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NETWORK

► Disability inclusion in small and medium-sized enterprises



Analysis of a survey among National Business
and Disability Networks

- Disability inclusion in small and medium-sized enterprises

► Table of contents

► Executive summary	1
► Introduction	3
► Results	5
Share of SMEs in NBDNs worldwide	5
Barriers for SMEs to promote disability inclusion	7
Emerging and promising practices	8
► Conclusion and recommendations	10
► Key resources	11

► Executive summary

While small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) generate the majority of employment opportunities worldwide, their visibility in promoting the employment and inclusion of persons with disabilities has been low, compared to the efforts of multinational enterprises - including those global companies that are members of the ILO Global Business and Disability Network (GBDN).

A bilingual (English and Spanish) survey by the ILO GBDN aimed to explore how SMEs could be better supported in their efforts to become inclusive of persons with disabilities was sent to the 36 National Business and Disability Networks (NBDNs)¹ that were members of the ILO GBDN at the end of 2021, and then again to those NBDNs who did not initially respond, at the beginning of 2023. This report is based on responses from both rounds of the survey, equating to 21 responsive NBDNs in total.

Main findings

While typically there are more medium-sized enterprises represented in NBDNs than small enterprises, the share of SMEs in the total company membership base of NBDNs is relatively small, with multinational enterprises commonly representing the majority of company members in NBDNs. In more than half of the NBDNs, SMEs constitute less than a quarter of the total company membership base.

According to most of the NBDNs, SMEs face barriers when it comes to promoting disability inclusion because companies lack disability awareness, knowledge on available support (including government support), committed individuals (at higher management levels) as well as funding for disability inclusion work. Sometimes, companies also do not see an advantage in disability inclusion. However, many NBDNs shared there are many opportunities for SMEs to promote disability inclusion, in comparison to bigger companies and multinational enterprises, such as:

- Since the number of employees in SMEs is lower, it can be easier to carry out trainings on disability inclusion.
- There tend to exist more agile contracting processes, enabling persons with disabilities to enter SMEs as employees relatively quickly.
- In SMEs, there can be more flexibility regarding the creation and adjustment of job roles and SMEs tend to be responsive in providing workplace adjustments for persons with disabilities, when needed.
- SMEs are often deeply embedded in local communities, which provides opportunities for them to make a meaningful impact on disability inclusion at the grassroots level.

SMEs ultimately can take a more personalised approach to disability inclusion in the workplace, as they often have closer relationships with their employees. This applies both to hiring persons with disabilities as well as retaining those who acquire a disability while already being employed.

Many NBDNs described that there are already existing initiatives and stakeholders, typically Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs) or foundations, working on disability inclusion in SMEs in their respective country. Some of these organisations develop training or coaching programmes for persons with disabilities or provide technologies or assistive devices for persons with disabilities.

¹ NBDNs provide country-level platforms for SMEs, nationally or regionally operating companies as well as local branches of multinational enterprises for peer-to-peer exchange and support on disability inclusion issues, in collaboration with relevant non-business actors like local and international Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs). NBDNs are sometimes hosted by bigger employers' and business member organisations.

Examples of promising practices

- In the United Kingdom, the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) focuses on supporting small businesses to succeed by working on public policy issues. FSB launched a campaign called “Business without Barriers”, which aims to make workplaces more inclusive and accessible for persons with disabilities.
- In Australia, the Council of Small Business Organisations Australia (COSBOA), has developed guidance on what would make it easier for small businesses in the country to employ persons with disabilities.
- In Nigeria, the National Commission for Persons with Disabilities, a government agency, works to promote the rights and welfare of persons with disabilities and collaborates with various stakeholders, including SMEs, to promote disability inclusion in the workplace and in entrepreneurship.
- In Saudi Arabia, the Ministry of Labor and Social Development has launched several initiatives such as the Mowaamah Programme, to promote the employment of people with disabilities in the private sector, including in SMEs.
- In China, the Stanford Social Innovation Review is working with the Leping Social Entrepreneur Foundation to establish a Disability Inclusion Incubation Lab, which has raised awareness on the value of hiring persons with disabilities in SMEs.
- In Zambia, the Sani Foundation has developed a job coaching programme, through which the foundation has facilitated employment of youth with disabilities in SMEs.
- In Kenya, the InBusiness Initiative works on economically empowering micro entrepreneurs with disabilities through skills training. Currently, this programme has reached over 750 entrepreneurs and engages with 11 public and private institutions.

Key recommendations

- Strengthen or establish direct contact with SMEs and work hand-in-hand with relevant partners at country level, including Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) and public authorities, to transfer knowledge and share experiences on the inclusion of people with disabilities in the workplace, particularly by attracting SMEs to NBDNs.
- Increase government data collection and usage, support and technical guidance to SMEs on promoting job opportunities for people with disabilities.
- Conduct awareness raising initiatives on the value and business case of hiring and employing people with disabilities, including through media campaigns.
- Incentivise the employment of persons with disabilities in medium-sized enterprises through specific requirements stipulated by buyers in global supply chains those medium-sized enterprises are already or want to become part of.
- Provide capacity building to SME-relevant employers’ associations to enable them to provide disability inclusion guidance to SMEs, including through supporting existing or launching new NBDNs.
- Encourage multinational enterprises to share their lessons learned on disability inclusion with SMEs.
- Disseminate information on already existing tools and guidance (see also “Key resources” at the end of this report).

► Introduction

SMEs are providing for more than two thirds of jobs worldwide and account for the majority of new employment.² SMEs typically have fewer than 250 employees but represent a large proportion of enterprises across the world. In the member countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), SMEs account for approximately 99% of all enterprises, providing the main source of employment.³ SMEs are an important player in providing job opportunities as they represent most enterprises globally and they have the potential to offer employment to persons with disabilities, too.

There are an estimated 1.3 billion people with disabilities in the world, with most of them being in working age. However, persons with disabilities are unemployed at much higher rates than persons without disabilities. In fact, seven in ten persons with disabilities are outside of the labour force, compared to four in ten persons without disabilities. Further, the employment gap between persons with disabilities and persons without disabilities increases with age. Intersecting identities of persons with disabilities, e.g. their gender identities, can further aggravate their disadvantage in the labour market.⁴

Although SMEs can be a key player when it comes to providing job opportunities to persons with disabilities, there is relatively little research on the role SMEs actually have in employing persons with disabilities.



Figure I: Two smiling colleagues working at a café

The ILO GBDN sent a bilingual questionnaire, in English and Spanish, on disability inclusion in SMEs to the 36 NBDNs that were part of the ILO GBDN at the end of 2021, and then again at the beginning of 2023 to those NBDNs who did not initially respond.

Participation in this questionnaire was voluntary, and respondents were made aware that their responses would be published.

NBDNs provide country-level platforms for SMEs, nationally or regionally operating companies as well as local branches of multinational enterprises for peer-to-peer exchange and support on disability inclusion issues, in collaboration with relevant non-business actors like local OPDs. Although NBDNs share the common goal of promoting disability inclusion and raising awareness on disability issues among companies at national level, they are diverse in terms of financial sustainability, host organisation, membership, and access to resources - to name a few examples.

² [ILO \(2019\) The power of small: Unlocking the potential of SMEs](#)

³ [OECD \(2017\) Enhancing the contributions of SMEs in a global and digitalised economy](#)

⁴ [ILO \(2022\) New ILO database highlights labour market challenges of persons with disabilities](#)

The ILO GBDN questionnaire had three specific aims:

1. Identify how many companies that are part of a country's respective NBDN are small enterprises (10 to 49 employees) and medium-sized enterprises (50 to 249 employees).
2. Understand what the most relevant barriers for SMEs are to promote disability inclusion, in comparison to bigger companies and local branches of multinational enterprises.
3. Assess how the ILO GBDN and international development partners could support SMEs' disability inclusion efforts.

The questionnaire contained seven questions. The first three questions were related to company membership of NBDNs – asking how many companies are members of their NBDN, how many company members they categorise as small enterprises, and how many company members they categorise as medium-sized enterprises. Following these questions, NBDNs were asked about what they see as the specific, most relevant barriers for SMEs to promote disability inclusion, in comparison to bigger companies and local branches of multinational enterprises.

The next questions asked NBDNs about what they perceive as the most relevant opportunities for SMEs to promote disability inclusion, in comparison to bigger companies and local branches of multinational enterprises, and if there are currently any initiatives and/or stakeholders working on

disability inclusion in SMEs in their respective country. Lastly, the questionnaire asked how the ILO GBDN and international development partners could support SMEs' disability inclusion efforts in their respective country.

The ILO GBDN expresses its gratitude to the NBDNs that took the time to complete the questionnaire and share their insights and experiences on the topic of disability inclusion in SMEs. Special thanks go to Aria Tung, Junior Project Officer on Disability Inclusion, who led the results analysis and report writing – under supervision by Jürgen Menze, Technical Specialist on Disability Inclusion. Dragan Radic, SME unit head, Henrik Moller, Senior Specialist on Employers' Relationships, and Stefan Trömel, Senior Specialist on Disability Inclusion, provided insightful feedback to improve a draft version of the report.



Figure II: World map indicating countries with National Business and Disability Networks

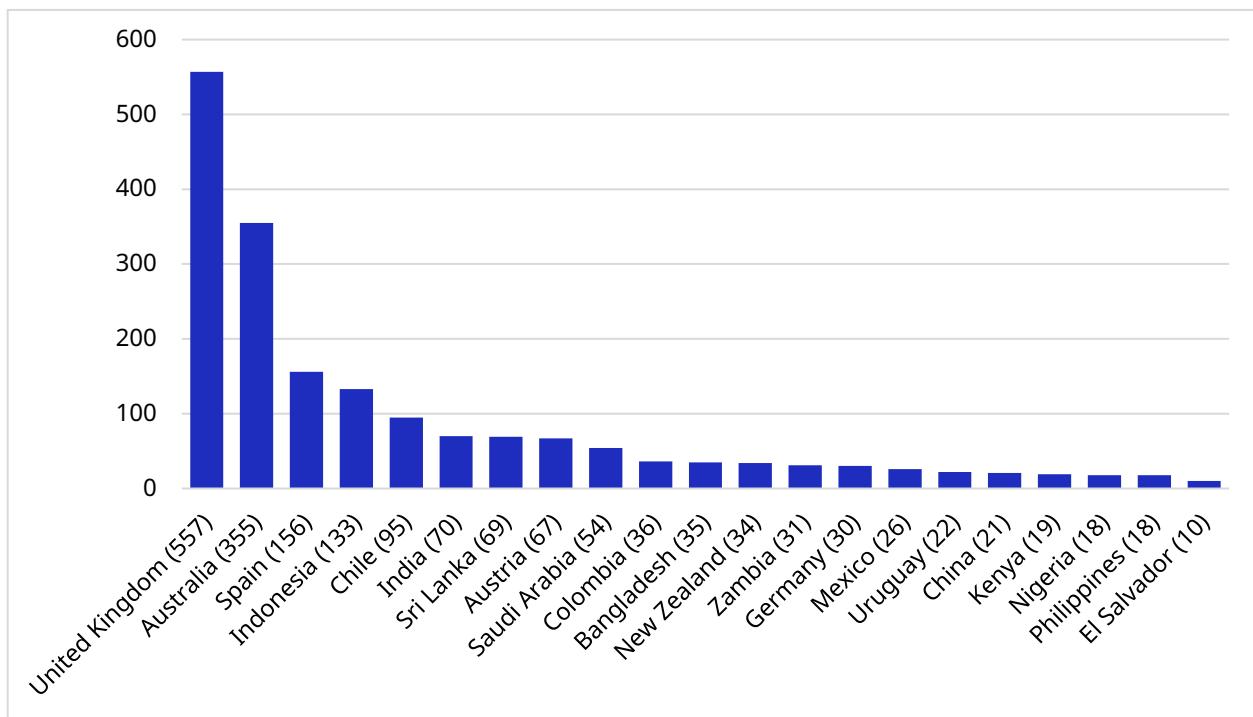
► Results

Share of SMEs in NBDNs worldwide

The first question asked to NBDNs was "How many companies are members of your NBDN?".

Most NBDNs have between 20 to 70 company members, independent of those companies' size. The NBDNs in the United Kingdom, Australia, Spain and Indonesia are outliers by having 557, 355, 156 and 133 company members respectively - significantly more than the other NBDNs.

Chart I: Number of company members in NBDNs



The next two survey questions asked how many company members NBDNs would categorise as small enterprises and then how many company members they would categorise as medium-sized enterprises.

The table below details the total number of company members of each responsive NBDN, and the breakdown of the absolute and relative number of SMEs, followed by the same for small enterprises, and then for medium-sized enterprises.

Table I: Company members in NBDNs, by number and share of SMEs, small enterprises and medium-sized enterprises

NBDN	Total number of company members	Number of SME members	Share of SME members in total company members	Number of small enterprise members	Share of small enterprise members in total company membership	Number of medium-sized enterprise members	Share of medium-sized enterprise members in total company membership
Australia	355	42	11.8%	14	3.9%	28	7.9%
Austria	67	14	20.9%	6	9.0%	8	11.9%
Bangladesh	35	2	5.7%	1	2.9%	1	2.9%
Chile	95	49	51.6%	2	2.1%	47	49.5%
China	21	1	4.8%	0	0%	1	4.8%
Colombia	36	4	11.1%	2	5.6%	2	5.6%
El Salvador	10	10	100%	2	20.0%	8	80.0%
Germany	30	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
India	70	unsure	N/A	3	4.3%	unsure	N/A
Indonesia	133	133	100%	54	40.6%	79	59.4%
Kenya	19	12	63.2%	5	26.3%	7	36.8%
Mexico	26	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
New Zealand	34	12	35.3%	2	5.9%	10	29.4%
Nigeria	18	2	11.1%	1	5.6%	1	5.6%
Philippines	18	3	16.7%	1	5.6%	2	11.1%
Saudi Arabia	54	14	25.9%	5	9.3%	9	16.7%
Spain	156	24	15.4%	14	9.0%	10	6.4%
Sri Lanka	69	69	100%	21	30.0%	48	70.0%
United Kingdom	557	26	4.7%	5	0.9%	21	3.8%
Uruguay	22	19	86.4%	5	22.7%	14	63.6%
Zambia	31	31	100%	10	32.3%	21	67.7%

The total number of enterprise members in NBDNs ranges from 10 companies (El Salvador) to 557 companies (United Kingdom).

El Salvador, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Zambia are the only countries where all of the company members of their respective NBDN are SMEs. Except for Uruguay, Kenya and Chile, which have SMEs representing 86.4%, 63.2% and 51.6% of their total company membership base respectively, the remaining 14 NBDNs have less than 40% of their company members being SMEs.

In more than half (55%) of NBDNs, SMEs constitute less than a quarter of the total company membership base.

For all NBDNs, the number of companies that are categorised as small enterprises (10 to 49 employees), is relatively low in comparison to the overall number of companies that are members in the respective NBDN. Except for Indonesia, which has 54 small enterprise members, every other NBDN has fewer than 22 small enterprise members. For more than two thirds of NBDNs (15 out of 21), the percentage of small enterprises makes up less than 10% of their total company membership.

As for medium-sized enterprises (50 to 249 employees), all NBDNs have fewer than 30 medium-sized enterprises as company members, except for Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and Chile, which have 79, 48, and 47 medium-sized enterprise members respectively. For almost two thirds of the NBDNs (13 out of 21), the percentage of medium-sized enterprise members is less than 30% of their total company members.

Barriers for SMEs to promote disability inclusion

In response to the question "What do you see as the specific, most relevant barriers for SMEs to promote disability inclusion, in comparison to big companies and local branches of multinational enterprises?" the answers varied, and each barrier was relevant, as no single barrier was overrepresented or underrepresented in NBDNs' responses.

It is important to highlight that for the initial questionnaire sent out at the end of 2021, respondents could only choose one option, whereas in the questionnaire sent out at the beginning of 2023, the answer option was multiple choice.

Respondents were given five potential barriers to choose from:

1. Lack of disability awareness and understanding.
2. Lack of knowledge on available support, including government support.
3. Lack of committed individuals (at higher management).
4. Lack of funding.
5. Companies don't see an advantage in disability inclusion.

1) was chosen by 14 NBDNs, 2) by 13 NBDNs, 3) by 13 NBDNs, 4) by 10 NBDNs, and 5) by 9 NBDNs.

In general, for most of the NBDNs, SMEs face barriers when it comes to promoting disability inclusion in their company because of a lack of disability awareness and available support, including government support, as well as a lack of committed individuals at higher management levels.

In addition to the five potential barriers offered to respondents to choose "Yes" or "No" to, there was also the option in the survey to respond with "Other," and share views on additional barriers. One NBDN explained the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on SMEs, severely impacting their ability to address disability issues, while a few NBDNs described the lack of support from SMEs' Human Resources units and generally a lack of human resources in SMEs.

The next question asked was "What do you see as the specific, most relevant opportunities for SMEs to promote disability inclusion, in comparison to big companies and branches of multinational enterprises?". Although a wide range of responses were shared, some of the most common answers were:

- SMEs' smaller teams can facilitate more personal contact, including with jobseekers and employees with disabilities, which could ultimately lead to a shared culture of inclusion within the company.
- Since the number of employees in SMEs is lower, it can be easier to carry out trainings on disability inclusion.
- There tend to exist more agile contracting processes, enabling persons with disabilities to enter SMEs as employees relatively quickly.
- In SMEs, there can be more flexibility regarding the creation and adjustment of job roles and SMEs tend to be responsive in providing workplace adjustments for persons with disabilities, when needed.
- SMEs are often deeply embedded in local communities, which provides opportunities for them to make a meaningful impact on disability inclusion at the grassroots level.

Emerging and promising practices

NBDNs were asked if there are already initiatives and stakeholders working on disability inclusion in SMEs and asked to describe them. Many NBDNs shared that there are already ongoing initiatives and existing stakeholders working on disability inclusion in SMEs in their country - typically NGOs or foundations or partnerships between companies. Some of these organisations develop training or coaching programmes for people with disabilities or provide assistive technologies or devices for people with disabilities. Others aim to raise awareness on disability inclusion in SMEs specifically.

A few NBDNs noted that they can count on **government support on disability inclusion for SMEs** in their respective countries.

- The Austrian Ministry for Social Affairs is putting in effort to support and advise SMEs on disability inclusion. A country-wide advisory system funded by the government had been launched in the past.
- In Australia, there are government-funded organisations assisting with job access for persons with disabilities and there are disability employment services that benefit SMEs.
- In New Zealand, most of the SME-related disability inclusion work happens through government support by placing persons with disabilities in SMEs.
- In Saudi Arabia, the Ministry of Labor and Social Development has launched several initiatives such as the Mowaamah Programme, to promote the employment of people with disabilities in the private sector, including in SMEs. Further, the Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage recently launched a programme to train persons with disabilities the necessary hospitality skills enabling them to work in SMEs in the tourism industry.
- In Nigeria, the National Commission for Persons with Disabilities, a government agency, works to promote the rights and welfare of persons with disabilities and collaborates with various stakeholders, including SMEs, to promote disability inclusion in the workplace and entrepreneurship.

Although the majority of NBDNs did not mention government support specifically, many described **programmes and initiatives created by NGOs or foundations** that work to promote disability inclusion in SMEs.

- In Nigeria, there are several initiatives and stakeholders working on disability inclusion in SMEs. Many local and international organisations are actively engaged in promoting disability inclusion in the workplace. One of these organisations is Sightsavers - an international disability NGO and a non-business associate member of the ILO GBDN - which promotes disability inclusion in SMEs by creating economic empowerment programmes that provide skills training and entrepreneurial support to persons with disabilities.
- In China, the Stanford Social Innovation Review works with the Leping Social Entrepreneur Foundation to establish a Disability Inclusion Incubation Lab, which has successfully raised awareness about the value of including persons with disabilities in SMEs.
- In Zambia, the Sani Foundation has developed a job coaching programme, through which the foundation has facilitated employment of youth with disabilities in SMEs.
- In Spain, the social enterprise Inserta, provides training and advice services for hiring persons with disabilities, specifically at SMEs.

Employer and Business Membership Organizations (EBMOs) focussing on SMEs can also act as enablers of the employment of persons with disabilities by SMEs.

- In Australia, the Council of Small Business Organisations Australia (COSBOA) aims to promote and support the development of small businesses in the country and works with the government to highlight issues that need to be addressed to support small businesses. COSBOA launched an employability project in 2018, completing research for the National Disability and Careers Advisory Council. The project aimed to

understand what the barriers are for SMEs to employ persons with disabilities and provides recommendations to help dismantle those barriers.⁵

- In the United Kingdom, the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) focuses on supporting small businesses to succeed, including by working on public policy issues. FSB launched a campaign called “Business without Barriers”, which aims to make workplaces more inclusive and accessible for persons with disabilities. As part of the campaign, a report was published, which outlines how to support persons with disabilities in the workforce, specifically in SMEs.⁶

The last question of the survey asked respondents “How could the ILO Global Business and Disability Network and international development partners support SMEs’ disability inclusion efforts in your respective country?”. Similar to previous questions, diverse answers were provided. Some of the key themes include:

- Raise awareness and generate more discussions on the value of hiring people with disabilities; for instance, creating campaigns, promoted through various media platforms, that showcase how employees with disabilities can benefit companies.
- Provide training opportunities tailored to meet the specific needs of SMEs, as well as guidelines, toolkits and statistical data showing business advantages for SMEs when employing persons with disabilities.
- Work hand-in-hand with like-minded partners in each country and engage SMEs in relevant discussions more closely, so that partners can transfer knowledge to and share experiences on the inclusion of people with disabilities with SMEs.
- Share case studies of successful initiatives on supporting SMEs in the area of disability inclusion that governments and other non-business actors could adapt and replicate.
- Government support to create programmes and partnerships with SMEs to provide persons with disabilities with job opportunities.

⁵ [COSBOA \(2018\) Employing people with disability in small business - what would make it easier?](#)

⁶ [FSB \(2022\) Business without barriers: Supporting disabled people and those with health conditions in the workforce](#)

► Conclusion and recommendations

As SMEs provide the largest proportion of jobs globally and can offer employment opportunities for many people around the world, it is imperative to understand how persons with disabilities can be included as workers in SMEs.

Due to the relatively small size of SMEs, they generally have more flexibility and less restrictions when it comes to their hiring processes. Moreover, SMEs may also have more flexibility in adapting job roles and create new positions or alter current ones to be inclusive of persons with disabilities.

SMEs can also take a more personalised approach to disability inclusion in the workplace, as they often have closer relationships with their employees. This applies to both hiring persons with disabilities and retaining colleagues who acquire their disability on-the-job. Further, the more personalised approach can also provide opportunities to deliver disability and accessibility-related trainings and spread awareness about disability issues more effectively.

Although SMEs may have more opportunities to hire and include persons with disabilities in their companies, there are important barriers to consider. These include a lack of disability awareness and a lack of available support, including funding, which impacts SMEs' ability to hire more persons with disabilities.

These challenges are typically more pronounced for small enterprises, compared to medium-sized enterprises. Since SMEs typically have fewer resources than larger companies, it is even more important for local organisations, including OPDs, to partner with SMEs and for governments to support and implement programmes which promote the employment of persons with disabilities in SMEs.

Key recommendations

- Strengthen or establish direct contact with SMEs and work hand-in-hand with relevant partners at country level, including OPDs and public authorities, to transfer knowledge and share experiences on the inclusion of people with disabilities in the workplace, particularly by attracting SMEs to NBDNs.
- Increase government data collection and usage, support and technical guidance to SMEs on promoting job opportunities for people with disabilities.
- Conduct awareness raising initiatives on the value and business case of hiring and employing people with disabilities, including through media campaigns.
- Incentivise the employment of persons with disabilities in medium-sized enterprises through specific requirements stipulated by buyers in global supply chains those medium-sized enterprises are already or want to become part of.
- Provide capacity building to SME-relevant employers' associations to enable them to provide disability inclusion guidance to SMEs, including through supporting existing or launching new NBDNs.
- Encourage multinational enterprises to share their lessons learned on disability inclusion with SMEs.⁷
- Disseminate information on already existing tools and guidance (see also "Key resources" at the end of this report).



Figure III: A group of colleagues smiling at work

⁷ The example of Thales, Metro, Schneider Electric, Capgemini, TotalEnergies – the latter three being ILO GBDN company members – is illustrative, see [Association des Paralysés de France \(2016\) Emploi et handicap : 5 grandes entreprises boostent les PME](#)

► Key resources

► [ILO Infostory "The Win-Win of Disability Inclusion"](#)

This InfoStory by the ILO, available in three languages, explains why employing people with disabilities makes good business sense for private companies, and how enterprises can help promote inclusion.

► [Business Disability Forum's SME Toolkit](#)

The toolkit provides practical advice and guidance for all small and medium-sized businesses and start-ups on what being disability-smart means and how it can benefit organisations of any size.

► [Small Business and Disability Employment: Steps to Success](#)

Developed by the Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability (EARN), this toolkit provides strategies for recruiting and retaining persons with disabilities in SMEs.

► [ILO GBDN Charter resources](#)

Organised by the ten principles of the ILO GBDN Charter, dozens of disability inclusion resources for businesses are featured on the ILO GBDN website.

► [Guide for business on the rights of persons with disabilities](#)

Developed jointly by the United Nations Global Compact and the ILO and available in six languages, this guide suggests concrete actions companies can take to implement good disability inclusion practices.

► [International Training Centre of the ILO's "Disability in the Workplace: A Global Perspective"](#)

In this interactive course, employers, experts and persons with disabilities share their experiences to enable organisations to plan, implement and audit their disability inclusion strategy.



We are the world's only coming-together of leading multinational companies working with the ILO - the United Nations agency for the world of work - to the benefit of business, persons with disabilities and economies and communities worldwide. As ILO Global Business and Disability Network, we aim to promote decent work for persons with disabilities in the private for-profit sector – with a geographical focus on developing countries. At global level, our Network comprise more than 35 leading multinational enterprises from diverse industry sectors as well as several international non-business entities with specialised disability expertise, including the International Disability Alliance. At the level of individual countries, more than 35 National Business and Disability Networks on all continents pertain to our Network.

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