation on the Registry was established in 2001 with the aim to improve the quality of the registered data, and to allow people with disabilities to exercise their rights in the system. The Registry allows detailed insight into the level of physical, intellectual, sensory and mental impairment, the level of support and the working capacity of a disabled person. A unique identification number allows data on the same person to be extracted from other databases to quickly provide the needed certificates.

Following this validation, the Institute of Expertise, Professional Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities determines whether the employer has met the required quota.

Execution of the Law is monitored by the Institute of Expertise, Professional Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities and by the Ministry of Labour and Pension System.

As part of the quality assurance of the Law, an ombudsman for people with disabilities has the right to access the premises of the employer. In case of irregularities, a report is submitted within 30 working days, and the employer needs to take corrective actions. Furthermore, if the ombudsman judges that a person with disabilities has been subjected to discrimination, violence, abuse or exploitation, a complaint is submitted to the State Attorney and the State Administration Body, suggesting measures to protect the rights and interests of people with disabilities.

## Impact

The Law on Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities serves as an important incentive for employers to hire, recruit and retain people with disabilities. Around 11 000 people with disabilities have been employed in Croatia since implementation of the Law.



## Lessons learned

- **The creation of an inclusive labour market is a priority public health concern.** An inclusive labour market allows all to participate to the best of their abilities regardless of any form of disability or vulnerability.
- **The National Institute of Public Health has a crucial role in promoting intersectoral action and in producing an evidence briefing to shed light on the impact of employment policies on the health of people with disabilities and the economy.** Shared positive experiences and examples of best practices may help reduce fear and stigma among employers and co-workers and may lead to an increase in employment of people with disabilities.
- **Political stakeholders can contribute to an inclusive labour market** by underpinning the urgency of workplace integration in times of an ageing workforce and skill shortages so that prospective employers recognize the benefits they can gain.
- **Employers have an important role when it comes to the work integration of people with disabilities.** A quota system has proved essential as it requires companies to employ a minimum percentage of people with disabilities, combined with a penalty for each place not filled.
- **For the person with a disability, a quota system primarily provides an opportunity for employment,** but at the same time it may contribute to the experience of self-stigma.
- **Integrating relevant information from different sources is the basis for work ability judgments.** Clear communication channels between involved players and systems (i.e., personal, workplace, health care and compensation systems) are needed.

## References

1. Saunders S, Nedelec, B. What work means to people with work disability: a scoping review. *J Occup Rehabil.* 2014;24:100–10.
2. Lisak N. Disability Policy in Croatia. Pre-Conference Symposium Disability Studies in Postsocialist Countries and in Southeast Asia, 22 April 2015. Ljubljana; 2015.

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