

DOI <https://doi.org/10.30525/2592-8813-2024-4-20>

## OBSTACLES IN THE EMPLOYMENT OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES: THE PERSPECTIVE OF EMPLOYEES AND EMPLOYERS IN UKRAINE

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**Abstract.** This study examines the obstacles to employment for people with disabilities in Ukraine, emphasizing spatial, institutional, legislative, and social. The research is based on 16 in-depth interviews with people with disabilities and 8 interviews with employers representing small, medium-sized, and large enterprises. Key findings reveal systemic issues, including inaccessible infrastructure, limited educational and medical support, weak enforcement of employment laws, and persistent societal stigmas. Employers often focus on meeting quota requirements superficially, avoiding genuine inclusion. Stakeholders highlighted unclear legislation, societal stereotypes, and insufficient infrastructure. Successful employment depends on stronger legal enforcement, accessible infrastructure, inclusive workplace policies, and initiatives to challenge stereotypes. The study concludes that addressing these barriers requires comprehensive reforms and enhanced collaboration between the state, businesses, and individuals with disabilities to foster meaningful integration into the labor market.

**Key words:** people with disabilities, social inequalities, employment, labor market, inclusion, stakeholders.

**Introduction.** People with disabilities frequently face significant obstacles in the labor market, resulting in economic vulnerability and social isolation. Based on data from the State Statistics Service of Ukraine, there are approximately 2.7 million working-age people with disabilities in the country, yet only 26% are employed. Despite current legislation guaranteeing pensions, benefits, and social protections, many people with disabilities receive pensions that fall below the living wage. This situation is further complicated by the need for medical services, making it almost impossible for them to survive solely on pensions (*which are paid to people with disabilities following Ukrainian law*). Consequently, public assistance or employment becomes essential.

According to Article 19 of the Law of Ukraine, "On Basics of Social Protection for the Disabled in Ukraine" (2017), employers must meet specific employment quotas for people with disabilities. For companies with more than eight employees, at least one job must be designated for a person with a disability, and in companies with 25 or more employees, 4% of full-time positions should be allocated. However, the effectiveness of this law is questionable, as enforcement remains weak, and compliance is often superficial.

This scenario highlights the urgent need for reforms at both the legislative and enterprise levels. An in-depth understanding of the challenges faced by people with disabilities in the employment and labor market is essential to understanding barriers and protective factors that could improve employ-

ment rates and working conditions for this population. **The study aims** to identify and explore these obstacles and protective factors from the perspective of employees with disabilities and potential employers.

### **Barriers to employment of people with disabilities**

Employment opportunities for people with disabilities remain significantly lower compared to those without disabilities. This disparity is evident in both pre-pandemic and pandemic data. For example, as highlighted by Asli Atay, Lovedeep Vaid, and Naomi Clayton (2021), the employment rate for people with disabilities increased before the pandemic, but the gap remained stubbornly high at 28.1% in 2019. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this issue, widening the gap to 29% between Q4 2019 and Q4 2020. These findings underscore systemic obstacles that disproportionately impact the employability of individuals with disabilities during periods of economic instability.

The situation is not unique to one region or type of disability. Research on financial security for people with complex disabilities in the UK found that 82% of such individuals were unemployed in 2020-21 (National Centre for Social Research, 2022). Employment plays a crucial role beyond financial support. It offers opportunities for self-actualization, satisfaction, and confidence, vital to an individual's sense of identity and fulfillment (Paul & Batinic, 2009). Their exploration of the psychosocial benefits of employment informs the importance of work beyond financial support. This aligns with my research focus on the broader implications of employment opportunities for self-actualization and identity formation among individuals with disabilities.

However, the likelihood of employment varies based on the type and severity of the disability. For example, less than a third of people with epilepsy, autism, severe learning difficulties, or mental illness are employed, while those with fewer health conditions have higher employment rates (Powell, 2024). Despite these variations, the overall support employers provide still needs to be improved. According to the Disability in the Workplace 2023 report, 34% of respondents believe their employer could do more to support them (REBA, 2023). This gap in support is often perpetuated by stereotypes and misconceptions about people with disabilities. Research outcomes show that barriers such as workplace accessibility, harassment, and discrimination are widespread (Ramachandra et al., 2017). These issues contribute to unwelcoming workplace cultures, discouraging individuals with disabilities from seeking or retaining employment (Ameri et al., 2018; Baert, 2018). These studies underscore the disparity between existing support mechanisms and the expectations of employees with disabilities. Drawing on this foundation, our research included business representatives in the sample to explore their perspectives on compliance with legal requirements in Ukraine. By examining their narratives, we aimed to understand how employers interpret and implement inclusive practices in practice, moving beyond mere formal adherence to laws. This approach sought to capture the depth and nuance of their efforts to address the real needs of employees with disabilities and foster genuine workplace inclusion.

Addressing these stereotypes and misconceptions is a complex process requiring legal and cultural changes. As noted by the American Foundation for the Blind, genuine inclusion begins with actively involving people with disabilities in diversity initiatives, treating disability as an integral aspect of diversity rather than an isolated issue (2023).

People with disabilities face significant and ongoing obstacles to employment, including workplace inaccessibility, social stigma, stereotypes, and inadequate employer support. These issues result in a persistent employment gap between people with and without disabilities, limiting opportunities for financial stability, self-actualization, and social inclusion. While legislative frameworks and corporate social responsibility initiatives exist in many contexts, their implementation often remains superficial, failing to address the root causes of exclusion. Key gaps identified in the literature include the insufficient understanding of employers' practices in complying with legal

requirements and their efforts to ensure meaningful workplace inclusion for employees with disabilities. This study builds on these gaps by investigating how these obstacles manifest in specific employment contexts, exploring the depth of employer practices, and analyzing the employment experiences of people with disabilities.

### **Disability Legislation Ukrainian: Critique Overview**

The legislative framework governing accessibility and employment for people with disabilities in Ukraine provides an essential foundation for their inclusion in the labor market. The Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine (2011) mandates that accommodations for people with disabilities must be integrated during the planning stages of urban and building development. However, despite these requirements, many workplaces remain physically inaccessible, severely limiting employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities. This legislative gap not only undermines the Constitution of Ukraine, which guarantees the right to freely choose a profession (Law of Ukraine on Urban Planning, 2011), but also perpetuates structural inequities within the labor market. Our research will examine how these legal requirements are implemented in practice and whether businesses comply with these standards to create inclusive environments.

A critical issue lies in the insufficient enforcement of reasonable workplace accommodations. The reluctance of both employers and the state to implement necessary adjustments often pushes individuals with disabilities into the shadow economy or forces them to rely on inadequate pensions. This lack of compliance not only diminishes the confidence of job candidates but also leads to hidden disabilities. This can result in further health complications due to the absence of necessary workplace accommodations according to Law of Ukraine on Urban Planning (2011).

In contrast, when employers adhere to the law, positive employment experiences emerge. Compliance with medical guidelines and individual rehabilitation programs creates safer and more inclusive work environments (Law of Ukraine on Urban Planning, 2011). However, such positive cases remain overshadowed by poor enforcement. Article 19 of the Law on Social Protection sets employment quotas for people with disabilities, but its impact is undermined by widespread non-compliance (Law of Ukraine on Social Protection for Disabled Persons, 2017).

Furthermore, the broader issue is compounded by insufficient legislation and the inadequate condition of public infrastructure, which often fails to meet accessibility standards in transport, office, and residential buildings (Law of Ukraine on Regulation of Urban Development Activities, 2011). However, businesses that employ people with disabilities can derive multiple benefits, including enhancing their corporate image and accessing grants or benefits from social insurance programs (Ivanova & Semyhina, 2010).

Additionally, specific bonuses are available for employees with disabilities, such as exemptions from probation periods, the right to part-time work, and priority in layoffs, particularly for war-disabled persons (Labor Code of Ukraine). Despite these legal provisions, Barclay and Markell argue that legislation alone is insufficient to address the employment challenges faced by people with disabilities. Thus, beyond legal reform, training and education programs are necessary to enhance employment opportunities (Barclay & Markell, 2009).

Overall, there are a number of obstacles to the employment of people with disabilities in Ukraine. While a legal framework exists to promote accessibility and inclusion, its implementation remains inconsistent. Key challenges include inaccessibility of workplaces, insufficient enforcement of accommodation requirements, and widespread non-compliance with employment quotas. The gap in understanding how legislative shortcomings intersect with social and institutional obstacles to perpetuate employment inequality remains insufficiently understood. This study aims to fill this gap by examining the lived experiences of people with disabilities and

the perspectives of employers in the Ukrainian labor market. Through this analysis, the study will offer insight into the limitations of existing policies and identify potential ways to promote true inclusion in the workplace.

### **Benefits for Businesses**

Research highlights numerous advantages for businesses that employ people with disabilities, ranging from increased profitability to enhanced competitive advantage. These benefits are driven by improved employee retention, strengthened customer loyalty, and an enhanced corporate image, all of which reflect a company's commitment to diversity (Lindsay et al., 2018). For employees with disabilities, secure employment provides financial stability and opportunities for personal and professional growth. For employers, retaining such employees leverages their accumulated knowledge, reduces turnover costs, and fosters a more stable workforce (OECD, 2021).

Beyond economic advantages, employees with disabilities often contribute valuable skills such as perseverance, innovative thinking, and problem-solving. These qualities are increasingly essential in navigating the complexities of a rapidly evolving global market (World Economic Forum, 2019). Studies consistently show that workplaces employing people with disabilities become more inclusive, collaborative, and productive, benefiting all employees and enhancing overall organizational performance.

The competitive advantage of employing people with disabilities is further underscored by Alemany and Vermeulen (2023), who argue that inclusivity strengthens firms' relationships with customers and stakeholders. This perspective positions disability-inclusive employment as a strategic asset rather than merely a social responsibility. Similarly, Mahasneh (2023) emphasizes the economic value of inclusion, suggesting that businesses that prioritize hiring people with disabilities can gain access to new markets and enhance their overall operational efficiency. These insights provide a framework for examining how Ukrainian businesses perceive and leverage the advantages of disability inclusion.

The global pandemic highlighted the essential contributions of employees with disabilities, as Schur et al. (2020) found that these workers often performed as well as or better than their peers in remote and hybrid settings. This finding challenges stereotypes about the capabilities of people with disabilities and emphasizes the importance of focusing on their actual performance rather than pre-conceived limitations.

In a broader context, diversity in the workplace is no longer just a human resources issue but a strategic business approach. People with disabilities offer unique perspectives that can shape product development and expand market reach (Shaewitz et al., 2018). Supporting employees through flexible policies and inclusive work environments enhances their workplace experience and contributes to a more innovative and productive company (Shaewitz et al., 2024).

However, the integration of people with disabilities into the workforce is not solely about legal or economic adjustments. Bonaccio et al. (2020) note that employers' attitudes toward workers with disabilities can be influenced by the fear of disrupting established workplace dynamics. Thus, organizational cultural change is crucial to fostering true inclusion and acceptance.

Employing people with disabilities offers both economic and organizational benefits, including improved profitability, innovation, and workplace culture. These findings highlight the potential for disability inclusion to address systemic inequalities while enhancing business outcomes. However, a significant gap exists in understanding how these benefits are realized in specific cultural and institutional contexts, such as Ukraine. This study aims to bridge this gap by examining how Ukrainian businesses perceive and implement inclusive practices. It will also explore the social and structural obstacles that hinder inclusion, especially from the perspective of workers with disabilities, offering insights into how they can be overcome to foster genuine workplace diversity and equity.

## Method

### Participants and Recruitment

In Study 1, participants were recruited through social thematic groups on Facebook, as well as regional and national non-governmental organizations (NGOs) addressing issues faced by people with disabilities in Ukraine. Potential participants were invited to complete a Google Form, where they provided personal data and completed a screening process to determine eligibility for in-depth interviews. For Study 2 (stakeholders), recruitment followed a snowball sampling technique, whereby individuals already participating in the study identified others who might be interested in contributing. Participants provided informed consent by completing a Google form with their personal data, which allowed the authors to contact them for the study. Before each interview, participants were asked to confirm their consent again. This process ensured that participants were fully aware of the study's purpose, role, and rights, including their responses' confidentiality and ability to withdraw without any consequences. This approach aimed to create a secure and ethical environment for participants to share their experiences. The identities of all participants were anonymized to ensure confidentiality. All interviews were transcribed by the authors of this study.

#### *Study 1 (Participants with Disabilities)*

Sixteen participants with disabilities were interviewed, including individuals from the first (I), second (II), and third (III) disability groups. The respondents, aged 24–47, comprised 9 women and 7 men. The sample included individuals with both congenital and acquired physical disabilities, representing a diverse range of needs and challenges. Participants were selected from various regions of Ukraine, including Kyiv Oblast (5), Dnipropetrovsk Oblast (4), Kharkiv Oblast (3), Zhytomyr Oblast (1), Odesa Oblast (1), Vinnytsia Oblast (1), and Chernivtsi Oblast (1). Prior employment experience, whether formal or informal, was a key criterion for selection.

#### *Study 2 (Stakeholders)*

Eight stakeholders from enterprises of varying sizes (large, small, and medium) participated in the interviews. The respondents, aged 29–45, included 3 women and 5 men. The participants were grouped into two categories:

Representatives from large international companies: These stakeholders worked for subsidiaries of prominent foreign brands with well-established frameworks for corporate culture, workflow organization, and technical infrastructure. These companies have demonstrated potential for creating supportive environments for employing individuals with disabilities, benefiting from foreign expertise, training programs, and financial support.

Representatives from small and medium-sized enterprises: These stakeholders had direct influence over organizational structures and were responsible for facilitating the employment of individuals with disabilities. Their companies allocated budgets for equipment and staff training, showing greater flexibility in adapting workflows, including transitioning roles to digital platforms or offering flexible work protocols. However, some employers focused solely on fulfilling government-mandated disability employment quotas, disregarding the professional capabilities of candidates, which negatively impacted their salary levels and career growth opportunities.

### Sample Demographics

The final sample consisted of 16 participants with disabilities (Study 1) and 8 stakeholders (Study 2). **Table 1** presents the demographic details of participants with disabilities, and **Table 2** provides the demographic information of the stakeholders interviewed.

### Data Collection

#### Procedure

#### *Study 1 (Participants with Disabilities)*

Eleven participants were interviewed using semi-structured formats. These interviews were conducted via Zoom, a video conferencing platform, while five additional participants provided written

Table 1

**Demographic characteristics of respondents with disabilities**

Name	Age	Region	Gender	Education	Work Status	Disability group	Type of disability
Respondent 1	24	Dnipropetrovsk Oblast	w	Master degree	freelance	1	stroke consequences
Respondent 2	38	Kharkiv Oblast	m	Master degree	employed	3	genetic disorder
Respondent 3	41	Kharkiv Oblast	w	Bachelor degree	employed	3	cerebral palsy (CP)
Respondent 4	30	Dnipropetrovsk Oblast	w	Bachelor degree	freelance	1	spinal cord tumor
Respondent 5	40	Dnipropetrovsk Oblast	w	Master degree	self-employed	3	cerebral palsy (CP)
Respondent 6	34	Chernivtsi Oblast	w	Bachelor degree	self-employed	1	bone fragility
Respondent 7	43	Kyiv Oblast	w	Master degree	employed	2	an acute spinal cord injury
Respondent 8	47	Vinnytsia Oblast	w	Bachelor degree	employed	2	an acute spinal cord injury
Respondent 9	40	Kyiv Oblast	m	Master degree	employed	2	leg amputation
Respondent 10	22	Kyiv Oblast	w	Bachelor degree	employed	2	diabetes mellitus
Respondent 11	40	Kharkiv Oblast	m	Master degree	freelance	1	genetic disorder
Respondent 12	35	Zhytomyr Oblast	m	Bachelor degree	employed	2	skull injury
Respondent 13	43	Kyiv Oblast	m	Master degree	freelance	2	parkinsonism and intrusive encephalopathy
Respondent 14	44	Odesa Oblast	m	Bachelor degree	employed	1	neurology
Respondent 15	41	Dnipropetrovsk Oblast	m	Bachelor degree	unemployed	2	cerebral palsy (CP)
Respondent 16	32	Kyiv Oblast	w	Master degree	employed	1	cerebral palsy (CP)

Table 2

**Demographic characteristics of stakeholders**

Name	Age	Gender	Business type
Respondent 17	45	m	large, local
Respondent 18	29	w	medium, local
Respondent 19	32	w	large, international
Respondent 20	38	m	medium, local
Respondent 21	37	m	medium, local
Respondent 22	41	w	large, international
Respondent 23	44	m	job centre, local
Respondent 24	30	m	small, local

responses through the Telegram messaging app. The latter method was chosen to accommodate the individual needs and preferences of participants. All Zoom interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim using the platform's recording function. The two researchers involved in the study were responsible for reviewing and analysing the transcripts, ensuring a thorough engagement with the unique narratives of the respondents. The interviews ranged in duration from 18 to 57 minutes, with an average length of 35 minutes.

Participants were asked questions based on a semi-structured interview guide, which was organized into three key thematic blocks:

**Self-Perception:** Participants provided personal details, including hobbies, skills, qualifications, past job roles, job search goals, and descriptions of their “dream job.”

**Employment Experience:** This section explored the barriers participants faced in pursuing their “dream job,” their concerns related to employment, interview experiences, knowledge of and encounters with disability employment laws, and their experiences with job offers designed to fulfil employment quotas.

**Working Conditions:** Participants discussed the factors they considered essential for comfortable working conditions. They reflected on their satisfaction with their current work environment, the equality of working conditions for all employees, any challenges related to workplace conditions, team dynamics, company support, and suggestions for improving the work process.

#### **Study 2 (Stakeholders)**

The interviews in Study 2 ranged from 28 to 62 minutes in length, with an average duration of 39 minutes.

Using a structured interview guide, participants were asked questions about their corporate culture, working conditions, and the challenges or benefits associated with employing people with disabilities.

#### **Block 1: Corporate Culture**

Stakeholders provided insights into their business operations, including team composition, the proportion of employees with disabilities, criteria for employee selection, roles held by employees with disabilities, workplace relationships. They also discussed the influence of legal requirements on the employment of people with disabilities.

#### **Block 2: Working Conditions**

This section examined the specific accommodations made for employees with disabilities, including their work schedules, salaries, and interpersonal relationships both within and outside the workplace. It also addressed adaptation measures for new employees, initiatives to enhance team communication, and challenges in providing optimal working conditions.

#### **Block 3: Challenges and Benefits**

Participants shared their plans or ideas for increasing the employment of people with disabilities. They also discussed the impact of employing individuals with disabilities on their businesses, the challenges they faced, notable incidents, legislative support, and positive experiences related to disability-inclusive employment.

Semi-structured interviews with people with disabilities and stakeholders were conducted in Ukrainian, with some conducted in Russian. The interviews took place between 26 January and 24 February 2021.

#### **Data Analysis**

The six-phase thematic analysis technique by Braun and Clarke (2006) was utilized to analyse the interview transcripts. Initially, two researchers thoroughly read the transcripts of all interviews to familiarize themselves with the content. Following this, the same two researchers independently coded three interviews, identifying preliminary codes associated with key excerpts. Any discrepancies in coding were discussed and resolved. The first author then proceeded to code the remaining interviews.

In the third phase, the first author reviewed the codes, grouping related ones together and organizing them into potential themes. A thorough examination and discussion involving all authors followed to ensure the internal and external consistency, homogeneity, and relevance of these themes. This process led to the refinement of the themes (phase 4).

In the fifth phase, each author contributed to defining the identified themes and constructing the accompanying narrative structure and descriptions. Finally, all authors collaboratively developed the current analysis, which includes vivid excerpts from the participant narratives.

Through multiple team meetings and iterative readings of the transcripts, thematic saturation was confirmed.

### **Representativeness of the Sample**

The study's sample of 24 participants aimed for theoretical rather than statistical representativeness, reflecting a diverse range of experiences. Participants included people with disabilities from various regions of Ukraine, with differences in age, gender, type of disability, and employment status. Employers and stakeholders from small, medium-sized, and large enterprises were also included, offering perspectives from different organizational contexts.

This diversity allowed for an in-depth exploration of the barriers people with disabilities face in employment and the challenges employers encounter in creating inclusive workplaces. Data saturation was achieved as interviews revealed consistent themes, with no new significant topics emerging.

This approach ensured a robust understanding of the key issues surrounding the employment of people with disabilities in Ukraine, capturing both individual and institutional perspectives. It provided a foundation for identifying systemic barriers and potential strategies to promote inclusion.

### **Results**

Five major themes were identified through thematic analysis: 1) Four key obstacles to the employment of individuals with disabilities: spatial, institutional, legislative, and social; 2) Existing regulations concerning the accessibility of buildings and public spaces are often ignored. This leads to the exclusion of individuals with disabilities from certain work areas, regardless of their qualifications, due to spatial barriers; 3) Among the structural barriers, social barriers – characterized by prejudiced attitudes from both team members and employers – persist. These social barriers are not easily addressed by regulatory frameworks and remain a significant challenge; 4) Successful employment outcomes are influenced by factors beyond individual effort. Insufficient state intervention and societal biases regarding the employability of individuals with disabilities contribute to social vulnerability; 5) Ambiguous laws governing the employment of people with disabilities encourage quota-driven hiring practices by large enterprises. This, combined with inadequate state oversight and the reluctance of individual stakeholders, fosters illegal employment practices.

#### ***Study 1 (participants with disabilities)***

##### **Typology of Obstacles to the Employment of People with Disabilities**

During the analysis of the interviews, several key obstacles to the employment of people with disabilities were identified. These obstacles can be categorized as spatial, institutional, legislative, and social. The social category is further subdivided into societal attitudes and issues related to self-perception and how individuals with disabilities perceive their environment.

##### **The Spatial Obstacle**

The most prominent of these barriers is **the spatial obstacles**, which refers to the physical inaccessibility of urban environments. This includes the inadequate provision of ramps, workspaces, adapted toilets, and inclusive high-speed transport for people with limited mobility. The availability of these facilities is essential to allow individuals with disabilities, such as those who use wheelchairs, crutches, or canes, to move freely around the city, access schools, and attend workplaces. The importance of addressing accessibility from the earliest stages of building development is emphasized



by existing standards (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, 2011). However, despite these standards, adaptation issues in both urban infrastructure and buildings remain unresolved, posing significant challenges to the employment of people with disabilities. One respondent highlighted the profound impact of these barriers:

*"Physical barriers are the biggest obstacle. If you can't leave the house or use public transport alone, you can only dream about employment, visiting the office, and generally about visiting anything at all" (Resp 5).*

This observation underscores the foundational role that physical accessibility plays in facilitating employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities.

Further complicating the employment landscape is the lack of basic office accommodations. Some respondents noted that the absence of essential modifications, such as lifts, wide aisles, and accessible toilets, severely limits the availability of job opportunities, particularly in offices located on higher floors. This issue is exacerbated by the limited availability of remote work in certain fields, restricting employment possibilities for individuals with disabilities even when they possess the necessary qualifications. As one respondent mentioned,

*"There is no need for special conditions, except for the basic ones so that a person could get to work, use the bathroom, and use the kitchen if there is one, which is often the case in the office. And that's enough" (Resp 4).*

This situation not only limits job opportunities but also contradicts the constitutional right of every individual to freely choose their profession (Law of Ukraine on Urban Planning, 2011). In essence, the physical environment continues to impose significant restrictions on the professional choices available to individuals with disabilities, highlighting the urgent need for better implementation of accessibility standards.

### **Institutional Obstacles**

**Institutional obstacles** to the employment of people with disabilities encompass challenges within the medical and educational systems, as well as within the business and public sectors. A key issue is the limited access to educational institutions, many of which are not adapted to meet the needs of low-mobility individuals and fail to offer online education options. This lack of accessibility in education significantly reduces opportunities for individuals with disabilities to obtain the necessary qualifications for high-paying or prestigious positions. One respondent highlighted a case where they were hired without the management being fully aware, only to have their employment later denied:

*"Sometimes people were hired without management even knowing about it. Then a week later the management would deny me the vacancy when I had already been working" (Resp 3).*

This incident illustrates the unpredictable and often unjust employment practices faced by people with disabilities.

Another respondent addressed the limitations in educational access, recalling that there was only one institution offering remote learning:

*"At the time when I graduated, there was only one university where you could study remotely, it was 'Ukraine' (the title of a private university – author's note) and there was a speciality that more or less suited me" (Resp 4).*

This underscores the restrictive nature of the educational system for individuals requiring remote learning or other accommodations, further complicating their path to employment.

In addition to educational barriers, respondents reported negligence in the medical sector, particularly in receiving accurate and prompt diagnosis, appropriate rehabilitation plans, or necessary medical certificates. The bureaucratic process of appealing or re-establishing a diagnosis can be highly resource-intensive, both financially and physically, exacerbating the difficulties people with disabilities face in securing employment.

Employers and the authority often fail to provide reasonable adjustments in accordance with the law (Law of Ukraine on Urban Planning, 2011), which forces many individuals with disabilities into the shadow economy, stripping them of their legal rights to work, independence, and self-sufficiency. Respondents noted that their most successful job searches occurred through networking or freelance work, where they could conceal their disability status, as job centres and interviews proved ineffective due to employers' unwillingness to hire people with disabilities. The lack of promotion of successful employment stories in businesses and public employment centres further discourages potential employers, reinforcing the institutional barriers that hinder full participation in the labour market for people with disabilities.

### **Legislative Obstacles**

Despite the existence of current regulations, the **legal framework** itself poses significant barriers to the employment of people with disabilities. This can be attributed not only to employers' disregard for the law, but also to instances where individuals with disabilities unintentionally contribute to these practices. For example, Article 19 of the Law "On Basics of Social Protection for the Disabled in Ukraine" stipulates that enterprises with eight or more employees must allocate 4% of their full-time positions to people with disabilities (Law of Ukraine on the Basics of Social Protection of Disabled Persons, 2017). However, the experiences of many respondents indicate that some employers exploit loopholes in the law, resorting to salary fraud or informal employment, whereby individuals with disabilities receive only a minimal living wage despite being "formally" employed. This exploitation is reflected in the words of one respondent:

*"My daughter and I were left like that. The problem was that we just had to live for something. What is given by the state is so insignificant, and if we account for the subsistence level in our country, which is the lowest for people with disabilities, it is just some kind of mockery" (Resp. 8).*

This highlights the financial insecurity faced by people with disabilities, as even state support remains insufficient to meet basic needs. Additionally, another respondent shared a different perspective on the quota system:

*"I have a non-working disability group. Because of this law (the quota law – author's note), I got lucky, I managed to 'employ' my labor book ("trudova knyha" (labor book) is an official employment record document used in some post-Soviet countries, including Ukraine, to track an individual's work history – author's note), and I got some money from it, but officially? I could work somewhere remotely" (Resp. 11).*

This statement underscores how the quota system sometimes leads to superficial compliance, where individuals are recorded as employed, but still, do not engage in meaningful work or professional development.

These legal and employment practices contribute to broader social insecurity among people with disabilities. Many individuals face obstacles due to a lack of understanding of their legal rights and due to employer stereotypes, that result in employment being offered only to meet the state-mandated quota. The distortion of employment statistics, caused by practices like fictitious employment or minimal wage agreements, further obscures the true scale of employment challenges faced by people with disabilities.

Moreover, some individuals with disabilities also contribute to these issues by participating in fictitious employment arrangements, driven by a lack of readiness to engage in the labour market. This reluctance is often rooted in negative experiences or psychological barriers that deter them from pursuing legitimate employment opportunities.

While some respondents view the quota system positively as an opportunity to secure formal employment aligned with their qualifications, others remain unaware of their rights and the legal provisions designed to protect them. This knowledge gap further exacerbates the challenges faced

by people with disabilities in navigating the labour market, perpetuating the cycle of social and economic insecurity.

### Social Obstacles

In addition to structural and regulatory challenges, a significant obstacle to the employment of people with disabilities is the **social obstacle**. This obstacle is manifested through biased attitudes from both staff and employers, as well as the internal fears and self-doubt of jobseekers themselves.

One respondent noted the limited opportunities offered by large utility companies, which typically involve either physically demanding tasks or low-wage positions:

*"Large utility companies offer jobs that people just can't take on, which include either hard physical work or very low wages, such as a storekeeper, a cleaner, a caretaker, and that is it. It does not even occur to them that a person with a disability can have a good post and professionally perform their work"* (Resp. 5).

This statement highlights how deeply rooted stereotypes about the abilities of people with disabilities restrict their access to employment that matches their qualifications and offers fair compensation.

Another respondent highlighted the reluctance of employers to make necessary accommodations, emphasizing that it is often seen as easier to avoid hiring people with disabilities entirely:

*"People are afraid to take responsibility. Why should they hire a person with a disability? Why should they build that toilet and that ramp? It is easier for them not to hire such a person at all"* (Resp. 7).

This reluctance not only perpetuates exclusion but also creates a significant barrier to workplace diversity and inclusion. Furthermore, respondents pointed out the role of unqualified recruiters who, despite corporate social responsibility policies, may reject a candidate upon learning of their disability. One participant shared their experience:

*"HR or another specialist may like everything, they are ready to make an appointment, and they do so, but then I say at the end that I have a disability, and that is it"* (Resp. 9).

This kind of rejection, based solely on the disclosure of a disability, undermines candidates' confidence and may encourage them to conceal their disability status. This could lead to health issues due to the lack of accommodations aligned with their individual rehabilitation plans.

Another respondent described their experience of workplace discrimination, where community attitudes led to their job being terminated:

*"When I worked in a print shop, it was closed because people started complaining to the city council as to 'why are you forcing a disabled person to work here.' It was bothering them for some reason that a person in a wheelchair was making photocopies"* (Resp. 12).

This incident highlights how societal biases can extend beyond employers and affect the wider community's perception of disability in the workplace.

Negative experiences with employers further compound these challenges. Some respondents reported violations of employment agreements, leading to disillusionment with formal employment. One participant recounted:

*"Once it happened, they would not comply with the terms of the agreement. We agreed on a 2–3 hour working day and a payment of 500 euros per month. As a result, I had to work all day, and my salary was dependent on the company's profits"* (Resp. 13).

Such incidents reinforce negative stereotypes about managers, leading jobseekers to question whether it is worth facing potential discrimination or whether they should remain dependent on social benefits. Self-perception also plays a critical role in determining an individual's willingness to engage in the job market. As one respondent explained:

*"I have an inner feeling of how I will be perceived, that is, whether physical problems will influence whether I will be hired or not"* (Resp. 16).

This lack of confidence can deter individuals from actively pursuing job opportunities, even when they have the necessary qualifications.

Several additional factors contribute to the challenges of finding employment for people with disabilities. These include narrow specializations with limited demand, especially in smaller towns; high competition in certain industries; and increased candidate requirements, which often exclude people with disabilities from training opportunities. Moreover, factors such as gender, age, and prior education can also influence employment outcomes, with maternity leave limiting opportunities for women and social expectations placing financial pressures on men.

Finally, the respondents' prior employment experiences play a pivotal role in shaping their attitudes toward future job prospects. Those with positive employment histories are more optimistic and willing to participate in interviews, while those with negative experiences are more likely to seek freelance work or engage in the shadow economy. This underscores the importance of fostering positive employment experiences to encourage greater workforce participation among people with disabilities.

### **Self-Perception of People with Congenital and Acquired Disabilities**

Peculiarities of respondents' perception of their disability are essential not only in the context of involvement in the labour market, but also in creating conditions for accessibility in the workplace. They are also critical in identifying possible difficulties in integration into corporate culture and/or adaptation in the workplace.

**People with acquired disabilities** have a greater context of being in the labour market through the experience of comparing life before and after disability status. Because of this, representatives of this group more often point to the need to create physical conditions, including adaptation programs and learning opportunities (online or by the principles of barrier-free space), creating conditions to facilitate the performance of tasks within a household and routine tasks. Among the problems not related to accessibility and adaptation to new situations, the internal psychological aspects of disability stand out. These include rejection of one's body, feelings of inferiority, changes in health, lack of support, feelings of lost opportunities, distrust, and fear of the necessity to change a lifestyle. For those **people who have a congenital disability**, the focus is on the difficulties of integration into society. It is accompanied by loneliness and fear of "going out" into society. In the context of employment, among the concerns of space adaptation, the team adaptation issue is added due to the psychological aspect of disability.

To sum up, successful employment is influenced by some factors that do not primarily depend on the jobseekers' efforts. This puts them in a position of social insecurity due to the lack of state intervention. These factors include legislation, favourable institutional mechanisms, and the context of society. This generates prejudices about the ability of a person with a disability to work.

### **Outlining a positive experience of employment of people with disabilities**

The positive employment experiences of people with disabilities can be considered to comply with regulations under the law. This includes creating conditions in line with the Medical Expert Commission's guidelines and individual rehabilitation programs for the employment of people with disabilities and the use of additional safety measures for this category of employees by employers (Law of Ukraine on Urban Planning, 2011). In some cases, provided by the law of Ukraine training, the employer must provide the possibility of retraining or employment following medical recommendations.

A key finding of the study is that successful employment for people with disabilities occurs when the **state-business-worker triad** collaborates effectively. The state ensures legal enforcement and accessibility, businesses implement inclusive practices and comply with laws, and workers engage in training and advocate for their rights. This cooperation creates opportunities for employment that align with qualifications and offer fair compensation, overcoming obstacles and fostering inclusion.

*"Businesses should be encouraged to hire people with disabilities. Not to oblige but to encourage. There should be bonuses for businesses instead; the employer should be interested. It is very popular and fashionable now to be so socially responsible, so many of those who hold such beliefs act following them" (Resp. 7).*

This collaborative model is further strengthened by introducing mechanisms such as online interviews, state- or enterprise-funded training programs for new qualifications, and policies to enhance corporate social responsibility. These measures ensure that businesses are incentivized to invest in inclusive practices, creating a sustainable and supportive ecosystem for employing people with disabilities.

Such a cooperation mechanism will not only improve the employment statistics of people with disabilities but also allow stakeholders to improve internal social responsibility policies and ethical business principles. This will increase the number of qualified staff and loyalty and/or increase the target audience. Thus, jobseekers will increase their motivation to seek employment, strengthen trust in government and business, and promote change in spatial accessibility at the local and city levels, which everyone needs. In addition, at the level of businesses and enterprises, one can highlight some positive aspects, such as improving the image, increasing brand loyalty, and forming a high level of commitment to the company among employees.

A Study 2 was dedicated to the experience of employers or stakeholders to describe more broadly the problem of employment of people with disabilities while considering the position of all parties involved.

### ***Study 2 (Stakeholders)***

#### **Obstacles Identified by Stakeholders in Hiring People with Disabilities**

This section analyses stakeholders' challenges when hiring people with disabilities, emphasizing issues with unclear legal requirements, societal attitudes, and infrastructure barriers. It highlights how ambiguities in legislation and insufficient incentives discourage employers from the inclusion of workers with disabilities. Societal biases and misconceptions about the abilities of people with disabilities further limit employment opportunities, while inadequate infrastructure, both public and private, exacerbates these difficulties. By addressing these systemic issues, the section provides a foundation for understanding the broader context of employment barriers faced by people with disabilities in Ukraine and the perspective of employers and stockholders.

#### **Unclear Legislation**

The most prevalent challenge identified by stakeholders is the lack of a clear understanding of existing legal frameworks related to the employment of individuals with disabilities. Current laws often fail to provide adequate guidance, leaving both employers and employees in difficult situations. For instance, restrictions on hiring individuals with certain disability groups for full-time positions limit their employment options and discourage employers from engaging in meaningful inclusion efforts. Additionally, potential incentives, such as tax breaks or financial benefits, are typically vaguely defined in official documents, making it unclear whether hiring people with disabilities would yield any tangible advantages for employers.

As a result, large enterprises may choose to hire individuals with disabilities simply to meet quotas and avoid sanctions, rather than fostering genuine workplace inclusion. One respondent reflected on this situation:

*"In these circumstances, they [stakeholders – author's note] think first of all what they will get in the upcoming days if they rely on the work of a person with a disability...they believe that the income and added value they can get through the work of such a person will be lower than if they hired a person without a disability" (Resp. 19).*

This highlights how short-term thinking and stereotypes about productivity hinder the employment of people with disabilities, despite the potential long-term benefits, such as increased loyalty

and improved corporate reputation. Moreover, bureaucratic processes add further complexity to hiring individuals with disabilities. Another respondent noted that businesses often find it easier to invest in physical adjustments, such as adapting toilets and workspaces, rather than navigating complicated legal requirements:

*"The main problem is that all the bureaucratic processes from a business standpoint are not worth employing a person with a disability" (Resp. 17).*

Stereotypes about the status of being incapable of working are another example of how inconsistencies in current legislation and ignorance of current legislation can harm the employment of people with disabilities. There is a misconception that obtaining disability status is equated with obtaining the status of incapacity to work. According to the Constitution of Ukraine, everyone has the right to work. As of now, total incapacity to work starts at retirement age. Disability implies partial/temporary incapacity to work, which provides for the possibility of employment (Pension Fund of Ukraine, 2021). However, ignorance of the specifics of this distinction on the part of both stakeholders and people with disabilities can become an obstacle to the employment of people with disabilities.

These problems demonstrate the need to reform existing laws on the employment of people with disabilities. In addition, one possible solution may be developing an information campaign to work with employers and potential employees to increase their awareness of both parties' current rights and responsibilities. It can also be helpful to organize mediation between people with disabilities and stakeholders, cooperation between stakeholders, and exchange experiences between Ukrainian and international companies. **Societal Stereotypes**

Societal stereotypes and misconceptions significantly influence stakeholders' willingness to hire people with disabilities. Entrenched biases about the capabilities of individuals with disabilities result in limited opportunities and workplace discrimination. One respondent noted that employers often hesitate to hire people with disabilities. This was not due to financial or organizational challenges, but because workers without disabilities and organizations as a whole lack the knowledge or experience to effectively work with people with disabilities:

*"A problem with companies is that not everyone wants to deal with people with disabilities because it is scary. Not everyone can deal with them. When they were still offices, they were not inclusive. That is, if a person has a disability due to diabetes, then no issue. But if this person is in a wheelchair, they cannot be in the office because there is simply no toilet. There are some, but they are simply not accessible for people with disabilities. There were fears on the part of employers about the cost of employment and difficulties with organizing workspaces" (Resp. 18).*

Societal stereotypes significantly hinder employment opportunities for people with disabilities by fostering misconceptions about their abilities and productivity. While financial concerns arise in specific cases, biases about integrating people with disabilities into the workplace frequently play a larger role, particularly in organizations lacking experience or inclusive practices. In conclusion, breaking these stereotypes is crucial for an inclusive labor market. Awareness campaigns, employer training, and equitable hiring policies can help ensure people with disabilities are recognized for their skills, not limited by prejudice.

#### **Insufficient Infrastructure**

The condition of public infrastructure and office spaces poses a substantial obstacle to hiring people with disabilities. Many buildings, including old and new constructions, fail to meet accessibility standards required by Ukrainian legislation (Law of Ukraine on Regulation of Urban Development Activities, 2011). This includes the absence of ramps, accessible toilets, and appropriate workspace modifications.

Employers often find the cost of renovating existing buildings to meet accessibility requirements prohibitive. One respondent reflected on this financial challenge:

*"The high cost of renovating old buildings to meet accessibility standards can be prohibitive for some companies" (Resp. 24).*

The inadequacy of city infrastructure further compounds this issue, as some employers expressed concerns about the broader challenges faced by employees in navigating urban environments:

*"Speaking of transfers, etc., then, in this case, we have more questions about the city infrastructure. We are ready to consider the option of hiring employees in wheelchairs, and for this purpose, the infrastructure of the city itself should be adjusted" (Resp. 24).*

In many cases, the responsibility of creating accessible workspaces falls disproportionately on employers, despite the state's legal obligation to ensure such accommodations. This mismatch of responsibilities complicates the employment landscape and limits opportunities for people with disabilities.

The obstacles faced by stakeholders in hiring people with disabilities arise from a combination of unclear legislation, societal stereotypes, and insufficient infrastructure. Addressing these obstacles requires clearer legal frameworks with explicit guidelines and incentives, government initiatives to support infrastructure upgrades, and public awareness campaigns to challenge societal biases. Additionally, fostering collaboration between businesses and stakeholders, alongside international knowledge exchange, can improve employment conditions and promote the inclusion of people with disabilities in the workforce.

**Discussion.** This study underscores multiple obstacles to employment for people with disabilities in Ukraine, aligning with findings from previous research.

Physical barriers, such as inaccessible workplaces and public transportation, were prominent among respondents. This aligns with Semigina and Ivanova (2010), who pointed out that inadequate infrastructure limits job opportunities, and Powell (2024), who also emphasized the impact of outdated infrastructure on employability.

Institutional challenges, including limited access to education and healthcare, further restrict employment. Paul and Batinic (2009) and Lindsay et al. (2018) both stressed that these barriers prevent people with disabilities from acquiring the necessary qualifications.

Unclear and poorly enforced legislation also hinders progress, as employers often bypass quotas through superficial compliance. Barclay and Markel (2009) and Mahasneh (2023) noted similar findings regarding the failure of legislation without proper enforcement.

Social stigma and workplace discrimination were major obstacles. These findings are consistent with Ramachandra et al. (2017) and Araten-Bergman (2016), who documented biases against hiring individuals with disabilities, a challenge also observed by Ameri et al. (2018).

Psychological barriers, particularly among individuals with acquired disabilities, were significant. Paul and Batinic (2009) and Baert (2018) highlighted the impact of self-doubt and negative experiences on job-seeking behaviour.

To address these issues, a comprehensive approach is needed. Shaewitz et al. (2018) emphasized the importance of employer education to combat biases, while Bonaccio et al. (2020) advocated for flexible workplace policies that accommodate individuals with disabilities. Moreover, Barclay and Markel (2009) and Ameri et al. (2018) stressed that legislative reforms must be paired with effective public awareness campaigns to reduce stigma and increase understanding of the benefits of hiring people with disabilities.

Addressing the barriers identified in this study – whether spatial, legislative, institutional, or social – requires coordinated efforts across multiple sectors. Improving infrastructure, enforcing laws, educating employers, and combating societal stigma can significantly enhance employment opportunities for people with disabilities in Ukraine.

While the issue of how disabled people are perceived and treated in a society is a universal one and concerns every country and/or community, in Ukraine, the ongoing war currently influ-

ences the situation. This means that the issue of creating proper policies that would ensure the protection of people with disabilities is crucial. Participants indicated that self-perception and personal attitudes significantly impact their integration into corporate culture. Those who felt valued and supported reported higher levels of job satisfaction and engagement. The study found that participants faced various barriers to employment, including misconceptions about their abilities and inadequate workplace accommodations. However, positive examples, including flexible schedules, accessible facilities, and supportive colleagues, were crucial for experiences noted in inclusive environments with supportive policies. Adequate working conditions successfully integrate employees with disabilities. The study highlighted the need for continuous improvement to foster a truly inclusive workplace. Overall, the findings suggest that while progress has been made, there is still a need for enhanced efforts to support the full integration of people with disabilities into corporate culture. This study has some limitations that need to be acknowledged and could potentially be addressed in future research. The findings are based on qualitative data from individuals with disabilities and stakeholders, with a relatively small sample size. Additionally, using snowball sampling for participant recruitment may have introduced selection bias. These factors limit the generalizability of the results and suggest that further research with larger, more diverse samples and different recruitment methods are necessary to validate and expand on these findings.

**Conclusion.** The study's results suggest fundamental policy changes to improve employment for people with disabilities. At the state level, enforce inclusiveness in architecture and infrastructure, ensure workplace accessibility, mediate between employers and workers, improve and enforce laws, and provide training for employers and employees. At the enterprise level, adopt social responsibility policies, promote diversity, implement adaptive practices, educate management on laws, and develop training and internship programs. Individually, engage in self-development and skill improvement through specialized training. Social projects should include public education, workplace adaptation, and mentoring programs.

**Acknowledgements.** The authors are grateful to all the participants involved in the research.

**Disclosure statement.** The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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