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## **Revista de Cercetare si Interventie Sociala**

ISSN: 1583-3410 (print), ISSN: 1584-5397 (electronic)

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Revista de cercetare și intervenție socială, 2024, vol. 85, pp. 79-93

<https://doi.org/10.33788/rcis.85.4>

Published by:  
Expert Projects Publishing House



On behalf of:  
„Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University,  
Department of Sociology and Social Work  
and  
HoltIS Association

# Disability Inclusion in the Workplace: Perspectives of Romanian Human Resources Specialists

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## Abstract

In Romania, people with disabilities (PWDs) represent 18% of the working-age population. Yet, participation in the workforce for PWDs is very low. This study is a cross-sectional, online survey of human resources (HR) specialists from 82 companies activating in Romania that aims to assess the extent to which companies hire PWDs, evaluate the perceived barriers to employing PWDs, and identify potential strategies to facilitate the employment of PWDs. Participants are mostly women (81.5%), are hired by companies located in Bucharest (42.7%), Cluj (15.9%), and Brasov (7.3%), and belong to the service sector of activity (61%). The 33/82 companies from the study that employ PWDs collectively hire 739 PWDs. After employing an individual with disabilities, 63.6% of the companies do not offer any type of training/workshops for typical employees. The most reported challenge in employing PWDs is the fact that qualified PWDs are hard to find (36.6%). The HR specialists mentioned that the most useful information that would persuade companies to hire PWDs would be information showing how employing PWDs has benefited other companies in the same sector (79.3%).

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**Keywords:** Romania; people with disabilities; employment; human resources specialists.

## **Introduction**

### *Employment of people with disabilities (PWDs) in Europe*

In 2020, 24.9% (or 92 million people) of the EU's 27 inhabitants aged 16 or older reported a disability, with 7.2% declaring a severe disability and 17.7% a moderate disability. In the 20-64 age group, there are 43.7 million people with disabilities and only 22.2 million are employed. Data available for this age group shows that the employment rate for PWDs was roughly 51%, compared to 75% for people without disabilities (European Commission, 2021). This suggests an important gap in the employment rate for PWDs. The EU legal framework, guided by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (European Commission, 2023c), promotes non-discrimination for PWDs in various areas, including employment. Yet, the employment situation for people with disabilities can vary widely across countries and states due to differences in policies, access to education, economic conditions, and social attitudes (OECD iLibrary, 2023).

### *Employment of PWDs in Romania*

The latest statistics from the National Authority for Persons with Disabilities show that 853,465 PWDs live in Romania. Out of these, 49% are between 16 and 64 years old and represent around 18% of the working-age population. Participation in the workforce for PWDs is very low (46.8%) compared to those of individuals without disabilities (75.7%) (European Commission, 2023a). In addition, Romania has the lowest employment rate of people with severe disabilities among all EU countries (Grigoras *et al.*, 2021).

### *Policies relevant to labor market integration of PWDs*

Romania ratified the UNCRPD on 31 January 2011 (United Nations Human Rights Treaty Bodies, 2023), with the first country report due in March 2013. Yet, the report has been submitted almost 10 years later, in March 2022 (Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2023). During this time, Romania has made several policy changes to stimulate the employment of individuals with disabilities. First, the Labor Code forbids discrimination in employment on the grounds of disability (Codul Muncii, 2022). Second, the right of PWDs to employment accommodations and fair treatment at work is promoted by the Law on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Disabled Persons (Law no. 448/2006). This law stipulates that both private and state employers with at least 50 employees are subject to a 4%

employment quota. In addition, they can access subsidies for equipment purchases, workplace modifications, training costs, and transportation of PWDs. Yet, the impact of Law No. 448/2006 on the insertion of PWDs in the labor market is limited since employers prefer to pay the corresponding fines rather than hire PWDs (Baciu and Lazar, 2017) and they are reluctant to adapt workplaces to accommodate the needs of PWDs (Birau, Dănăciță and Spulbar, 2019). Moreover, the Romanian government also falls short in its role as an employer: no ministry employs the required number of PWDs (Grigoras *et al.*, 2021). Third, the National Strategy on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities ‘An equitable Romania’, 2022-2027 (Ministerul Muncii și Solidarității Sociale, 2022), adopted in April 2022, also promotes the employment of PWDs by increasing access to employment, increase the quality of employment, and increase access to professional training for PWDs. Yet, despite this encouraging legislation, it is challenging for PWDs to secure a workplace that enables them to earn enough money to independently support themselves and their family (European Commission, 2023b). Conversely, recruiting employees with disabilities can be a challenge for employers (Grigoras *et al.*, 2021).

### *Barriers and enables to the employment of PWDs*

A survey of the literature published on this topic (Lengnick-Hall, Gaunt and Brooks, 2007) found that the main reason reported by employers who avoid hiring PWDs is the PWDs’ lack of necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities for job execution. Other reasons included negative reactions on behalf of co-workers and/or customers, insufficient knowledge about the economic incentives to hire PWDs, and lack of substantial economic incentives to hire PWDs. Other studies suggest that among the most important barriers to work integration of PWDs are the supervisors’ and co-workers’ stereotypes (Colella and Bruyère, 2010) and discriminatory attitudes (Grigoras *et al.*, 2021) as well as their concern regarding the lower job performance of PWDs (Burge, Ene Ouellette-Kuntz and Lysaght, 2007), as well as lower productivity (McCary, 2005).

On the other hand, factors that enable hiring PWDs include the existence of a formal disability hiring policy and disability training (Araten-Bergman, 2016). In addition, employers were found more likely to hire PWDs when they had previous experience with PWDs (Chan *et al.*, 2010; Copeland *et al.*, 2010).

### *Aim of the study*

Potential effective strategies to support labor market integration of PWD have been outlined in the latest European Semester 2022-2023 Romanian country fiche on disability equality (European Commission, 2023b) and recommend “bridging the gap between employers and employees with disabilities” (European Commission, 2023b) by taking steps towards reducing the factors that discourage or prevent

employers in recruiting and retaining PWDs. In line with these strategies, this study aimed to assess the extent to which Romanian companies hire PWDs, evaluate the perceived barriers to employing PWDs from the perspective of human resources (HR) specialists, and gauge the opinion of HR specialists on potential strategies to facilitate employment and retention of PWDs.

## **Methodology**

### *Study design*

This study is a cross-sectional, online survey of HR specialists from 82 companies activating in Romania and has been carried out with the support of Ascendis Consulting SRL, the largest consulting firm in organizational culture in Romania, in March-June 2023.

### *Eligibility and Ethical Approval*

Subjects were eligible if they confirmed being 18 or older, worked as an HR specialist, and accepted to participate in the study. Participants have provided written informed consent before being allowed to access the study's survey. Ethical approval was obtained from the Scientific Council of Babes-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca, Romania (approval #1956 /17.02.2023).

### *Data collection*

Data was collected using a self-administered online survey distributed by (a) Ascendis to their institutional partners, (b) through the LinkedIn platform to HR specialists in Romania, and (c) on social media mailing lists with a human resources profile. The average time needed to complete the survey was 11 minutes.

### *Data collection tool*

The survey consisted of four sections: (1) general questions about the company: county, company's activity profile, sector of activity, number of employees, employees' average age, knowledge about Law no 448/2006 and its application across their company, and number of employees with disabilities. (2) Employees with disabilities: number of employed PWDs, their type of disabilities, recruitment strategies for PWDs, and workplace adaptations made for PWDs, as described by Moody and colleagues (2016) (Moody *et al.*, 2017). (3) Strategies to increase employment of PWDs: barriers to hiring PWDs and factors associated with the employment of PWDs (Moody *et al.*, 2017), and types of information that could be useful in persuading companies to hire PWDs. (4) Information about the responder: age, gender, ethnicity, position within the company, length of time in that position,

total years of experience in the work market, interaction with individuals with disabilities, and attitudes towards employing a person with disabilities. The latter has been measured on a 7-point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree to 7= strongly agree) using the Perceived Barriers to Employing People with Disabilities (PBED) Scale (Breen, Havaei and Pitassi, 2019).

### *Data analysis*

Descriptive statistics (valid %, mean, SD, range – where relevant) have been used to describe the sample in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, and years of experience in the job market. In addition, descriptive statistics have been used to describe the company's profile in terms of the company's activity profile, sector of activity, number of employees, employees' average age, knowledge about Law no 448/2006 and its application across their company, and number of employees with disabilities.

Principal component analysis was conducted to assess the psychometric properties of the PBED Scale. Internal reliability was also assessed using Cronbach's alpha. Responses to open-ended questions have been analyzed using inductive thematic analysis. Chi-square and Pearson correlations have been used to evaluate the associations between variables of interest.

## **Results**

### *Description of surveyed companies and respondents*

Participants in our survey are mostly employed by companies located in Bucharest (42.7%), Cluj (15.9%), Brasov (7.3%), Iasi (6.1%), Sibiu (6.1%), Timis (6.1%), Arad (2.4%), Constanta (2.4%), Galati (2.4%), Ilfov (2.4%), Arges (1.2%), Bihor (1.2%), Bistrita (1.2%), Braila (1.2%), and Prahova (1.2%). The profiles of the companies and the sector of activity are listed in Table 2.

The mean age of the employees in these companies is 36.1 (SD=6.2, range: 20-50). Additional characteristics of the companies participating in the survey are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of companies participating in the survey

		N	%*
Profile	Manufacturing industries	18	22.2
	Construction	4	4.9
	Trade	11	13.6
	Transport, storage, and telecommunications	8	9.9
	Services, including hotels and restaurants	21	25.9
	Financial intermediation	3	3.7
	Education	7	8.6
	Health and social services	8	9.9
	Extraterritorial organizations and bodies	1	1.2
Sector of activity	Service	50	61
	Production	20	24.4
	Trade	11	13.4
	Other	1	1.2
Number of employees	1-9	8	9.8
	10-19	3	3.7
	20-49	13	15.9
	50-249	23	28.0
	250-499	6	7.3
	500-999	5	6.1
	1000 or over 1000	24	29.3

Note: \* = valid %

Virtually all HR specialists who participated in our survey reported being of Romanian ethnicity. Most respondents were female (81.5%). The mean age of the survey participants was 39.2 years (SD=7.38, range 22-55). In terms of years of experience, participants have, on average, 7.4 years of experience in the current position (range 0.3-25 years, SD=6.64), 7.44 years of experience in the current company (range 0-30 years, SD=7.22), and 17 years of total work experience

(range 2.5-37 years, SD=7.87). In our sample, 30% of the respondents have a PWD in their immediate or extended family. Regarding interactions with PWDs, 53% of the sample mentioned interacting with PWDs several times in the last year or less. On the other hand, 2.4% of subjects interact weekly, and 13.4% interact daily with PWDs.

### *Perceived Barriers to Employing People with Disabilities (PBED) Scale*

The outcomes of the principal component analysis rendered a Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin coefficient of .771, indicating the adequacy of the sample. Cronbach's Alpha of the PBED items was .812 indicating high internal consistency. Given these results, a BPED score was computed. The minimum score was 9, indicating more positive attitudes toward employing PWDs. The maximum score was 48, indicating more negative attitudes toward employing PWDs. The average score was 26.7, (SD=9.01, range=9-48). Examining the relationship between the BPED score and other variables of interest in the dataset, there is a negative, negligible statistically significant correlation between the BPED score and the years of experience in the current working passion. ( $r(82)=-.229$ ,  $p=.038$ ). This suggests that HR specialists who have less years of experience in their current position may hold more negative attitudes toward PWDs. There was no association between having a family member with disabilities and the PBED score ( $F(0.620) = 51.160$ ,  $p=0.433$ ).

### *Awareness about and application of the Law no. 448/2006*

The provisions of Law No. 448/2006 do not apply to 26.8% of the companies represented in the survey because they employ less than 50 people. Yet, awareness regarding this law was relatively high among the sample, with 63.4% of subjects reporting that they are aware of all its requirements. Only 2.4% of subjects have never heard of this law. Among the companies to which this law applies, the 4% employment quota for PWDs is met by only 14.6% of them, while 35.4% of the companies represented in this survey make monthly payments to the state budget because they are not meeting this requirement. At the same time, 23.2% of the companies are purchasing services from sheltered units.

### *Employing PWDs*

Only less than half of the subjects mentioned that PWDs are employed in their companies (46.3%). The rest of the subjects did not have access to this information (2.4%) or were not sure about this information (9.8%), whereas 41.5% mentioned that, to their knowledge, no PWDs is employed in their company. When asked about the number of PWDs employed in their companies, only 33 respondents mentioned being aware of how many individuals with disabilities are employed in their company. These 33 companies (40%) are currently employing 739 PWDs.

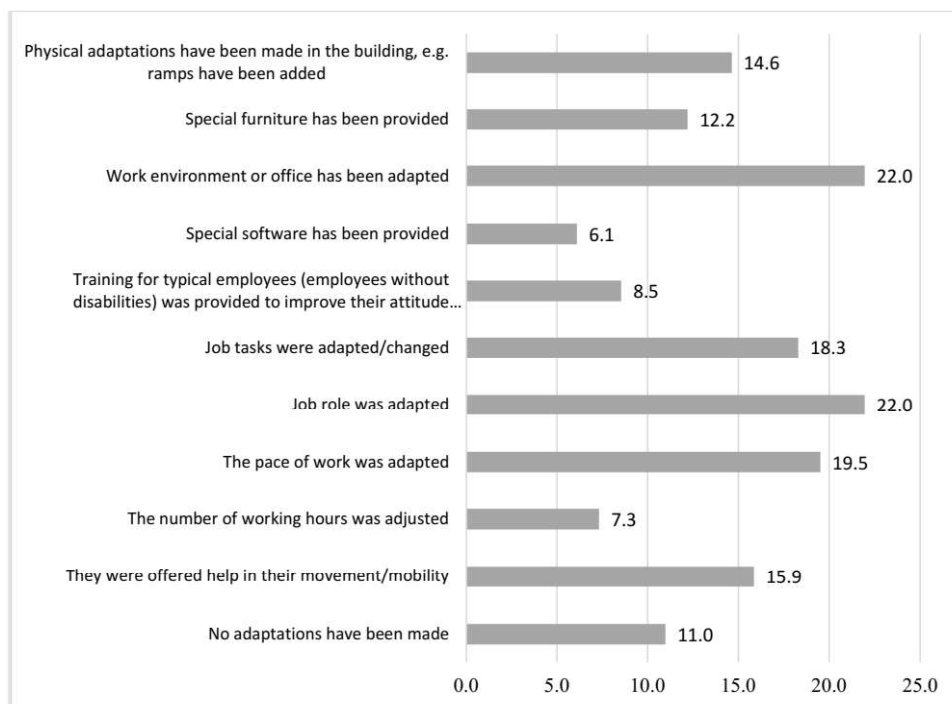


Yet, more than half of these (450 PWDs) are employed by only one company. Therefore, the remaining 32 companies collectively employ 289 PWDs. In the last year, only 20 companies have employed individuals with disabilities.

In terms of types of disabilities, the PWDs who are employed in these companies have physical (75.6%), visual (40%), hearing (28.9%), mental or psychological disabilities (15.6%), and 4.4% have HIV/AIDS.

### *Workplace adaptations made for PWDs*

After employing an individual with disabilities, 63.6% of the companies do not offer any type of training/workshops for typical employees. Yet, 18.2% provide this type of training periodically or provide this type of training to typical employees who are working directly with PWDs. In most cases, companies have adapted the work environment and the job role to meet the needs of PWDs. The list of adaptations made for PWDs among the surveyed companies is presented in Figure 1.



*Figure 1. Adaptations made for employed PWDs (%)*

Barriers to employing PWDs

Based on Figure 2, the most important challenge in employing PWDs is the fact that qualified PWDs are hard to find (36.6%). Second, the nature of the work conducted in the companies represented in the survey cannot be conducted effectively by PWDs (26.8%). Third, there is the issue of the lack of knowledge or information about PWDs (25.6%). The least important barrier for HR specialists involved in the study was the lower productivity of PWDs as compared to the productivity of typical employees.

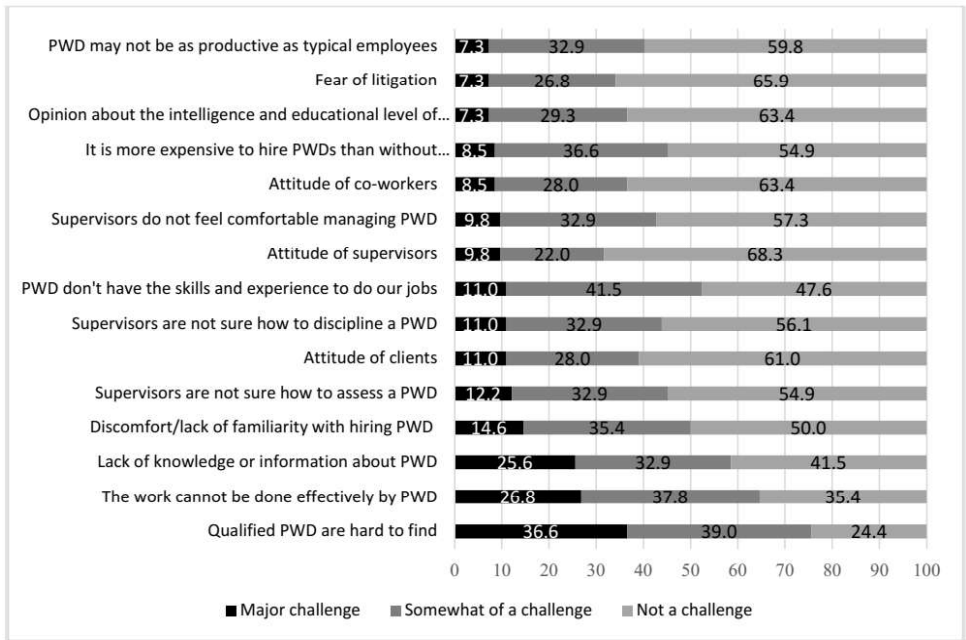


Figure 2. Barriers to employing PWDs

In addition, Table 2 lists the types of reasons HR specialists have offered for their companies not employing PWDs along with relevant quotes.

*Table 2. Selected quotes describing reasons for not employing individuals with disabilities*

Reason	Quote
Not a good fit with the requirements of the company/job	<p>"They (PWDs) are not a good fit for the positions within our company" (Subject 85, female, age 43, 22 years of experience in the current position)</p> <p>"The activities within the company are not exactly suitable for people with physical and mental disabilities because they involve the production of parts in compliance with quality standards as well as their physical handling" (Subject 50, female, age 39, 4 years of experience in the current position)</p>
Lack of qualifications	"There are no PWDs who are qualified for the jobs we need" (Subject 73, female, age 48, 16 years of experience in the current position)
Supervisor reluctance	"Managers' reluctance to integrate PWDs" (Subject 37, male, age 35, 5 years of experience in the current position)
Lack of productivity	<p>"There is the idea that they (PWDs) cannot do their job as efficiently as other people." (Subject 82, female, age 39, half a year of experience in the current position)</p> <p>"We place great emphasis on numbers and key performance indicators (KPIs) and it is probably considered that a person with disabilities would not face such a stressful work environment" (Subject 23, male, age 33, 2 years of experience in the current position)</p>
Lack of trust	"Lack of trust. For PWDs to apply for any open position and for employers fearing that they would not know how to manage such an employee" (Subject 49, female, age 40, one year of experience in the current position)
Lack of interest on behalf of PWD	<p>"PWDs do not apply for jobs in the market, and they are hard to find." (Subject 11, female, age 37, 5 years of experience in the current position)</p> <p>"We are not informed that there are PWDs interested in applying to available jobs." (Subject 25, female, age 29, 4 years of experience in the current position)</p>

*Type of information that may enable companies to hire PWDs*

The HR specialists mentioned that the most useful information that would persuade companies to hire PWDs would be information showing how employing PWDs has benefited other companies in the same sector (79.3%), information that is supported by statistics or research (79%), and information showing how employing PWDs can increase the productivity of the company (78%). The least helpful information would be information on the costs associated with accommodating PWDs in the workplace (9.8%) and information showing how employing PWDs has benefited nationally recognized companies (9.8%).

## Discussion

The aim of this study was to assess the extent to which Romanian companies hire PWDs, evaluate the perceived barriers to employing PWDs from the perspective of HR specialists, and gauge the opinion of HR specialists on potential strategies to facilitate employment and retention of PWDs.

Our findings raise the issue of Law No. 448/2206's ineffectiveness in promoting the employment of PWDs by highlighting the low number of PWDs employed by the 82 companies covered in our survey (these companies collectively employ 739 PWDs). To put this into perspective, only 14.6% of these companies meet the 4% employment quota for PWDs specified in the law, and 35.4% of them prefer to pay the associated fines instead. The Romanian government also falls short in its role as an employer: no ministry employs the requisite amount of people with disabilities (Grigoras et al., 2021). The law stipulates that if employers fail to comply with this obligation, they must pay a monthly fine equal to the gross national minimum wage (3000 RON in 2023 or 600 EUR) for each job reserved for a PWD, or half of this amount if they pay for goods or services produced by PWDs working in sheltered units. Other European countries (Germany, France, Austria, Belgium, Italy, or Spain) have also adopted the quota system, though with slight, potentially more effective, changes. For example, German employers with more than 20 employees need to meet a 5% quota for PWDs (Disability: IN, 2023). Otherwise, they need to submit a compensatory payment of up to 320 EUR for each mandatory job for PWDs.

In terms of types of disabilities, the PWDs who are employed in the 82 companies have physical (75.6%), visual (40%), hearing (28.9%), mental or psychological disabilities (15.6%), and 4.4% have HIV/AIDS. Contrasting our findings with the share of PWDs in employment by the of disability in Romania, the numbers show that the highest employment rates are among people with somatic disabilities (38.4%), followed by individuals with auditory disabilities (12%) (Asociația Profesională Nguvernamentală de Asistență Socială ASSOC, 2012).

Previous data also shows that the discriminatory attitudes of some employers add to the employment gap faced by Romanian PWDs (Grigoras *et al.*, 2021). Usually, employers claim that it is impossible to identify candidates with the qualifications and competence necessary for the advertised positions. In agreement with this statement, our findings also show that 36.6% of the samples report that the most important challenge in employing PWDs is the fact that qualified PWDs are hard to find. Yet, qualitative research (Grigoras *et al.*, 2021) has revealed preconceptions about the employability of people with disabilities, the lack of cost-effectiveness of hiring them, the potential challenges brought on by mental health issues, or the training and accommodations they may require in the workplace. In line with these findings, our results also show that respondents who less years of experience in their current position (but not more years of experience in the work market) hold more negative attitudes toward employing PWDs. Interestingly, in our sample there was no association between having a family member with disabilities and the attitude of HR specialists regarding their employability. This is consistent with a study published in 2015 that found out that employer's attitudes were not correlated with having "a personal relationship" with a PWD (McDonnall, Crudden and O'Mally, 2015).

Only 18.2% of the companies covered in our survey provide some type of disability training to typical employees. This is unfortunate since current studies show that the existence of disability training is one of the two factors that enable hiring PWDs, along with the presence of a formal disability hiring policy (Araten-Bergman, 2016). Therefore, one of the recommendations put forward in this paper is to systematically support the development and implementation of disability training services and materials readily available to employers as a means to foster employment of PWDs.

Due to demographic shifts and the aging of the population, the current workforce is aging and there are employee shortages in specific occupations all across Europe (Eurofound, 2022). As many PWDs can and want to work (Gühne *et al.*, 2021), work integration of PWDs could become a solution to this problem. Therefore, the PWDs could represent a valuable asset for the labor market, as long as the barriers to the employment of PWDs are lifted. In our study, respondents mentioned that the most useful information that would persuade companies to hire PWDs would be information showing how employing PWDs has benefited other companies in the same sector (79.3%), followed by information that is supported by statistics or research (79%), and information showing how employing PWDs can increase the productivity of the company (78%).

## Conclusion

Our study describes the perspectives of a convenience sample of HR specialists on the barriers to employing PWDs from the perspective of HR specialists and gauges their opinions on potential strategies to facilitate employment. Thus, our study opens the door for further research into the strategies that might support Romanian employers to integrate PWDs into the work market.

While our study provides valuable insights, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. First, the findings are based on a convenience sample of HR specialists. As the subjects who decided to respond to the survey might be more interested in the topic of PWDs' employment than those who did not, our findings might be influenced by selection bias. Second, due to the convenient nature of the sample, our results lack generalizability across Romanian companies in terms of employment of PWDs. Future research of this kind should adopt a random sampling technique, to ensure selection bias is avoided.

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