

WP4 – NATIONAL REPORT: JOB SHADOWING

BELGIUM

Job Shadowing Opportunities for Individuals with Disabilities

Objective

The objective of this report is to assess the potential for implementing job shadowing opportunities for individuals with disabilities and long-term health conditions in Belgium, with a particular focus on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The report explores the current policy and legislative framework, labour market conditions, and existing inclusive employment practices that may support or hinder the adoption of job shadowing initiatives. It also examines the needs, challenges, and opportunities experienced by employers and potential participants, identifying key factors that influence the successful implementation of such schemes. Furthermore, the report aims to provide evidence-based insights and practical recommendations for promoting inclusive workplace learning, strengthening collaboration between relevant stakeholders, and enhancing access to meaningful employment pathways for people with disabilities and long-term health conditions.

National Context

Belgium has established a comprehensive legal framework to promote the employment of people with disabilities and long-term health conditions through anti-discrimination legislation and employment support measures. In particular, the federal **Anti-Discrimination Act of 10 May 2007** prohibits discrimination on the ground of disability and current or future state of health, and obliges employers to provide reasonable accommodation unless this would represent a disproportionate burden. In addition, Belgium ratified the **United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities** in 2009, and in 2021 the right of persons with disabilities to full inclusion in society was enshrined in Article 22ter of the Belgian Constitution (Unia, n.d.; European Commission, 2021).

Despite these legislative provisions, the implementation of inclusive employment policies remains uneven, and labour market participation among people with disabilities continues to be significantly lower than that of the general population. Only around 23% of people who are severely limited in their daily activities are in employment, and Belgium's disability employment gap of more than 33 percentage points is among the widest in the European Union, well above the EU average of around 24 percentage points (Statbel, 2019; European Disability Forum, 2025). In the federal public administration, a 3% employment target for persons with disabilities has been in place for many years but has never been reached (Unia, n.d.).

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which constitute the overwhelming majority of businesses in Belgium, often face challenges in implementing disability-inclusive employment practices. These challenges include limited awareness of reasonable accommodation measures, insufficient knowledge of available financial incentives, and concerns regarding workplace adaptations. The situation is further complicated by Belgium's institutional structure, in which employment and disability support policies are largely a regional competence: VDAB and GTB in Flanders, Forem and AViQ in Wallonia, and Actiris and the PHARE service in the Brussels-Capital Region each operate their own support schemes. Consequently, although many employers express positive attitudes towards inclusion, practical experience in recruiting, supporting, and retaining employees with disabilities remains limited (Unia, n.d.; AViQ, n.d.).

Nevertheless, there is growing recognition that workplace learning initiatives, such as job shadowing, can facilitate the labour market integration of people with disabilities and long-term health conditions. Belgium already has a strong tradition in this field: the annual DUOday initiative, which pairs jobseekers with disabilities with employees of participating companies for a day of job shadowing, has grown into a nationwide action supported by the public employment services in all three regions (DUOday Belgium, n.d.; GTB, n.d.).

Opportunities and Potential

Job shadowing represents a practical and low-risk approach for promoting the inclusion of people with disabilities and long-term health conditions in the Belgian labour market. As small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) account for more than 99,9% of businesses in Belgium, such initiatives can provide employers with the opportunity to gain first-hand experience of inclusive workplaces while becoming familiar with reasonable accommodation practices and the support available through regional employment and disability services (European Commission, 2021; Unia, n.d.).

For participants, job shadowing offers valuable exposure to real working environments, enabling them to observe workplace routines, understand job expectations, develop practical skills, and strengthen their confidence before entering employment. This type of workplace learning complements the existing support instruments available in Belgium, such as individueel maatwerk (individual customised work support) in Flanders, the integration and tutoring premiums provided by AViQ in Wallonia, and the employment support measures of the PHARE service in Brussels, and can facilitate smoother transitions into the open labour market (VDAB, 2023; AViQ, n.d.).

Experience from Belgium suggests that employers often lack practical knowledge about disability inclusion and have limited access to guidance on workplace adaptations and inclusive recruitment. The success of DUOday demonstrates that when job shadowing is offered in a structured, well-supported and time-limited format, employers are willing to participate in large numbers and frequently discover the talents of candidates they would not otherwise have considered (DUOday Belgium, n.d.; GTB, n.d.). Structured job shadowing programmes, accompanied by mentoring and practical guidance, could therefore help SMEs build confidence, reduce misconceptions, and encourage the adoption of more inclusive employment practices.

Overall, job shadowing has the potential to act as a bridge between employers and people with disabilities, promoting mutual understanding, increasing workplace readiness, and creating pathways towards sustainable and inclusive employment in Belgium (European Commission, 2021).

Challenges and Barriers

Despite the existing legislative framework, several barriers continue to hinder the effective inclusion of people with disabilities and long-term health conditions in the Belgian labour market. Employers, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), often have limited knowledge of disability-inclusive recruitment practices and are unfamiliar with the support measures and financial incentives available through the regional employment and disability agencies (Unia, n.d.; European Disability Forum, 2025).

Another significant challenge is the limited awareness of reasonable accommodation and workplace accessibility. Many employers report uncertainty about how to adapt workplaces or respond appropriately to the needs of employees with different types of disabilities, while concerns about the perceived costs and administrative burden of workplace adjustments remain common (Unia, n.d.).

The fragmentation of competences between the federal state, the regions, and the communities adds a further layer of complexity. Support schemes, recognition procedures, and financial incentives differ between Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels, which can make it difficult for employers - especially SMEs operating across regions - to identify and access the assistance to which they and their employees are entitled (AViQ, n.d.; VDAB, 2023).

Furthermore, both the European Commission (2021) and the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2024) emphasise that inclusive employment cannot rely solely on legislation. It requires continuous training for managers and staff, awareness-raising initiatives to challenge stereotypes, and access to expert advice and mentoring. Strengthening these support mechanisms would help Belgian SMEs build confidence in employing people with disabilities and create more inclusive workplace cultures.

Conclusion

Belgium has established an important legislative and institutional framework to promote the employment of people with disabilities and long-term health conditions. However, significant challenges remain in translating these legal provisions into inclusive workplace practices, particularly within small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Limited awareness of disability inclusion, insufficient knowledge of reasonable accommodations, the fragmentation of support schemes across regions, and one of the widest disability employment gaps in the European Union continue to affect labour market participation for people with disabilities (Statbel, 2019; European Disability Forum, 2025).

The findings of this report suggest that job shadowing has considerable potential as an accessible and practical tool for fostering workplace inclusion. By providing participants with direct exposure to real working environments and enabling employers to gain first-hand experience of inclusive practices, job shadowing can help reduce barriers, improve confidence, and encourage more inclusive recruitment. The nationwide success of DUOday shows that this approach is already well accepted in Belgium and could be extended from a single annual event towards more regular, structured placements within SMEs (DUOday Belgium, n.d.).

To maximise the impact of job shadowing initiatives, collaboration between employers, the regional public employment services (VDAB, Forem, Actiris), specialised support organisations such as GTB, AViQ, and the PHARE service, disability organisations, and vocational education and training providers will be essential. In addition, awareness-raising activities, employer training, and ongoing mentoring should accompany job shadowing programmes to ensure that they contribute to sustainable and meaningful employment opportunities.

Overall, job shadowing represents a promising pathway for strengthening disability inclusion in the Belgian labour market and supporting the transition of people with disabilities and long-term health conditions into decent and sustainable employment (European Commission, 2021).

Guidelines for SMEs on Implementing Job Shadowing

Purpose

These guidelines aim to support Belgian SMEs in planning and implementing job shadowing opportunities for individuals with disabilities and long-term health conditions in a practical, inclusive, and accessible manner. They are based on the principles of inclusive employment promoted by the European Commission and the International Labour Organization (European Commission, 2021; ILO, 2024).

1. Planning and Preparation

SMEs should define the objectives of the job shadowing activity, identify the expected learning outcomes, and appoint an employee who will act as a mentor throughout the placement. The duration should remain manageable, typically ranging from one to five working days, depending on the participant's needs and the workplace context.

2. Stakeholder Cooperation

Employers are encouraged to collaborate with the regional public employment services (VDAB in Flanders, Forem in Wallonia, Actiris in Brussels), specialised support organisations such as GTB, AViQ, and the PHARE service, disability organisations, and vocational education and training providers. These stakeholders can assist in participant selection, workplace preparation, needs assessment, and the provision of ongoing support.

3. Implementation of the Activity

Participants should receive an introduction to the organisation, including workplace rules, health and safety procedures, daily routines, and introductions to colleagues. The experience should primarily focus on observing work activities while providing opportunities to participate in simple, supervised tasks where appropriate.

4. Reasonable Accommodation

Before the placement begins, employers should identify any reasonable accommodations required by the participant. These may include accessible communication, adapted instructions, flexible scheduling, assistive technologies, or adjustments to the physical working environment. Employers should note that reasonable accommodation is a legal obligation in Belgium and that regional schemes can reimburse part of the costs of workplace adaptations (Unia, n.d.; AViQ, n.d.).

5. Awareness and Inclusion

Managers and employees should be informed about the objectives of the job shadowing activity and encouraged to create a welcoming and supportive environment. Disability awareness activities and open communication can contribute significantly to a positive experience for both participants and staff.

6. Monitoring and Evaluation

At the end of the placement, feedback should be collected from both the participant and the workplace mentor. The evaluation should examine learning outcomes, workplace experiences, challenges encountered, and recommendations for improving future job shadowing activities.

7. Follow-up Actions

Where appropriate, employers should explore opportunities for continued engagement, including internships, vocational training, work-based learning, supported employment measures such as individueel maatwerk in Flanders or the AViQ integration premium in Wallonia, or future recruitment. Maintaining communication with participants and supporting organisations can strengthen long-term inclusive employment pathways (VDAB, 2023; AViQ, n.d.).

Final Remark

Job shadowing represents a practical, flexible, and low-cost approach to promoting disability inclusion within Belgian SMEs. By allowing employers and participants to gain first-hand experience of inclusive workplaces, it can reduce misconceptions, build confidence, and facilitate successful transitions into employment. With

appropriate guidance, collaboration, and support, job shadowing can become an effective stepping stone towards more inclusive and sustainable employment practices in Belgium.

Example of Good Practice (Belgium)

Programme

DUOday - The National Job Shadowing Initiative for People with Disabilities

Initial Situation

Many Belgian employers, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), have limited experience in recruiting people with disabilities and often lack knowledge regarding reasonable accommodation and available financial support. These barriers contribute to one of the widest disability employment gaps in the European Union (Statbel, 2019; European Disability Forum, 2025).

Intervention

DUOday was first organised in Flanders in 2010 by GTB, the specialised employment support service, inspired by the Irish 'Job Shadow Day', and has since grown into an annual nationwide initiative supported by the public employment services in all three regions. During DUOday, **a jobseeker with a disability forms a duo with an employee of a participating company for one day**, observing work processes, carrying out tasks where possible, joining meetings, and taking part in the daily life of the team (DUOday Belgium, n.d.; GTB, n.d.).

Workplace Support

Participating employers are prepared and supported by specialised job coaches from GTB and the regional employment services, who assist with matching, workplace preparation, and follow-up. The initiative is carried out in partnership with employer organisations such as UNIZO, VOKA, and Verso, which helps to reach SMEs across all sectors (GTB, n.d.).

Outcome

DUOday has grown steadily since its launch: in 2018, more than 600 companies participated and over 650 duos were formed, and the concept has since been adopted in numerous other European countries. In many cases, the one-day experience has resulted in longer placements, internships, or employment contracts, and it has proven to be an effective way of changing employers' perceptions of the abilities of people with disabilities (DUOday Belgium, n.d.; GTB, n.d.).

Key Insight

This initiative demonstrates that a simple, well-organised, and low-threshold job shadowing format can engage hundreds of employers, including SMEs with no previous experience of disability inclusion. Building on the DUOday experience, more regular and structured job shadowing placements could allow Belgian SMEs to gain experience with disability inclusion before progressing to internships or permanent employment.

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