

Closing the Skills Gaps: Inclusive Apprenticeships and Work-Based Learning

Labour shortages are reaching critical levels across industries, with 74% of employers worldwide struggling to find qualified workers. To bridge this gap, businesses and policymakers must invest in targeted solutions such as expanding training programmes, embracing skills-based hiring, and aligning education with real-world demands. A key part of the solution lies in tapping into underutilised talent, particularly persons with disabilities, who make up 16% of the global population but face significant barriers to education and employment, resulting in unemployment rates nearly 25% higher than those without disabilities.



Inclusive apprenticeships and work-based learning (WBL) programmes create pathways to employment for persons with disabilities while helping employers fill skill gaps, drive innovation, and enhance workplace diversity. By removing barriers and fostering inclusion, these initiatives improve both social equity and business productivity while contributing to resolving the global talent shortage.

International standards and recommendations

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities sets out that persons with disabilities include individuals with long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments that, when combined with these barriers, restrict full participation in key aspects of life, including employment. Universal design and reasonable accommodations—like accessible infrastructure and adaptive technologies—are critical for creating equitable opportunities.

The ILO Recommendation on Quality Apprenticeships (R208) adopted in 2023 includes an important provision on equality and diversity, encouraging members to promote “social inclusion in apprenticeships, taking special account of the situation and needs of persons belonging to one or more vulnerable groups or groups in situations of vulnerability.”

Business Case for Inclusive Apprenticeships

Inclusive apprenticeships require a structured approach, including open communication, active collaboration with disability organisations, partnerships across sectors, flexible training, accessible facilities, and mentorship.

Inclusive apprenticeship and WBL programmes promote well-functioning company cultures and benefit corporate profitability.

- Apprenticeships, including those for individuals with disabilities, increase retention (up to 85%) and loyalty. Inclusive apprenticeships benefit company culture by fostering better inclusion strategies and respectful communication.
- While associated with social responsibility, inclusive apprenticeships are a profitable business solution. Companies hiring people with disabilities see higher revenue, net income, and profit margins.
- They have also been shown to boost skill levels and productivity, reduce turnover, and expand talent pipelines.
- Costs (salaries, mentoring, training, and initial productivity losses) are offset by long-term benefits. Companies often overestimate investment in accommodations and inclusive programme design. Government support (grants, subsidies) can help offset accommodation costs for smaller employers.

Inclusive apprenticeships promote a supportive, sustainable workplace environment, benefiting businesses in the long term.

Tips on Inclusive Friendly Apprenticeships and WBL for Persons with Disabilities

Inclusive Hiring Practices

1. Develop inclusive job descriptions using clear and simple language, focusing on essential skills and qualifications and highlighting the company's commitment to diversity and inclusion.
2. Use diverse recruitment channels by partnering with disability employment services and disability organisations and advertising job openings on platforms that reach people with disabilities.
3. Ensure accessible application processes by providing alternative formats for job applications (e.g.: online, paper, and audio) and helping with the application process as needed.
4. Train hiring managers and staff on disability awareness and inclusive recruitment, promoting sustainable cultural change.

Adjustments and Support

1. Make necessary adjustments to provide reasonable accommodation to employees with disabilities (e.g.: accessible workstations, assistive technology, etc). JobAccess provides a comprehensive guide on reasonable accommodations [HERE](#).
2. Promote a culture of respect and inclusion through disability awareness training and employee resource groups for individuals with disabilities and allies. A well-informed team is better equipped to create a truly inclusive work environment.
3. Offer continuous support and mentorship, including assistance in navigating the workplace, continuous feedback, and career development opportunities tailored to individual needs with regular reviews and adjustments.
4. Allow employees to rotate between roles in the organisation to broaden their skill sets, using job shadowing as a tool for WBL and career exploration.
5. Support employees' pursuit of further education and certification by encouraging participation in courses, workshops, seminars, and conferences.

Case Studies

The Adecco Group (TAG) & Nestlé: Inclusion, Training, and Digital Opportunities

With the goal of empowering young persons with disabilities through training and digital opportunities, TAG and Nestlé created an inclusive apprenticeship programme that equips participants with the soft and digital literacy skills needed to succeed in the modern workforce.

The Adecco Group (TAG) in Spain: Fundación Adecco

In Spain, the Fundación Adecco is one of the most acknowledged institutions dealing with inclusion of persons with disabilities for more than 25 years. Fundación Adecco has developed a yearly programme of grants for persons with disabilities to help them pursue their upskilling goals, including apprenticeship programmes.

Accenture: Leveraging Technology to Upskill Employees with Disabilities

Accenture has been at the forefront of leveraging technology to upskill all employees, including people with disabilities, by designing inclusive programs that enhance technical skills to meet the evolving demands of work. These programs harness the power of technologies to create opportunities for growth and career progression for everyone.

Adaptive Construction Solutions (ACS): Building an Inclusive Registered Apprenticeship Programme

Since 2016, ACS has achieved significant diversity milestones, with 20% of its apprentices self-identifying as having a disability, a 97% completion rate, and high employment retention of its apprentices. ACS' approach includes comprehensive on-the-job training, mentorship, and a strong emphasis on accessibility. By educating employers about disability inclusion and creating an environment where apprentices feel comfortable requesting accommodations, ACS not only addresses immediate workforce needs but also promotes long-term career development and business growth.

