



**Advancing Disability
Awareness, Equality
and Inclusion Training
in the Workplace
Practical Toolkit**



About Employers for Change

Employers for Change, is a programme of the Open Doors Initiative, and funded by the Department of Children, Disability and Equality. The service empowers employers with all the information and advice needed to hire inclusively and to employ, manage and retain staff with disabilities.

Since launching in March 2021, Employers for Change has engaged with over 500 employers and trained over 3000 employees across sectors and industries, helping them build more inclusive workplaces for persons with disabilities.

We hope this toolkit serves as a valuable resource in your journey toward greater disability inclusion.

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employersforchange.ie



An Roinn Leanaí, Míchumais
agus Comhionannais
Department of Children,
Disability and Equality

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Introduction



Purpose of this toolkit

This toolkit summarises key practical recommendations from Employers for Change's Advancing Disability Awareness, Equality and Inclusion Training in the Workplace - Research Report. It provides guidance for employers in Ireland seeking to enhance disability awareness, equality, and inclusion training in the workplace.

It has been designed for those who are responsible for planning and organising training, such as management, human resource staff, inclusion leads and learning and development personnel. Based on the findings of the research report, this toolkit provides these individuals with practical guidance, key considerations and resources.

A note on terminology

People with disabilities, persons with disabilities and disabled people. Different terminology is used throughout this report reflecting legal references, community preferences and language used by attendees of the focus groups and key informants.

Understanding the different stages of Disability Awareness, Equality and Inclusion

Disability awareness focuses on understanding disability and challenging misconceptions. It helps to build confidence, respect and empathy but does not by itself create systemic change.

Disability equality takes a rights-based approach grounded in the social model of disability. It explores barriers created by policies and environments, and highlights duties under Irish equality law, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty.

Disability inclusion moves from awareness to action. It supports organisations to embed accessibility and inclusion across recruitment, communication, policy and culture.

Box 3: Models of disability

Charity Model: Portrays persons with disabilities as victims in need of care or pity. This outdated model often reinforces dependency and exclusion.

Medical Model: Views disability as a health condition or impairment that resides in the individual. The focus is on diagnosis, treatment, and rehabilitation to “fix” the person.

Social Model: Emphasises that disability arises from societal barriers - physical, attitudinal, and systemic, rather than the individual’s impairment. It advocates for removing these barriers to enable full participation.

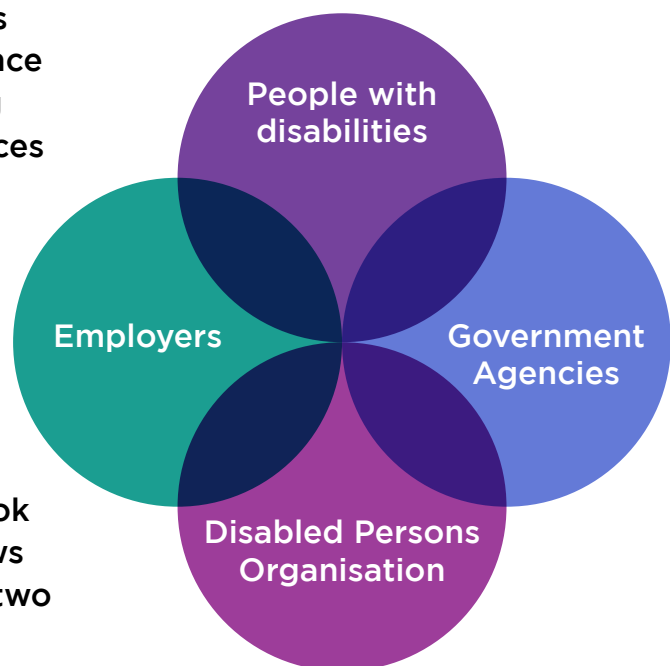
Human Rights Model: Builds on the social model, framing disability as a human rights issue. It promotes dignity, autonomy, and inclusion, aligning with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).

Methodology

Literature review, which provides an overview of the main themes found in publications about the legal and policy background for disability awareness training in Ireland. It looks at evidence of the effectiveness of such training and the main gaps in current practices and guidelines.

Four focus groups with different stakeholders, including people from the disability sector, employers and employer representative bodies, government agencies, and Disabled Persons Organisation. In total, 26 people took part. On top of that, seven interviews were held with key informants and two written submissions were received.

Focus Groups



Key insights from the research

Growing commitment from employers

Irish employers across the public and private sector, and the civil society are increasingly committed to disability awareness, equality and inclusion training. Staff who have participated in training report positive experiences and increased understanding, supporting them to feel more confident on creating a more inclusive workplace. This is in line with the available academic research in employment and the education sector, and international research, as discussed in the “Literature review and mapping” section of the research report.

There are several enabling factors that supported the growing commitments of employers to upskill on disability awareness, equality and inclusion and these included legal and policy frameworks, and the growing recognition that disability awareness and equality training needs to be included in organisational systems.

The research highlighted there is a growing network of diverse training providers of disability awareness and equality training, including not-for-profit sector organisations; private training consultants; public sector bodies and Disabled Persons Organisations (DPOs).

The Department to Social Protection provides support for disability awareness and inclusion training through the Work and Access Scheme, which offers funding of up to €20,000 over a 12-month period. (Source: [Employers for Change Website](#))

Tailored approach to meet organisational needs

The success of disability training depends on how well it is designed, delivered, and aligned with the organisation’s context and culture. Employers stressed there is no one-size-fits-all: some need an overview of legislation and key facts, others require more technical sessions on recruitment, reasonable accommodation or disclosure. Flexible formats and delivery (e.g. tailored sessions for HR, managers and frontline staff, offered in short, interactive 60–90 minute blocks with scenarios, role-play and live polls) are critical to meeting diverse needs and maximising impact.

Along with the positive progress made, the research also highlighted some of the challenges that persist and the gaps. These included a reliance on generic training approaches, information overload, lack of follow-up, and systemic barriers such as limited resources, attitudinal resistance, and the absence of standardised training frameworks.

Section 1: Key Elements for Effective Training

This section uses the insights from the research participants, and outlines five key elements of effective disability awareness, equality and inclusion training.

“

Attitudinal barriers are the biggest barrier where I work. You can fix systems; you can fix processes. It is harder to fix attitudes.

”

1. Person-centred lived experience

The research highlighted including the lived experience of persons with disabilities as central to effective training. This can mean that persons with disabilities are part of the core training team.

“

We had employees with disabilities, some born with them, others who acquired them later in life, they shared their personal experiences within our organisation. For me, gaining awareness of the different types of disabilities was incredibly valuable. It highlighted the importance of recognising not just visible disabilities, but also the many hidden ones that people live with every day.

”

Toolkit tip:

- Invite employees, Employee Resource Group members or external speakers with lived experience to co-deliver or contribute to training sessions. You can reach out to your local disabled persons organisation to see if they offer such a service.

2. Needs-informed and practical

The research highlighted how important it is to identify training needs of the organisation based on internal surveys and organisational data. It is important that a training organiser feels ownership of the training session and shares organisational insights to the training provider. This ensures that the topics addressed in the training reflect the lived experiences and needs of employees, making the training more timely, meaningful and engaging.

“

We did all the surveys, and from the surveys, we got topics that people were interested in, and we rolled out a programme.

”

Equally important is the emphasis on practical, actionable guidance. Training that equips staff with clear steps such as how to access reasonable accommodations, implement inclusive recruitment practices, manage disclosure of disability, and ensure digital and web accessibility empowers individuals and teams to translate learning into everyday practice. These elements help foster a more inclusive workplace culture where everyone can participate fully and equitably.

Toolkit tips:

- Start with internal data. Conduct surveys or focus groups to understand employee needs and interests.
- Seek training that is grounded in key facts and practical, disability awareness training helps build a shared understanding and dispel common myths. It ensures staff know their rights and responsibilities, supports legal compliance, and gives credibility to the training.
- Ensure legal frameworks are included in the training. Leadership and management should know about law and policy, as they would with all areas, disability is no different. Also, employees with disabilities should understand their legal rights and the employers' obligations. See [Appendix A](#) for more information.
- Provide accessible tip sheets on reasonable accommodations, inclusive recruitment, meeting public sector employment quotas and accessible work environments that are informed by your organisation's policies and procedures.
- Link legal content to organisational values. Frame legal compliance as part of a broader commitment to inclusion and human rights, not just a box-ticking exercise. Include a message from leadership reinforcing the importance of legal compliance as a shared responsibility.



I'm doing this training, and that training, and another one - and on top of my regular workload, it sometimes feels like an added expectation rather than something that's actually part of my job.



3. Effective training

The research highlighted that effective training is strategic and audience-focused, with design, delivery and content tailored to the needs of different roles across the organisation. When organising inclusive disability awareness training it is important to ensure preparatory materials such as agendas and resources are shared in advance. This supports all participants by allowing time to process information and prepare for discussion.

“ Providing advance information, such as agendas and materials before training, was essential particularly for individuals with cognitive or sensory disabilities as it allowed for better preparation and engagement. ”

The research highlighted how interactive formats for training significantly enhance engagement and learning. Techniques like role-play, scenario-based exercises, and live feedback tools such as polls encourage active participation and reflection. When assessing training, ask your provider if these elements will be included in your session.

Tailoring sessions to different roles within the organisation such as line managers versus general staff ensures content is relevant and applicable to participants' responsibilities. This targeted approach helps translate awareness into action.

Toolkit tips:

- Request sessions with real-world application and examples.
- Staff time is limited, be strategic in choosing what exactly is needed to support a team with disability inclusion.
- Explore interactive learning formats such as role-play, scenario-based exercises and live tools like polls.

4. Accessible and inclusive delivery of training

Ensure disability awareness, equality and inclusion training is accessible in both content and delivery, this is fundamental to its success. Examples were given in the research where training on accessibility was undermined when physical or digital environments are not accessible, where there was a lack of captioning, or Irish Sign Language. The accessibility of training materials, including but not limited to captions, assistive technology and transcripts, was highlighted by many of the research participants as important for living up to values. This means enquiring about the accessibility of materials, delivery and digital platforms, so that all participants can fully engage.

“ There’s an assumption that disabled people aren’t in the room getting this training in a workplace. ”

Creating a safe, non-judgmental environment is equally important. When participants of awareness training workshops feel respected and supported, they are more likely to engage openly, ask questions, and share experiences. Encouraging dialogue and addressing the fear of “saying the wrong thing” helps foster a culture of learning and empathy, where mistakes are seen as opportunities for growth rather than sources of shame. This can be supported by the training organiser by highlighting why the training is important to the organisation or by having members of the ERG or inclusion committee take part.

Together, these elements ensure that training is not only informative but also inclusive, respectful and empowering for everyone involved.

“ No such thing as stupid questions...which helped reduce fear and stigma. ”

Toolkit tips:

- Ensure all training materials, such as slides, handouts, and digital platforms accessible by asking your training provider. Including all invitations and promotion for the training.
- Create a safe learning environment. Set clear ground rules that promote respect and openness. Encourage active listening and reassure participants that the space is non-judgmental and supportive.
- Normalise questions and mistakes. Let participants know it's okay to ask questions or make mistakes. Address the fear of "saying the wrong thing" by framing the training as a learning journey, not a test.

5. Organisational commitment and support structures

Visible leadership support plays a critical role in the success of disability training. When senior leaders actively endorse and participate in training sessions, it sends a powerful message that inclusion is a shared responsibility and a strategic priority. Their involvement helps to normalise conversations around disability and encourages broader engagement across the organisation.

“

It really does need to start from the top down and be structured to suit the needs. When engaging with employees, there must be a clear buy-in: what's in it for us? But if there's an ethos within the company - this is what we do, this is the training we provide - it becomes beneficial for everyone.

”

Establishing dedicated roles and structures further strengthens this commitment. Positions such as Access Officers and Disability Liaison Officers, along with Employee Resource Groups (ERGs), provide ongoing support, expertise, and advocacy. These roles help embed disability inclusion into everyday practices and ensure that employees have clear points of contact for guidance and feedback.

However, not every organisation has such an internal network, particularly smaller organisations. Find a way to connect it into induction training and management training can be a helpful way to embed disability inclusion in procedures.



Disability awareness is sometimes seen as “non-essential” unless it is directly relevant to one’s role.



It’s also important to recognise and address pockets of resistance within teams. Resistance may stem from discomfort, lack of awareness, or fear of change. By identifying these challenges early and responding with empathy and education, organisations can foster a more open and inclusive culture where disability inclusion is embraced rather than avoided.

Toolkit tips

- Secure visible leadership commitment. Encourage senior leaders to actively endorse and participate in training.
- Integrate training into broader inclusion strategies. Ensure disability awareness training is part of a wider equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) framework. Link it to organisational goals, performance indicators, and accountability mechanisms.
- Treat disability awareness as a learning journey and set expectations accordingly. Plan for follow-ups, refreshers and additional chances to go deeper or revisit certain key topics.
- Use induction and existing training material as opportunities to include disability awareness equality and inclusion. This could be on-boarding and management training.
- Address resistance proactively. Identify and engage with teams or individuals showing resistance. Use empathy and education to understand concerns and build trust, rather than enforcing compliance.
- Monitor and evaluate impact. Track participation, feedback, and outcomes of training sessions. Use this data to refine needs analysis, plan for future training and demonstrate progress to leadership and employees.

Section 2: Key Considerations

The research highlighted several areas that can impact on effective disability training.

“ The disability awareness workshop was truly eye-opening. It provided a deeper understanding of the challenges people with disabilities face and the role we all should play to create more inclusive environments. ”

1. Keep sessions simple

The research highlighted how participants found sessions with too much information overwhelming, especially when slides are dense with content. This led to disengagement and made it difficult to retain or apply what was learned. Ensure training that is organised has a clear learning objective and meets the learning needs of the team. Sometimes it can be helpful to facilitate more than one training session, so attendees are not overwhelmed with too much information.

2. Consider tailored content

Generic training that doesn't reflect the diversity of disability experiences was viewed as ineffective. Participants preferred tailored, role-specific content that was relevant to their everyday work. Communicate with your training provider your employee preferences and avoid a one-size-fits-all approach.

3. The need for practical next steps

Training that ends without clear next steps or resources was seen as contributing to a "tick-box" culture. Without follow-up, initial enthusiasm faded and future participation declined. Ask your training provider to deliver clear follow up next steps so employees can continue their inclusion journey and apply their learnings to the everyday.

Organisations should ensure employees have time and space to reflect on what they have learned and identify practical ways to put it into practice in their own roles.

4. Ensure training is accessible and accredited

Participants highlighted contradictions when training on inclusion was delivered in inaccessible formats e.g. missing captions, lack of Irish Sign Language, unreadable fonts or inaccessible platforms. Ask your training provider if their session is fully accessible and liaises with your internal IT to ensure key accessibility features are enabled for online delivery. You can also ask your training provider if they are accredited and can provide your time with certificates.

5. Create a culture of openness

Training attendees often feared saying the wrong thing and this led to disengagement. This was worsened by a lack of confidence and inclusive language knowledge. Training that seeks to build attendees' confidence and allows for questions is key to ensuring a disability inclusive culture in your organisation.

6. Include all employees

Disability inclusion is most effective, when it is woven into the fabric of the organisations and all employees feel included and equipped with the right knowledge and skills. Plan training not only for managers, but all employees and team members.

7. Embed training as part of core work

When disability training is treated as a meaningful part of a person's role and is part of the culture, their engagement increases. Avoid scheduling sessions during lunch time or on top of heavy workloads; instead, build it into working time and link it clearly to job responsibilities and organisational goals.

Appendix A: Key legislation and policy framework

The research included a legal and policy review on Irish employment law and policies that can help guide training content for employers and those responsible for designing the training. The research report discusses this in more detail.

The key legislation for the organisation leadership, HR and those responsible for line management of staff includes:

- **Employment Equality Acts 1998–2015**
- **Disability Act 2005**
- **Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty**
- **EU Employment Equality Directive (2000/78/EC)**

Article 27 of the CRPD

Article 27 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) says that people with disabilities have the same right to work as everyone else. This includes the right to choose and do work in environments that are open, inclusive, and accessible. Under Article 27, Governments and employers must:

- Ban discrimination in all areas of work, including hiring, pay, promotion, and working conditions
- Ensure fair treatment, including equal pay and protection from harassment.
- Provide reasonable accommodations so people with disabilities can do their jobs.
- Support access to training, job placement, and career development
- Promote employment in both public and private sectors, using incentives and inclusive policies.
- Encourage self-employment and entrepreneurship.
- Support return-to-work and job retention programmes.
- Protect against forced labour and ensure safe, fair workplaces.

On the policy front, the Government launched the **National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025–2030**.

Pillar 2: Employment – Key Highlights

Goal: Close the employment gap and ensure disabled people have equal access to meaningful work.

Key Commitments:

- **Public Sector:** Lead by example by meeting the 6% employment target, expanding work placements, and improving career pathways.
- **Private Sector:** Promote inclusive hiring, raise awareness, and support employers through initiatives like the Work and Access Scheme and Wage Subsidy Scheme.
- **Support to Work:** Provide tailored supports to help disabled people access, retain, or return to work. Reform benefit systems to remove disincentives and expand employment advisory services.

Awareness Training:

The strategy commits to strengthening awareness, training, and capacity across staff and management in the civil and public service. This includes deploying Disability Liaison Officers (DLOs) and reviewing disability equality training for Intreo staff to better support disabled jobseekers.

Resources



Trainings provided by Employers for Change

<https://www.employersforchange.ie/Disability-Awareness-Training>

WIDE Framework <https://wide.employersforchange.ie/>

Legal and policy

A Guide to the Employment Equality Acts 1998-2015

<https://www.ihrec.ie/downloads/A-Guide-to-the-Employment-Equality-Acts-English.pdf>

Universal Design <https://universaldesign.ie/about-universal-design>

Work and Access <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-social-protection/services/work-and-access/>

Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, all Articles available at this link <https://social.desa.un.org/issues/disability/crpd/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities-articles>

Article 27 of the CRPD, available at this link <https://social.desa.un.org/issues/disability/crpd/article-27-work-and-employment>

Accessibility of materials

Universal design for learning

<https://www.ahead.ie/udl>

Microsoft Accessibility Tools

<https://learn.microsoft.com/en-us/microsoft-365/education/guide/1-reference/baseline-reference-accessibility>

Employers for Change Inclusive and Accessible Communications toolkit https://www.employersforchange.ie/userfiles/files/EFC_InclusiveCommunications_Toolkit.pdf



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