Jaunatnes starptautisko programmu aģentūra

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YOUTH AUT WORK

Youth work for employability of youngsters with autistic spectrum

Collection of Positive Practices

"Successful initiatives and strategies in supporting autistic youngsters in employment"

TITLE:

Collection of positive practices "Successful initiatives and strategies in supporting autistic youngsters in employment"

PROJECT:

“Youth work for employability of youngsters with autistic spectrum (youthAUTwork)”, funded by the Agency for International Programmes for Youth, Republic of Latvia

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Table of Contents

SUMMARY OF THE PROJECT 1

INTRODUCTION AND STRUCTURE OF THE PUBLICATION 4

What do we mean by a “positive practice”? 4

Who is this publication for? 7

Structure of the Collection 8

Reading the practices as possibilities, not recipes 9

COLLECTION OF POSITIVE PRACTICES 10

1 - Rimi Latvia 11

2 - “Bordo Vasca” Inclusive Café 16

3 - Traiettorie project 21

4 - PizzAut 25

5 - Sala da tè solidale 30

6 - Svetionik u plavom / Lighthouse in blue 36

7 - „Budi uz nas“ inicijativa Udruge za autizam Pogled / "Be with us" initiative of the Pogled Autism Association 42

8 - Prehod mladih / Youth Transition 49

9 - Specialisterne 56

10 - Kirjokartta / Spectrum Map – turning self-knowledge into practical support 61

11 - Vivre et Travailler Autrement / Living and Working Differently 66

12 - AutiTalent 73

13 - Ambitious about Autism 82

14 - SUPPORT Project 90

15 - Autism: Spectrum of Employment Skills – ASES 97

SUMMARY OF THE PROJECT

Project title:
"Youth work for employability of youngsters with autistic spectrum"

Abbreviation:
youthAUTwork

Summary of the project:

The motivation for our project comes from a need observed across Latvia, Italy and Serbia: the integration and accessibility of youth with autism in the labour market. We want to address this issue by training educators and youth workers and preparing society and the working environment for the effective inclusion of individuals with autism. Research indicates that young people with autism have significantly lower rates of employment compared to those with physical or cognitive disabilities. In Latvia, the challenges include insufficient support in education, limited access to specialised training, and a lack of employer awareness about inclusive practices. Similarly, in Italy, the employment for young people with autism is hindered by regional disparities in services, inadequate vocational training programmes, and low employer awareness, which limit opportunities for proper employment and career growth. On the other hand, in Serbia, the situation is worse including a lack of inclusive workplace policies, limited vocational training and job coaching, and widespread social stigma, leading to high unemployment rates and dependence on family support.

These individuals are part of a vulnerable group encountering significant obstacles in societal integration at various levels. The difficulty in securing employment for people with autism can be attributed to several factors, including:

- The lack of effective policies for the employment inclusion of vulnerable people;
- The lack of training regarding the correct relational approach in relation to young people with autism;
- The lack of awareness regarding this issue in the entrepreneurial fabric and in society.

The consequence of these listed facts is that young people with autism, once they finish school, find themselves cut off from the world of work and therefore enter a state of isolation and dependence on their families or social services.

The project aims to address the following needs:

- Effective employment inclusion policies tailored to the unique challenges faced by young individuals with autism.
- The need for specialised training that equips youth workers with the skills to support youngsters with autism in navigating the labour market successfully.
- The need to raise awareness within local communities and the business sector about the potential benefits of employing young people with autism and to challenge existing misconceptions.
- The need to actively contribute to the improvement of the European Union's Diversity and Inclusion policies, ensuring that they adequately address the employment needs of individuals with autism.

By focusing on these needs, the project seeks to create a more inclusive and supportive environment for young people with autism as they transition into the workforce.

The **goal** of our project is to enrich the quality of youth work for the employability of youngsters with autistic spectrum and provide tools for further empowering them for better inclusion in the labour market.

The specific objectives of the project are:

1. To increase the competences of youth workers, school teachers and social workers in developing and implementing a model for inclusion of youngsters with autistic spectrum in the labour market through the innovative guidebook with curriculum and the training course.
2. To educate youngsters with autistic spectrum in practical skills for the labour market, personal branding, communication and relational skills through an innovative toolkit and the piloting workshops.
3. To increase capacities of consortium partners in the topic and disseminate project outputs with relevant stakeholders in local/international level through collection and promotion of positive practices, project online platform and national conferences.

Project activities are:

- **WP1** – Project Management
- **WP1** – Project kick-off meeting – online
- **WP2** – R1 Guidebook with Curriculum "Empowering youth workers and educators to support youngsters with autism in the labour market"
- **WP2** – R2 Training course for youth workers
- **WP1** – Project mid-term meeting – online
- **WP3** – R3 Toolkit "Empowerment of youngsters with autism on building skills for career success"
- **WP3** – Toolkit piloting workshops
- **WP4** – R4 Collection of positive practices for inclusion in the labour market
- **WP4** – R5 Project online platform
- **WP4** – International conference – IT
- **WP4** – International conference – LV
- **WP4** – International conference – RS
- **WP1** – Project evaluation meeting – online

Project results:

Guidebook with Curriculum "Empowering youth workers and educators to support youngsters with autism in the labour market"

Toolkit "Empowerment of youngsters with autism on building skills for career success"

Collection of positive practices for inclusion in the labour market

Project online platform

INTRODUCTION AND STRUCTURE OF THE PUBLICATION

Employment inclusion does not have one single formula. A young autistic person may need support to understand their own strengths and preferred working conditions before they can even start thinking about a particular profession. Another person may already have strong technical skills but struggle to get through a conventional job interview. Someone else may need a supported internship, a job coach, an adapted workplace, a gradual transition from school, or simply an employer willing to communicate tasks more clearly. For some young people, independent living, transport or everyday organisation are inseparable from whether employment is realistically possible.

This is why the youthAUTwork partnership decided that a collection of positive practices should not present one "correct" employment model. Instead, this publication brings together 15 different initiatives, approaches and systems from across Europe which show that inclusion can be created in very different ways. The collection includes practices from Latvia, Italy, Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Denmark, Finland, France, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, as well as two initiatives developed through wider international European partnerships.

The publication was developed within the Erasmus+ KA220-YOU project "Youth work for employability of youngsters with autistic spectrum – youthAUTwork". One of the main objectives of the project is to increase the capacities of youth workers, educators, social workers and organisations to support autistic youngsters in entering and participating in the labour market. Within WP4, the Collection of Positive Practices was envisaged as a practical knowledge base: not only to show what has already been done, but to inspire other organisations, communities and professionals to adapt useful elements to their own realities.

What do we mean by a "positive practice"?

We use the term positive practice deliberately. It does not mean that every initiative described in the following pages has solved every challenge connected with autism and employment. It also does not mean that one model can simply be copied from one country and expected to produce identical results somewhere else.

Some practices in this publication are mature employment models with many years of experience. Others are newer initiatives which are still testing, expanding or building their first employment pathways. Some focus specifically on autistic people, while others work with wider groups of people with disabilities but contain methods highly relevant to autistic youngsters. The scale is also very

different: from a small community café or local production initiative to national employment services and international methodologies.

The variety of approaches represented in this Collection was intentional.

For example, **Rimi Latvia** shows how inclusion can happen inside an ordinary large employer through workplace mentoring, adapted onboarding, cooperation with disability organisations and individualised support. It demonstrates that mainstream employment does not necessarily require creation of a separate workplace.

Several **Italian practices** show different ways of building the bridge between preparation, real work and participation. **Traiettorie** focuses on the difficult transition from school to working life. Through individual assessment, a mentor, tailored training and carefully matched internships, the practice shows why employment preparation should be gradual and why a placement is more likely to succeed when both the young person and the workplace have been properly prepared. **PizzAut,** on the other hand, demonstrates the potential of creating genuine employment through a social-enterprise model. Its restaurants combine professional training, real paid work, workplace support, autonomy-building and public awareness, while maintaining an important principle: inclusion and professional quality should not be treated as opposing objectives.

Other community-based **Italian practices**, such as **Bordo Vasca Inclusive Café** and **Sala da Tè Solidale**, show how local organisations can create authentic working environments in which young people with disabilities, including autistic youngsters, develop professional skills through daily contact with customers, colleagues and real workplace responsibilities. Both practices also show that social value alone is not enough: service quality, trained support staff and financial sustainability remain necessary.

In **Serbia,** **Svetionik u plavom / Lighthouse in Blue** developed from a very concrete concern of families: what happens when an autistic young person finishes school and the structured support around them suddenly becomes much smaller? Its recycled-paper social enterprise demonstrates how a productive activity can be divided into meaningful tasks, individualised according to ability and connected with real products, customers and increasingly with employers.

A similar post-school concern lies behind the **Croatian** **Budi uz nas** **initiative**, although its pathway is different. By developing a microgreens-production model, the organisation is building workplaces around structured production, mentoring and individual adaptation. The practice is particularly interesting because it also shows what happens before employment becomes possible: fundraising, adapting premises, purchasing equipment, recruiting appropriate professional support and mobilising the local business community are themselves part of creating inclusive employment.

The **Slovenian** **Prehod mladih / Youth Transition** programme takes us even earlier in the employment journey. Its experience emphasises that transition planning should start while a young person is still in education and may involve a long sequence of steps — identifying

interests, visiting workplaces, work trials, vocational rehabilitation, applications and employment. It demonstrates that a successful transition cannot always be compressed into a few workshops immediately before graduation.

Specialisterne, originating from Denmark and later developing internationally, represents another model: changing recruitment and workplace practices so that neurodivergent candidates can demonstrate actual competence rather than being selected primarily through conventional social-performance expectations. Practical assessments, job matching, coaching and employer education are central elements of this approach.

The **Finnish Spectrum Map (Kirjokartta)** approaches employability from the perspective of self-understanding. Before asking an autistic young person which profession they want, it helps them identify how they experience communication, sensory conditions, routines and different everyday situations. Such information can later be translated into very practical workplace statements — for example, explaining that written instructions or explicit information about changing priorities helps the person perform effectively.

The **French Vivre et Travailler Autrement model** broadens the perspective further. It shows that meaningful employment can also be possible for autistic adults with intellectual disabilities and higher support needs, provided that employment is considered together with professional support, autonomy, everyday-life skills and, where necessary, housing and mobility. It reminds us that the distance from the labour market should not automatically be confused with an inability to work.

The **Dutch AutiTalent model** illustrates the importance of specialised employment mediation. Rather than concentrating only on training autistic jobseekers, the organisation works between candidate and employer — analysing job requirements, identifying suitable matches, preparing both sides and providing workplace coaching after recruitment. Its experience particularly underlines that obtaining a job and keeping a suitable job are two different challenges.

In the **United Kingdom, Ambitious about Autism** provides another important pathway through its Employ Autism programme and Supported Internships. The model responds to a familiar paradox faced by many young autistic people: employers ask for previous work experience, but young people cannot obtain experience because nobody provides the first opportunity. Paid work experience, supported internships, employer preparation and continued coaching therefore become bridges into real employment rather than indefinite preparation for it.

The **international SUPPORT Project** places these questions within the broader methodology of Supported Employment. Its approach emphasises individual aspirations, strengths, personalised employment pathways, employer cooperation and continuing support after recruitment, demonstrating why employment inclusion should not finish on the day a person signs a contract.

Finally, **Autism: Spectrum of Employment Skills – ASES (by international consortium)** turns the perspective directly towards employers and SMEs. Its educational resources address accessible

> recruitment, interviewing, onboarding, workplace communication, performance management and professional development. The practice therefore reinforces one of the central messages emerging from the entire Collection: increasing the employment of autistic people cannot depend only on making autistic jobseekers more “work-ready”. Workplaces also need to become readier for autistic employees.

Taken together, these examples tell us something important: employment inclusion is not only about preparing an autistic person for work. It is also about preparing workplaces, services, communities and support systems to recognise what that person can contribute.

Who is this publication for?

This Collection is primarily intended for youth workers, educators, teachers, job coaches, employment professionals, social workers and organisations supporting autistic youngsters. However, many of the lessons are equally relevant for employers, HR professionals, municipalities, social services, policy makers, disability organisations and families. Autistic young people themselves may also find useful examples here, particularly those related to self-knowledge, career planning, workplace adjustments, supported employment and communicating support needs.

The publication is not intended to provide a ready-made programme that must be followed exactly. It should rather help readers ask better practical questions:

- What could we adapt in our organisation?
- Which part of this practice responds to a problem we also have?
- Who would need to be involved locally?
- What support would be required to make it work?
- And what should we avoid copying because our context is different?

A youth organisation in a small town may not be able to reproduce the complete national structure of a programme from another country. But it may be able to introduce workplace mentoring, start transition planning earlier, create a relationship with three local employers, develop a simple “How I work best” profile with autistic youngsters, or organise a supported work trial. Transferability therefore does not necessarily mean reproducing the whole model. Sometimes one well-adapted element is enough to improve an existing practice.

Structure of the Collection

To make the different initiatives easier to understand and compare, each positive practice follows a common structure.

1. **Background and Short Description** introduces the context in which the initiative developed, the problem it responds to and the main target group.
2. **Objectives** explains what the initiative is trying to achieve and which employment or inclusion barriers it addresses.
3. **Description of the Practice** presents what actually happens: the services, activities, work environments, stakeholders and employment pathways involved.
4. **Methodology and Approach** looks more closely at how the practice works. Depending on the initiative, this can include learning by doing, individualised job matching, supported employment, mentoring, job coaching, structured work, employer preparation, workplace adaptation or self-advocacy.
5. **Results and Impact** presents the outcomes which are currently documented. The publication makes an effort to distinguish between established results and outcomes that are still emerging, particularly for newer initiatives.
6. **Success Factors** identifies the conditions that appear particularly important for making the practice work.
7. **Challenges and Lessons Learned** is intentionally included because positive practices are not useful if only their successful side is presented. Financial sustainability, staff capacity, transport, employer engagement, continuity of professional support and the transition from internships to paid employment appear repeatedly across the Collection.
8. **Transferability, Replication and Practical Tips** is perhaps the most important section for readers who want to act. Rather than simply saying that an initiative is “transferable”, this section asks what could realistically be adapted and what conditions would need to be created first.
9. **Sources** allow readers to continue exploring the original organisations, projects, tools and resources behind each practice.

Reading the practices as possibilities, not recipes

Across all 15 cases, several messages appear repeatedly:

- **Real work matters.**
- **Individualisation matters.**
- **Employers need preparation too.**
- **Support should continue after recruitment when it is needed.**
- **Families and professionals can be important, but the young person should remain at the centre of their own employment journey.**
- **Workplace adjustments do not always need to be expensive.**
- **And employment should not be measured only by whether somebody enters a workplace, but also by whether that person can remain there, develop and have a decent quality of life.**

At the same time, the practices show that there is no one “autistic worker” and therefore there cannot be one universal autism-employment solution. One young person may need only a clearer recruitment process. Another may need a mentor for the first months. Another may first need to discover what kind of environment allows them to work well. Someone else may require long-term coordinated support involving employment, mobility, daily living and family.

The purpose of this Collection is therefore not to tell readers which model is the best. Its purpose is to show that there are already many ways of opening doors, and to help youth workers, employers, organisations and communities think more concretely about which door they can open next.

COLLECTION OF POSITIVE PRACTICES

1 **Rimi Latvia** 11
Latvia national

2 **“Bordo Vasca” Inclusive Café** 16
Italy local

3 **Traiettorie project** 21
Italy local

4 **PizzAut** 25
Italy national

5 **Sala da tè solidale** 30
Italy local

6 **Svetionik u plavom / Lighthouse in blue** 36
Serbia local

7 **„Budi uz nas“ inicijativa Udruge za autizam Pogled / "Be with us" initiative of the Pogled Autism Association** 42
Croatia local

8 **Prehod mladih / Youth Transition** 49
Slovenia national

9 **Specialisterne** 56
Denmark national

10 **Kirjokartta / Spectrum Map – turning self-knowledge into practical support** 61
Finland national

11 **Vivre et Travailler Autrement / Living and Working Differently** 66
France national

12 **AutiTalent** 73
Netherlands national

13 **Ambitious about Autism** 82
United Kingdom national

14 **SUPPORT Project** 90
International consortium from Austria, Belgium, Croatia, France, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Romania and Spain
international

15 **Autism: Spectrum of Employment Skills – ASES** 97
International consortium from Portugal, Denmark, Latvia, Greece, Cyprus, the Netherlands and North Macedonia
international

1

COLLECTION OF POSITIVE PRACTICES

Rimi Latvia

Inclusive employment and workplace support for young people with disabilities and neurodiversity

Country:
Latvia

Level:
national

Sources

Rimi pilot project:

https://www.rimi.lv/jaunumi/mentora-atbalsts-darba-vide-rimi-isteno-unikalu-pilotprojektu-cilvekiem-ar-invaliditat

Rimi and Latvijas Autisma apvieniba cooperation:

https://www.rimi.lv/jaunumi/rimi-un-latvijas-autisma-apvienibas-organizetaja-diskusija-parruna-ipaso-bernu-nakotni-latvija

1. Background and short description

Rimi Latvia is one of the largest retail employers in Latvia, and important part of its human resource strategy is dedicated to diversity, equity and inclusion. It promotes equal employment opportunities for people with disabilities, including individuals with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities. The company does so by creating accessible and supportive workplaces. It has developed an inclusive employment model based on collaboration with public institutions, social enterprises and organisations representing disabled persons. These partnerships aim to reduce barriers to employment and provide practical workplace support for employees who require additional assistance.

Young people with disabilities and neurodivergent individuals can benefit from these initiatives when entering the labour market, as this allows them to gain their first work experience and to develop

workplace skills in a mainstream employment environment. The company also supports wider community initiatives that promote inclusion and equal opportunities.

2. Objectives

The general objective of the practice is to promote equal employment opportunities by creating an inclusive workplace where people with disabilities and different support needs can successfully participate in the labour market.

Specific objectives are:

- Increase employment opportunities for people with disabilities, including young people entering the labour market;
- Provide individual workplace support through mentoring and adapted onboarding;
- Develop inclusive recruitment and employment practices;
- Improve accessibility and workplace adaptations according to individual needs;
- Raise awareness of diversity, disability inclusion and neurodiversity among managers and employees;
- Collaborate with public institutions and civil society organisations to improve inclusive employment.

3. Description of the practice

Rimi Latvia applies an inclusive employment approach that combines recruitment, workplace support, mentoring and cooperation with external partners.

One of the central initiatives is a workplace mentoring programme implemented together with the social enterprise Ligero. The programme provides employees with disabilities, particularly people with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities, with dedicated workplace mentors who assist during onboarding, explain work tasks, support communication with colleagues and supervisors and help employees adapt to the workplace. The pilot programme that started in 2025, initially involved 19 employees who were working in Rimi stores in Riga. It demonstrated how mentoring in the workplace can significantly improve integration.

Rimi also cooperates with organisations that support integration, such as SUSTENTO, the Latvian Integration Foundation and other stakeholders. Jointly they organise social hackathons focused on developing innovative solutions for disability inclusion. These initiatives encourage employers, disability organisations, technology experts and people with disabilities to co-create practical solutions that promote inclusive recruitment, support workplace adaptation and accessible working environments. In the hackathon organised in summer 2025, the winner team proposed a practical guide that is supposed to help employers make recruitment and selection processes more accessible

to people with disabilities. The proposed solution focused on adaptations in job advertisements and job interviews, adjustments in the recruitment tasks and the overall selection process. These changes can help to reduce unnecessary barriers in the recruitment process and allow candidates to demonstrate their actual skills. Rimi indicated that the winning concept would be further developed and possibly integrated it into the recruitment practices of the company.

They also regularly organise open recruitment events specifically aimed at jobseekers with disabilities, which allow participants to learn about available positions, workplace conditions and career opportunities. Rimi also integrates inclusion into its organisational culture by promoting diversity policies, equal treatment, accessible workplaces and employee wellbeing. The company supports NGOs and organisations working with children and young people with disabilities using its corporate social responsibility programmes.

4. Methodology and approach

Rimi's methodology is based on the principle that successful inclusion in the workplace requires ensuring equal employment opportunities and provision of continuous support.

The approach combines the following elements:

- Inclusive recruitment and hiring;
- Individualised onboarding that is supported by workplace mentors;
- Workplace adaptations that are based on the functional needs of the employee;
- Learning through practical work experience in real environment;
- Cooperation with disability organisations and social enterprises;
- Awareness raising among managers and colleagues in order to foster an inclusive organisational culture.

The mentoring approach is particularly important for employees, as it can provide additional support in understanding workplace routines, communication or adapting to new responsibilities. This practice emphasises individual strengths, abilities and thus fosters long-term employment sustainability instead of focusing on limitations.

5. Results and impact

Rimi Latvia initiatives have allowed to successfully employ and support people with disabilities in the mainstream retail workplaces. The mentoring pilot project has demonstrated that personalised support facilitates integration into work teams, improves employee confidence and increases job retention. Participants not only gain valuable work experience and practical skills, they also achieve greater independence and provide meaningful contribution.

The company's cooperation with disability organisations has also contributed to wider public awareness of inclusive employment and has encouraged other employers to reconsider their approaches to accessibility, recruitment and workplace adaptation. Rimi has received national recognition for its diversity and inclusion practices, including repeated Gold Status in the Latvian Diversity Charter assessment "Diversity is Strength".

6. Success factors

Several factors that contribute to the effectiveness of Rimi Latvia inclusive employment practice are the following:

- Strong organisational commitment to diversity and inclusion;
- Availability of individual workplace mentoring;
- Cooperation with disability organisations, social enterprises and public institutions;
- Real employment opportunities in a real workplace rather than simulated work environment;
- Continuous awareness raising and training of managers and co-workers;
- Workplace adaptations based on the individual needs;
- Integration of inclusion in the human resource policy of the company.

7. Challenges and lessons learned

- One of the main challenges is making sure that employees with different support needs get the right level of support to do their job well. Experience shows that it is not enough to only prepare the new employee, also managers and colleagues also need to be ready. Workplace mentors make this transition easier, as they help with communication, clarify expectations and provide support in case of difficulties. Also, workplace adjustments need to reflect the individual employee, their strengths and what helps them work successfully.
- Another important lesson is the value of cooperation between employers, disability organisations and public institutions. Each of them brings different knowledge and expertise, and together they can provide better support to both the employee and the company that creates the new workplace.

8. Transferability, replication and practical tips

Rimi Latvia model can be replicated by other employers seeking to improve the inclusion of young people with disabilities and neurodivergent employees. Key conditions for replication include:

- Management commitment to diversity and inclusion;
- Ensuring mentoring during recruitment and onboarding;
- Cooperation with disability organisations and employment services;
- Individual workplace accommodations;
- Training for managers and colleagues on disability awareness and inclusive communication;
- Continuous monitoring and support throughout employment rather than only during recruitment.

The practice demonstrates that inclusive employment does not require separate workplaces; instead, mainstream businesses can successfully employ people with diverse abilities when appropriate support systems are available.

2

COLLECTION OF POSITIVE PRACTICES

“Bordo Vasca” Inclusive Café

Employment and social inclusion project

Country:
Italy

Level:
local

Source

Instagram page of the project: www.instagram.com/bordovasca100

1. Background and Short Description

The “Bordo Vasca” Inclusive Café is an innovative employment and social inclusion initiative developed by Fondazione Zanandrea in Cento, Italy. The project was created through a partnership between the Foundation, the local sports association managing the municipal swimming pool, and the Municipality of Cento.

The idea emerged from a simple observation: an attractive and highly frequented space inside the municipal swimming pool remained unused and closed for long periods. The partners identified an opportunity to transform this space into a community café that could also promote inclusion and meaningful work experiences for young people with disabilities. Officially launched in February 2026 and currently in its pilot phase, the café provides practical work opportunities for young people with disabilities, including autistic young adults, who are supported by the Foundation’s services.

The project addresses several challenges. On the one hand, it seeks to create real opportunities for participation and employment in a welcoming environment. On the other, it aims to raise community awareness about the value of inclusion and the right to work for all people.

2. Objectives

The overall objective is to promote the social and labour inclusion of young people with disabilities, while fostering a culture of inclusion and equal opportunities within the local community.

Specific objectives are:

- Provide participants with practical work experience in a real customer-service environment.
- Strengthen self-confidence, responsibility, and professional skills.
- Enable young people to feel valued, productive, and recognised for their abilities.
- Promote awareness within the local community about the importance of inclusive employment.
- Demonstrate that high-quality services can be delivered while creating meaningful opportunities for people with disabilities.
- Create conditions that may lead to future paid employment opportunities.

3. Description of the Practice

The practice revolves around the daily management of a café located inside the municipal swimming pool of Cento, which also features a large outdoor seating area. The café operates as a regular business activity managed by Fondazione Zanandrea. Young people involved in the project are generally supported by a Foundation professional, such as an educator or social-care operator, during their shifts. The experience allows participants to practice workplace skills in a protected but authentic environment.

The Foundation's three services (CSO - social and vocational centre; Daily Centre; and Freedhome - an Independent Living project) each contribute by covering specific shifts at the café. For time slots not covered by service staff, an external employee has been hired to ensure operational continuity.

The project's implementation required several key steps:

- Identifying and securing the location through agreements with the sports association and the municipality.
- Developing an economic sustainability plan.
- Organising training activities for both participants and staff.
- Establishing café management procedures, including customer service, ordering systems, and cash register operations.
- Promoting the initiative through social media and community outreach activities.
- Organising events to engage local citizens and communicate the project's social mission.

A network of actors contributes to the initiative, including Foundation professionals, young participants, external staff members, volunteers, and trainees involved through other local

employment projects. Volunteers also play a significant role in communication activities, producing social media content and collecting testimonials from participants, staff members, and visitors in order to raise awareness about the project's objectives and impact.

4. Methodology and Approach

The project is based on a learning-by-doing approach, where participants acquire skills through direct involvement in real work activities rather than through purely theoretical training. Daily support is provided by educators and social-care professionals who act as mentors and coaches. Their role is to assist participants, facilitate learning, and ensure that work activities remain both meaningful and achievable. Particular attention is given to accessibility and inclusion. Several practical adaptations have been introduced to enable participation by people with different support needs.

Examples include:

- Braille labels placed under categories of utensils and equipment.
- Cash register functions that automatically calculate change, helping participants perform transactions more independently.
- Continuous guidance and personalised support during customer interactions.

A key principle of the project is balancing its social mission with service quality. While promoting inclusion remains the primary goal, customers must also receive a positive and professional experience. For this reason, both participants and staff receive training not only in inclusion practices but also in hospitality and customer service.

5. Results and Impact

As the project has been operating for only a few months and remains in an experimental phase, long-term employment outcomes cannot yet be evaluated. Nevertheless, several positive impacts have already emerged. Participants have begun developing professional and interpersonal skills, particularly in:

- Customer interaction.
- Teamwork.
- Time management.
- Punctuality and workplace responsibility.
- Food and beverage preparation.

Participants report feeling more engaged, active, and involved in daily life. Rather than spending long periods at home without structured activities, they have the opportunity to take on meaningful responsibilities, contribute to a real service, and experience the satisfaction of being part of a

working environment. As one participant, Mirko, explained, the café has given him "something more to do" and the opportunity to learn new skills such as preparing coffee and simple cocktails, while also improving his ability to respect schedules and arrive on time.

An important outcome concerns self-efficacy and empowerment. Customers have generally shown patience, understanding, and encouragement when participants work more slowly or make mistakes. These positive interactions provide valuable reinforcement, helping participants build confidence in their abilities and develop a stronger sense of competence and belonging. Although it is still too early to assess employment outcomes, the project is already demonstrating its potential as a meaningful stepping stone toward future work opportunities.

6. Success Factors

Several elements have contributed to the project's early success:

- First, the strong collaboration between Fondazione Zanandrea, the Municipality of Cento, and the local sports association made it possible to secure an advantageous location and build institutional support around the initiative.
- Second, the setting itself represents a significant asset. Being located inside a municipal swimming pool provides access to a regular flow of customers, including parents waiting for their children during sports activities. The presence of a large outdoor area further enhances the attractiveness of the venue and contributes to its economic viability.
- A particularly important success factor has been the positive response from customers. Supportive comments, patience, and encouragement from community members create a welcoming environment in which participants can gain confidence and strengthen their self-efficacy. These daily interactions reinforce learning and contribute significantly to participants' personal growth and motivation.
- The project also has a strong educational value. Through real work tasks, participants develop responsibility, autonomy, social skills, and an understanding of workplace expectations in a way that classroom-based activities alone cannot provide.
- Another key element is the attention given to communication and community engagement. Through the support of volunteers, particularly in social media activities and storytelling, the project clearly communicates its mission, helping citizens understand not only what happens at the café but also why it matters. This contributes to greater awareness of inclusion and disability-related issues.
- Finally, the organisation of dedicated events and community initiatives encourages people to visit the café, engage with participants, and experience the project's social value firsthand. These occasions help strengthen community participation and foster a culture of inclusion.

7. Challenges and Lessons Learned

The project faces several interconnected challenges:

- One of the most significant challenges concerns financial sustainability. A key ambition is to provide direct compensation for participants' work, but securing sufficient funding to achieve this remains complex. At present, participants receive financial compensation only when their involvement is linked to other funded projects or internship schemes.
- Another challenge is ensuring adequate staffing levels. The café requires trained professionals who can simultaneously support participants and maintain a high-quality service for customers. This has highlighted the importance of investing in specialised training for both Foundation staff and participants. Working in hospitality requires specific competencies, including customer service skills, organisation, communication, and the ability to manage unexpected situations.
- A further lesson learned is that inclusion and service quality must go hand in hand. While customers appreciate the project's social mission, the long-term sustainability of the initiative also depends on providing a positive and professional customer experience.
- The experience has also confirmed the importance of communication and community involvement. Explaining the project's goals, sharing participant stories, and organising public events are not secondary activities but essential components for building understanding, reducing stigma, and creating community support around inclusive employment initiatives.

8. Transferability, Replication and Practical Tips

The initiative has strong replication potential for organisations seeking to combine social inclusion with practical employment opportunities.

Key conditions for replication include:

- Building strong partnerships with local authorities and community organisations.
- Securing an accessible and visible location with a stable customer base.
- Investing in training for both participants and staff.
- Developing a realistic financial sustainability plan from the outset.
- Providing continuous support and supervision during work activities.

A particularly valuable element is the involvement of volunteers and community members, who can contribute significantly to communication, awareness-raising activities, and daily operations. Social media promotion has also proved essential for communicating the project's objectives, reducing stigma, and strengthening community engagement.

3

COLLECTION OF POSITIVE PRACTICES

Traiettorie project

Supporting the transition to work through tailored autonomy and skills development pathways

Country:
Italy

Level:
local

Source

Trajectories Project presentation:

https://centoform.it/portfolio/traiettorie-di-sviluppo-delle-autonomie-e-delle-competenze/

1. Background and Short Description

The project “Trajectories for the development of autonomy and skills to support the transition to employment” was developed in the Alto Ferrarese area (Italy) to respond to a well-known gap: the difficult transition from school to work for young people with disabilities, including those on the autism spectrum.

After leaving school, many young people experience a sudden loss of structure, a lack of clear direction, and reduced support systems. This often leads to frustration, low self-esteem, and inactivity. The project was designed precisely to prevent this “void” and to accompany young people in a gradual and structured transition toward employment. It targets 16 young people who have recently completed their education and are supported by local social services, within a strong partnership between public authorities, training providers, schools, and third sector organisations.

2. Objectives

The overall objective of the project is to facilitate a smooth and meaningful transition from education to employment. More specifically, the project aims to strengthen personal autonomy, improve self-awareness, and support participants in identifying realistic and satisfying professional paths. Another core objective is to equip them with both transversal and job-related skills, while also building the confidence necessary to enter real work environments.

3. Description of the Practice

The project is structured as a progressive and highly personalised pathway, in which each participant is accompanied step by step from initial orientation to real work experience:

- The process begins with an in-depth assessment phase, where each young person is supported by a mentor (or tutor) who works closely with them, their families, and professionals. This phase is essential to understand aspirations, strengths, and possible difficulties, and it leads to the creation of an Individual Transition Plan.
- Following this, participants enter a series of training workshops, each lasting 16 hours, designed to progressively prepare them for entering the labour market. These workshops are not rigid or standardised; rather, they are selected and combined differently for each participant, depending on their needs and development pace.
- The workshops cover different areas, such as personal empowerment, communication and cooperation, orientation in the labour market, and basic or more specific job skills. They are delivered through experiential and interactive methods, allowing participants to test themselves in practical situations rather than only learning theoretical concepts.
- This training phase is not simply preparatory, but it plays a crucial role in observing participants in action, refining their profiles, and better understanding which working environments could be suitable for them.

Only after this gradual preparation does the project move towards internships. These are carefully designed for each participant, they are not assigned randomly, but result from a detailed matching process.

4. Methodology and Approach

A key element of the methodology is the central role of the mentor, who accompanies each participant throughout the entire pathway. This professional does not only support the young person, but also acts as a bridge between the individual and the local labour market. The mentor typically has a deep knowledge of both the participants and the local context, including direct relationships with companies, social enterprises, and organisations in the area.

This dual knowledge allows for a highly accurate matching process. Before activating an internship, the mentor works extensively to identify a workplace that is not only available, but also genuinely inclusive and willing to invest in the experience. This involves direct contact with employers, discussions about expectations, and an assessment of the organisational climate. During the internship, support does not stop. On the contrary, continuous monitoring and dialogue are essential. The mentor maintains regular contact with both the participant and the employer, helping to prevent or resolve misunderstandings, adjust expectations, and gradually improve the working relationship. This ongoing mediation and fine-tuning process is one of the most demanding aspects of the project, requiring strong coordination skills, flexibility, and constant attention.

5. Results and Impact

The project produces results at several levels. Participants develop stronger autonomy, improved self-confidence, and better emotional regulation. They also acquire practical skills and gain a clearer understanding of their own abilities and professional preferences.

From an employment perspective, the internships represent a crucial step, as they allow participants to experience real work settings in a supported way. This often leads to increased readiness for future employment and facilitates connections with formal employment services. Beyond individual outcomes, the project also strengthens the local ecosystem, fostering collaboration between services, training providers, and employers, and promoting a more inclusive culture.

6. Success Factors

- One of the main strengths of the project lies in its personalised and step-by-step approach, which avoids pushing participants too quickly into work environments without adequate preparation.
- Equally important is the role of the mentor, whose in-depth knowledge of both the individual and the local labour market makes it possible to create meaningful and sustainable matches.
- Another key factor is the strong partnership between different actors, which ensures continuity and coherence throughout the pathway.

7. Challenges and Lessons Learned

- One of the main challenges is the significant investment of time and coordination required. Building trust with participants, families, and employers cannot be rushed, and the matching process demands careful attention.
- Another challenge is avoiding short-term or purely symbolic work experiences. Without a structured approach, there is a risk that internships become temporary “parking solutions” with no real long-term impact.
- The main lesson learned is that preparation and mediation are not secondary elements, but the core of the intervention. Only through a gradual, supported, and well-coordinated process is it possible to create meaningful and lasting outcomes.

8. Transferability, Replication and Practical Tips

This practice can be transferred to other contexts, but only if certain conditions are met:

- First of all, it is essential to invest in professional figures who can act as mentors with a dual competence: understanding the needs of participants and maintaining strong connections with the local labour market.
- Another key element is the preparation phase. Training activities should not be seen as optional, but as a fundamental step to build awareness, confidence, and readiness.
- A crucial recommendation is to dedicate time to selecting and preparing host organisations. It is important to go beyond formal availability and assess the real willingness of companies to engage in inclusive processes.
- Finally, continuous support during internships is essential. Regular communication and small, daily adjustments can prevent conflicts and transform a fragile experience into a successful one.

4

COLLECTION OF POSITIVE PRACTICES

PizzAut

Inclusive employment and autonomy model for autistic people

Country:
Italy

Level:
national

Source

PizzAut Official Website: https://www.pizzaut.it/

1. Background and Short Description

PizzAut is an innovative social inclusion initiative developed in Italy to promote the employment and autonomy of autistic young people and adults. Founded by Nico Acampora, the project was created in response to a well-known challenge: despite the abilities and potential of many autistic people, access to meaningful employment opportunities remains extremely limited.

PizzAut combines professional training, employment, community awareness, and autonomy development within a single integrated model. The initiative became nationally known through the creation of restaurants managed primarily by autistic workers, demonstrating that inclusion and high-quality service can successfully coexist. The first restaurant opened in Cassina de' Pecchi in 2021, followed by a second larger restaurant in Monza in 2023.

The target group consists of autistic young people and adults who often face barriers in accessing training, employment, and independent living opportunities. Through structured pathways, PizzAut supports participants in developing professional skills, gaining work experience, and building autonomy in everyday life.

2. Objectives

The general objective of the project is to promote the labour inclusion of autistic young people and adults, by creating real employment opportunities in inclusive and supportive workplaces, that can foster autonomy, dignity, and social participation through work.

Specific Objectives are:

- Provide professional training tailored to the needs and abilities of autistic individuals.
- Develop technical, social, and workplace-related competencies.
- Demonstrate that autistic people can successfully perform a wide range of professional roles when appropriate support is available.
- Raise awareness among employers, institutions, and the wider community about neurodiversity and inclusion.
- Support the transition towards independent adult life through employment and autonomy-focused initiatives.

3. Description of the Practice

PizzAut operates through an integrated pathway that combines training, employment, and autonomy development:

- A central component of the model is AutAcademy, a professional training programme that prepares autistic participants for work in hospitality and customer service. Training is adapted to individual learning styles, abilities, and developmental pace.
- Following training, participants can access employment opportunities within PizzAut restaurants. These restaurants are designed as real businesses, providing high-quality food and customer service while employing autistic workers in various roles, including food preparation, kitchen support, customer service, order management, and hospitality activities. The restaurants are primarily run by autistic employees, supported by a smaller number of neurotypical professionals.
- Beyond direct employment, PizzAut also collaborates with companies to promote the recruitment and inclusion of autistic workers in mainstream labour market settings.
- The project further supports participants through initiatives aimed at developing personal autonomy, including programmes focused on independent living skills and preparation for adult life.
- Actors involved include autistic workers, trainers, educators, restaurant staff, families, volunteers, local communities, businesses, and public institutions.

4. Methodology and Approach

The methodology is based on the principle that meaningful employment is one of the most effective tools for inclusion, empowerment, and self-determination.

The educational approach combines:

- Learning by doing, through direct participation in real work activities.
- Personalised training pathways, adapted to the characteristics and potential of each participant.
- Experiential learning, allowing individuals to develop technical and social skills in authentic workplace settings.
- Progressive autonomy-building, gradually increasing responsibilities according to each person's readiness.

Support measures include ongoing coaching, supervision, mentoring, and workplace adaptations when necessary. Staff members work alongside autistic employees to facilitate learning, communication, and integration into work routines.

A key aspect of the approach is the focus on abilities rather than limitations. The project intentionally challenges stereotypes about autism by creating environments in which autistic individuals can demonstrate competence, professionalism, and reliability. The restaurants themselves serve as spaces for inclusion and awareness-raising, where customers interact directly with autistic workers and gain a better understanding of neurodiversity.

5. Results and Impact

PizzAut has generated significant impact at both individual and societal levels. For participants, employment brings increased self-confidence, autonomy, financial independence, and a stronger sense of identity as workers and active citizens. Having a paid job contributes not only to economic inclusion but also to personal dignity and self-determination.

The project demonstrates that autistic individuals can successfully perform professional roles in demanding, customer-facing environments when given appropriate opportunities and support. Through daily work experiences, participants develop technical skills, social competencies, communication abilities, time-management skills, and workplace responsibility.

Beyond individual outcomes, PizzAut has had a major awareness-raising effect. Thousands of customers have experienced inclusion firsthand by interacting with autistic workers in an ordinary setting, helping to challenge stereotypes and reduce prejudice.

The initiative has also become a national reference point for inclusive employment practices and has inspired public debate, policy discussions, and similar projects focused on labour inclusion for autistic people.

6. Success Factors

Several factors contribute to the effectiveness of the PizzAut model:

- One of the most important is the creation of real employment opportunities, rather than simulated activities or short-term internships. Participants are employed within genuine business settings where their work is valued and visible.
- Another key factor is the combination of professional quality and social impact. PizzAut has consistently communicated that inclusion should not come at the expense of service quality; instead, both objectives reinforce each other.
- The personalised training provided through AutAcademy allows participants to acquire relevant skills at their own pace, increasing the likelihood of success in employment settings.
- Strong communication and advocacy activities have also played a crucial role. Through media coverage, public events, awareness campaigns, and direct engagement with communities, PizzAut has succeeded in making autism and employment inclusion visible and understandable to a broad audience.
- Finally, the project places a strong emphasis on dignity and autonomy, creating pathways that extend beyond employment to broader aspects of adult life, including independent living and community participation.

7. Challenges and Lessons Learned

- One of the main challenges addressed by PizzAut is overcoming widespread social and cultural barriers that limit employment opportunities for autistic people.
- Another challenge has been demonstrating that a business can simultaneously pursue economic sustainability and high levels of inclusion. Building a successful restaurant model while providing personalised support requires significant organisational effort, professional expertise, and financial resources.
- Training also represents a critical area. Participants need support to develop workplace competencies, while colleagues, employers, and customers often require increased awareness and understanding of neurodiversity.
- An important lesson learned is that employment inclusion cannot be achieved through isolated interventions. Successful inclusion requires a comprehensive ecosystem involving training, workplace adaptation, community awareness, employer engagement, and continuous support.

- The experience has also shown that autistic individuals often face barriers created by environments rather than by their own abilities. When workplaces are designed to be supportive and inclusive, people can demonstrate skills and potential that are frequently underestimated.

8. Transferability, Replication and Practical Tips

PizzAut model has strong transferability potential and offers valuable lessons for organisations interested in inclusive employment.

Key conditions for replication include:

- Strong leadership and a clear social mission.
- Partnerships with local authorities, businesses, and community organisations.
- Access to professional training opportunities.
- Commitment to long-term support rather than short-term placements.
- A focus on abilities, strengths, and individual potential.

5

COLLECTION OF POSITIVE PRACTICES

Sala da tè solidale

Solidarity tea room for employment inclusion, community participation and social innovation

Country:
Italy

Level:
local

Source

Sala da Tè solidale Official Website: https://www.oltretuttoaps.it/

1. Background and Short Description

Sala da Tè Solidale is a social enterprise initiative promoted by Oltre-Tutto APS in Cento, Emilia-Romagna (Italy). The association was founded by families seeking meaningful opportunities for young people with disabilities after school, particularly in response to the limited employment and social participation opportunities available in adulthood. The project combines a fully functioning tea room and café with a structured pathway for social and labour inclusion. Located in the historic centre of Cento, Sala da Tè serves as both a hospitality business and a community hub where people with and without disabilities can meet, work, and interact in a natural and inclusive environment.

The target group consists primarily of young people and adults with disabilities, including autistic individuals, who often face barriers in accessing employment opportunities and developing autonomy. Around 10 participants are regularly involved in the activities of the tea room, while 2–3 students from local secondary schools participate in internships each year, creating an important bridge between education and employment. The initiative addresses several challenges: promoting meaningful work opportunities, strengthening autonomy and self-confidence, combating social isolation, and changing public perceptions about disability through direct community engagement.

2. Objectives

The project aims to promote the labour inclusion of young people and adults with disabilities, including autistic individuals, by providing meaningful opportunities for participation in a real work environment. At the same time, it seeks to foster personal autonomy, social participation, and active citizenship, enabling participants to play a visible and valued role within the community. More broadly, the initiative contributes to the development of a more inclusive local culture, encouraging positive interactions between people with and without disabilities and challenging stereotypes through everyday experiences of collaboration and mutual exchange.

Specific Objectives are:

- Provide meaningful work experiences in a real customer-service environment.
- Develop professional, social, and interpersonal skills.
- Strengthen self-confidence, self-efficacy, and personal responsibility.
- Support participants in identifying their strengths and preferred work tasks.
- Facilitate transitions from education to employment through internships and practical work experiences.
- Create opportunities for interaction between people with and without disabilities.
- Raise public awareness of the value of inclusive employment.

3. Description of the Practice

Sala Da Tè operates as a public tea room and café in the centre of Cento, offering beverages, desserts, snacks, and artisanal products in a welcoming and accessible environment. Participants are actively involved in the daily operation of the venue and can undertake a variety of responsibilities, including:

- Welcoming customers.
- Taking orders.
- Table service.
- Preparing tea, coffee, cappuccinos, and other beverages.
- Managing products and displays.
- Supporting catering and special events.
- Contributing to the organisation of community activities.

The project is characterised by a highly personalised approach. Participants are encouraged to discover which tasks best match their interests and abilities. Some enjoy direct interaction with customers and develop strong front-of-house skills, while others prefer behind-the-counter activities, becoming particularly skilled in beverage preparation and operational tasks. A distinctive feature of Sala da Tè is its role as a community space. Beyond hospitality services, the venue

regularly hosts cultural, educational, and social initiatives that bring together different groups of citizens.

One example is “TeaGether – Conversations in Different Languages”, an initiative led by volunteers from the European Solidarity Corps hosted by Fondazione Zanandrea. These free language-exchange events offer informal conversation sessions in English, French, German, and Slovenian, creating opportunities for intercultural exchange, social participation, and community engagement while increasing the visibility of the tea room and its inclusion mission. The project is supported by participants, staff, volunteers, families, local institutions, schools, and community partners who jointly contribute to its social and educational value.

4. Methodology and Approach

The project is based on a learning-by-doing methodology, where participants acquire skills through direct involvement in authentic work situations rather than simulated activities. Work experiences take place in a real commercial setting, allowing participants to develop both technical and relational competencies in everyday situations. This experiential approach helps participants understand workplace expectations while gradually increasing their autonomy and confidence.

A key element of the methodology is the constant presence of a job coach, educator, or responsible operator during each shift. This ensures that participants receive personalised support while maintaining a high-quality service for customers.

The project's inclusion strategy focuses on:

- Identifying and valuing individual strengths.
- Offering differentiated tasks according to participants' preferences and abilities.
- Providing continuous guidance and feedback.
- Encouraging positive interactions with customers and the wider community.
- Creating opportunities for social participation beyond work activities.

The tea room itself functions as an inclusive environment in which disability becomes visible in a positive and natural way. Customers engage directly with participants, contributing to the reduction of stereotypes and fostering a culture of mutual understanding.

5. Results and Impact

Sala da Tè has become a recognised example of inclusive employment and community participation within the local area. Approximately 10 young people and adults with disabilities are regularly involved in the activity, while 2–3 students from local secondary schools undertake internships each year, benefiting from early exposure to workplace experiences. Participants receive a small reimbursement for their work, and additional paid opportunities may be activated through publicly funded internships and inclusion programmes.

The project has generated significant personal benefits for participants. Through their involvement in the daily activities of the tea room, they develop a range of professional and interpersonal competencies, including customer-service skills, communication abilities, and the capacity to interact effectively with colleagues and customers. Participants also strengthen their organisational skills by learning to manage tasks, respect schedules, and adapt to workplace routines and expectations. The experience encourages a greater sense of responsibility and workplace awareness, while simultaneously fostering personal autonomy, self-confidence, and a growing belief in their own abilities. Through these everyday work experiences, participants gain not only practical skills but also a stronger sense of competence, independence, and belonging within the community.

An important outcome is the possibility for each participant to identify their own strengths and preferred roles. Some discover that they enjoy customer interaction and thrive when taking orders or welcoming guests. Others feel more comfortable in operational roles behind the counter and become highly competent in preparing tea, coffee, and cappuccinos. This personalised approach allows everyone to contribute in a meaningful and rewarding way.

Participants frequently describe the experience as gratifying because it provides structure, purpose, social relationships, and the opportunity to make a visible contribution to the community. Positive interactions with customers have a particularly strong impact on self-efficacy. Encouragement, appreciation, and recognition from visitors help participants develop confidence and a stronger belief in their own capabilities.

Employment outcomes remain challenging, as is often the case in inclusive employment initiatives. However, the project continues to create new opportunities through local partnerships and collaborations. A recent example is the creation of the Frollineria Sociale, a social bakery producing biscuits and pastries with the involvement of young people with disabilities and autism. The products are also sold at Sala da Tè, creating synergies between inclusive enterprises and expanding employment opportunities within the local ecosystem. At community level, Sla da Tè contributes to changing perceptions about disability by demonstrating the skills, professionalism, and potential of people with disabilities in everyday work settings.

6. Success Factors

Several factors contribute to the effectiveness of the Sala da Tè model:

- A key success factor is the presence of a real business environment, where participants perform meaningful tasks and interact with genuine customers on a daily basis.
- Another important element is the continuous support provided by educators, job coaches, and responsible staff members. This ensures a balance between participant development and service quality.
- The project also benefits from strong involvement by families, volunteers, and community stakeholders, creating a supportive network around participants.

- Its location in the heart of Cento encourages frequent interactions with citizens and maximises visibility, helping to normalise inclusion and facilitate social participation.
- Positive customer feedback plays a crucial role in strengthening participants' self-confidence and self-efficacy. Everyday recognition of their work reinforces motivation and personal growth.
- The project's educational value is another major strength. Participants develop practical skills, communication abilities, responsibility, and workplace habits that can support future employment opportunities.
- Finally, Sala da Tè successfully builds synergies with other local initiatives. Collaborations with projects such as the Frollineria Sociale and community activities like TeaGether demonstrate how inclusive enterprises can work together to create broader opportunities for participation, employment, and social inclusion.

7. Challenges and Lessons Learned

Like many inclusive employment initiatives, Sala da Tè faces the challenge of balancing social objectives with the operational demands of a commercial activity.

- One of the main challenges concerns financial sustainability. While participants receive reimbursements and some paid placements can be activated through public funding, securing stable resources remains an ongoing concern.
- Creating long-term employment pathways is another challenge. Transitioning participants into open labour market settings is not always straightforward, highlighting the importance of continuously developing new opportunities and collaborations within the local territory.
- The project has also shown that meaningful labour inclusion requires consistent and skilled support. The presence of educators and job coaches is essential both for participant development and for maintaining service quality.
- Another important lesson concerns the value of collaboration. Experiences such as the Frollineria Sociale demonstrate that inclusive employment initiatives become stronger when organisations, social enterprises, schools, local authorities, and community groups work together rather than independently.
- Finally, Sala da Tè has demonstrated that inclusion extends beyond employment itself. Community events, cultural activities, and initiatives such as TeaGether help create social connections, increase public awareness, and build a more welcoming environment for diversity. These activities play a crucial role in transforming inclusion from a workplace objective into a community value.

8. Transferability, Replication and Practical Tips

The Sala da Tè model has strong potential for replication in other communities interested in promoting labour inclusion through social enterprise activities. However, its success depends on several key conditions:

- First, it is important to identify a public and welcoming venue where participants can interact naturally with customers and become visible members of the community. The workplace should not be isolated from everyday life, as regular interactions with citizens play a crucial role in fostering inclusion and reducing stereotypes.
- Another essential element is the presence of trained professionals who can provide continuous guidance and support. The experience of Sala da Tè shows that meaningful inclusion requires a balance between participant development and service quality. For this reason, the constant presence of educators, job coaches, or responsible staff members is a fundamental component of the model.
- The project also highlights the importance of building strong partnerships with families, volunteers, local authorities, schools, and community organisations. Inclusive employment initiatives are more sustainable when they are embedded within a supportive local network that can contribute resources, skills, and opportunities for growth.
- A particularly valuable lesson concerns the importance of collaboration among different inclusive projects. Experiences such as the partnership with the Frollineria Sociale demonstrate how local organisations can create synergies that expand employment opportunities and strengthen the overall inclusion ecosystem. Rather than working independently, organisations should seek opportunities to connect their activities, share resources, and create complementary pathways for participants.
- Finally, community engagement should be considered an integral part of the intervention rather than an additional activity. Events, cultural initiatives, and opportunities for social interaction—such as the TeaGether language exchange programme organised with European Solidarity Corps volunteers—help attract new visitors, increase public awareness, and create a stronger sense of belonging around the project.

The experience of Sala da Tè suggests that employment inclusion is most effective when it is accompanied by broader opportunities for participation, social exchange, and community involvement.

6

COLLECTION OF POSITIVE PRACTICES

Svetionik u plavom / Lighthouse in blue

Work engagement, social entrepreneurship and employment pathways for young people with autism

Country:
Serbia

Level:
local

Source

Official LinkedIn profile of Svetionik u plavom:
https://www.linkedin.com/in/svetionik-u-plavom-306860388/

1. Background and Short Description

“Svetionik u plavom” is an association and social enterprise based in Sremska Kamenica, on the territory of the City of Novi Sad, Serbia. It was established in December 2022 by a group of parents who were facing a very concrete problem: what happens to young people with autism when formal education finishes, but adequate opportunities for work, further development and meaningful participation in the community are not available.

This problem is particularly visible in Serbia. During school years, a young person can have at least some organised educational structure, professional support and regular social contact. After leaving school, the number of available services is significantly reduced. For families, this frequently means that the young person again becomes highly dependent on parents and spends much more time at home, even when he or she has abilities, motivation and capacity to participate in work-related activities. The initiative therefore did not start from an abstract inclusion concept, but from the everyday reality of families. The central work activity developed by Svetionik u plavom is the manual production of recycled ecological paper from discarded cigarette packages. The method was developed with support and knowledge transfer from the association “Naša kuća” from

Belgrade and is described as being based on Japanese methods for work engagement of persons with disabilities. The produced paper is later transformed into different practical and promotional products.

2. Objectives

The general objective of Svetionik u plavom is to improve the social, work-related and economic inclusion of young people with autism after completion of their formal education. The practice aims not only to provide activities where young people can spend their time, but to create an environment in which work has a purpose, a product and a visible value for the wider community.

Its more specific objectives can be identified as:

- To provide young people with autism with opportunities for meaningful work engagement after completing school.
- To prevent social isolation and inactivity that can occur when organised educational support ends.
- To develop practical work habits such as regular attendance, following a sequence of tasks, completing assigned activities and taking responsibility for a part of the production process.
- To strengthen social and communication skills through cooperation with occupational therapists, other participants, visitors, customers and business representatives.
- To recognise individual abilities and organise tasks according to the possibilities and needs of each participant.
- To provide an environment in which young autistic people can gradually increase independence and confidence.
- To create products with real market value instead of limiting activities to simulated occupational exercises.
- To increase the visibility of autistic young people as potential workers and contributors to the local economy.
- To establish cooperation with companies and employers and create pathways towards wider labour-market participation.
- To advocate for greater systemic support for autistic people after completing formal education.

3. Description of the Practice

The central element of the practice is a supported work environment operating from the association's premises in Sremska Kamenica. Young people participate in the process of recycling used cigarette packages and transforming the recovered material into handmade paper. The value of this activity is in its relatively clear and divisible work process. Different phases of production can be allocated according to individual abilities, concentration, motor skills, preferences and support needs. The organisation publicly explains that every young person can participate in a certain phase of

production in accordance with his or her possibilities. This is an important distinction. The practice does not require all participants to complete every task at an identical level or speed; instead, the production process itself can be divided and personalised.

The recycled paper is not produced only as an educational exercise. It is subsequently transformed into concrete products. According to the 2025 catalogue of social-economy products published by the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Serbia, Svetionik u plavom offers promotional and personalised materials including business cards, certificates, acknowledgements, calendars and flyers, as well as handmade products such as greeting cards, invitations, decorative boxes, coasters, spiral notebooks, planners and notebooks. This market dimension is very relevant. When a young person participates in the production of an item which somebody orders, buys and uses, the result of his/her work becomes visible outside the rehabilitation or social-service environment. This makes it possible to connect skill development with a more authentic experience of economic participation.

During 2026, the organisation implemented the programme “Opening Doors: Employment Pathways for Young People with Autism”, focused more explicitly on entering the open labour market. The programme included six months of work, learning, development of professional and digital skills and cooperation with local companies. Its employability component was designed to include workshops on CV writing, preparation for job interviews, professional behaviour and cyber security, with at least 12 autistic young people planned to complete the learning process and prepare their own CV.

4. Methodology and Approach

The methodology of Svetionik u plavom combines learning by doing, individualised occupational support, social entrepreneurship and gradual preparation for employment. A central principle is that the work activity has to be adjusted to the person, rather than expecting every participant to adjust to one standardised way of performing a task. Occupational therapists and professional associates have an important role in this process.

- **Individualisation of tasks** - Participants can be involved in different parts of the production according to their abilities. The objective is not to artificially make everybody do the same activity.
- **Learning through real work** - Skills are developed while producing objects that have an actual purpose and customer. This creates a different kind of motivation compared with an exercise created only for training.
- **Structured work processes** - Manual paper production offers clear sequences and visible results. This can be particularly valuable for autistic participants who benefit from predictable procedures, repetition and concrete outcomes.
- **Strengths-based approach** - Participants are not primarily approached through diagnosis and limitations. The work process tries to identify where an individual can contribute and how responsibilities can gradually be increased.

- **Ongoing professional support** - Support is not limited to initial instruction. Occupational therapists and associates monitor progress and can adapt the task, rhythm and level of assistance.
- **Cooperation with families** - Parents have been central actors from the establishment of the organisation. In the Serbian context, this is both a strength and a reflection of the lack of systematic post-school support.
- **Contact with employers and the wider community** - The model deliberately brings companies, customers and visitors into contact with young autistic people and their work. This reduces the distance between beneficiary and potential worker.
- **Integration of environmental and social objectives** - The practice connects two forms of value creation: material which would otherwise become waste is recycled, while people who are frequently excluded from labour-market participation are given opportunities to produce economically and socially valuable products.

5. Results and Impact

- At the individual level, the most immediate effect is the existence of a structured post-school environment where autistic young people can continue developing instead of losing routines and social contacts after education. Public communication from the organisation refers to around 15 users of its work centre, showing that the activity is not a one-time workshop but a continuing support environment.
- Another important result is the development of real products and market relationships. The 2025 inclusion of Svetionik u plavom in the Chamber of Commerce catalogue of social-economy products gives the enterprise visibility in a business-oriented context rather than only in disability-related networks. Its product portfolio demonstrates that the activity has developed beyond the initial production of blank sheets of paper.

During 2026, the model became more connected with employers. Open Days presented concrete examples of work engagement and occupational work through recycled-paper production, while employer meetings exposed local companies directly to the abilities and work of participants.

- An especially interesting further development has been the production of the magazine “Svetionik”. According to Radio Television of Vojvodina, the publication combines recycled paper made through the work of autistic young people with stories, puzzles, concentration games and content created by young people themselves. In this way, young participants are not only workers in the physical production process; they also contribute ideas and content.
- At community level, the initiative contributes to changing perceptions of autism. A company representative who visits Svetionik u plavom does not only hear that autistic people “can work”; he or she can see the production process, meet participants and handle the finished product. This direct experience is much more powerful than awareness raising based only on presentations.

6. Success Factors

- The first success factor is **the initiative of families themselves**. The organisation was created because parents did not accept that finishing school should also mean finishing opportunities for learning, participation and meaningful work.
- A second factor is **the presence of a concrete and understandable productive activity**. Handmade recycled-paper production can be divided into individual phases, repeated, adapted and gradually mastered. At the same time, the finished product is tangible, visually attractive and possible to sell.
- Another factor is **the combination of social purpose and market value**. Customers do not purchase only “something made by persons with disabilities”; the organisation tries to produce usable and personalised products. This is important for the dignity of the participants and for the sustainability of the social-enterprise model.
- **Professional support** is also essential. The presence of occupational therapists and the use of individual plans makes it possible to distinguish meaningful work inclusion from simply giving participants something to do.
- Finally, the practice has gradually **expanded its ambition**. It did not remain only with paper production. Employer meetings, professional-skills training, CV preparation, interview training and digital competence development demonstrate organisational learning and a willingness to move participants progressively closer to the open labour market.

7. Challenges and Lessons Learned

- The first challenge is **financial sustainability**. A model requiring premises, materials, occupational therapists and continuous individual support cannot be maintained only from occasional product sales. Public communication from the organisation has indicated that product sales are still insufficient to cover monthly operational costs and that maintaining salaries for occupational therapists can be difficult. This is a critical lesson for replication: social entrepreneurship can contribute to sustainability, but it should not automatically be expected to finance all disability-support costs through the market.
- A second very concrete challenge is **transportation**. Although the premises are in Sremska Kamenica, many users live in Novi Sad. Some participants are not independent users of public transport and therefore depend on parents to bring them to and from activities. The organisation has reported that this creates a significant practical burden and that, in some cases, its president provides transport using a private vehicle.
- A third challenge concerns **the transition from work engagement to formal employment**. Occupational activities are valuable for building routine, skills and confidence, but they are not the same as obtaining paid employment in the open labour market. The organisation's newer

programmes show awareness of this difference and are increasingly focused on CVs, interview skills and direct employer connections.

- Another lesson is that **employer awareness needs to be practical**. Asking employers only to listen to presentations about autism may have limited impact. Svetionik u plavom's approach of inviting employers into the work space, showing the production and allowing them to participate in it creates more meaningful contact.

8. Transferability, Replication and Practical Tips

Svetionik u plavom has strong potential for replication, especially in smaller communities where standard employment services for autistic young people are insufficient. The exact activity, recycled-paper production, does not need to be copied in every context. The more transferable element is the method behind it.

- Organisations wishing to adapt the model could start by identifying a productive activity that can be divided into clear and manageable steps, allows different levels of participation, produces a useful or marketable outcome, can be repeated enough to create predictability, permits individualisation according to abilities, offers possibility for gradual increase of responsibility, is connected with the local economy or community, and can generate interaction with customers or employers.
- A second recommendation is to create individual work plans. The objective should not be to identify what the person cannot do, but to establish what task can be performed now, what support is necessary and what could become possible after practice.
- Third, professional support has to be planned from the beginning. Occupational therapists, job coaches, youth workers or other trained professionals are not simply supervisors.
- Fourth, organisations should think beyond their own work centre. Employer contact should start early. Companies can be invited to visit participants, purchase products or services, provide materials, participate in employer-awareness sessions, offer workplace visits, provide job-shadowing opportunities, contribute with mentors, consider internships and employment.
- Fifth, transport and physical accessibility need to be treated as part of employment planning. A young person cannot benefit from an opportunity which he/she cannot reach independently or affordably.
- Sixth, social-enterprise income should ideally be combined with public funding, grants, corporate procurement and other sustainable financing sources. Support services should not depend only on whether enough products are sold in a given month.

7

COLLECTION OF POSITIVE PRACTICES

„Budi uz nas“ inicijativa Udruge za autizam Pogled / "Be with us" initiative of the Pogled Autism Association

Inclusive employment through microgreens production for young people with autism

Country:
Croatia

Level:
local

Source

Udruga za autizam Pogled Official Website: https://udrugapogled.hr/

1. Background and Short Description

“Budi uz nas” (“Be with us”) is an initiative of Udruga za autizam Pogled (Autism Association View), an autism association based in Nedelišće, in Međimurje County in the north-western part of Croatia. The organisation has been active since 2009 and has long experience in providing developmental, psychosocial, recreational and other forms of support to children, young people and adults with autism and their families. In recent years, an increasingly important issue appeared in their work: a growing number of their young members were completing secondary school, while there were very few realistic opportunities waiting for them afterwards in the labour market.

This situation was especially visible through the experiences of young members such as Antonia and Josip, who had finished school and wanted to work, but remained for months without a suitable opportunity. Pogled describes the period after schooling as a kind of empty space in which young autistic persons can lose the structure, goals and everyday contacts that school previously provided.

Families were also reporting the frustration of young people who could see their peers looking for their first jobs while they themselves remained at home, even though they were motivated and capable of working.

To address this situation, in September 2025 the association launched its first larger fundraising campaign, “Budi uz nas” – “Be with us”, with the objective to create employment opportunities for Antonia, Josip and other young autistic members. The concrete idea was to develop an employment model based on the production of microgreens – young edible plants increasingly used in healthy nutrition and gastronomy. The campaign initially aimed to raise EUR 35,000 for space, equipment, seeds, packaging, mentoring and the creation of the first workplaces. The fundraising campaign exceeded its original target, while at the same time creating new partnerships, stronger community support and greater media visibility. During 2026, Pogled moved from fundraising towards setting up the production infrastructure. In March 2026, it recruited a microgreens production manager, a position explicitly combining agricultural production with mentoring and adaptation of work tasks for autistic young people. In June, Inoxmont-VS donated three customised stainless-steel production tables, and in July DanKuchen Studio Čakovec provided a customised kitchen and equipment for the new premises.

2. Objectives

The general objective of “Budi uz nas” is to create sustainable employment opportunities for young people with autism after completion of schooling, while supporting their independence, participation and sense of belonging in the local community.

The specific objectives of the practice are:

- To create first employment opportunities for young autistic people who face difficulties accessing the ordinary labour market.
- To prevent inactivity and social isolation after completion of formal education.
- To establish a structured production activity that can be adjusted to different individual abilities and support needs.
- To provide participants with practical work experience through real production rather than only simulated training.
- To develop work habits, responsibility, punctuality and understanding of production routines.
- To strengthen independence and confidence of young autistic people.
- To provide continuous mentoring while participants learn individual work tasks.
- To adapt work processes and the working environment instead of requiring autistic employees to fit into an inflexible standard system.
- To develop an economically meaningful product with realistic market potential.
- To demonstrate to companies and the wider public that autistic young people can perform productive and economically useful work when an appropriate environment is provided.

- To mobilise businesses, donors, families and institutions around the development of inclusive employment solutions.
- To create a model that could eventually be expanded to include more autistic young people.

3. Description of the Practice

The core of the practice is establishment of a microgreens production unit in which young autistic people will participate in a supported working process. Microgreens production contains a number of distinct activities that can be organised as separate tasks. Pogled's own description of the planned production covers the process from sowing to packaging, while the production manager is responsible for organising production cycles, maintaining optimal growing conditions, controlling quality and introducing autistic young people into the working process. In practical terms, a microgreens production cycle can create several work roles. A participant may be involved in preparing growing trays or materials, another in sowing, monitoring plants or routine maintenance, while another person may participate in harvesting, preparation or packaging. The exact allocation for individual Pogled participants has not yet been publicly documented in enough detail, therefore it would be incorrect to present a specific task distribution as already implemented. What is confirmed, however, is that the organisation is deliberately designing the production so that tasks can be adapted to the possibilities of autistic young people. Another important part of the practice is mentoring. From the first campaign, Pogled made it clear that young participants would not simply be placed into production and expected to manage independently from the first day. The fundraising objective explicitly included learning and progression with mentors.

The physical environment is also being developed around production needs. Three customised stainless-steel tables donated in June 2026 were specifically prepared according to the association's dimensions and additional requirements and intended to provide a safe, functional and easily maintained area for preparation and packaging. A customised kitchen with appliances was donated one month later for the new premises in which the employment model is being developed.

There is also a strong community component. The programme did not emerge through one institutional grant where the wider community remained unaware of the initiative. The Budi uz nas fundraising campaign intentionally involved citizens, families, companies, donors and local institutions in the process of creating the first employment opportunities.

4. Methodology and Approach

The methodology combines structured work, individual adaptation, mentoring, learning by doing, strengths-based planning and social entrepreneurship.

- **Structured and predictable production** - The choice of microgreens allows a production cycle to be divided into concrete steps. Pogled identifies precisely this quality as one reason for choosing the activity: microgreens cultivation is repetitive, concrete and produces visible outcomes

relatively quickly. At the same time, the practice should avoid making a stereotype that all autistic people prefer repetitive work. The more important principle is that the work contains several different tasks and these can be matched with different interests, abilities and support needs.

- **Adaptation of the workplace** - The organisation has approached work-environment adaptation before starting full production. Discussions with autism professionals have included the use of visual support, organisation of tasks and creation of a safe and supportive work environment. This follows an important principle of inclusive employment: when a work process creates unnecessary difficulties, it is worth analysing the process before concluding that the worker is unable to perform the job. A production sequence can be standardised, visualised or broken into smaller steps. Materials can always be located in the same place. Completed and unfinished tasks can be visually separated. Instructions can be written or illustrated.
- **Mentored introduction to work** - Young employees are expected to receive mentoring during entry into production. The production manager combines technical responsibility for cultivation with responsibility for introducing and mentoring autistic workers. This is particularly useful because the mentor understands both dimensions: what the production requires and how a specific young person learns and works.
- **Learning by doing** - The practice is based on learning directly through a genuine production process. Participants are not learning abstractly what punctuality, quality control or responsibility mean. These concepts have concrete consequences. Seeds need to be planted according to the production schedule, growing conditions need to be monitored, packaging has to be completed properly, and products eventually need to reach customers.
- **Strengths-based task allocation** - Pogled's reasoning for choosing microgreens is partially connected with strengths observed in their users, particularly precision and capacity to perform structured activities. The most transferable principle here is not that “autistic people are good at growing microgreens”. Rather, find an economic activity where the strengths of the actual participants can become valuable work competences.
- **Social entrepreneurship and market orientation** - The practice attempts to combine social impact with a product that has market potential. Healthy eating, locally produced food and sustainable urban agriculture have created increasing interest in microgreens, and the association deliberately considered this market dimension when selecting the activity. The long-term sustainability of the employment model will therefore partly depend on whether production can generate regular demand and revenue.
- **Community mobilisation** - The fundraising component can itself be seen as a methodological innovation. Instead of hiding the difficulty of financing inclusive employment, Pogled transformed it into a public conversation: these young people want to work; this is the production model; this is what is needed to create their workplace; will the community participate?

5. Results and Impact

Because the programme is still relatively new, the results need to be divided into results already achieved and employment outcomes which are still being developed.

- The most visible achieved result is **financial mobilisation**. The original campaign target was EUR 35,000. More than EUR 40,000 was ultimately raised, approximately 15% more than planned. The campaign also generated new partnerships, increased media exposure and strengthened connections between the association and the local community. This is important because fundraising was not intended only for general organisational activities. It was connected with concrete conditions needed for employment: production premises, equipment, seed, packaging, mentoring and creation of workplaces.
- A second concrete result is that **the idea progressed into physical establishment of the production unit**. In 2026 the organisation began preparing the new production environment, received purpose-designed stainless-steel work tables and a customised kitchen with equipment, and publicly documented continued development of the premises.
- A third significant result is **professionalisation of the model**. In March 2026, Pogled advertised a full-time production-manager position with a permanent contract. The role combines responsibility for microgreens production with mentoring autistic young people and adapting work tasks. This represents an important move from a project idea toward an organisationally structured employment system. Another result is development of a stronger community network. Businesses have contributed financially and through in-kind donations.
- The campaign has also **generated an important awareness impact**. Instead of presenting autistic young people only as recipients of support, its public communication focuses on young people wanting to work, contribute and belong. Antonia and Josip became concrete faces of the employment gap that occurs after schooling, making the issue understandable to the wider community without relying only on statistics.

This positive practice shows how inclusive employment is built step by step, including financing, workspace design, professional support and business partnerships before the first employee can successfully start working.

6. Success Factors

- One important success factor is that the initiative emerged from real needs identified during long-term work with autistic young people and their families. Pogled did not first select microgreens and then look for beneficiaries. The employment problem came first,the production model was developed afterwards as a response.
- A second factor is the choice of an activity that combines structure with market potential. The work can be divided into observable production phases while the final product belongs to an

expanding segment connected with local food, sustainability and gastronomy.

- A third factor is professional mentoring. The association does not expect young autistic workers to adapt independently to the production process. The job description of the production manager explicitly includes mentoring and adaptation of tasks.
- Another important success factor is that workplace adaptation was discussed before employment problems appeared. The consultation documented by the Croatian Autism Associations network addressed visual supports, structured tasks and mentor involvement during development of the model.
- The fundraising strategy also proved particularly successful. Through participation in Erste Bank Croatia's “Ostavi dobar trag” support programme, the organisation strengthened its approach toward individual donors, businesses and strategic fundraising.
- The involvement of the local business community has created another success factor. Rather than receiving only money, the organisation attracted forms of support directly useful to establishing production, including customised professional equipment.

7. Challenges and Lessons Learned

- The first major challenge is the familiar post-school gap. During education, support can be organised through the school system. After graduation, the young person is expected to move into an adult employment environment, but the necessary bridge between these systems is often missing. Pogled's own campaign developed precisely because young members were finishing school and remaining without realistic employment opportunities.
- A second challenge is that inclusive employment requires significant investment before the workplace becomes operational. A safe production area, cultivation equipment, packaging space, professional staff, materials and mentoring all have costs. The project also shows the importance of employing people with the right combination of competences. A production manager needs technical knowledge of agriculture and quality standards, but also patience, flexibility and readiness to mentor autistic employees. Pogled explicitly built both dimensions into the position.
- The practice also demonstrates that fundraising itself requires professionalisation. Pogled reported that participation in fundraising mentoring helped the organisation clarify its priorities, improve communication with donors and make more systematic decisions.
- Another challenge is the balance between social objectives and economic sustainability. Microgreens must ultimately be produced at adequate quality, on schedule and at a price that customers are willing to pay. If the economic activity does not function, the employment model becomes permanently dependent on donations. On the other hand, if productivity is treated as the only criterion, participants who require more support could become excluded.

8. Transferability, Replication and Practical Tips

The strongest transferable element of “Budi uz nas” is not microgreens themselves, but the reasoning used to design the employment model. Microgreens worked as a logical option for Pogled because the production can be structured into relatively clear cycles and tasks, while also having potential market demand. Another local community could reach a completely different conclusion.

Several practical conditions from Pogled's experience can be transferred:

- **Carry out a needs assessment before selecting the business activity** - The employment model needs to respond to actual participants who are leaving education and looking for meaningful adult roles.
- **Choose a process which can be divided into manageable tasks** - Not every employee needs to perform the complete production chain. Some participants may become highly independent in one phase.
- **Design accessibility before opening the workplace** - Consider visual support, predictability, organisation of materials, sensory environment, instruction formats and break arrangements before problems appear.
- **Create a professional mentor role** - The mentor should understand both the economic activity and the people being supported. Pogled's production-manager role provides a good example of combining these competences.
- **Develop real products for real customers** - Work gains different meaning when the participant knows that somebody will actually use or consume what has been produced.
- **Do market research** - A socially valuable activity cannot become sustainable employment if there is no demand for the product.
- **Treat fundraising strategically** - Pogled's campaign demonstrates that a clearly defined target can mobilise community support. Instead of asking citizens to “support autism”, the organisation could explain concretely what the money would create: production space, equipment, mentoring and first workplaces.
- **Invite companies to participate in concrete ways** - Businesses may provide money, equipment, expertise, materials, distribution contacts, purchasing agreements or technical services. The customised equipment donations received by Pogled illustrate this approach.
- **Do not confuse occupational activity with employment** - This is especially important. Participants should know whether they are attending training, volunteering, participating in work activity or actually employed. If the final objective is labour-market inclusion, the pathway should progressively move towards paid and legally recognised work.

8

COLLECTION OF POSITIVE PRACTICES

Prehod mladih / Youth Transition

A national transition model connecting education, vocational rehabilitation and the labour market for young people with disabilities

Country:
Slovenia

Level:
national

Sources

Final Compendium of the Prehod mladih Project, 2022:
https://prehodmladih.si/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Zaključni-zbornik-PMTD.pdf?

Prehod mladih – Official Project Website:
https://www.prehodmladih.si/

1. Background and Short Description

Prehod mladih – Youth Transition is a Slovenian national model developed to address one of the most critical periods in the lives of young people with special needs: the transition from education toward further education, vocational preparation and employment. The original large-scale project "Prehod mladih na trg dela" – Transition of Young People to the Labour Market was implemented across Slovenia from January 2018 until August 2022, coordinated by the Association of Vocational Rehabilitation Providers of the Republic of Slovenia (ZIZRS) and implemented through the national network of vocational rehabilitation providers. It was co-financed by the Republic of Slovenia and the European Union through the European Social Fund.

The starting point of the initiative was not that Slovenia had no education or employment-support systems for persons with disabilities. On the contrary, the project authors recognised that both systems were comparatively well developed. The problem was the missing connection between

them. A young person could successfully complete school but then become lost between educational institutions, the Employment Service, vocational rehabilitation, social services and employers. The project described this missing connection almost as a “system error”: there was no sufficiently established interface responsible for accompanying the young person from one system into the other.

The target group consisted of young people with special needs under the age of 29 who were expected to experience significant barriers in transition to employment. The categories included young people with autism spectrum disorders (6.4% of participants were recorded primarily under autism spectrum disorders), together with young people with intellectual disabilities, visual or hearing disabilities, speech-language difficulties, physical disabilities, chronic illnesses, and emotional or behavioural difficulties.

Between 2018 and 2022, the project provided support to almost 2,100 young people with special needs throughout Slovenia. It was implemented as a truly national intervention, rather than a small local pilot.

What makes this practice especially relevant today is that the approach did not disappear after the first project ended. Following the experience and evaluation of the original intervention, Slovenia launched Prehod mladih+ (PM+) in August 2025. The renewed national project runs until September 2029 and plans to include 2,500 young people with special needs across Slovenia. Autistic young people remain explicitly included in its target group.

2. Objectives

The general objective of the original Prehod mladih project was to contribute to greater social inclusion of young people with special needs and establish a supportive interface between school and the labour market, enabling young people to enter employment or further education in a more informed and empowered way.

Its main objectives were:

- to develop relevant competences of young people with special needs and bring them closer to the labour market;
- to increase their social inclusion;
- to encourage earlier activation and career planning already while young people are still within education;
- to involve and empower parents and caregivers during the transition process;
- to increase cooperation between educational institutions and employment-related services;
- to establish a coordinated employment network supporting school-to-work transition;
- to connect young people with real employers;

- to provide workplace visits, work trials, practical placements and training opportunities;
- to improve young people's understanding of their own abilities, interests and professional possibilities;
- to motivate and educate employers regarding employment of young people with special needs;
- to create continuity between education, employment services and vocational rehabilitation;
- to prevent young people from becoming inactive after completion of education.

Many employability programmes begin when a young person is already unemployed. Prehod mladih follows a more preventive approach. Professionals argued that employment-related preparation should begin while a young person is still attending school, so that planning, exploration and employer contact can happen before the educational support structure disappears.

3. Description of the Practice

The central feature of Prehod mladih was the creation of an individual transition pathway for every participant. Participation was voluntary, and young people were expected to take an active role in the process. After inclusion, a professional worker worked with the young person to develop an Individual Transition Plan. This was not only an administrative form. It was the central document for planning and managing the transition process. It contained an overall assessment of the young person's functioning together with long-term and short-term objectives related to employment or further education.

The process usually covered several connected areas:

- Getting to know the young person
- Individual transition planning
- Practical contact with the world of work
- Working with educational institutions
- Working with families
- Working with employers
- Follow-up after transition

4. Methodology and Approach

The methodology of Prehod mladih can be described as preventive, individualised, multidisciplinary, community-based and labour-market oriented.

- **Early intervention** - Possibly the most important principle is that transition preparation begins before school ends. The project background explicitly identified the risk that young people leave education and spend considerable time at home, gradually losing work habits, competences,

confidence and motivation. The project therefore tried to create continuity while the young person was still reachable through educational institutions.

- **Individual Transition Plan** - The Individual Transition Plan puts the young person's own objectives at the centre. Professionals do not have one standard programme that everybody completes in identical sequence.
- **Multidisciplinary support** - Professionals involved in the original programme were predominantly psychologists, social workers and occupational therapists, with special educators, sociologists and related profiles also participating. They combined knowledge of disability with knowledge of employment, vocational rehabilitation and local labour-market opportunities. This interdisciplinary structure reduces the tendency to look at employability only from one perspective.
- **Learning through real experience** - Workplace visits, work trials and practical placements allow participants to compare ideas about professions with the reality. The evaluation showed that users and parents particularly valued practical presentation of schools and workplaces, while parents highlighted how employer contact helped young people develop a more positive and realistic relationship toward future work.
- **Continuous professional relationship** - The intervention was not generally a one-meeting counselling service. Participants were included for a substantial period. The original evaluation found an average formal participation of 14.7 months. When preparation before formal inclusion and six-month follow-up after exit are considered, the actual professional relationship could be significantly longer. Approximately 70 hours of professional work were recorded on average per participant across the project. For autistic youngsters, continuity can be especially meaningful because establishing trust can require time.
- **Ecosystem approach** - The young person is positioned in the middle of a network: young person – family – school – vocational rehabilitation – employer – Employment Service – social/health services. The role of transition professionals is partly to make this network function. This is perhaps the central methodological innovation: Prehod mladih did not create another separate service beside all existing services. It attempted to become the connecting mechanism between them.

5. Results and Impact

The original 2018–2022 implementation generated considerable quantitative and qualitative evidence. Almost 2,100 young people with special needs received transition support across Slovenia. Their average age at inclusion was 15.5 years, although participants ranged from 12 to 28 years old.

The disability/support-needs profile was diverse. 6.4% were recorded primarily as young people with autism spectrum disorders, while autism also occurred within the large group of participants with multiple combined conditions. This confirms that autistic young people were not a marginally theoretical target group but were actually represented in implementation.

The programme created a very wide institutional network. By 2022, it cooperated with 619 educational institutions, and over the whole period 246 employers participated in project activities.

The evaluation also gives useful insight into what happened after participants completed their interventions. Across the project period, 63.6% continued education, 9.8% registered with the Slovenian Employment Service, and 1.1% were recorded as entering employment directly. The relatively small direct-employment percentage needs to be interpreted carefully: the majority of participants entered the project while still at primary-school age, meaning that continuation of education was the expected and appropriate transition for most.

For a 14-year-old autistic participant, success should not necessarily mean “got a job”. A successful outcome might be:

understood own abilities → selected an appropriate secondary programme → gained first workplace experience → avoided dropping out → maintained a realistic employment pathway.

6. Success Factors

Several factors contributed to the quality of this practice:

- **National coverage:** Services operated across Slovenia, giving young people from different regions access to transition support.
- **Early intervention:** Support began while young people were still in school, before unemployment became a long-term issue.
- **Individual Transition Plan:** Created a shared direction for the young person, family and professionals, ensuring coordinated support.
- **Multidisciplinary expertise:** Transition workers could involve psychologists, occupational therapists and other specialists when needed.
- **Workplace experience:** Young people could visit and try workplaces before making career decisions.
- **Stakeholder integration:** Schools, families, employers, the Employment Service and vocational-rehabilitation professionals worked together.
- **Continuity after exit:** Follow-up support after transition was recognised as an important part of effective practice.
- **Strong evaluation:** The project systematically collected data on participants, interventions, outcomes and satisfaction across stakeholders.
- **Evidence-based practice:** Systematic evaluation provided stronger evidence of impact than programmes relying mainly on anecdotal success stories.

7. Challenges and Lessons Learned

- **Sustainability is essential**: One of the strongest lessons of Prehod mladih is that a good pilot is not enough if the service disappears when project financing ends.At the end of the original intervention, participants, families, schools and professionals all identified uncertainty about the future of the model as an important weakness. The evaluation stressed that interruption is particularly problematic for a target group where trust and professional relationships may require considerable time to develop. Temporary project employment also contributed to turnover among professional workers.

Prehod mladih+ (2025–2029) is a step forward, but it remains project-funded and is still working toward longer-term standards and institutionalisation.

- **Time matters**: Transition cannot always be achieved through a few workshops. Participation lasted on average 14.7 months. Progress may involve gradual steps:

  identifying interests → workplace visit → work trial → job application → vocational rehabilitation → employment.

  Moving too quickly into an unsuitable workplace can lead to worse outcomes.
- **Coordination between systems is challenging**: Education, employment, social welfare and healthcare often work under different rules and cultures. Prehod mladih was created partly to address this lack of coordination.
- **Access should be broader**: Support was linked to formal recognition of special educational needs. Stakeholders suggested extending support to young people with significant difficulties even without formal recognition. This is particularly relevant to autistic young people, who may face major transition challenges without having a formal diagnosis or recognised educational status.

8. Transferability, Replication and Practical Tips

Prehod mladih has strong transferability value and it is the transition methodology. A local youth organisation, school, municipality or disability organisation can adapt several elements even without creating a national programme.

- Start transition planning while the young person is still in education. Do not wait for graduation.
- Create one Individual Transition Plan. The plan can be relatively simple, but it should connect the different activities.

- Give the young person real workplace exposure. Whenever possible, organise: company visits, job shadowing, work trials, volunteering, practical placement, supported internships. A young person can learn much more from two hours inside an actual workplace than from a long abstract description of the profession.
- Include employers before the final employment stage. Employers should not first hear about the young person when receiving a CV. Develop relationships before this.
- Appoint one transition professional as the connecting person. One of the biggest risks is that the family receives different information from school, employment services, social services and NGOs. Where possible, one professional should coordinate the pathway and know: where the person currently is, what has already been tried, which objective comes next and who needs to be contacted.
- Include the family, but maintain the young person's ownership. Parents may provide crucial information and practical support. However, career objectives should not be chosen only according to what parents believe is safest. The young person should participate actively and, where possible, make his/her own informed choices.
- Prepare employers for adjustments. If an autistic participant begins a workplace trial, discuss practical questions with the employer. Instead of broadly asking whether the company is “autism friendly”, analyse: clarity of instructions, predictable scheduling, sensory environment, communication channels, task changes, feedback style, availability of one contact person. Often relatively small adaptations can determine whether the experience succeeds.
- Follow participants after the transition. Do not automatically close the case on the day the person enters school, registers with an employment service or signs a contract. A simple follow-up after one week, one month, three months and six months can reveal whether the transition is stable.
- Evaluate pathways, not only final jobs. This more accurately reflects gradual transition.
- Build cooperation as a system, not as personal contacts only. Do not depend only on one motivated teacher and one friendly company. Build a network which can survive when people change jobs.

9

COLLECTION OF POSITIVE PRACTICES

Specialisterne

Inclusive employment model for neurodivergent people

Country:
Denmark

Level:
national

Sources

Social impact report 2025

Foundation Specialisterne Official Website: https://specialisternefoundation.com/about-us/

1. Background and short description

Specialisterne is an internationally recognised social enterprise founded in Denmark in 2004 by Thorkil Sonne. The organisation was established with the aim to address the high unemployment rates among autistic people. It does so by creating employment pathways that recognise and value neurodivergent strengths. Since its foundation, Specialisterne has expanded to more than 25 countries and is now a global leader in neurodiversity employment and workplace inclusion.

The target group includes autistic people and individuals with other forms of neurodiversity, such as ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). Specialisterne works with both neurodivergent jobseekers, as well as employers; and it provides training, recruitment, workplace support and consultancy to create sustainable employment opportunities in mainstream labour markets.

2. Objectives

The general objective of the practice is to promote sustainable employment for autistic and other neurodivergent people by removing barriers to recruitment, improving workplace inclusion and demonstrating the value of neurodiverse talent.

Specific objectives are:

- Prepare neurodivergent individuals for meaningful employment;
- Develop recruitment processes that is based on assessment of skills more than on social performance;
- Support employers in creating inclusive workplaces;
- Provide ongoing job coaching and support in the workplace;
- Increase awareness of neurodiversity among employers and in the society;
- Demonstrate the business value of neurodiverse teams;
- Contribute to equal employment opportunities and social inclusion.

3. Description of the Practice

Specialisterne operates through an integrated employment pathway that combines candidate preparation, inclusive recruitment, employer consultancy and ongoing workplace support. Candidates participate in tailored assessment and preparation programmes designed to identify their strengths, interests and work preferences. Specialisterne does not rely primarely on traditional interviews, which might be a disadvantage to many neurodivergent applicant, but instead uses practical exercises, work simulations and competency-based assessments.

Following assessment, candidates are supported with CV preparation, interview coaching, career planning and job matching. Specialisterne cooperated with companies from different sectors including information technology, software testing, engineering, finance, administration, business services and data management to identify positions that match candidates' abilities.

Support does not stop after the candidate is hired. Job coaches assist employees and employers during onboarding and also throughout employment. They help to facilitate communication, clarify expectations, recommend the necessary workplace accommodations and resolve challenges that may arise. Specialisterne also provides neurodiversity training for managers and colleagues in order to promote inclusive workplace cultures.

4. Methodology and approach

Specialisterne's approach is based on the neurodiversity paradigm, which recognises neurological differences as natural variations, and not as deficits that need to be corrected. The organisation focuses on adapting workplaces and recruitment processes rather than asking candidates to adapt to existing employment practices. The educational and employment approach combines:

- Skills assessment based on strengths;
- Practical work simulations instead of traditional interviews;
- Personalised career planning;
- Education for emplayers and neurodiversity awareness training;
- Job coaching before, during and after recruitment;
- Workplace accommodations to meet the needs of the person;
- Continuous cooperation between employees and employers.

The model is focused on the long-term employment sustainability, not just simply placing individuals into jobs. The ongoing support is gradually reduced as employees gain more confidence and independence in their roles.

5. Results and impact

Since its establishment, Specialisterne has contributed to the employment of more than 10,000 neurodivergent individuals worldwide and has become one of the most influential organisations promoting neurodiversity in employment. The Specialisterne Foundation has set an ambitious long-term goal of enabling one million meaningful careers for autistic and other neurodivergent people through global partnerships and systems change.

Benefits for participants include increased employment opportunities, improved self-confidence, financial independence and career development. Many employees are able to find sustainable long-term employment through regular coaching and workplace support.

Employers also report benefits, such as improved innovation, attention to detail, high quality work and better awareness of inclusive management practices. Specialisterne has teamed with numerous international companies and demonstrates that neurodiverse people can make a successful contribution across a wide range of industries.

6. Success factors

- One of the key features is its strengths-based approach, which evaluates candidates based on their abilities, and not just their communication skills.
- Another important factor is the redesign of the recruitment processes. Practical assessments and work simulations provide fairer opportunities for neurodivergent applicants than conventional interviews.
- Through ongoing workplace support in form of job coaching, employees can more successfully transition into employment. At the same time, managers and colleagues are receiving support to build inclusive workplaces.
- Strong partnerships with employers from different sectors support sustainable employment opportunities rather than one-off placements. Finally, the organisation's international network allows continuous sharing of knowledge and best practices across countries.

7. Challenges and lessons learned

- One of the biggest obstacles has been overcoming traditional recruitment practices that puts too much emphasis on social interaction during interviews, thus disadvantaging the neurodivergent applicants.
- Another challenge is changing employer perceptions about autism and neurodiversity. Many employers need initial guidance to understand the necessary workplace accommodations and appreciate the strengths of neurodivergent employees.
- Specialisterne has demonstrated that successful inclusion is not only about preparing the candidates but also about preparing employers. Sustainable employment also includes elements such as ongoing collaboration, workplace flexibility and a readiness to adjust organisational practices. The organisation has also shown that even minor workplace adjustments can make a big difference to employee wellbeing and organisational effectiveness.

8. Transferability, replication and practical tips

The Specialisterne model has been successfully replicated internationally and offers valuable guidance for organisations wishing to improve employment opportunities for neurodivergent people.

Key conditions for successful replication include the following:

- Strong commitment to neurodiversity and inclusive employment;
- Strengths-based recruitment and assessment methods;
- Individualised career guidance and job coaching;
- Close collaboration with employers throughout recruitment and employment;
- Manager and staff training on neurodiversity;
- Flexible workplace accommodations;
- Long-term support focused on sustainable employment rather than short-term job placement.

Their model demonstrates that improving employment outcomes for neurodivergent people requires changes to recruitment systems, workplace culture and employer practices, rather than expecting individuals to adapt to traditional employment models.

10

COLLECTION OF POSITIVE PRACTICES

Kirjokartta / Spectrum Map – turning self-knowledge into practical support

Helping young people understand their strengths and needs, and translate them into a better fit at work

Country:
Finland

Level:
national

Sources

Autism Finland's Spectrum Map Official Website:
https://autismiliitto.fi/tuki-ja-neuvot/kirjokartta/spectrum-map/

Additional information on the development and purpose of the tool is available through: https://autismiliitto.fi/eautismi/

1. Background and short description

Spectrum Map (Kirjokartta) is a free online tool developed by Autism Finland to help autistic young people and young adults better understand their individual characteristics, strengths and use them to define their support needs. The tool was developed through eAutismi project, with funding from Finland's Funding Centre for Social Welfare and Health Organisations (STEA).

Its main target group is autistic young people and young adults aged 14–28, although Autism Finland notes that it can also be useful for older autistic people.

Spectrum Map was developed in response to a practical problem, namely, autism diagnoses are often received during adolescence or later. Without proper information and opportunities for self-reflection, a young person may find it difficult to understand their own autistic characteristics, recognise their strengths and explain to the others what kind of support they need. The tool does not

focus on the deficits that the young person has. Instead, it provides a structured way of exploring: What is true for me? What are my strengths? What situations are difficult for me? What can help me?

Although Spectrum Map was not developed specifically as an employment tool, this type of self-knowledge is highly relevant when preparing a young person for employment, discussing workplace needs or identifying reasonable adjustments.

2. Objectives

The main aim of Spectrum Map is to strengthen self-understanding and help autistic youngsters to recognise and express strengths and their support needs. More specifically, the tool helps a young person to:

- explore their individual autistic characteristics;
- recognise personal strengths and challenges;
- understand situations that may cause difficulties or overload;
- identify strategies that may help them;
- find ways to communicate their needs to other people;
- create a personal summary of the things that are important to them.

It is possible for autistic individuals to use Spectrum Map independently, as well as go through it together with a parent, teacher, instructor or another support person. This makes it a useful tool in planning transition into the work: rather than a professional deciding what support a young person needs, the tool can provide a structure for exploring this together with the young person.

3. Description of the practice

Spectrum Map is organised around four areas:

- Interaction and communication
- Planning and organisation
- Habits and interests
- Senses, body and stress

Each area contains 10 statements. The respondent considers each statement and chooses either “applies to me” or “does not apply to me.” When the young person selects “applies to me”, additional information opens through what is called a “virtual coach”. In some cases, the user can also watch a short video in which an autistic person shares their own experience and practical strategies to address the issue mentioned in the statement.

At the end of each topic, all statements selected by the user are brought together so that the young person can choose from suggested strategies, add their own ideas and create a personalised summary. The summary can be saved as a PDF or printed. The young person can use the results in discussions with people who support them, in preparation for the job interviews or when drafting their CVs.

4. Methodology and approach

Spectrum Map uses a person-centred and strengths-based approach, and it does not produce a score or rank the person's abilities. Instead, the user decides which statements describe their own experience. This is important because autistic people can experience the same situations very differently. For example, planning and organisation can be an area of considerable strength for one person while another may need support with starting tasks, estimating time needed for them or dealing with changes.

Another important feature is the combination of professional information and lived experience. The site includes videos and practical suggestions from autistic people themselves – most of the content was developed by the target group itself.

The use of this tool in the work environment can be as follows:



5. Results and impact

The Finnish version of Spectrum Map was launched in October 2024, following user testing during which positive feedback was received. Autism Finland continued adapting the site in response to feedback, accessibility was specifically considered in the development of the website.

Spectrum Map is currently available in several language versions, including English, which increases the possibility of using or adapting the approach outside Finland.

6. Success factors

Several features make Spectrum Map particularly interesting as a practice. Namely,

- **The young person is the expert on their own experience:** the tool does not tell the person which characteristics they have. Instead, the person can choose what applies to them.
- **It combines strengths and support needs:** with this the focus is not on the difficulties that the person experiences.
- **It makes abstract questions more concrete:** responding to concrete statements and situations make it easier for young people to identify.
- **It gives the young person something they can take away:** the personalised summary that can be saved or printed, can be useful in later conversations.
- **It can be used independently or together with support person:** the tool supports both, self-reflection, coaching or can be used for a structured conversation with a professional.
- **Autistic people's lived experience is part of the resource:** the tool was developed together with the target group and includes experience-based videos and practical tips.

7. Challenges and lessons learned

- One important lesson is that asking a young person directly: "*What support do you need?*" may not always provide a useful answer. The person may not yet have enough experience, language or self-understanding to identify what exactly makes a situation difficult and what would provide them the necessary support.
- Spectrum Map approaches the question differently. It breaks self-reflection into specific areas and concrete statements and situations that allow to person to work out what helps.
- Another lesson implemented in this tool is that a personal profile should not become another assessment made about the young person. The value of the approach is that the young person identifies themselves what applies to them and can decide which strategies are useful in their individual case. The resulting summary should therefore remain a tool for the young person, not a label that is used by professionals or employers.

8. Transferability, replication and practical tips

Spectrum Map has strong potential for use in programmes preparing autistic young people for employment, even if employment is not its original primary purpose. Such practices can be:

- **Creating own profile "How I work best"**

After completing relevant parts of Spectrum Map, a professional can help the young person translate the findings into a short workplace profile, which define, for example:

I work best when:	If I am not sure, it helps when:
...	...
...	...

- **Support tool for job matching**

Before discussing specific occupations, answers of the Spectrum map may help the person to explore:

- *What environments help them concentrate?*
- *How much predictability do they prefer?*
- *What kind of communication works well?*
- *What situations create overload?*

This information can help professionals to see what job could fit the young person, and what should their workplace be like.

- **Use it to prepare for self-advocacy**

A young person can practise explaining a need they have without necessarily having to give a long explanation about autism. For example:

I understand instructions better when the important steps are written down.	*If priorities change, it helps me when someone tells me clearly which task should come first.*

This makes self-advocacy concrete and connected to the actual work situation.

11

COLLECTION OF POSITIVE PRACTICES

Vivre et Travailler Autrement / Living and Working Differently

Mainstream employment, individualised workplace support and inclusive living for autistic adults with intellectual disabilities

Country:
France

Level:
national

Sources

Vivre et Travailler Autrement Official Website:
https://www.vivreettravaillerautrement.org/success-story/

1. Background and Short Description

Vivre et Travailler Autrement (VETA) is a French employment and social-inclusion model created from an experiment developed within the Andros Group, initially at the Novandie industrial site in Auneau, Eure-et-Loir. The first experiment started in 2014, when Andros employed its first autistic worker within an ordinary industrial environment. From this first experience, a much broader model was progressively developed around employment, autonomy, housing and participation in ordinary community life.

The target group is particularly important because it differentiates VETA from many neurodiversity-employment initiatives. It is not mainly addressed to autistic university graduates or to people with low support needs. French public authorities currently describe the target group more precisely as adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder (TSA) and an associated Intellectual Developmental Disorder (TDI), including people who had previously been oriented towards highly supported residential

services such as FAM or MAS facilities and who were generally very distant from the open labour market.

The original Andros model has two strongly connected pillars: employment in an ordinary company, normally through a permanent employment contract, with job and workplace adaptations where needed; and an ordinary and increasingly autonomous living environment, combined with socio-educational support and development of everyday-life skills.

What makes VETA especially relevant as a positive practice is that the Andros experiment did not remain an isolated corporate social-responsibility activity. The methodology was progressively formalised and transferred to other companies. By late 2025, VETA reported partnerships with 12 companies and 60 autistic people employed through permanent contracts. In February 2026, the French public career-information service Onisep reported around 60 autistic young adults participating in approximately 13 VETA-type arrangements across different sectors. More significantly, after around ten years of experimentation, the model influenced French public policy.

2. Objectives

The general objective of VETA is to support autistic adults with substantial support needs to obtain greater professional, personal and social autonomy through meaningful employment and participation in ordinary community life. VETA considers employment as an important lever for citizenship and autonomy, but not as an isolated objective. Employment, housing and participation in social and community life are treated as interconnected elements of adult life.

More specifically, the practice aims:

- To enable autistic adults with associated intellectual disabilities to access ordinary mainstream employment rather than remaining automatically limited to sheltered or institutional environments.
- To create permanent paid employment through CDI contracts when the employment match is successful.
- To identify the abilities and competences of individual autistic candidates.
- To identify genuine tasks needed by companies which correspond with these competences.
- To adapt jobs and workplaces where barriers exist.
- To use structured and visual methods to make work tasks more understandable.
- To provide continuous specialised support during employment.
- To prepare managers and colleagues for inclusion of autistic employees.
- To provide access to ordinary or inclusive housing according to individual needs and wishes.
- To support participation in local community life, leisure and everyday activities.
- To challenge assumptions that people with severe autism and intellectual disability are automatically unable to participate in employment.

3. Description of the Practice

VETA has progressively transformed the original Andros experience into a structured replication methodology. The association describes four principal work areas which need to be addressed when a new VETA arrangement is created:

- Preparation and support of the company;
- Definition of financing and identification of the medico-social organisation which will operate the local support;
- Identification of future autistic beneficiaries/employees;
- Identification and implementation of an appropriate housing solution.

This is important because the model does not begin only by recruiting autistic people. It creates an ecosystem around employment:

- **Preparation of the company** - The first step is to understand the company itself. The company is not asked to "create something for autistic people" only because it wants to show social responsibility. VETA first looks at work that really needs to be done and then asks if there is an autistic candidate whose competences correspond to this work, and what adaptation would allow him/her to perform it.
- **Identification and preparation of candidates** - The original Andros model deliberately involved persons who had been considered extremely distant from employment.
- **Learning the actual job** - Employees perform real industrial roles, not separate occupational activities created only for disabled workers. At the original Andros factory, VETA reports that autistic employees perform the same work positions as other employees. An interesting observation from the Andros experiment is that some of the adaptations created for autistic employees proved useful also for non-autistic colleagues. Sometimes an "autism adaptation" is simply better work organisation.
- **Gradual entry into permanent employment** - The original Andros participants did not receive permanent contracts immediately. The 11 workers currently described by VETA entered CDI employment after trial periods of approximately 6–12 months. This allows the process to be observed from both sides. A long enough testing period can therefore function as real supported job matching, rather than a short symbolic work placement.
- **Part-time employment combined with autonomy development** - In the original Andros model, employees work half-time, generally during the morning, through permanent employment contracts. The other part of the day is used for development of everyday-life skills, autonomy and social participation.
- **Housing and community life** - The original participants live at Maison du Parc, situated within the town rather than in an isolated institutional site. The location allows people to access local shops and participate more naturally in community life. VETA considers employment, housing and leisure as three interconnected pillars of its approach. The current French policy framework has

developed this principle further and requires housing solutions to respect the wishes, needs and life aspirations of the individual, rather than automatically linking everybody to one specific form of shared housing.

- **Continuous specialised support** - The Andros experiment involved eight autism professionals supporting the original group of autistic employees, with individualised assistance according to the person's needs. This professional support connects: work + personal autonomy + communication + everyday life.

4. Methodology and Approach

The VETA methodology can be described as strengths-based, highly structured, individualised, ecological and oriented toward mainstream participation.

- **Begin with competencies rather than institutional labels** - One of the strongest features of VETA is that people initially considered candidates for highly supported institutions were reassessed through a completely different question: What can this person do?
- **Match abilities with actual company needs** - The methodology does not start from a generic list of “jobs for autistic people”. Instead it analyses company tasks, analyses individual abilities, identifies the match and adapts the environment. This avoids stereotypes. The methodology follows this: find tasks where the actual person's competences correspond with actual employer needs.
- **Structure the work environment** - For some participants, visual organisation is essential. At Andros, work activities were sequenced through visual aids, pictures, markings and functional visual schedules.
- **Keep real productivity expectations** - VETA has made a deliberate choice not to treat autistic workers as symbolic employees. According to its own evaluation of the original Andros experiment, autistic employees reached at least equivalent productivity to non-autistic colleagues on the same positions. VETA also reports that all 11 Andros workers who received a CDI remained employed.
- **Adapt support intensity to the individual** - The methodology recognises that one person may require visual instructions, another reassurance, another communication support and another more assistance in everyday living. Therefore, same diagnosis does not equal same support plan.
- **Support the company as well as the employee** - VETA supports employers through diagnosis, environmental adaptations, training and recruitment. This is essential. If the autistic employee is the only person who is asked to change, inclusion remains fragile. The organisation changes together with the worker.
- **Integrate work and adult life** - VETA treats employment as one component of an adult life which also includes: housing, leisure, relationships, personal autonomy, use of community services. This holistic approach is particularly relevant for people with substantial support needs.

5. Results and Impact

VETA reports that 11 autistic adults obtained permanent employment contracts after trial periods of 6–12 months, and that all remained employed. The organisation also reports no loss of productivity compared with other workers performing the same jobs. The Andros Group currently describes the broader inclusion experience as involving around twenty employees with severe autism in permanent contracts across Andros activities, demonstrating expansion beyond the original Novandie group.

An independent public-information source, Onisep, reported in February 2026 that approximately 60 young autistic adults were working through around 13 VETA-type arrangements across sectors including retail, defence and luxury industries. One important impact is that the programme reached people normally considered particularly distant from employment.

- **Impact on employers** - The Andros experience also generated organisational changes. Visual schedules, task structuring and floor markings introduced for autistic employees sometimes proved helpful to the wider workforce. The practice therefore demonstrates that reasonable accommodation does not necessarily produce a separate “special system” inside the company. Some changes can simply improve clarity for everybody.
- **From experimental project to public policy** - The greatest systemic result appeared in 2025 when the French ministries established the employment-and-housing support services throughout France for adults with ASD and associated intellectual developmental disorder. The objective is for each department to develop a service supporting at least 6–10 people, with ordinary employment and ordinary housing as the central directions. The national plan provides the needed finansing.

6. Success Factors

Several interconnected elements appear fundamental to the success of VETA.

- **A real permanent job** - The first factor is that the objective is real paid employment, preferably a permanent CDI contract. This is important for dignity but also for employer behaviour. When the person is an actual employee, the company has to think seriously about integration, quality, training and sustainability.
- **Work is matched with competence** - The employer does not employ somebody simply to fulfil an inclusion objective. The objective is to identify work the person can actually perform and the company actually needs. This is what makes long-term employment possible.
- **High-quality environmental adaptation** - The visual support at Andros is a very concrete example of reasonable accommodation. These adaptations reduce ambiguity without reducing the technical purpose of the job.

- **Strong specialised support** - The original Andros arrangement is resource-intensive, with eight professionals supporting the group of autistic employees and their broader autonomy pathway. This level of support is one reason why persons with very substantial needs can participate.
- **Support is external to ordinary company management** - The company is supported by the medico-social structure. Meaning that the production manager does not need to become an autism therapist and the autism professional does not need to become the factory manager. Each contributes his/her expertise.
- **Housing and employment are considered together** - The person cannot reliably arrive at work every morning if the rest of life is unstable. Housing, transport, personal organisation, daily living and social participation influence employment sustainability.
- **Long-term partnership** - VETA does not simply give an employer training material and leave. It accompanies the implementation process over time and transfers competencies to local actors. This is one reason why replication is possible.
- **Public-private-medico-social cooperation** - This ecosystem is more complicated to create, but considerably more stable once functioning.
- **Demonstration before advocacy** - Another strong feature is that VETA first generated practical evidence. It could also demonstrate that people are doing the work, that they have contracts, that adaptations that function can be simple and that other companies are asking to replicate the model. This made their policy advocacy much stronger.

7. Challenges and Lessons Learned

Despite its strong results, VETA is not a simple or low-cost methodology to replicate.

- **The model requires considerable professional support** - Eight professionals supporting the original Andros group demonstrates the intensity of the intervention. This should not be hidden when presenting the success. The company may experience no additional productivity cost at the work position, but somebody still finances the specialised support. In France, this has increasingly been organised through public disability and medico-social funding. For replication, therefore, it is not enough to find a motivated employer. There must also be a sustainable financing mechanism around the employee.
- **Scaling takes time** - VETA developed the model for approximately ten years before it became incorporated into national policy. Even today, replication is not immediate. In early 2026, VETA's director reported that administrative and financial barriers were still slowing implementation and that dozens of interested companies were waiting for suitable territorial support structures to become operational.
- **Employment and housing must support choice, not become an obligatory package** - Connecting employment with housing is one of VETA's strengths, but it also requires particular ethical attention. A person should not be forced to accept one housing arrangement because he/she wants a job, or fear losing support because an employment relationship finishes.

- **Part-time employment should not become a universal formula** - The original model uses half-time employment because the other part of the day supports daily-living skills and personal development. For the original participants this has apparently worked very well. But it should not become a rule. Replication should preserve the logic of individualisation.
- **Structured work should not become stereotyped work** - Industrial jobs with predictable and repetitive components have been effective within Andros. But this should not create a new stereotype that people with autism and intellectual disability can only perform repetitive factory activities.
- **Productivity should not become the only measure of human value** - One of VETA's strongest arguments to employers is that autistic workers can reach equivalent productivity. However, inclusion should not depend on proving that every disabled employee is more productive than everybody else. Workers without disabilities are also not all exceptional performers.

8. Transferability, Replication and Practical Tips

The complete French VETA model is connected with the French medico-social, employment and housing systems and cannot simply be copied into any other country. However, many of its components have very strong transferability potential. For organisations interested in adapting the practice, the following elements could be particularly useful:

- Start with real company needs
- Carry out detailed job analysis
- Make the invisible rules visible
- Use real employment pathways
- Fund professional support separately from the company's normal production costs
- Prepare colleagues before the first working day
- Give the employee enough time to learn the real job
- Gradually reduce unnecessary support
- Consider the whole employment day
- Keep housing as a support option, not a condition of employment
- Work with groups, but individualise pathways
- Evaluate both employment and quality of life
- Use successful companies to persuade other companies
- Transform individual pilots into policy evidence

12

COLLECTION OF POSITIVE PRACTICES

AutiTalent

Autism-specialised recruitment, detachment and workplace support for sustainable employment

Country:
Netherlands

Level:
national

Source

AutiTalent Official website: https://www.autitalent.nl/

1. Background and Short Description

AutiTalent is a Dutch social enterprise and specialised employment agency connecting people with autism with employers throughout the Netherlands. It was founded in July 2007 at a moment when employment initiatives based on the strengths of autistic people were still relatively uncommon in the Dutch labour market. The starting idea was quite simple but, at that time, also rather unconventional: instead of assuming that people with autism represented a difficult group to employ, the organisation wanted to demonstrate that their individual talents could have concrete economic value for companies.

Only two years after the organisation was established, 17 autistic people had already been placed in work. Since then, the model has developed considerably. AutiTalent describes itself today as a social enterprise and business service provider with social impact as a central purpose. Its mission is not only to help autistic people find employment, but importantly also to help them keep suitable employment. The organisation is offering direct recruitment and selection, workplace coaching, career guidance, autism-related advice to employers, data and archive projects, and support related to Social Return on Investment.

AutiTalent approaches this gap from a practical position. Many autistic people have qualifications and relevant abilities but experience difficulties in recruitment, communication, workplace organisation or finding an environment corresponding with their needs. Others obtain employment but repeatedly become overburdened or lose their jobs because their support needs are not recognised. The organisation therefore positions itself between the candidate and the employer, translating the requirements and possibilities of each side.

2. Objectives

The general objective of AutiTalent is to contribute to an inclusive labour market in which autistic people can obtain suitable paid work and maintain employment over time, while employers gain access to talents that can otherwise remain hidden by conventional recruitment and workplace practices.

Its specific objectives can be identified as:

- To connect autistic jobseekers with suitable employers and genuine paid employment.
- To identify employment opportunities where individual strengths and professional competences can be used effectively.
- To support autistic candidates during recruitment and selection.
- To remove unnecessary barriers created by conventional recruitment processes.
- To provide employers with a better understanding of autism in the workplace.
- To achieve an accurate match between the person, job tasks, organisation and work environment.
- To develop employment arrangements which are sustainable rather than focused only on initial placement.
- To facilitate communication between the autistic employee, manager, employer and, where relevant, an external job coach.
- To identify difficulties early, before they grow into conflict, sickness absence or termination of employment.
- To support reasonable and practical workplace adjustments.
- To support employers with restructuring or *job carving* when an existing vacancy does not fully correspond with available candidate profiles.
- To enable employees to develop further through additional training and career-development opportunities.
- To strengthen employer confidence in employing autistic people.
- To contribute to diversity, inclusion and Social Return objectives within public and private organisations.

- To demonstrate that autism-specific support can coexist with normal professional standards, salary conditions and expectations.

In this sense, the model works simultaneously on three forms of sustainability:

1. person–job sustainability: the work suits the person's competences and needs;
2. employment sustainability: problems are identified and supported after placement;
3. business sustainability: the employee contributes something the organisation actually needs.

3. Description of the Practice

The core AutiTalent practice is supported detachment. In the Dutch *detachering* model used by AutiTalent, the autistic worker is employed by AutiTalent but performs his/her work within another organisation – the client. AutiTalent therefore remains the formal employer while maintaining close involvement with both the employee and the organisation where the person works. Detachments can be short or long term.

For an employer who has never previously worked with an autistic employee, the model can reduce uncertainty. The company does not have to create all disability-related expertise internally from the first day. AutiTalent remains present and can intervene when clarification, adjustment or support is required.

For the autistic employee, the advantage is also significant: there is an organisation familiar with autism which remains involved even after the job begins.

- **Registration of jobseekers** - Autistic people can register free of charge within the AutiTalent candidate database. A formal autism diagnosis is not mandatory. AutiTalent states that a person can register where there is a recognised suspicion of autism and the person himself/herself accepts this and is prepared to discuss it.

An important point is that registration does not automatically produce individual career counselling. AutiTalent makes this very transparent. It does not normally start by meeting every registered person and helping him/her determine which profession to choose. Its large candidate database is matched with concrete vacancies received from employers. When a potentially suitable position appears, AutiTalent contacts the candidate and then begins a more detailed process involving intake, recruitment preparation and workplace support. People needing broader career orientation are referred toward job-coaching or reintegration services, including those available through Dutch municipalities.

- **Matching vacancy and candidate** - Employers can send a vacancy to AutiTalent, which searches its database of more than 3,500 registered jobseekers. AutiTalent explicitly notes that insufficient conventional work experience does not automatically exclude somebody. In some situations, there

can be a significant difference between what the person's CV suggests and what he/she can actually perform. The organisation may therefore give greater attention to characteristics such as accuracy, reliability, motivation and the possibility to learn tasks gradually. This is particularly relevant to young autistic jobseekers.

- **Job carving and function creation** - When an employer is interested in inclusion but does not have an immediately suitable vacancy, AutiTalent can explore function creation or job carving. This means analysing work within the organisation and seeing whether particular tasks can be grouped into a meaningful position that corresponds with a candidate's competences. This does not mean inventing meaningless work. Good job carving takes genuine activities which need to be performed and reorganises them in a way that can create a sustainable professional role.
- **Supported recruitment** - Once a candidate is identified, AutiTalent does not simply forward the CV and disappear. Recruiters support preparation of both sides and can attend the job interview. The intermediary helps ensure that communication style does not unnecessarily hide competence.
- **Employment through detachment** - When a placement is agreed, the person generally enters employment with AutiTalent and works inside the client organisation. Employees working through this structure fall under the relevant Dutch temporary-employment collective labour agreement. AutiTalent states that detached employees receive equivalent remuneration and employment conditions compared with employees of the client in comparable positions, build pension rights from their first working day and receive additional employment protections within the AutiTalent structure.
- **Fixed relationship manager** - After placement, responsibility shifts from the recruitment stage toward ongoing relationship management. A fixed AutiTalent relationship manager normally becomes the contact for both employee and employer. The relationship manager stands between employee and employer, trying to understand both perspectives and create a bridge between them. This can be very valuable when a difficulty appears.
- **Job coaching** - AutiTalent does not automatically replace a person's existing job coach. Employees normally retain their own job coach, and AutiTalent expects that professional to have experience with autism. Where a person is entitled to job coaching does not have an appropriate coach, AutiTalent can in some cases arrange internal autism-specialised job coaching.
- **Workplace adjustments** - AutiTalent emphasises that autistic employees do not all require the same workplace. Possible adjustments include: concrete and direct communication, a fixed or quieter workplace, changes to the task package, structured work instructions, support with planning, avoiding unnecessary sensory overload, gradual learning of new tasks.
- **Direct recruitment and selection** - Detachment is not the only pathway. When an organisation wants to employ an autistic person directly, AutiTalent can conduct specialised recruitment and selection. It identifies candidates, prepares both sides, participates in recruitment and supports the initial employment phase. After the start-up period, AutiTalent withdraws and the employment relationship continues directly between worker and employer.

4. Methodology and Approach

The AutiTalent methodology is based on several interconnected principles: strengths-based matching, autism-specific recruitment support, individual workplace adaptation, two-sided mediation and long-term employment sustainability.

- **Strengths are important, but stereotypes should be avoided** - AutiTalent frequently observes strengths among registered jobseekers such as: accuracy, analytical thinking, creativity, honesty, and loyalty. These characteristics can create professional value. However, the organisation also explicitly recognises that autistic people are very different from each other. One person may enjoy telephone problem-solving while another may experience exactly the same task as extremely difficult.
- **Recruitment is treated as a possible barrier** - AutiTalent recognises that many autistic people do not automatically respond to vacancies or experience difficulties during application and interview processes. This can mean that a strong candidate never reaches the stage where the employer can actually evaluate his/her work.
- **The match is more than CV + vacancy** - AutiTalent places considerable emphasis on the match itself. Its recruiters and relationship managers examine both sides, the candidate and the employer. External recognition of this approach comes also from UWV, the Dutch Employee Insurance Agency.
- **Two-sided support** - This is probably the central methodological characteristic. AutiTalent supports both employee and employer. This is different from a model where the autistic person receives a job coach but the employer has no specialised support. Teaching autistic youngsters to ask for clarification is useful. But teaching managers to give clearer instructions is useful as well. The sustainable solution often lies in the middle.
- **Problems should be addressed early** - The relationship manager does not wait for a formal employment crisis. The philosophy is to identify a small difficulty when it is still small. AutiTalent's own staff describe situations where autistic employees may keep problems to themselves for too long, making it useful to have a trusted intermediary who can intervene before the situation becomes overwhelming. This preventive principle can reduce: misunderstanding, overloading, sickness absence, conflict, and premature job termination.
- **Adaptations are individual, not formulaic** - Do not create an adjustment according to an autism checklist. Create it together with the person and then verify whether it actually works.
- **Normal professional expectations remain** - AutiTalent does not suggest that autistic employees should be protected from feedback or professional standards. This is an important inclusion principle. Respect does not mean lowering all expectations. It means giving a person a fair possibility to understand the expectations and fulfil them.

5. Results and Impact

The most current organisational information states that more than 750 autistic employees have been helped into temporary or permanent employment, with hundreds of employers involved. The organisation also maintains a national candidate pool exceeding 3,500 registered jobseekers.

One especially strong operational result is conversion from detachment into direct employment. AutiTalent currently reports that 9 out of 10 placements result in a permanent appointment by the client after approximately one year. It attributes this outcome to careful matching, continuous support and early resolution of difficulties.

AutiTalent's impact is not limited to individual employees. Employers gain practical experience of autism, neurodiversity, reasonable adjustments, inclusive recruitment, clear communication, job carving, and strengths-based management. For some organisations, the first placement can change attitudes within the whole team.

6. Success Factors

Several factors explain the effectiveness and longevity of the AutiTalent model.

- **Almost twenty years of specialisation** - AutiTalent has worked specifically with autism and employment since 2007. This accumulated practical knowledge matters. The organisation is therefore not applying a theoretical autism checklist to every new placement. It has considerable practical experience of what can work and, equally important, what sometimes does not.
- **Large candidate pool** - More than 3,500 registered jobseekers make it possible to search for a genuine match rather than simply place the only available candidate into the only available vacancy. This is especially important for a strengths-based approach. Real matching requires choice.
- **Real paid employment** - The model is based on contracts and normal employment conditions rather than indefinite unpaid work experience. This gives participants professional status and gives employers a reason to evaluate the employee according to the contribution made to the organisation.
- **Detachment reduces the employer's first-step risk** - For a company with limited autism experience, the detachment model creates a relatively accessible first step. AutiTalent remains the formal employer, the specialist contact, the organisation supporting difficulties, and the bridge with additional job coaching. This can make the first inclusive recruitment decision less intimidating.
- **Permanent employment remains the preferred outcome** - The detachment is not intended to create permanent separation between autistic employees and mainstream employers. The fact

that AutiTalent reports nine out of ten placements progressing into permanent appointments demonstrates that the model can function as a bridge toward ordinary direct employment.

- **One contact person understands both sides** - The relationship-manager function is a particularly strong success factor. The employee does not have to resolve every workplace misunderstanding alone. The manager does not have to interpret autism without specialist support. And the intermediary does not represent only one side. This makes early problem-solving much more possible.
- **Adjustments are usually practical** - Meaningful changes can sometimes be very small: clearer deadlines, a fixed workplace, less ambiguous communication, appropriate onboarding, noise reduction, and structured tasks. This can change employers' assumptions that autism inclusion is always complicated or expensive.
- **Employer needs are taken seriously** - AutiTalent does not approach employers only with a social mission. It looks for professional value. This is one of the reasons why the original organisation grew from digitalisation work into cooperation with police, tax authorities, defence, energy companies and other mainstream organisations.
- **Employee development is not forgotten** - Detached employees can access additional education and career development, and AutiTalent personnel meetings also allow voluntary contact with other autistic colleagues.

7. Challenges and Lessons Learned

Despite its strong results, AutiTalent also illustrates several limitations and important lessons.

- **It does not serve the whole autism spectrum** - This point should be stated clearly. The current model generally requires a jobseeker to be able to work at least around 18 hours weekly, travel to work and function within mainstream office-based employment with appropriate support. This excludes some autistic people with substantial intellectual disabilities, high daily support needs, very limited working capacity, inability to travel without intensive support, and need for highly structured daily workplace coaching.
- **Sectoral scope is deliberately limited** - Current AutiTalent vacancies mainly concern office environments, sometimes with technical, logistics or facility components. The organisation explicitly states that it does not generally provide placements in healthcare, education, production, hospitality or retail. This creates professional expertise but also limits applicability for young autistic people whose interests lie elsewhere.
- **It is not a career-orientation service** - AutiTalent does not normally provide comprehensive orientation for every registered jobseeker before a vacancy exists. Its team does not have capacity to meet everyone within a database exceeding 3,500 people.

- **Geography still matters** - Although AutiTalent works nationally, its opportunities are not distributed equally. The organisation reports that vacancies are more concentrated around the Randstad and the corridor toward Arnhem and Zwolle, while opportunities in the northernmost and southernmost regions occur less frequently. This shows that even a national specialised agency cannot create jobs where there is insufficient employer demand.
- **A strengths narrative can also become stereotypical** - Accuracy and analytical thinking appear frequently in AutiTalent employment examples. These are real strengths for many participants. However, not every autistic person is exceptionally accurate, analytical or interested in detailed work. For practitioners, therefore, "autistic talent" should not become a new expectation that autistic workers must be somehow extraordinary. An employee should be allowed to be simply competent enough for the job, like any other worker.
- **Job retention requires continued attention** - A recent study of autistic adults in the Netherlands found that people in paid employment reported, among other facilitators, more supportive workplaces and supervisors and better coaching in finding and keeping employment. Finding the job is only half of the problem. Keeping a suitable job requires self-awareness, appropriate management, workplace fit, communication, and support during changes.

8. Transferability, Replication and Practical Tips

- Separate career preparation from recruitment and matching – Allow youth organisations to focus on career readiness while specialised actors manage employer engagement, vacancies, matching and placement.
- Use holistic candidate profiles – Match candidates based not only on qualifications and experience, but also on strengths, preferred tasks, working conditions, communication style and support needs.
- Match candidates to real job requirements – Engage employers to identify actual tasks, working conditions and expectations rather than relying solely on formal job descriptions.
- Apply job carving where appropriate – Reorganise existing productive tasks into coherent roles that respond to genuine organisational needs.
- Prepare both sides of the recruitment process – Support candidates with interview preparation and employers with clear, inclusive recruitment practices and reasonable adjustments.
- Provide coordinated, individualised support – Assign a clear contact person and distinguish, where useful, between job coaching and employment mediation.
- Adapt workplace support to the individual – Ask employees what enables them to work effectively and regularly review adjustments rather than applying standard solutions.

- Promote autonomy and clear communication – Use concrete expectations and instructions while ensuring support does not undermine the employee's competence, responsibilities or independence.
- Focus on retention and progression – Continue support after placement and monitor employment at 3, 6 and 12 months, including job fit, satisfaction, sustainability and progression.
- Adopt flexible pathways and measure outcomes – Recognise that different levels of support are needed and evaluate success through sustainable employment, including transition to permanent contracts and direct employment.

13

COLLECTION OF POSITIVE PRACTICES

Ambitious about Autism

Paid work experience, employer preparation and supported transition into employment for autistic young people

Country:
United Kingdom

Level:
national

Source

Ambitious about Autism Official Website: https://www.ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk/

1. Background and Short Description

Ambitious about Autism is a UK national charity working with autistic children and young people. Within its wider activities in education, participation, advocacy and transition to adulthood, the organisation has developed an important employment strand which includes the Employ Autism programme and a network of Supported Internships. Although these two interventions have some differences in eligibility and delivery, they are strongly connected by the same basic principle: autistic young people should not be prepared endlessly for an employment opportunity which may never arrive. They need access to real workplaces, real professional tasks, employers who have been prepared for inclusion, and individual support before, during and after the work experience.

A young autistic person can leave school, college or university with qualifications and very good technical competences but without previous employment history. The usual labour-market paradox then appears: employers ask for experience, while the young person cannot obtain experience because nobody gives the first opportunity.

Employ Autism addresses this gap mainly through paid experiences of work for autistic young adults, generally aged 18–25. Participants can access paid placements, employability activities,

industry-insight opportunities, employment coaching and resources. At the same time, Ambitious about Autism works directly with employers so that recruitment and employment processes are made more accessible.

Alongside Employ Autism, Ambitious about Autism has been delivering Supported Internships since 2019. These are one-year study programmes for young people aged 16–25 who have an Education, Health and Care Plan and want to progress towards paid employment with additional support. Interns spend most of the programme inside a host workplace, combine real employment roles with classroom learning and receive specialist job coaching.

2. Objectives

The general objective of the Ambitious about Autism employment model is to increase autistic young people's access to meaningful and sustainable employment by simultaneously developing their employability and reducing barriers created by recruitment systems and workplaces.

More specifically, its objectives are:

- To give autistic young people access to genuine work experience before they are expected to compete independently in the labour market.
- To provide paid work experiences through Employ Autism, recognising that autistic young people should contribute as workers and not only as unpaid beneficiaries.
- To enable participants to develop professional skills, confidence and understanding of workplace routines.
- To improve CV preparation, applications and interview competences.
- To help young people identify their strengths, career interests and preferred working conditions.
- To support participants in understanding and requesting reasonable workplace adjustments.
- To develop independence and practical adulthood competences.
- To provide specialist job coaching where greater levels of employment support are needed.
- To support young people during recruitment, not only before the application begins.
- To prepare employers and colleagues through autism training.
- To review and adapt recruitment practices which unintentionally disadvantage autistic candidates.
- To help employers understand reasonable adjustments and individual communication needs.
- To support employers throughout the placement when uncertainties or difficulties appear.
- To produce evidence and practical resources that other employers and employment professionals can use.

3. Description of the Practice

The Ambitious about Autism model can be understood through two complementary pathways:

A. Employ Autism – paid work experience and supported employment opportunities

Employ Autism mainly serves autistic young adults, with the majority of opportunities aimed at people aged 18–25. The programme currently offers paid work experiences together with employability support, education and training activities, insight events and employment coaching. A placement begins before the young person actually enters the workplace.

Ambitious about Autism identifies organisations willing to provide paid opportunities and works with them to establish suitable placements. The employer is not expected simply to advertise an existing vacancy through the programme, on the contrary, they receive advice about autism and neurodiversity, inclusive recruitment, accessible interview practices, workplace adjustments, supporting an autistic intern, and retention and workplace inclusion.

Employ Autism is deliberately cross-sectoral and offers internships in public-sector departments, financial services, IT, recruitment and reinsurance, while the programme has cooperated over time with employers such as the Civil Service, Deutsche Bank, SAP UK, Santander and other public and private organisations. This diversity is important. Autism employment initiatives are sometimes strongly associated with software testing or IT. Employ Autism demonstrates that autistic people may have ambitions and competences across all professional sectors, and Ambitious about Autism explicitly tells employers that roles should be matched with individual interests and skill sets rather than with stereotypes about autism. Young people receive support during the entire application process. The young person can therefore ask questions about the vacancy, receive support in understanding the application and prepare for the real interview he/she is going to attend.

A very relevant characteristic is that Employ Autism expects employers to pay interns for their work. This is not only financial. Payment changes the meaning of the activity. The young person is not visiting the company as a beneficiary who is being allowed to practise. He/she becomes a worker expected to contribute to the team.

Support continues also after recruitment. Ambitious about Autism staff remain available for regular check-ins, assistance with workplace adjustments and difficulties encountered during the placement. Employers also receive support throughout implementation. Post-placement support is also provided. After an internship, participants can review the experience with Ambitious about Autism staff and access career guidance. This stage matters because even an excellent internship does not automatically become employment.

B. Supported Internships – intensive transition for young people requiring more support

These programmes are for young people aged approximately 16–25 who have an Education, Health and Care Plan and want to progress toward paid employment. They run for one academic year,

normally from September. Participants spend five days each week at the host workplace. Each programme combines up to three workplace rotations, classroom learning linked directly with employment, daily specialist job coaching, regular progress feedback, and individual employment goals. Participants may experience as many as three different workplace roles. This is useful because the first job somebody imagines is not always the one which best fits. The programme gives young people room to discover this through experience rather than prediction.

The job coach is a central professional figure. Current job descriptions from Ambitious about Autism show that job coaches provide individualised on-site training and work closely with interns, host-business staff, parents and carers to support progression toward sustained employment. When the one-year programme finishes, every intern can receive up to nine months of additional job-coach support.

4. Methodology and Approach

The methodology can be described as strengths-based, real-work oriented, individualised and explicitly two-sided, because support is provided both to autistic youngsters and employers.

- **Real employment rather than simulated employability** - Probably the most important methodological principle is that employability is learned inside work. Participants deal with genuine deadlines, colleagues, instructions, travel, breaks, feedback and workplace expectations. This has educational value that cannot be reproduced completely in a workshop room. The learning becomes meaningful because there is a reason to apply it.
- **Person–job matching** - The programme works from individual strengths and interests instead of an assumed “autistic employment profile”. This is clearly visible in the diversity of sectors and professional tasks. One young person may work in finance. Another in government policy or in pharmacy distribution.
- **Preparing both sides** - Another central methodological principle is that the employer is part of the intervention. Employers receive autism training before placements and practical guidance concerning recruitment and workplace adjustments. Current programme partners report high levels of learning: 100% reported increased understanding of autism, 94% confidence in working alongside autistic colleagues, and 88% feeling better equipped to support an autistic person in the workplace.
- **Reasonable adjustments as normal work management** - Research and programme evaluation identified a range of frequently useful adjustments, including changes in working hours, communication, level of support, logistics, the physical environment, equipment, role structure, social obligations and working location. Most of these are not expensive.
- **Workplace passports and individual communication** - The workplace profile/passport is another simple but powerful methodology. The manager does not have to become an autism specialist.

- **Gradual development of independence** - Both Employ Autism and Supported Internships provide support, but the objective is not dependence. Young people are expected to develop their own confidence, decision-making, workplace skills and autonomy.
- **Co-production and autistic voice** - Employ Autism itself emerged from campaigning by autistic young people and was developed with autistic youth representatives and experts by experience. The organisation also makes participants' own internship experiences available to future candidates through blogs and its resource hub. This contributes to a more human model. Young people considering employment do not only receive instructions from professionals. They can see how other autistic people experienced the same transition.

5. Results and Impact

The results of these two programs that are worth mentioning are the following:

- around 1,200 autistic young people had received tailored career support;
- around 500 autistic young people had accessed paid work experience;
- more than 500 careers and employability professionals had received autism training;
- 83% of autistic interns had been offered a contract extension or permanent role.

Major findings from the independent evaluation done by the London's Centre for Research in Autism and Education with 19 autistic interns, 22 employers and 10 parents are:

- participants generally described the internship as a highly valuable experience.
- the programme helped remove autism-specific barriers to employment.
- there were also expectations which were not fully met, providing concrete lessons for improvement.
- Interns reported increased confidence, while parents also observed greater independence.
- Employers described improved mutual understanding and recognised that some barriers experienced by autistic people were actually produced by organisational systems rather than the individual's capability.
- A successful internship does not only change the employee. It can make the company see itself differently.

A subsequent longitudinal academic study followed 27 autistic adults without a learning disability, with an average age of 23.3, across internships in seven organisations. Participants were assessed before the internship, six months afterwards and again 12–24 months after the internship. The results were substantial. The overall employment rate among participants increased from 25.93% before the internship to 55.56% at the 12–24 month follow-up. Income and hours worked also increased. The researchers additionally found improvement in daily-living skills.

6. Success Factors

Several elements explain why the practice has generated strong results:

- **Paid experience rather than unpaid exposure** - Employ Autism expects employers to pay the intern. This reinforces dignity and the understanding that the participant is generating economic value. It also reduces the danger that autistic young people become permanently placed into a sequence of unpaid “opportunities” without progressing toward employment.
- **Employer preparation happens before the young person arrives** - The employer receives training in advance. This means that the first day is not also the first moment in which a manager begins thinking about autism. Colleagues can prepare. Recruitment can be adjusted. Possible accommodations can be discussed. Expectations can become clearer.
- **Individual support continues through the whole pathway** - Support is available before application, during recruitment, during placement, and after placement. This continuity prevents young people from repeatedly having to explain their situation to different professionals.
- **Strong employer partnerships** - The programme has worked with public institutions, international companies, professional firms, hospitals and employers from numerous sectors. These are not only places where interns are sent. Employers are treated as programme partners. This contributes to wider organisational learning and creates opportunities for permanent recruitment.
- **Real responsibility** - Interns perform actual tasks. The participant therefore has an opportunity to discover that his/her work is really needed and that he/she did not get the placement just because somebody feels sorry for them.
- **Evidence-based improvement** - The organisation invested in external research rather than relying only on positive testimonials. Immediate qualitative experiences were studied, followed by long-term quantitative outcomes up to two years after internships. The research findings were then used to further develop Employ Autism.

7. Challenges and Lessons Learned

Despite the strong results, the research also identifies difficulties which make this practice especially useful as a learning example:

- **Expectations must be clarified before the internship** - The qualitative evaluation found that interns, employers and parents all reported some expectations that were not met. This shows that even a carefully supported placement needs very clear preparation. A young person should not finish an internship disappointed because he/she believed a permanent job was guaranteed when the employer never made such commitment.
- **There is no universal autism adjustment** - The programme's employer toolkit explicitly stresses that workplace adjustments must be individualised for each autistic young person.

- **Employment success does not automatically mean better mental health** - Employment can provide income, routine, purpose, independence and professional identity. But an unsuitable or exhausting workplace can also increase stress. Programmes should therefore monitor not only if the person got a job, but also if the job is sustainable, does the work-person fit function, are adjustments appropriate and if the person manages to cope with the workload.
- **Support after placement matters** - A contract extension can look like the final success indicator, but the transition does not finish there. The Supported Internship model's provision of up to nine months of follow-on job-coach support is therefore particularly significant.
- **Opportunities must remain diverse** - Autism-employment initiatives have sometimes concentrated on technology because certain autistic strengths can be useful there. Employ Autism deliberately demonstrates opportunities in public administration, law, insurance, healthcare, finance, hospitality, recruitment and other fields.

8. Transferability, Replication and Practical Tips

The complete UK model depends partly on the British education and employment system and could not be copied identically in another country. However, many elements are highly transferable:

- **Create employer partnerships before recruiting young people** - First identify companies that genuinely want to cooperate and discuss with them about potential sectors and roles, required competences, available working hours, possible mentors, recruitment practices, and workplace environment.
- **Require real work** - An internship should contain tasks the organisation actually needs. Avoid creating artificial activities only for the autistic intern. This creates professional identity and gives the employer evidence of the participant's contribution.
- **Pay work experience whenever possible** - There is a risk that young people with disabilities spend years moving between unpaid projects, occupational activities and internships. A paid placement communicates something different: your contribution has economic value!
- **Train the employer before placement** - A short preparatory programme can include autism and neurodiversity, avoiding stereotypes, accessible interviews, reasonable accommodation, direct communication, sensory considerations, feedback, workplace mentoring, and disclosure and confidentiality.
- **Prepare an individual workplace profile** - Together with the young person, create one concise document covering strengths, preferred was to receive instructions, what is needed for better concentration, preferred communication, needed adjustments, and

which personal data will be shared with colleagues. This document should be practical, not diagnostic.

- **Adapt interviews according to the actual job** - If spontaneous speaking is not a major competence required for the job, do not make it the principal selection criterion. Possible adaptations include questions provided in advance, precise rather than abstract questions, additional processing time, practical work tasks, clear information about who will attend, and clear explanation of interview structure.
- **Use a job coach or identified mentor** - For participants requiring intensive support, one professional can provide task analysis, workplace training, communication support, employer liaison, gradual reduction of assistance, and follow-up. For participants with lower support needs, an internal workplace buddy supported by an external employment coach may be sufficient.
- **Offer more than one work experience where possible** - The Supported Internship rotation system is highly transferable. Instead of asking a young person to choose a profession before ever working, allow him/her to experience two or three roles.
- **Provide follow-up** - A programme should not terminate on the last internship day. Schedule follow-up 1, 3 and 6 months after the internship ended. Check whether the person if he/she obtained another job, continued education, needs another placement, needs help communicating the experience in applications, and requires support in an existing role.
- **Let autistic young people participate in programme design** - Employ Autism itself emerged from autistic youth campaigning and co-development. Organisations adapting the model should therefore include autistic youngsters not only in evaluation but already in planning.
- **Do not prepare only the autistic person but the employer as well** - Too often, employability programmes prepare only the autistic youngsters. But what about the employers? This creates a much fairer transition. It creates the bridge that allows autistic youngsters to participate in ordinary companies and ordinary workplaces, with additional support where this is necessary. Do not ask first whether an autistic young person is ready for the workplace. Ask also whether the workplace is ready to recognise and support the autistic young person. When both sides are prepared, a first internship can stop being only an educational experience and become a genuine entrance into professional adult life.

14

COLLECTION OF POSITIVE PRACTICES

SUPPORT Project

Supported employment for reducing long-term unemployment among persons with disabilities

Countries:
International consortium from Austria, Belgium, Croatia, France, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Romania and Spain

Level:
international

Sources

EASPD SUPPORT Project
https://easpd.eu/project-detail/support/

LinkedIn Project Page
https://www.linkedin.com/company/support-project-europe/

1. Background and Short Description

The **SUPPORT Project** is a European initiative funded by the **European Social Fund Plus (ESF+)** and coordinated by the **European Association of Service Providers for Persons with Disabilities (EASPD)**. The project runs over a period of 36 months, from July 2025 to June 2028. It was developed in response to a challenge that continues to affect many people with disabilities across Europe, including autistic people: the difficulty of accessing and maintaining meaningful employment in the open labour market.

Although important progress has been made in the field of disability rights and inclusion, employment rates among people with disabilities remain significantly lower than those of the general population. Many individuals, including autistic adults, experience long periods of unemployment, limited access to personalised employment services, and difficulties finding workplaces prepared to recognise and support their potential. These barriers often result in reduced economic independence, lower social participation, and fewer opportunities for personal development.

The SUPPORT project was designed to address these challenges by promoting and disseminating the Supported Employment methodology, an approach that has demonstrated its effectiveness in helping people with disabilities, including autistic people, obtain and retain paid employment through personalised and ongoing support. Rather than focusing on limitations, Supported Employment starts from the aspirations, interests, and strengths of each individual and seeks to identify employment opportunities that match their abilities, preferences, and support needs.

The project brings together organisations, disability service providers, employment experts, and labour market stakeholders from different European countries. Through this transnational cooperation, partners work together to adapt and strengthen Supported Employment practices in their respective contexts while also contributing to the development of common tools, resources, and training opportunities.

The project primarily targets adults with disabilities, including autistic adults, who have experienced long-term unemployment and require personalised support to enter or re-enter the labour market. At the same time, it engages employment services, support organisations, and employers, recognising that successful labour market inclusion depends on the active cooperation of all relevant actors.

2. Objectives

The overall objective of the project is to improve access to sustainable and quality employment for people with disabilities, including autistic people, by strengthening the implementation of Supported Employment across Europe. More specifically, the project seeks to increase the employability of people with disabilities and autistic people and to support their participation in the labour market through personalised pathways tailored to individual needs, aspirations, and strengths. At the same time, it aims to strengthen the skills and capacities of employment professionals and service providers, enabling them to deliver more effective support and guidance.

Another important objective is to support employers in developing more inclusive recruitment and workplace practices. The project therefore works not only with job seekers but also with companies, promoting awareness, understanding, and practical strategies that facilitate the creation of accessible and inclusive working environments. This aspect is particularly relevant for autistic people, who may benefit from workplace adaptations, clear communication processes, and supportive organisational cultures.

Through training activities, methodological development, and international cooperation, SUPPORT also aims to produce practical tools and guidance that can contribute to the wider dissemination and sustainability of Supported Employment approaches across different European contexts.

3. Description of the Practice

The SUPPORT project is centred on the implementation and promotion of the Supported Employment model, an approach based on the principle that people with disabilities, including autistic people, should have the opportunity to access ordinary jobs within the open labour market while receiving the support they need before, during, and after employment. The pathway begins through collaboration between the individual, employment services, social and healthcare professionals, and, where appropriate, family members. In many cases, the process starts when a person is registered with the **Targeted Employment Placement Service** and is identified by local services as potentially benefiting from a Supported Employment pathway. Once involved in the programme, participants are not immediately directed towards available job vacancies. Instead, considerable attention is devoted to understanding who they are, what they would like to achieve, and what type of support may be necessary to facilitate successful labour market participation. This initial phase allows employment professionals to build a detailed profile of each participant and to develop an individualised employment plan that reflects personal aspirations, skills, and support requirements. This process is particularly important for autistic participants and for people with complex support needs, as it allows employment goals, support strategies, communication methods, and workplace expectations to be tailored to individual profiles rather than based on standardised assumptions.

A key feature of the process is the role of the **job coach**, who becomes the main reference point throughout the participant's journey. The job coach works closely with the individual, employment services, employers, and other stakeholders, ensuring continuity of support and helping to mediate between personal needs and workplace expectations. The pathway gradually progresses from assessment and planning to the exploration of employment opportunities. Particular attention is dedicated to identifying workplaces that are not only available but also willing to engage in inclusive practices. Employers are therefore involved from an early stage and are supported in understanding how reasonable accommodations, flexible approaches, and tailored solutions can contribute to successful employment outcomes for people with disabilities, including autistic employees. Once a suitable opportunity has been identified, participants receive support throughout recruitment procedures, interviews, on-boarding activities, and the initial stages of employment. However, the support does not end when a job placement is achieved. Continuous follow-up and workplace support remain essential components of the methodology, helping to address emerging challenges, strengthen job retention, and promote long-term career development.

The project complements these individual pathways through a wide range of additional activities, including the development of national adaptation guidelines, training programmes for professionals, employer engagement initiatives, and actions aimed at promoting inclusive employment practices at both local and European levels. The practice is therefore implemented within community-based services and real workplace environments, ensuring that support is delivered directly within ordinary employment settings rather than in segregated or simulated contexts.

4. Methodology and Approach

The SUPPORT project adopts a strongly **person-centred and strengths-based approach**. Rather than focusing on disability-related limitations, the methodology places individual preferences, ambitions, abilities, and potential at the centre of the intervention. This approach is particularly relevant for autistic people, as it recognises that communication styles, sensory experiences, workplace preferences, and support needs can vary significantly from one individual to another. The methodology therefore avoids one-size-fits-all solutions and instead promotes personalised pathways that respect individual differences.

- Participants are encouraged to play an active role in defining their employment goals and in making decisions about their professional future. Employment professionals act as facilitators, helping individuals identify opportunities and overcome barriers while respecting personal choices and aspirations.
- A central element of the methodology is the provision of personalised support. This can include individual coaching, career guidance, skills-development activities, workplace mediation, and ongoing follow-up after recruitment. The intensity and duration of support vary according to individual circumstances, ensuring flexibility and responsiveness to changing needs.
- Equally important is the active involvement of employers. The project promotes a collaborative approach in which companies are considered partners in the inclusion process rather than passive recipients of candidates. Through awareness-raising, practical guidance, and continuous dialogue, employers are supported in creating working environments where diversity can be recognised as a resource.
- The methodology also places considerable emphasis on cooperation among different services and professionals. Employment inclusion is understood as a shared responsibility that requires coordination between employment services, social services, healthcare providers, employers, disability organisations, and local communities.

5. Results and Impact

As the project was launched in 2025 and is currently ongoing, final outcomes' data are not yet available. Nevertheless, the expected impact of the initiative is clearly defined and operates at multiple levels.

- For participants, including autistic people and other persons with disabilities, the project is expected to increase confidence, employability, self-determination, and access to meaningful employment opportunities. Through personalised support and practical workplace experiences, participants are anticipated to develop greater autonomy, improved labour market participation, and stronger professional identities.
- At an organisational level, the project seeks to strengthen the capacity of employment service providers and disability organisations to deliver Supported Employment interventions. Training activities and methodological resources are expected to improve professional competencies and contribute to more effective service delivery.
- The project also aims to generate positive changes within workplaces. By supporting employers in understanding disability inclusion, neurodiversity, and inclusive employment practices, SUPPORT intends to contribute to more accessible working environments and improved recruitment and retention outcomes for people with disabilities, including autistic workers.
- Beyond individual and organisational benefits, the project is expected to strengthen cooperation among stakeholders operating in the fields of employment, disability, autism, and social inclusion. This collaborative dimension represents an important foundation for the long-term sustainability of Supported Employment methodologies across Europe.

As the implementation phase is still underway, formal evaluation findings and impact data are not yet publicly available.

6. Success Factors

Several elements contribute to the potential effectiveness of this practice.

- One of the most significant strengths lies in the **use of an internationally recognised Supported Employment methodology** that has already demonstrated positive outcomes in different contexts. The project combines this evidence-based approach with sufficient flexibility to allow adaptation to national and local realities.
- Another crucial factor is **the emphasis placed on personalised support**. Participants are not expected to follow standardised pathways; instead, interventions are tailored according to individual aspirations, skills, and support needs. This flexibility is particularly valuable when working with autistic job seekers, whose experiences, strengths, and workplace requirements can differ considerably from one person to another.

- **The active role of job coaches** represents a further success factor. Their ability to accompany participants throughout the employment journey, while simultaneously engaging employers and coordinating services, helps create continuity and stability within the process.
- Finally, **the strong partnership involving organisations from different countries** promotes knowledge exchange, innovation, and the development of solutions that can be transferred and adapted across different labour market contexts.

7. Challenges and Lessons Learned

Like many employment inclusion initiatives, the SUPPORT project faces several challenges:

- One of the most significant difficulties concerns the persistence of misconceptions and stereotypes regarding disability and neurodiversity within the labour market. Although awareness has increased in recent years, many employers still lack experience and confidence in recruiting and supporting employees with disabilities, including autistic employees.
- Another challenge concerns the diversity of legal, institutional, and labour market frameworks across European countries. Adapting a common methodology to different national contexts requires flexibility, continuous learning, and strong cooperation among partners.
- The project also highlights the importance of professional expertise. Effective Supported Employment cannot be delivered without adequately trained practitioners capable of combining employment knowledge, interpersonal skills, disability awareness, and an understanding of the diverse support needs that may be experienced by autistic people and other individuals requiring personalised support.
- A key lesson emerging from the Supported Employment experience is that successful inclusion depends on the active participation of multiple stakeholders. Employment outcomes are significantly improved when employers are engaged early, support measures are personalised, and long-term follow-up remains available beyond the initial placement phase.
- The methodology further reinforces the idea that sustainable employment is rarely achieved through standardised interventions. Instead, meaningful outcomes are more likely when support is tailored to each individual's unique circumstances, aspirations, strengths, and support requirements.

8. Transferability, Replication and Practical Tips

> The SUPPORT model demonstrates strong potential for transferability and replication across different contexts. One of its main strengths lies in its flexibility, as the core principles of Supported Employment can be adapted to different labour markets, service systems, and

organisational settings. This adaptability makes the model particularly relevant for initiatives aimed at improving employment opportunities for people with disabilities, including autistic people, while remaining responsive to the diversity of needs that characterise different groups and local contexts. However, successful replication requires certain conditions. Organisations need access to trained professionals capable of performing the role of job coach or employment specialist. Equally important is the development of strong relationships with employers and other labour market actors, as employment inclusion cannot be achieved by support services alone.

Experience also suggests that organisations should invest in continuous training and supervision for professionals involved in employment support. Maintaining high-quality practice requires ongoing opportunities for learning, reflection, and professional development, particularly in areas such as autism inclusion, workplace accessibility, and person-centred planning.

Another important recommendation is to engage employers from the earliest stages of the process. Building trust and understanding before vacancies arise often creates more sustainable opportunities for future placements.

Organisations should avoid treating employment placement as the end point of intervention. Long-term support, regular monitoring, and workplace mediation remain essential components of successful and sustainable employment outcomes. The experience of Supported Employment demonstrates that effective labour market inclusion is not achieved through a single intervention but through a continuous process of collaboration, adaptation, and personalised support that evolves alongside both the individual and the workplace.

15

COLLECTION OF POSITIVE PRACTICES

Autism: Spectrum of Employment Skills – ASES

Preparing SMEs to recruit, support and develop employees with autism

Countries:
International consortium from Portugal, Denmark, Latvia, Greece, Cyprus, the Netherlands and North Macedonia

Level:
international

Source

ASES Official Project Website: www.asesproject.eu

1. Background and Short Description

Autism: Spectrum of Employment Skills (ASES) was a European cooperation project focused on one of the less addressed sides of employment inclusion of autistic people: the preparedness of employers themselves. The project was implemented between November 2021 and October/November 2023 within Erasmus+ Cooperation Partnerships in Vocational Education and Training. The partnership brought together organisations from Portugal, Denmark, Latvia, Greece, Cyprus, the Netherlands and North Macedonia. The Business Confederation of North Macedonia represented the North Macedonian business sector in the partnership.

ASES started from the observation that the very low employment participation of autistic people cannot be explained only through a lack of competences among jobseekers. The project identified

several barriers situated directly in recruitment and employment systems: insufficient access to appropriate vocational training, difficulties caused by conventional communication expectations, absence of reasonable accommodation and continuing prejudices about autism. The central idea was therefore that improving employability of autistic people requires changing both sides of the employment relationship.

ASES intentionally focused its learning resources on the employer or manager. The project developed tools that help SME owners, managers and HR staff understand how recruitment, onboarding, workplace communication, performance management and career development can become more accessible to autistic employees.

The project targeted small and medium-sized enterprises and their management, people with autism, business and employment stakeholders, organisations working with persons with disabilities, and economic authorities at local, regional, national and European level. Within ASES, this meant that autism expertise was not discussed only among disability organisations. The consortium intentionally combined organisations with autism expertise, such as the Portuguese Federation of Autism Associations, the Latvian Autism Association and Specialisterne, with organisations bringing business, VET and employer perspectives, including BCM.

2. Objectives

The overall purpose of ASES was to contribute to increased employment and better workplace inclusion of autistic people by developing the capacities of SMEs to recruit, support, mentor and professionally develop autistic employees.

The project defined a broad set of objectives, including:

- to provide SME management with recruitment and career-development methodology suitable for staff with autism;
- to create a distance-learning solution for SME managers;
- to increase understanding of the qualities and competences autistic employees can bring into companies;
- to support productivity of autistic employees through more appropriate working conditions;
- to increase recruitment and retention of employees with autism;
- to reduce the employment gap between persons with and without disabilities;
- to address exclusion of autistic people in workplaces;
- to strengthen the role of VET in career development of autistic employees;
- to contribute to economic participation by improving access of autistic people to employment.

ASES looked at the whole employment cycle, not only recruitment. The employer needs tools for interviewing, on-boarding, communication, workplace organisation, support, performance evaluation and further professional development.

3. Description of the Practice

ASES developed its intervention around three principal educational resources, each serving a somewhat different purpose:

- ***ASES Serious Game – "Autism Can Be a Company Asset"***

The Serious Game is probably the most innovative and recognisable component of the practice. Instead of only providing managers with a long manual, the project created an interactive digital game through which employers and managers can experience scenarios connected with recruitment and everyday employment of autistic people.

The game uses situations based on common barriers experienced by autistic people in the labour market. The player is placed into the role of a decision-maker and has to select responses to different situations, including recruitment, communication and teamwork. The learning process therefore happens through consequences and reflection rather than only by memorising theoretical information. One particularly interesting feature is that the game allows participants to look at employment situations from different perspectives. The Dutch game-development partner 8D Games explained that the scenarios were developed through research and expert input. Autism-focused partners contributed knowledge about lived experiences and barriers, while business partners, including the Business Confederation of Macedonia, brought the employer perspective.

- ***ASES VET Curriculum for SME Management***

The second major result was a structured VET curriculum designed specifically for SME managers and related professionals. Each module is accompanied by presentation material and a trainer guide. The course contains six learning modules:

  - Autism in SMEs and Social Policies
  - SME Management Soft Skills
  - Work Environment Management
  - Provision of Support to Staff with Autism
  - Code of Conduct – Colleagues, Management and Autistic Staff
  - Tools Supporting Autistic Staff throughout the Employment Cycle – Practical Guidelines.

- ***ASES e-Guide for Recruiting and Developing Staff with ASD***

The third resource is a practical e-Guide for employers and recruiters. It contains procedures, tools, guidelines, practical tips, examples of good practice, interview methods and guidance concerning professional development of autistic employees. The intention was to make it a quick-reference resource which an employer could consult during recruitment, management or professional development rather than only study once during training.

4. Methodology and Approach

The methodology of ASES can be described as employer-centred, strengths-based, practical, scenario-based and focused on the complete employment cycle.

- **Changing the environment rather than only changing the autistic person** is the central principle that difficulties at work should not automatically be interpreted as deficits of the autistic employee. ASES materials highlight that conventional workplaces can disadvantage autistic people through environmental and organisational characteristics and sometimes the answer can be a relatively small adjustment, such as a written task list, a clear deadline, advance information about a change, reduced background noise, a named colleague for questiona, and a more specific performance conversation. Such adjustments do not require creation of a completely separate workplace.
- **Strengths-based understanding of autism** - ASES also challenged the idea that employers should approach autism primarily from a deficit perspective. The project background emphasised the importance of building on individual strengths and recognising that autistic employees may bring valuable competences into workplaces. This does not mean promoting simplistic stereotypes such as “All autistic people are good at IT.” That would only replace one stereotype with another. A strengths-based approach means looking at the actual individual candidate and ask: What does this person do well? Which tasks correspond to his/her abilities? What environment supports these abilities? Which responsibilities could allow this person to contribute meaningfully?
- **Looking at recruitment from both sides -** ASES places strong attention on interviews and recruitment. Traditional recruitment often evaluates social performance in addition to, and sometimes more than, job competence. A candidate may be expected to make immediate eye contact, interpret abstract questions, speak spontaneously about himself/herself, understand implied meanings or answer broad questions such as “Tell us who you are”. An autistic candidate can have excellent competence for the actual job but perform weakly in this artificial social situation. ASES therefore trains managers to recognise that the interview method itself can create a barrier. This is one reason why the serious game lets managers experience the interview process and why the VET curriculum specifically includes conducting interviews with autistic candidates.

- **Practical simulation and gamification -** Gamification is used not simply to make the training "fun", but to enable practice. The game developer explains that managers can repeatedly experience social situations digitally without needing to stage them physically. Players receive small scenarios, make choices and receive direct feedback about consequences. This also allows them to identify areas where their own knowledge is weaker. This is particularly useful in employer education because awareness sessions can otherwise remain too abstract.
- **Continuous support and performance management -** ASES also addresses what happens after hiring. Its guidance on performance appraisal recommends using the probationary period to understand skills, competences and training needs; providing regular constructive feedback; applying coaching or mentoring where appropriate; and using continuing performance reviews throughout employment. When performance problems appear, managers are encouraged first to investigate what is happening. The ASES guidance specifically warns against automatically attributing poor performance to disability or personality. Instead, managers should clarify expectations, investigate causes and ask the employee what support could help.

5. Results and Impact

The most clearly documented results of ASES are the three completed educational resources:

- the Serious Game "Autism Can Be a Company Asset";
- the ASES VET Curriculum for SME Management;
- the ASES e-Guide for Recruiting and Developing Staff with ASD.

The VET Curriculum and e-Guide were made available in multiple European languages which considerably increases transferability of the materials. The Serious Game is publicly available and was developed specifically so that SMEs, which often do not have the resources for large corporate neurodiversity programmes, can still access practical autism-employment training. The project contrasts this reality with large companies that can afford specialised recruitment programmes and therefore deliberately designed a lower-barrier tool for smaller employers.

ASES also generated a body of freely accessible articles and practical guidance concerning supported employment, inclusive workplaces, checklists, performance appraisal, recruitment and experiences of autistic workers.

For North Macedonia, BCM's involvement was particularly strategic because it introduced autism and employment inclusion into a business-confederation environment. The ASES consortium describes BCM as an employers' association representing and supporting the business community and promoting responsible business practice. Its participation therefore creates a bridge between specialised autism knowledge and networks of companies.

6. Success Factors

- One of the strongest success factors is **the composition of the partnership**. The consortium brought together three types of knowledge that employment inclusion requires: autism expertise, business expertise and educational/digital learning expertise. Autism-focused organisations contributed understanding of lived experiences and support needs. Specialisterne brought extensive neurodiversity-employment experience. Business organisations such as BCM contributed understanding of SMEs and employer realities. 8D Games contributed expertise in educational game development. VET organisations contributed educational methodology. This avoided a common problem where employment guidance is developed entirely by disability professionals without asking whether an ordinary SME manager will realistically use it.
- A second success factor is **the specific focus on SMEs**. Large corporations may have HR departments, diversity specialists, occupational health services, internal training units and dedicated recruitment teams. A company with 20 employees may have none of this. Often the owner or one manager is responsible for recruitment, supervision and solving workplace difficulties. The ASES resources were deliberately designed so that this manager could access practical information without establishing an expensive corporate neurodiversity programme.
- Another success factor is **multiple learning formats**. Some managers will complete a training course. Some will try the game. Others will consult the e-Guide only when preparing an interview. ASES provides entry points for different learning preferences and amounts of available time. The use of realistic employment scenarios is also particularly strong. The Serious Game scenarios were informed by autism specialists, lived-experience knowledge and business partners.

7. Challenges and Lessons Learned

- The first lesson is that **educating autistic jobseekers alone cannot solve labour-market exclusion**. A young person may learn to communicate more clearly during interviews, but employers also need to examine whether their questions actually measure job competence. The responsibility for inclusion must therefore be shared.
- **Employer awareness has to become practical competence** - Many employers may already agree with inclusion as a principle. The problem appears when they need to answer concrete questions, such as “How should I adapt the interview?”, “What should I do about sensory sensitivity?” or “What is a reasonable accommodation?”.
- **SMEs need solutions proportional to their capacity** - An SME cannot necessarily reproduce a multinational company's neurodiversity recruitment programme. Replicable inclusion therefore needs low-cost interventions: better interview questions, clear written instructions, predictable on-boarding, visual or written checklists, one identified mentor, regular feedback, simple workplace adjustments. Several of these changes cost very little.

- **Inclusion is not the same as lowering professional expectations** - ASES performance-management guidance is useful because it does not suggest that autistic employees should not have work standards. It recommends clear expectations, regular review and constructive feedback. When performance is weak, managers should investigate the cause and provide appropriate support rather than ignoring the problem or attributing it immediately to autism. This is a more respectful approach. Inclusive employment means providing a fair opportunity to meet job requirements, not creating an environment in which nothing is expected from the employee.
- **Recruitment methods can unintentionally measure the wrong competence** - This is another important lesson. Suppose a company is hiring somebody for structured data processing. The candidate will spend 90% of the job: working independently, checking data, following written rules, identifying inconsistencies. Yet recruitment may depend on a 45-minute unstructured conversation requiring rapid social interaction. In that case, the company might accidentally select the best interview performer instead of the best person for the actual job. ASES encourages companies to reconsider this mismatch.
- **Workplace inclusion continues after recruitment** - The project gives considerable attention to retention and performance management because obtaining a contract is only one milestone. A difficulty appearing during the probationary period should not automatically become evidence that the placement failed.

8. Transferability, Replication and Practical Tips

ASES has very high transferability potential because the principal resources are already digital, multilingual and freely accessible:

- **Use employer training together with youth training** - If an organisation is preparing ten autistic young people for employment, it could at the same time recruit ten or fifteen local companies for a short employer programme. This would create a more balanced intervention.
- **Use scenarios instead of only presentations** - Employer workshops should include concrete situations. Scenario discussions often reveal hidden workplace assumptions much better than definitions of autism.
- **Review recruitment procedures** - Companies can conduct a simple audit of their recruitment practice.
- **Create predictable on-boarding** - A new autistic employee can benefit from a simple written introduction containing: work schedule, task sequence, names and roles of key colleagues, break times, whom to ask for help, communication channels, rules about

unexpected changes and first-week expectations. Such document can actually improve on-boarding for all employees.

- **Identify one workplace mentor** - The mentor does not need to become a therapist. He/she needs to be a reliable colleague who can clarify expectations, answer practical questions, provide consistent feedback, notice misunderstandings early and explain workplace routines. This is much more realistic for an SME than creating a complex support department.
- **Review the sensory environment** - Ask the employee rather than assuming. Possible adjustments may concern: noise, light, seating, headphones, interruption levels, breaks and meeting environments. Different autistic people will need different things.
- **Provide regular and concrete feedback** - Do not wait for a problem to become large.
- **Do not attribute every workplace difficulty to autism** - If an employee misses a deadline, investigate the actual reason. Maybe the deadline was never clearly stated. Maybe two supervisors gave conflicting priorities. Or perhaps the employee simply made a mistake. Autism should not become the automatic explanation for every difficulty.
- **Use the free resources instead of developing everything from zero** - An organisation does not need to develop a complete employer curriculum from scratch. The existing Serious Game, VET Curriculum, Trainer Guides, presentations and e-Guide can be used or adapted for employer-awareness and training initiatives.

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