

17th May 2023

Introduction

Good Morning, my name is Jodie McGrielle and I am NCBI's Employment, Training & Academia Manager. I am 41 years old and identify as a Welsh, white female with long brown hair, wearing..

I am here with my colleague Sean Doran who is a Program Manager and an Accessibility Consultant in NCBI.

NCBI welcomes the opportunity to feed into the deliberations of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Enterprise, Trade, and Employment. Enabling people with disabilities to have full opportunity to participate and progress in the labour market is vital for their own financial independence, mental health, and social interactions but also reaps dividends for companies and the economy too.

On a sectoral level, it was really disheartening but not surprising to find out that just last month the **European Disability Forum** described Ireland as leading the “hall of shame”, by having one of the lowest number of **PWD in employment** in **Europe**.

Yet, we know that companies that employ Persons with Disabilities (including those with vision impairment or blindness) are much more profitable and better performing.

NCBI plays a crucial role in maximising a blind or vision-impaired person’s ability to participate, retain or return to the labour market. However, 75% of blind or vision impaired people in Ireland are not active in the labour market – that’s too much untapped potential.

Issues of employer discrimination, bureaucratic and insufficient statutory support as well as the inaccessibility of the recruitment process remain a constant stumbling block.

The Comprehensive Employment Strategy for Persons with Disabilities (2015-2024), operates as a cross-departmental strategy and is the current national employment strategy guiding employment services and supports for people living with sight loss.

Many of the actions in the Strategy reflect a holistic and proactive approach to employment and the creation of the Open Doors initiative is particularly welcome by NCBI. However, key actions which are necessary for the advancement of people living with sight loss obtaining and retaining employment have not been completed. These include the publication of the review of the Reasonable Accommodation Fund, the creation of a strategy that promotes and supports entrepreneurship and self-employment for people with a disability, and an employer information campaign to promote the recruitment and retention of people with a disability.

NCBI's Employment-Focused Solutions

NCBI is not currently funded by the state for delivering Employment Services. NCBI was fortunate enough to be awarded 200k from the Dormant Accounts fund. During the span of NCBI's 18-month VisAble initiative which ended in 2022, overall results exceeded targets in most outputs. **44 individuals with vision impairment achieved employment**, furthermore, this project facilitated the creation of **employment opportunities by 26 employers** specifically for people with disabilities. A further **107 engaged in employment activation activities** and **114 engaged in employment skills training**. Additionally, **70 individuals received assistive technology** or equipment to enhance their capabilities.

In 2022, the employment team supported **340 referrals, 207 of which are new referrals to NCBI** on a mere **4.2 WTE** nationally. Despite these factors and the absence of state support, there is significant disparity in national coverage, particularly in the Western and North-western regions of the country. Furthermore, referrals have increased by 25% within 2023, an unsustainable demand without additional financial support and resourcing.

In order to bolster NCBI's strategic position in the employment sector, we have appointed two National Workplace Integration Officers. Their responsibility is to establish a network of inclusive partners who are confident in employing individuals with vision impairments.

NCBI has also developed a suite of bespoke programming. NCBI's Employment Skills for Individuals with Vision Impairment or Blindness, QQI Level 4, allows learners to fully participate in all aspects of the curriculum. Assessments were carefully considered to ensure the content was accessible, realistic, and achievable for learners who have vision impairments.

<https://www.ahead.ie/journal/NCBIs-Bespoke-Major-Award-QQI-Level-4-in-Employment-Skills-for-people-with-visual-impairment-or-blindness>

In addition, NCBI holds the exclusive responsibility for conducting manual examinations for the International Computer Driving License (ICDL). However, this certification heavily relies on vision-based and automated assessments when taught in mainstream settings, which compromises its usability for learners with visual impairments. Furthermore, NCBI has taken a pioneering step by becoming the first Further Education and Training Provider to enable learners to independently access their assessments digitally.

Digital Accessibility

NCBI's Inclusion & Accessibility (IA) Labs conducted a review of a large number of websites in Ireland to create Ireland's first Digital Accessibility Index Report. This report provides detailed information on how inaccessible many areas of Ireland's digital landscape can be for people with disabilities.

One sector which was highlighted in this report was employment. The report showed 89% of job search sites were not digitally accessible. Since 2020, all publicly funded Government websites are legally obliged to be compliant with the Web Content

Accessibility Guidelines, but many still fall far short including www.publicjobs.ie. This law is extending to all private sector service providers in 2025 through the adoption of the European Accessibility Act.

Despite IA Labs reaching out to more than 600 recruitment companies to provide guidance on compliance with accessibility standards, not a single company was willing to make their website accessible. This failure to prioritise digital accessibility effectively excludes individuals with disabilities from applying for jobs and participating in the workforce on equal terms.

Making your workplace more accessible and diverse by ensuring all digital platforms and digital content is compliant is not only the right thing to do, but it can also increase a business's target demographic by 13.5% as stated by the CSO. Digital accessibility noncompliance serves as a significant barrier to employment in Ireland, contributing to the existing disparity.

In Employment

NCBI has placed importance on providing a secure and user-friendly training and design space that caters to the needs of people with disabilities including those who are vision impaired or blind. This space aims to promote and support their increased use of public transportation through a “learning by doing” approach.

The Wayfinding Centre is a step in this incremental change within the Irish Context as less than 6% of people with disabilities utilise public transport every day to attend school or work (CSO 2016).

Conclusion

Technology is the great enabler for people who are blind or vision impaired. NCBI recommends the allocation of dedicated funding and training to ensure that all publicly funded job search websites fully comply with the government's legislation regarding the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines. Special emphasis is placed on websites such as www.publicjobs.ie and www.jobsireland.ie, as they were legally obligated to be accessible by 2020.

The Workplace Adaptation Equipment Grant is available to employers for acquiring assistive technology resources. However, individuals who are blind or visually impaired have reported significant delays in the grant processing, which subsequently affects both the employee and the employer negatively (NDA 2019). To address this issue, NCBI has introduced a Special Case Funding scheme that enables service users to obtain interim funding for the required equipment. It is worth noting that the grant is currently tied to specific roles rather than being tailored to individual needs.

NCBI emphasizes the need for greater flexibility in welfare payments or tax allowances to provide better support for individuals with vision impairments who are seeking employment, self-employment, or working on a sessional or contract basis.

To succeed, NCBI must be agile and do the hard work to develop real and mutually beneficial partnerships with companies, government leaders, other non-profits, competitors, and community groups. NCBI has the capabilities and solutions, we ask the committee to support us with funding to continue these crucial services. NCBI asks the government to support equity for people impacted by blindness or vision impairment rather than equality.

Thank you.