

# Being Disability- Inclusive in the Workplace Guidance for Apprenticeship Employers



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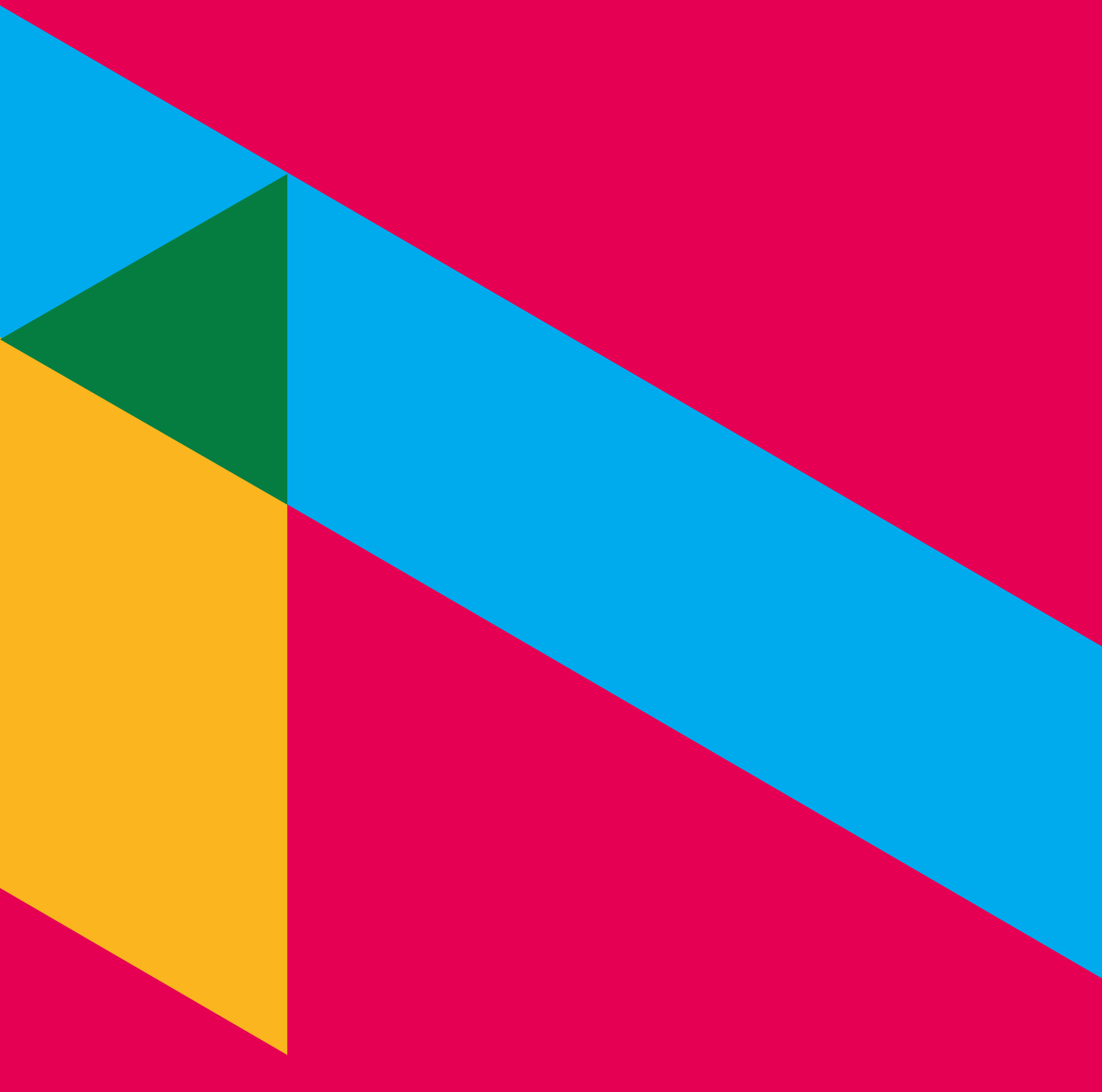


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# Introduction



Ireland has an untapped pool of talented disabled people who are keen to work and to be an asset to Irish employers. Through numerous surveys and other research over the past 10 years, many employers confirm that disabled employees are adding unique value and diversity to their labour force.

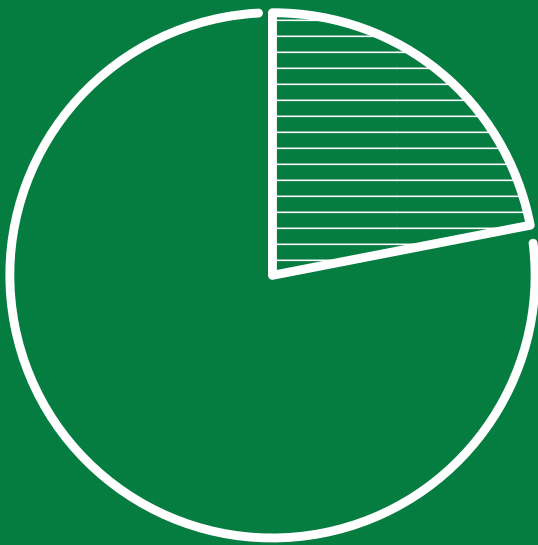
This guide aims to support inclusive workplaces for disabled apprentices in Ireland<sup>1</sup>. The guide includes facts about disability in Ireland, information on barriers apprentices with disabilities can experience, and 10 steps that employers can take to successfully recruit and retain talented disabled employees in their workplace.

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<sup>1</sup> This guidance document builds on a project on disability-inclusive advice for employers led by AHEAD and the organisation Fastrack into Technology (FIT).

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# Did you know?



**22%**

of the Irish population disclosed at least one  
disability in Census 2022

## Facts about disability in Ireland

- The last Census indicates that **22% of the Irish population have a disability**.
- Many disabled people in Ireland have a **strong desire to enter the labour market** (DSP, 2017).
- **Disabled people are less than half as likely to be in employment than their non-disabled peers**, (EDF, 2020). This is despite disabled people accessing higher levels of education and attaining qualifications in ever-increasing numbers, (AHEAD, 2025; HEA, 2023; SOLAS, 2020).
- When employers think about disability, they tend to focus on physical disabilities (BANDA, 2021). However, **most disabled people reported/disclosed non-visible disabilities** such as dyslexia, autism, a mental health difficulty or an ongoing medical condition.
- **The number of apprentices self-declaring a disability and obtaining the necessary supports is low**, at just 5% of all apprentices registered in Ireland, (NAO, 2025). The equivalent figure of students disclosing a disability and in receipt of supports in higher education is 8% of all students, (AHEAD, 2025).
- A majority of **medium-to-large Irish employers believe that hiring people with a disability is beneficial to the organisation** and can also help their businesses to innovate. In general, a significant majority of Irish employers believe that having a diverse workforce positively impacts their ability to generate revenue, and helps motivate and retain staff, (BANDA, 2021).

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- Sometimes employers fear that the cost of providing supports for disabled employees will be overly expensive. However, research data from AHEAD's WAM Mentored Work Placement Programme shows that **two thirds of accommodations put in place do not incur any cost to the employer**. Most involve relatively simple changes to work practices (AHEAD, 2020), while many that do incur a cost are likely to be already available within the organisation (e.g., software). Furthermore, any financial cost can be recouped through targeted funding streams provided by the State (for example the Work and Access fund<sup>2</sup>, which is financed by the Department of Social Protection).

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

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## Electrical apprentice

“I am an apprentice currently in Phase 2 of my apprenticeship. I was born with a limb deficiency where I am missing my hand below the elbow. My uncles and grandfather were electricians, and I always wanted to be an electrician. When I was looking for an employer to take me on as an apprentice, I made a phone call to my employer to ask him if he would take me on and I explained to him about my disability. The employer did not see this as an issue. He agreed to give me a 2-week trial and challenged me during the trial. I found ways around the challenges and my employer was happy to register me as an apprentice after the trial. I have not experienced any discrimination in the workplace or amongst my classmates. I am currently in Phase 2 of my apprenticeship and have not been met with any challenges. It is important to create inclusive workplaces so that there are more opportunities for people with disabilities.”



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# Overcoming the barriers

Barriers still exist in Ireland when it comes to recruiting and ensuring success at work for apprentices with disabilities. These include:

- **Attitudes in society and the workplace:** Evidence suggests disabled people still encounter stigma and discrimination in Irish society. Almost half of Irish people (46%) believe disability is a disadvantage when applying for a job, while 2 in 3 people (67%) do not believe that disabled people enjoy equal opportunity in terms of employment, (NDA, 2017). Some of the fears commonly raised by disabled people are that their employer may not look beyond their disability and that their work colleagues will treat them differently.
- **The disclosure disconnect:** Disclosing disability in the workplace can often be daunting for disabled people. Some do not feel comfortable telling employers about their disability in recruitment or at work. A better understanding of the lived experience of people with disabilities can help to build a relationship of trust and acceptance, while promoting more open communication for all parties. Some examples of fears raised regarding disclosure of disability are that someone won't want to employ someone because they have a disability or that disclosing will affect promotion chances.
- **Barriers in the recruitment process:** Often disabled apprentices are inhibited from showcasing their talents and capabilities in the recruitment process. Some examples of common practices that can disadvantage disabled people in the recruitment process include:
  - Inaccessible application forms and complex text-based applications.
  - No opportunity to request support for interviews such as accessible venues for interview, additional clarity of the interview style and approach or sign language interpretation.
  - A lack of awareness regarding disability among interview panels.
  - Testing processes known to disadvantage some disabled people, such as psychometric testing and group assessments are long accepted as being unfair to some disabled people. Alternatives should be sought to enhance equal opportunity.

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- **Getting what is needed to succeed:** In some cases, even when employees do disclose their disability, support in employment is not forthcoming. Some examples of the supports needed by some disabled people include:
    - Changes in how tasks are communicated, (e.g., following up verbal instructions with an email confirmation).
    - Access to assistive technologies and productivity tools, for example read aloud features, writing assistance and task management tools, often already available within mainstream software like Office 365.
    - Time off to attend important or often essential medical appointments.
  - **Awareness of the law and available resources:** A lack of awareness among employers about their legal responsibilities (for example current Irish equality legislation) and the grants (for example, the prediscussed Work and Access Programme) and resources available to support employers to be more inclusive (see Resources Section).
  - **Inaccessible physical spaces:** People with certain disabilities may have certain physical access requirements such as ramps to entrances, lifts between floors, accessible bathrooms, uncluttered walkways, and access to a disabled parking space.
  - **Inaccessible digital spaces and materials:** Digital systems and platforms which have not been designed to adhere to the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) may cause difficulties for some disabled users when interacting with them. Equally, accessibility should always be considered by authors of documents and other digital materials used in the workplace.

## Hairdressing apprentice

“My name is Edwina, and I am an apprentice hairdresser. I have dyslexia and I find I must learn things quickly and reading long words can be stressful. The support from my teacher in the college is good support and I’m not getting left behind. I’m not stressed when it comes to tests because I have the support. I have the support from my mentor at work; she explains things well to me as I take that bit longer to get it. It is very important to have that extra support in college and in the salon when it comes to explaining things as it is less stressful for me.”



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# 10 steps

to successfully recruit and retain disabled  
apprentices in your company

Most of the barriers experienced by disabled people in recruitment are the result of a lack of awareness or unconscious bias, rather than any form of intentional discrimination. Employers can thoughtfully review and remove the barriers that may exist in their recruitment processes and workplaces.

Work practices can create an environment where disabled apprentices feel comfortable being themselves and telling others about their disability if they wish to do so. Employers who want to enable their apprentices to demonstrate their talents and abilities need to create an environment where they feel valued and accepted for who they are.

All employers want their apprentices to perform at their best. So, it's important to provide them with the tools and supports they need to succeed. For disabled apprentices, this means listening to their needs and responding, often by making small changes that make all the difference in their work. Special attention should be paid to establishing a working environment where apprentices feel they have clear pathways and equal opportunities to be hired, retained and promoted in the company or organisation.

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## Step 1

### Use disability-friendly language in apprentice job advertisements and build inclusive approaches into your recruitment processes.

- **Review job specifications** to ensure the language is written in disability-friendly, plain English. Complex job descriptions and specifications can unintentionally deter applications from disabled people. For example, when an employer states that they want an 'energetic' candidate, what is meant by this? When terms like this are used in job specifications, individuals with a physical disability, for example, may be discouraged from applying, despite having the competency and capability to fulfil all aspects of the role.
- **Audit company website and application forms for accessibility** to ensure they adhere to Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG), so that all individuals regardless of their disability can engage with the process. External services are available to help with this if necessary (see Resources Section).
- **Offer flexibility in the recruitment process.** There are many ways that people can demonstrate their skills and suitability for a role. As discussed, some assessment methods can act as a barrier for people with certain disabilities, and it's important that employers are ready to offer alternative assessment approaches to disabled people who require them. The aim is always to maintain the standard of the recruitment process, while still enabling disabled people to participate in an equal manner.

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Be accessibility-aware when selecting a venue for interviews and other recruitment processes. Make the recruitment space accessible for disabled people. Ensure that venues are wheelchair accessible, close to an accessible bathroom, and in a building with easy access to accessible parking bays. Communicate these arrangements to all job applicants as part of good practice. Attaching a picture or graphic of the interview venue is an excellent way of supporting people to get prepared.

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## Step 2

### **Encourage safe disclosure of disability or learning need with relevant staff member(s)**

Provide clear opportunities for disclosure of disability at all stages of the recruitment process. It is helpful to include a visible statement in all communications that clearly demonstrates the organisation's commitment to offering equal opportunities for disabled candidates. Communicate that reasonable accommodations are available upon request for candidates with disabilities to support them to engage with all aspects of the recruitment process into employment. It is crucial that confidentiality is safeguarded during the process.

## Step 3

### **Embed inclusive policies and procedures in your business**

Clear policies and procedures on the provision of reasonable accommodations (the legal term for disability supports) and needs assessment are vital. Accessibility and inclusion can be embedded in other company policies, for example those concerning procurement, communications, and recruitment.

## Pipefitting apprentice

"I am a pipefitter apprentice at Phase 1. I have dyslexia and I found school hard. I left after my Junior Certificate, and I applied for my apprenticeship with a local company. When I got the job, I didn't want to tell them that I found reading and writing extremely difficult even though I now had apps on my phone to help me. I wanted to feel part of my work group and I wanted to manage myself independently. I didn't want anyone to know. Hiding it put huge pressure on me. I was afraid to be asked to read something out or take notes and yet, besides that, I came up with different ideas to solve problems and could remember easier how things worked and what was said. My regional ETB Support Service visited my employer and offered supports.

My employer was very positive about my dyslexia and how they and the ETB could help me. I felt that this was a weight off my shoulders, I could now be myself without imagining the fear of different situations coming my way. My employer put up a poster 'Be Proud of Your Dyslexic Mind' - I really appreciated this and now I am thinking about what I have to offer rather than hiding it. I attend a support class on-site every week with my employer. We are talking about dyslexia in our apprentice group now and I wouldn't have realised how many others have it."



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## Step 4

### **Consider accessibility in all activities**

Give signals and signposts that inclusion is the norm in the organisation. It's important to send the message that people with disabilities are part of the fabric of the organisation. Small steps like always hosting events in accessible spaces, turning captions on in company webinars and videos, and using stock imagery featuring a diverse range of employees across communications are easy ways of signalling to employees that the organisation is serious about inclusion.

## Step 5

### **Provide disability awareness and training for all staff**

Ensure all staff have a basic level of training in being disability-inclusive. In this way, employers are building of a culture where different ways of working and communicating are respected and embedded in the workplace.

Develop structures for peer support. It is useful to encourage and support the development of a staff network or Employee Resource Group (ERG) focussed on disability. This enables community-building and creates avenues for these networks to raise accessibility issues arising from group discussions to senior management.

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## Step 6

### **Celebrate diversity and show that inclusion is the norm**

A fantastic way to show that the organisation welcomes all kinds of different employees is to host visible celebrations of diversity and intersectionality, such as recognising International Day of People with Disabilities.

## Step 7

### **Communicate availability of disability supports to all staff**

Offer clear information on staff supports, including how to avail of disability supports. Have a dedicated company webpage or space on the staff portal outlining the organisation's commitment to ensuring the workplace is disability-inclusive. Communicate the organisation's openness to providing a range of individualised supports. Provide information on how to access these supports and a named contact to discuss needs in confidence.

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## Step 8

### **Introduce a mentoring programme**

A great way to support new employees to settle in, develop networks and feel part of the organisation is to operate a mentoring system for new staff. Pair new staff members up with another volunteer employee outside their direct team, whose role it is to meet them occasionally. The mentor introduces them to how the organisation works, and acts as a confidential 'bounce-board' for any early issues arising. This is a great approach for all new staff, but particularly helpful for disabled people who may benefit from some additional assistance to adapt to the new environment.

## Step 9

### **Assess apprentices' needs and implement support**

Once an apprentice has informed the organisation that they have a disability, it's important to engage in open dialogue with them to establish what support needs they may have. This process is known as a 'needs assessment'. It's a structured conversation which explores the impact of the disability in relation to the workplace environment and the demands of the role. Through this dialogue, appropriate supports are explored and agreed upon with the apprentice and the outcomes are documented and signed off by both employer and apprentice. The process should include information on who is responsible for implementing the agreed support (e.g., HR, line manager). Confidentiality, respect and dignity are all essential in this process.

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## Step 10

### **Make use of national resources and financial supports**

A range of organisations, including AHEAD and Employers for Change, provide resources and supports to help employers on the journey to becoming more inclusive. In addition, state grants and supports are available to help finance the cost of supporting somebody with a disability in recruitment and employment, providing awareness training to staff, and adapting the workplace to meet accessibility criteria. These grants are offered by the Department of Social Protection and are known as the Work and Access Scheme.

## Further resources for employers

- AHEAD and Employers for Change have developed the [WIDE framework](#) to support organisations to hire, retain and promote more disabled people, and create more inclusive workplaces.
- The Irish Business and Employers Confederation (Ibec) and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU), in partnership with Employers for Change have developed a [Reasonable Accommodation Passport Scheme](#) designed to support disabled employees who require workplace adjustments or accommodations to record and communicate their needs more easily.
- Recruiting and/or working online? This page on [Inclusive virtual recruitment and onboarding practices](#) will help raise awareness of the accessibility features of online video-conferencing platforms.
- This [handy guide to inclusive recruitment](#) looks at job specification, language, disclosure and testing.
- [Willing Able Mentoring \(WAM\)](#) is a work placement programme coordinated by AHEAD which promotes access to the labour market for graduates with disabilities and build the capacity of employers to integrate disability into the mainstream workplace.
- [WAMs Top 5 Tips for Recruiting Graduates with Disabilities Video](#) offers employers easy to implement practices to remove barriers in the recruitment process.
- Interested in finding out more? Visit [www.apprenticeship.ie](http://www.apprenticeship.ie) and the [AHEAD website](#).

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- Sample of testimonials which can be included on [apprenticeship.ie](http://apprenticeship.ie) as part of the guidance on being disability-inclusive in the workplace.



## Electrical Instructor

My name is Ronan, and I am an electrical instructor with Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board (LCETB). I was working as a self-employed electrician and in October 2022 I got food poisoning and had to be hospitalised. While in hospital my legs swelled, and I lost mobility of my legs and arms. I couldn't breathe and passed out and spent the next 2 weeks in a coma on life support. My family were called in to the hospital on three occasions as the Doctors thought I would not make it. When I woke up, I could only move my head and was paralysed from the neck down and I was diagnosed with Guillain-Barre syndrome

which is a condition in which a person's immune system attacks the peripheral nerves. I spent 8 months in hospital and was told it was very likely I would never again walk. In rehab I had to learn to walk again which was very challenging. My hands were not fully functioning enough to return to my role as an electrician. I still must wear leg and arm supports every day. A friend who was an instructor encouraged me to apply for the instructor role in the training centre. I applied and advised them of my disability, which they didn't see it as an issue, I got the job and only for this role I would still be on disability allowance. I am forever grateful to the ETB for giving me a chance to be an electrical instructor. I am really enjoying the role and it has given me a purpose again."





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