

26 counties in the South of Ireland, Ireland



## Irish Wheelchair Association, Ability Programme

Keyword(s):

**Disadvantaged Groups of Learners**

**Labour Market and VET**



### Introduction

Irish Wheelchair Association (IWA) is a nationwide organisation with over 20,000 members, 57 Resource Centres, and 2,700 staff. Since its foundation in 1960, IWA has worked in partnership with members, volunteers, service users, staff, and funders to develop services and supports for the express needs of its customers. These services ensure that their independence, quality of life and personal requirements are addressed in a truly person-centred way. People are at the heart of what IWA do, as can be seen in our values.

Funded by the ESF & Department of Social Protection and administered by Pobal, The IWA's Ability Programme provides job seeking and employability skills coaching to young people aged 18 -

29 with any kind of physical disability (it is not solely for wheelchair users). Progression for our clients looks very different for everyone; depending on how "job-ready" they are when they join us. Many people with disabilities have not come through mainstream

schooling or college and may not have had the opportunity to gain skills in situations that others may take for granted e.g. taking public transport, timekeeping, or workplace skills. IWA's Ability

Programme addresses these issues as part of the curriculum and helps bring people with disabilities closer to the labour market.

Traditional supports for people with a disability who were looking for work were based on the premise of the individual being “job ready”. The IWA Ability Programme is holistic in its approach and aims to support individuals at every stage of their job-seeking journey, whether they are “job-ready” or not.

Ability focuses on developing decision-making, critical thinking, self-directed learning, and self-advocacy skills. Job Coaches support participants as opposed to 'doing it' for them.

### **Main challenge**

The European Commission Report for Ireland 2019 shows we have one of the lowest employment rates for people with disabilities in the EU (26.2 % compared to 48.1 % in the EU). Ireland also has one of the highest gaps between people with & without disabilities (45.1 percentage points) in employment. According to the DFI, only 31% of working-age people with a disability in Ireland are working, compared to 71% without a disability.

Supporting people with physical disabilities/reduced mobility is central to the aims and objectives of IWA. We understand the real needs and challenges facing people with physical disabilities in the Republic. Having set out to lead the way and change things for the better, IWA has never forgotten that core message and our determination remains a constant force for change.

A gap in services was identified in 2017. IWA ran an online survey to identify barriers for people with disabilities accessing employment, and to gauge how a supported employment programme might benefit. There were 42 interested respondents.

The purpose of designing and sourcing funding for the Ability Programme was to support these young people, through individualized coaching, to become independent jobseekers or employees.

A conference was held by IWA in 2018. Findings demonstrated that young people with disabilities were interested in a supported employment programme.

Expressions of interest forms were completed and an initial list of 20 potential participants was formed. This, together with the survey mentioned above formed the basis for the list of possible participants for any new supported employment programme.

The main challenge was creating awareness of the project and how it differed from existing employment services. Our programme fills the gaps that are missing in

mainstream employment services by addressing each barrier that may have prevented people with disabilities from gaining employment.

## **Timing**

The project was undertaken when the relevant funding was available. It also supports Ireland's commitment to the UNCRPD, specifically article 27 – Work and Employment.

In line with relevant government policies and strategies, the IWA Ability project promotes access to employment for people with disabilities. The project supports people with disabilities into employment or further along their career journey. The project supports people with disabilities to develop a career path of their choosing and access relevant training and education to make that plan a reality. Furthermore, it promotes support at local level delivering seamless supports to persons with disabilities.

The project works with employers to create greater awareness on the part of employers of the supports available to them to employ or retain a person with a disability and supports them to overcome perceived challenges and perceptions that employers may have about employing a person with a disability. It encourages employers to provide work experience/paid internships for people with disabilities and engages employers in actions that promote recruitment and retention of people with disabilities in open labor market.

The project provides individualised supports to people with disability to gain confidence to access the labor market and choose employment in their own community which directly impacts on physical and mental wellbeing and ensures they have an adequate income.

This project delivers a model of services that empowers people to make decisions about their career and provides them with the skills to access employment and have mobility within employment in the future providing them with opportunities to work and have a career.

## **Objective**

The general objectives of the projects are to:

- Empower young people with disabilities to develop the confidence & independence required to participate in education, training, and employment.
- Support those who are not in education, employment, or training to access same.

- Build the capacity of employers to recruit & retain people with disabilities.

### **Target group**

The initial project was aimed at young people aged 18 - 29 with any kind of physical disability who were interested in creating a career path for themselves. This has evolved and we now work with people with physical disabilities of working age.

### **Geographical range**

The project is a national project covering the 26 counties in the South of Ireland.

### **Stakeholders and partners**

Our project was implemented solely by the Ability staff team and we have partnered:

#### **Internally:**

- The team attended many meetings to present to IWA managers & teams across the Republic, with the aim of Ability being promoted from the top down.

#### **Externally:**

- With other relevant organisations – such as DFI, Enable Ireland, Spinal Injuries Ireland, Foroige, DSP, HSE, and Social Farming Ireland to raise awareness of the programme among representative organisations for people with disabilities.
- With the other 26 Ability groups to promote the need for this project and secure additional funding.
- With over 120 employers in the South of Ireland to create awareness of disability and support employers in their Diversity and Inclusion strategy
- With POBAL – the fund administrators in Ireland – successfully participating in all data checks and audits; financial and nonfinancial mid/end of year reporting also.
- With Quality Matters – the external authenticators for the Ability programmes – soft outcomes tool with randomly selected clients, various service provider feedback workshops and feedback calls completed.

Engagement with stakeholders initially was face to face through networking events and when the pandemic hit, this moved to online events and opportunities. This included Relationship building and inter-agency working to support people with a physical disability through paid roles, mentoring, volunteering opportunities, employer guest speaker at Ability webinars, training provision for participants and staff, cross-referrals, and promotion of our programme. Engagement with stakeholders involved linking into the benefits for them. For other organisations, there was an interest in getting people with disabilities into employment and where a participant did not meet the criteria for our programme, we were able to refer them to a programme that did meet their requirements. For employers, they wanted to enhance their Diversity and Inclusion strategy and to employ people with disabilities, therefore we focused on this when working with them.

### **Strategy / materials**

Working collaboratively with all Stakeholders was key to success. Building up networks with other agencies assisted up in building our profile and increased opportunities to reach more people with disabilities that could benefit from the service we provided.

Working with the other 26 Projects enabled us to build alliances with other organisations that have a similar goal to ourselves but work with people with different abilities. This enabled a joint approach to successfully extending funding when the ESF/POBAL funding was ending.

Face to face and online meetings were used to meet with a variety of stakeholders. Email and social media were also used to reach out to people and developing our own webinars enabled us to invite a variety of stakeholders to join us. The strategy was to use as many modes as possible of communication to reach the broadest range of stakeholders possible. As people became aware of the project and what it aimed to achieve word of mouth was also beneficial.

As for communication materials, we developed posters, leaflets and an information pack for employers.

This project was specifically geared towards people with a physical disability to ensure equal access to employment. The participants on the program we're actively involved in the development of their own journeys and as the project developed, participants who had achieved employment through the project became mentors for other participants who are still on their journey. Gender breakdown of participants on the project was 50/50. This was a natural development rather than an orchestrated one.

From this experience we have learned that there is a real openness from employers to employ people with disabilities but a fear of doing the wrong thing. This openness provides a real opportunity to create a working environment that's accessible to everyone and projects like this can create real achievable pathways to employment for people with disabilities

## **Resources**

Funding is fundamental to the implementation of this model going forward. The salaries and associated costs of the Job Coaches is the main cost. Working with the other Ability Projects we have secured further funding to run the programme to the end of December 2022. The need for sustainable funding will be key to the successful consistent implementation of this Strategy going forward.

## **Compliance with Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)**

The project aligns with a number of the Strategic Development Goals. It creates job opportunities for young people with disabilities, it reduces inequalities, and it has provided the opportunity to build partnerships that can influence funding and policy. Access to employment can also provide a decent living reducing poverty and is also good for your overall health and wellbeing.

## **Innovation(s)**

Coaching itself is an innovative method of sustained learning. Coaches support participants to identify their career path and set goals to accomplish it. It is purely person centred and takes the person from where they are to where they want to go in a timeframe that works from them. The learner is always in control.

The project also focused on building networks with other stakeholders that would support the goals of participants. This included

- Collaboration with a wide range of organisations including ETBs, key community and voluntary interests, employers, employment services and relevant State agencies. This demonstrates how we are always thinking about what's best for the individual client.
- The coaching model is innovative in its approach to employability skills training as it is truly person centered as well as being holistic.
- It ensures that balance is pursued in a participant's life. For example, improving one's social life is a recurring theme within the objectives of Ability clients.

- Coaches work with clients to support them to overcome any barriers to enjoying a social life. As a direct result of the Ability Programme, a young persons' group has been established in Galway. Ability clients met once a month to participate in a social event or activity e.g. Galway races picture attached.
- We can work with clients anywhere in the South of Ireland and participants do not have to be "job-ready".
- Participants also set their own timeframes for objectives and are never told what to do by coaches.
- Coaching sessions and group training have successfully taken place remotely e.g. CV workshop, group coaching sessions and group mindfulness classes.

## Evaluation

There was a written evaluation of the coaching process by the participant at the end of the series of sessions. This evaluation did not cover any reference to content (this remains confidential) but the participant was asked to comment on how they experienced the process and how useful it was in helping them meet their goals/make the changes they wanted to make. Evaluation is of interest to the organisation (which needs to make sure that it is getting value for money) and for the coach (who will also want to assure him/herself as to the value of their work).

Evaluation happened in 3 ways

- **Individually** between Coach and Person (verbally at the end of each session) and a written evaluation when coaching has ended
- **Periodically** between the Ability Coordinator and a number of randomly selected participants to get feedback on the coaching and annually to evaluate the programme coordination
- **Externally** by the Funder at the end of the project.

Stakeholders were actively involved in each part of the evaluation process both on an individual and focus group process.

## Success parameters

The success parameters around this project include:

- Participants with an interest in identifying and progressing their career path
- Support from the senior management team and alignment with the organisation strategy and values
- Dedicated team of Job Coaches that are person centered and implement a coaching culture
- Clear framework of how the project operates to ensure a consist approach to ensure quality in the serve

- Clear Goals and objectives that can be measured and reported on.
- Networking with other likeminded organisations
- Building relationships with potential employers

## **Impact**

The project has built in hard and soft outcome measures and evaluations have been carried out internally with the participants on the programme. The project has also been evaluated by an external company appointed by POBAL

The project has worked with 100 participants across 21 counties. Some of the Work-related progressions include paid employment; volunteering; participation on Community Employment Schemes.

Non-work related progressions include a range of objectives under 6 headings: Physical Health; Mental Health; Independent Living; Transportation; Social Integration; Education/Training; Employment.

Accredited and non-accredited courses have been commenced, ranging from a 1-day CV Workshop, up to a Level 9 in Architectural Technology & Design. This demonstrates the range of participant education levels that we support.

We have engaged with a range of employers & support them to foster an inclusive job market. This support ranges from development of a diversity & inclusion strategy, help to modify recruitment practices & provision of Disability Awareness Training. A pool of untapped talent is also available through our caseload of participants. Employers include major brands like Coca-Cola, Pfizer, LinkedIn, Dell, Apple, BT, and Tesco.

There have been positive Network and shared learnings opportunities with relevant stakeholders. Collaboration with a wide range of organisations including Education & Training Boards, colleges, community & voluntary interests, employers, public sector employment services, other disability organisations & relevant State agencies continues to evolve.

Our project embodies person-centeredness; it is a holistic approach which ensures that all aspects of an individual's life are encompassed, & it works to ensure a balance is created for participants. The project builds the persons capacity to become an independent job seeker.

Delivery of our project aligns closely with IWA's mission of enabling accessibility to all aspects of society for people with disabilities.

The success of the project has been recognised externally. The IWA Ability Programme won an Aontas National STAR Award 2021 for Best Adult Learner Initiative that Supports Social Inclusion

We were a finalist in a European wide "EU In My Region" 2020 competition by documenting a participant's poignant Ability story in a short video and we were Short-listed for Irish Institute of Training & Development's National Awards in Best Diversity and Inclusion Participative Initiative category, 2020.

### **Impediments**

Lack of sustainable Funding remains the main ongoing challenge in applying this strategy. Funding is grant based and often with a short timeframe of 12 – 18 months. Confirmation of new funding is often in the last few weeks of the existing project and staff have moved on for fear of having no work. Additionally, the funding criteria change with each grant and therefore parts of the project must change to meet the needs of the funding rather than the funding meeting the needs of the project.

Engagement with employers also continues to be challenging. The will is there, but when it comes to doing the practical work that supports the employment pathways, other priorities take over.

To overcome these challenges, we continue to work with other organisations to secure long-term sustainable funding and lobby the Government as a collective.

We continue to communicate and work with employers to develop their D&I journey.

### **Replicability**

There is huge scalability & potential with our project, especially if age restrictions were changed to "working age" and not limited to 18-29.

### **Concluding remarks**

IWA have established an innovative coaching model that promotes the inclusion of people with disability in the labor market in a way and at a pace that works for them.

### **Website/Social Media profile(s) of the initiative**

<https://www.iwa.ie/services/young-adults/employment-skillsprogramme/>

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