

business foundation for education



Project: 2020-1-N001-KA204-076508

BULGARIA NATIONAL REPORT

**I01: INCLUSION CHAMPION PROFILE
DESK AND FIELD RESEARCH**

Work-Aut

Leveraging WBL to foster professional inclusion of people affected by Autism Spectrum Disorder

Author: FONDATSIYA NA BIZNESA ZA OBRAZOVANI



Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union



This companion has been written in the framework of the "Work-Aut: Leveraging WBL to foster professional inclusion of people affected by Autism Spectrum Disorder" project, co-funded by the European Commission in the Erasmus+ programme - KA2 – Strategic Partnership - Project N. 2020-1-NO01-KA204-076508.

The European Commission's support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents, which reflect the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein. <http://www.workauteurope.com/>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

Co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union



INDEX

1. Summary.....	pag.1
2. Aim and Scope of the National Report	pag. 2
3. National situation of the inclusion of people affected by ASD in the labour market	pag. 3
3.1 Policies and strategies	pag. 4
3.2 Legislative framework	pag. 5
3.3 Identification of the problems (prejudices and barriers)	pag. 8
3.4 Implications for employers and young adults with ASD.....	pag.13
4. Relevant studies on inclusion of people affected by ASD in the labour market	pag. 15
5. Best Practices	pag. 19
6. Desk research – Interviews’ evaluation	pag. 25
7. Conclusions	pag. 35
8. References	pag. 37

1.Summary

The Autistic Spectrum Disorder is a complex disability affecting daily functioning throughout people's life. The level of disability varies, indicating that some people with ASD might be highly functional, yet they often feel excluded for many mainstream educational and professional opportunities. People with ASD in Europe need special support, but they often face high level of discrimination in all the different aspects of their lives, including education and professional training, which respectively leads to poor levels of employment. The employment rate for people with ASD in Bulgaria is under 10%, far below the 47% for people with other disabilities and 72% for people without disabilities. People with ASD are often under-employed, working in insecure and short-term jobs with very low levels of payment, often in institutions and protected environments and they are at a high risk of social exclusion and even poverty without any support from family or friends.

Despite the attempts to establish a legal framework for equal treatment and access to the labour market, people with ASD face a lot of challenges in terms of their opportunities for personal and professional development – social security, work conditions, minimum pay, indisiscrimination, specialized support in education and the transition towards employability, ensuring qualitative and inclusive employability with equal pay and overall improvement of their quality of life.

2. Aim and scope of the National Report

The goal of this national report is to provide an overview of the current situation in Bulgaria in terms of professional inclusion and integration of people with ASD.

The report will outline the existing legislative framework and policies ensuring integration of people with disabilities in the social and professional life, addressing the gaps and needs, as well as the challenges they face.

Several good practices on the inclusion of people with ASD in the labour market in Bulgaria will be presented. At the end of the report are summarized the results of a short survey among various professionals, outlining their point of view on the ways in which it is possible to bridge the gap between the target group, the institutions and the organizations in the labor market.

3. National situation of the inclusion of people affected by ASD in the labour market

According to Eurostat data from 2017, 19% of Bulgarians report the presence of health problems, which hinders their social activity, and every fifth Bulgarian over the age of 16 has a long-term physical disability. At the same time, statistics show that Bulgaria is among the top three countries with the lowest number of people with permanent disabilities of working age. Nearly 45% of Bulgarians over the age of 65 have permanent disabilities. Statistics for people over the age of 75 show that six out of ten people have similar problems.

When it comes to inclusion of people affected by ASD in the labour market, we need to mention that there are no policies or strategies in Bulgaria specifically targeted to people with ASD. People with ASD are included in a more general context, that of people with disabilities and mental health problems. The legislative framework and strategies in Bulgaria address this broader and more general context.

The preliminary desktop research reveals that the main efforts in terms of integrating people with ASD are directed mainly towards early life initiatives which aim to help children with ASD get access to appropriate educational opportunities that would prepare them for better social and professional integration later on in life. There are different organizations, mainly in the non-government sector which try to implement various educational initiatives for children with ASD, but it seems there is no unified state policy of providing specialized education to people with ASD.

The inclusion of people affected by ASD in the labour market is still a highly underdeveloped area in Bulgaria. There are no established clear pathways, just a national strategy directed towards ensuring employment opportunities to people with disabilities, which currently has more of a documental value than a practical application. Also the designated percentage of people with disabilities that could potentially get employment access is very low and dependent on the size of the company/organization that would provide employment.

The beginnings of some good practices in terms of labour inclusion can be observed in the private employment sector, where mainly foreign companies operating on the local market, with 100+ number of employees introduce some policies for providing employment opportunities to people with ASD, by adopting specialized programs from their headquarters abroad. Though positive, the examples of such practices are still very few and mainly existent due to the specific company's overall global policy and not so much on national, government-provided opportunities.

3.1 Policies and strategies

The current policies and strategies in Bulgaria are intended for the larger context of people with disabilities and mental health problems. As we noted above, there are no specified strategies addressing specifically people with ASD.

Some of the main documents containing guidelines and regulations related to people with disabilities and mental health problems are:

- a) National strategy for people with disabilities 2021-2030 – includes measure to improve the quality of life for people with disabilities
- b) National program for employment and education of people with permanent disabilities – promotes employment opportunities for people with disabilities

The government has adopted a National Strategy for People with Disabilities for the period between 2021-2030. The goal of this strategy is to eventually contribute to the establishment of better conditions and opportunities for people with disabilities to exert their rights and be able to equally participate in the different areas of public life with the other Bulgarian citizens.

The strategic goals of the document include: establishing the necessary conditions so that people with disabilities could lead an independent life, ensuring their social inclusion; improve their quality of life; gain access to social protection, qualitative inclusive education, health care, employment and appropriate work conditions.

The strategy is intended to be executed until 2030 through different action plans. A similar strategy has been in place for the period 2016 – 2020, with no significant improvements introduced in the lives of people with disabilities. Experts hope that this time the strategy will bring about real practical changes and not remain just at the level of a good document as it has happened so far.

The **National program for employment and education of people with permanent disabilities** is carried out by the Employment Agency and covers all municipalities in the country. The main goal of the program is to increase the employability and to ensure employment opportunities for unemployed people with permanent disabilities who have registered in the Labour office (24-month employment). The program also aims to encourage employers to hire people with disabilities.

3.2 Legislative framework

The labour and social realization of people with disabilities in Bulgaria is mainly regulated by two normative documents:

- Law on People with Disabilities /Disability Act/ – employment quotas for people with disabilities in a normal work environment
- Employment Promotion Act

The main normative act guaranteeing the rights of people with disabilities in the Republic of Bulgaria is the Law on People with Disabilities, in force since 01.01.2019.

A new comprehensive legal framework for regulating public relations related to the exercise of the rights of people with disabilities in the country is introduced with the law. The impact in the field of employment, living standard and quality of life of vulnerable groups, namely people with disabilities, continues to be a major focus of the legislation in that field, as well as the focus on accessibility.

The law introduces “a quota principle”, borrowed by international good practice, which ensures the maintenance and sustainability of the jobs for people with permanent disabilities. The public spending of funds in the form of subsidies for employing people with permanent disabilities is linked to fulfilling the commitments regarding the quota principle, with a view of improving public and corporate social responsibility. Mechanisms for encouraging employers, using incentives and preferences are also regulated.

The law regulates the provision of equal access to education and vocational training, rehabilitation, justice, physical environment, work and leisure, personal mobility, transport, information and communications, including information and communication systems and technologies and all other public services in urban areas, etc.

In terms of the quota principle the Law on People with Disabilities regulates the obligation for employers to ensure a certain percentage of people with permanent disabilities to be employed as a measure to support this vulnerable group of Bulgarian citizens. The purpose of the law is to significantly increase the share of people with disabilities working in the open labor market, not just in specialized closed labour environment, thus creating an environment in which people with disabilities can be significantly independent, yet maintaining their rights concerning social protection, adequate social services, integrated education and learning, appropriate work environment, accessible living environment, etc.

According to the law, Bulgarian companies with personnel headcount 50+ are obliged to hire people with disabilities. Through intended to ensure employment of people with permanent disabilities in the normal working environment, this measure provides opportunities for a very low percentage of people with disabilities: employers with personnel headcount ranging from 50 to 99 employees must provide work for at least **one person with permanent disabilities**. Employers with 100 or more employees and workers must provide work to people with permanent disabilities in a number equal to **2 percent of their current headcount**.

In order to meet its quota for recruitment of employees and workers with permanent disabilities, the employers follow a procedure whereby they inform the territorial divisions of the Employment Agency about the vacancies, the required employee profiles, and the necessary qualification and professional skills. Within three months of being notified, the employer is required to employ people with permanent disabilities who meet the requirements for employment at the workplace.

Under the law, persons with permanent disabilities are defined to include "persons with permanent physical, mental, intellectual and sensory impairment who may impede their full and effective participation in public life and to whom the medical expertise has established a degree of disability of 50 and over 50 percent."

In case of noncompliance with the obligation, the employer will be liable to pay a monthly compensation contribution in the amount of 30 percent of the minimum wage for each vacancy for a person with permanent disability that has not been filled.

Employers providing work opportunities to people with disabilities are subject to certain support provided by the state – the employers get reimbursed by the state budget for 30/50% of the insurance contributions; financial aid is also provided for the adaptation of the workplace to fit the needs of the people with disabilities, necessary equipment, to ensure health and safety work conditions, etc.

Another important law, which guarantees equal access of people with disabilities to the labour market, is the Law on Protection against Discrimination. It regulates protection against all forms of discrimination and helps prevent it, and its purpose is to ensure that everyone has the right to equality before the law, equality in treatment and opportunities to participate in public life and effective protection against discrimination. The Employment Promotion Act also talks about direct and indirect discrimination when it comes to mental and physical disabilities.

3.3 Identification of the problems (prejudices and barriers)

People with disabilities in Bulgaria face numerous challenges and barriers, which are the results of the main existing problems in the country, including: social exclusion and isolation, access to proper education, employment opportunities, equal access to health services and others. The same challenges are fully valid for people with ASD.

Disadvantaged people in Bulgaria are faced with negative stereotypes, which are the result of prejudice or cultural aspects. Such stereotypes impose misperceptions on people with disabilities, such as inferiority complex, a sense of resignation and reluctance social inclusion. That is why overcoming stigma and stereotypes in society is the main challenge for their integration.

People with ASD face numerous challenges in terms of their integration in the social and work environments, as well as in the more general context of life. Their challenges begin at a very early age where the educational system is not developed enough to provide specialists experienced in working with children and students with ASD, according to their special educational needs. This is even more valid for remote and small settlements. Furthermore, pedagogical specialists don't have access to timely and ongoing qualification/upskilling for working with children and students with special educational needs, hence teachers often lack the knowledge and the approach to teaching and preparing children with ASD. Not many specialized schools for children with ASD existed until recently. This is a trend that is changing gradually as more specialized schools are being established, but this is a slow process and mainly concentrated in the bigger cities, when rural areas still remain cut off from such educational care.

Part of the problem is also related to lack or insufficient coordination and partnership between parents and institutions. It is also necessary to develop individual curricula in which children and students with special educational needs can receive more attention and appropriate care. The existing low level of awareness of the rights of people with disabilities and the existing prejudices among the general public and in schools, very often leads to rejection and exclusion.

We could say that the educational system does not provide the appropriate school conditions for children with ASD, taking in consideration their specialized needs, which often leads to early stage drop out and exclusion.

Since October 2017, the Inclusive Education Ordinance has been in operation in Bulgaria. It was last amended in 2018. Inclusive education is a process of recognizing, accepting and supporting the individuality of each child or student and the diversity of needs of all children and students through activating and including resources aimed at removing barriers to learning and creating opportunities for development and participation in all aspects of community life. This regulation regulates all possibilities for additional support for children with special educational needs, children at risk and children with outstanding gifts. In Bulgaria, "children with special educational needs" refers to children with sensory disabilities, physical disabilities, multiple disabilities, intellectual impairments, specific learning needs, language and speech impairments, autism spectrum disorders and emotional and behavioral disorders. The philosophy of inclusive education is based on the so-called "social approach" which, unlike the medical approach, does not consider child impairment solely as a problem related to a disease. The social approach sees the disability as a problem of exclusion from ordinary social life because of social barriers in the environment - attitudes, prejudices, attitudes, stereotypes, etc.

Inclusive education is realized as a general and additional support for personal development, which provides an appropriate physical, psychological and social environment for the development of students' abilities and skills.

This regulation is a good step towards inclusion, but it is important to note that in Bulgaria the attitude towards children with special educational needs is still not positive enough. According to the experts, the main attitudes among the principals and teachers regarding students with special educational needs can be summarized in the following directions:

- Ignorance of the nature of inclusive education
- "Special students" must study in "special schools"
- Children with special needs require specialist care
- Schools do not have sufficient funds in their delegated budgets to recruit the necessary staff to work with these students
- Lack of appropriate didactic materials, textbooks and teaching aids
- The student with special educational needs requires all the attention of the teacher and there is no time left for the other students
- Administrative and logistical difficulties

The attitudes cited above indicate that a number of problems need to be resolved in order for the Ordinance to fulfill its main objectives. Although 28 regional centers have been established around the country to support the inclusive education process, there is still work to be done to provide sufficient staffing and additional training for teachers to be more prepared to work with children and students with special educational needs. In this sense, the complete fulfillment of the potential of the Inclusive Education Ordinance is still pending.

When it comes to the integration of adults with ASD in the labour market, the challenges are similar. On one hand companies and employers lack information on Autistic Spectrum Disorder and often view people with ASD as handicapped, unreliable and unable to work. Employers also fear potential problems at the workplace, thus often approach hiring people with ASD or other types of disabilities with prejudice. On the other hand, HR specialists are not prepared to handle the hiring process of people with ASD and meet their peculiarities, which would require them to change and adapt the hiring process. When it comes to accommodating people with ASD, employers also need to consider rearranging the work environment in a way that fits the special needs of people with ASD. For example, due to the high level of anxiety and problematic communication, people with ASD might need to use headphones while working, due to their high sensitivity to sounds.

They might need to have a specific light in the room (darker) to feel comfortable; they might not want to use their lunch break because they have difficulty socializing with others; they might feel more comfortable communicating through digital platforms, instead of verbally, etc. All of these specific aspects require time and resources to be able to accommodate people with ASD in the workplace and many companies are not willing to do that.

Bulgaria has tried to tackle that problem with a clause in the Law on People with Disabilities, obliging companies with a headcount of 50 and above to hire a certain percentage of people with disabilities. The state is trying to encourage companies to do that by providing certain incentives for those that hire people with disabilities, but unfortunately the percentage mentioned in the law is very low and despite the existing very often these legal requirements remain unfulfilled and no further actions are taken.

Another challenge is that the existing National program for providing employment opportunities to people with disabilities is too general, intended for people with all types of disabilities, but it does not take into consideration the specifics of the disability and hence its requirements, for example what kind of workplace adjustments will be needed to meet the needs of people with ASD; what kind of preparation will be needed by HR and hiring professionals to be able to adapt the recruitment of people with ASD; what kind of work environment adjustments need to be made by employers to meet the needs of employees with ASD, etc.

Some additional challenges include:

- The need to acquire certain habits of social coexistence and responsible behavior that are presented in some cases and is an essential condition for achieving social integration: weak communication skills, lack of empathy etc.
- The insecurity and lack of job stability to which the disabled person can gain access, as well as the low salaries, which are largely related to the low levels of qualification and specialization.

- The need for specific public services that help people with disabilities to join the labor market, allow them to promote themselves from an employment exchange and perform the job intermediation tasks.
- Social prejudices and barriers that remain deeply rooted especially in the rural world, as well as discrimination of the person and social rejection because of their disability, which often explains the feeling of low self-esteem and brings with it discrimination and social exclusion.

Last, but not least, it is important to mention that the existence of certain laws and policies in Bulgaria (Law on People with Disabilities, a National Program for People with Disabilities, etc.), does not always imply they are being observed and implemented properly. Unfortunately, very often some policies remain just at the level of a policy / a document with no further practical developments and executive authorities that strictly observe the fulfillment of the designated clauses in the law/policy.

3.4 Implications for employers and young adults with ASD

Ensuring employment and employment opportunities for people with disabilities, and providing adequate support for workers and employers, given the specifics of this part of the workforce, remains a major challenge in Bulgaria. Adaptability and mobility in relation to the work environment, as well as applying flexible, innovative and alternative methods of workplace support for people with disabilities, according to their personal characteristics and existing functional limitations, are still not sufficiently represented in our country. According to the Specific Recommendations given to Bulgaria by the Council of Europe, in the framework of the European Semester covering the period 2017-2020, it is still difficult for people with disabilities to lead an independent life.

A research carried out in Bulgaria on the "Employment of people with disabilities in the primary labor market - challenges and opportunities" indicates employers are concerned with the high level of protection against dismissal and the additional labour and social rights that people with disabilities have by the state. These are the major factors that influence their willingness to employ people with disabilities, along with the requirement to adapt the workplace and provide an accessible work environment. Other factors influencing their willingness or unwillingness is the lack of proper education, lack of motivation and communicative/social skills of people with disabilities.

Employers are likely to turn to employees with disabilities as a potential resource in the labor market, but want the concerns that the disability of the employee causes them (adaptation of the work and social environment, labor protection) to be compensated with support by the state - subsidizing the workplace, tax relief, projects, etc. Employers that have taken part in the survey, do not perceive the employees with disabilities as fully functional participants in the free labor market, but rather as people who have the right and opportunity to be part of employment, but if the state also participates in finding and guaranteeing employment.

On the other hand, the research among a representative part of people with disabilities reveals that they rely mainly on the Labour offices when it comes to finding employment in the open labour market. Remuneration, work environment and the sense of equality are the main motives in their choice of work. In addition, people with disabilities indicate that they don't have a special need for some kind of specific, additional support, but rather employers who are willing and not worried to hire employees with disabilities. Some of the most demotivating factors for people with disabilities in that sense are not being accepted by their colleagues, distrust from their employer and most of all lack of willingness by the employer to accept an employee with disabilities in their organization.

In summary, people with disabilities indicate they need an employer who is ready to hire people with disabilities; they need co-workers who are ready to accept someone with a disability; adapted environment if necessary, but not for a temporary employment based on a specific public program, but sustainable, long-term, full-time employment.

When it comes to people with ASD while ASD does present with a range of social communication and adaptive behavior deficits, adults on the spectrum may be extremely efficient, trustworthy, reliable, and cost-effective employees. Nevertheless, fewer than half of young adults with ASD maintain a job. Many businesses are unwilling to hire these capable candidates, concerned among other things about an increase in supervision costs and a decrease in productivity. This is a bias based on misperceptions; the financial and social benefits of hiring adults with ASD, for businesses and the individual, often outweigh the costs.

The above listed challenges place people with disabilities at a disadvantage. Their weak participation in education and the labour market leads to inequality in their income and poverty, as well as to social exclusion and isolation. A number of consistent actions and practical engagements of all stakeholders are needed to address all these barriers and, as a result, the inclusion and presence of people with disabilities in education, the labor market and social life.

4. Relevant studies on inclusion of people affected by ASD in the labour market

We couldn't find studies that are specifically conducted for people with ASD and their inclusion in the labour market. Nevertheless we were able to find some more general studies on the inclusion of people with disabilities in the labour market.

One of these studies is a research project - "Assessment of the net impact of the implementation of a comprehensive policy aimed at people with disabilities and their families" which contains a section on "Socio-economic analysis of social inclusion and labor market integration of people with disabilities and their families". This research project was conducted by a team of 18 people (lecturers, doctoral students, graduates from the Faculty of Economics at Sofia University), without any funding, on a voluntary basis. The research began in 2015 and covered a period between 2014 - 2016.

Despite the fact that this research project has conducted some comprehensive analysis on the educational preparation of people with disabilities, the number of unemployed individuals with disabilities registered in the employment offices, the professional qualification of people with disabilities (or lack of such), the public policies for the integration of people with disabilities and labour market inclusion, etc., some of the main conclusions of the research focus on the lack of discernment of the types of disabilities, as well as:

- insufficient information and data on the education of the people as per type of disability
- difficulty in distinguishing the types of disabilities in the overall data
- people with disabilities are being treated as a completely homogenous group
- the assessment of the impact monitors the sustainability without taking into consideration the types of disabilities and the specificities of the successful and sustainable integration of this vulnerable group into the labor market

- there is not enough information about the support for the integration on the labour market of people with disabilities who are not registered in the labour offices

The research concludes that in order to formulate more efficient policies for the inclusion of people with disabilities in the labour market, the following need to be taken into consideration:

- To have better statistics (scope, precision, detailness, regularity)
- To have adequate identification of the specific groups of people with disabilities
- To have specific measures for the specific groups of people with disabilities, including people with ASD
- To take into consideration the relationship between education, qualification and further realization in the labour market

Another interesting research and analysis was conducted by the National Alliance for Social Responsibility on the **“Employment of people with disabilities in the primary labor market - challenges and opportunities”** in Bulgaria. The study and analysis are part of the project "Partnership for a Better Life", implemented with the financial support of the Operational Program "Human Resources Development" 2014-2020, co-financed by the European Social Fund and the European union.

The survey regarding the employment challenges of people with disabilities in the open labour market was conducted among **three target groups**: specialists working in the social services for people with disabilities (114), employers (and potential employers) of people with disabilities in the regular labour market (30), and people with disabilities who are using social services (200). The study helped confirm or reject mass and expert assumptions about significant factors influencing this main type of employment and the way it is carried out.

What the results of this study show:

On Topic 1 of the survey: **Employment in the regular labour market** - employees with disabilities need employers who are more accepting than protective. Employers on the other hand perceive employees with disabilities being a risk, rather than a potential labour resource and they want this risk (financial and other) to be ensured and guaranteed by the state. People with disabilities would like to be full-fledged employees, on a full-time employment contract and a decent pay. Employers are reluctant to trust them mainly because of the high labour protection that accompanies them and also concerns about how they will be received by the workforce and/or whether it will be very difficult for employers (including bureaucratically) to adapt the work environment for them. Therefore, employers prefer time-limited employment programs through which they can use people with disabilities as a workforce, but without making long-term commitment.

On Topic 2 of the survey: **Educational support for employment in the regular labor market** - employers do not have any specific attitude to this topic, probably because they treat this target group of employees primarily as a temporary workforce. Social service professionals and people with disabilities see the need for training in the field of social skills (including applying for a job, preparation for a job interview and how to handle the interview itself) as well as in some specialized qualification courses.

On Topic 3: **Social services as a form of support in the regular labour market** - Employers do not have a specific view of how social services or services such as employment services can be useful to them in hiring people with disabilities. They expect that potential employees will reach them through the usual channels for this. Social services professionals see the need for expanding the scope and the type of services which support people with disabilities to develop social skills, in order to prepare themselves how to apply for a job and behave during a job interview.

People with disabilities also share the need for training for additional qualifications and social skills, but add to them an interest in working in social enterprises, which has not been "caught" by the social services specialists. The dependency of people with disabilities to look for employment even in the regular labor market, mainly through the employment offices, municipal programs or through the social services, also has not been identified by professionals as an important factor, but has a significant impact on the overall employability of people with disabilities in the regular labor market.

5. Identification of good practices at National and European level on professional inclusion of people affected by ASD

It was difficult to find good practices in Bulgaria for professional inclusion of people with ASD. There are some short-term projects during which certain activities were carried out for people with ASD. The other good practices that we found were mainly documents.

Foreign companies have tried to implement some practices in that aspect, as most of them have policies for hiring and integrating people with ASD on a global level as part of their diversity inclusion programs, but these policies have not yet been implemented in Bulgaria or the attempts to do that are yet scarce. SAP Bulgaria has tried to work with people with ASD a couple of years ago, but has hired only one person and they share that the integration process has been difficult and has required a lot of resources. Another foreign larger company that has an office in Bulgaria is VMWare who are currently trying to implement the policies they have for people with ASD on a global level at the Bulgarian office.

In the current home-office situation that makes it even more challenging taking into consideration the challenges in supervision and monitoring the work execution, as well as the requirement for active daily communication, which might pose some difficulties for people with ASD.

<i>Title of the good practice</i>	SOCIETY AND WORK INCLUSION TECHNOLOGIES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTHS WITH ASD
<i>Country</i>	Bulgaria
<i>Level</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Local <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> National <input type="checkbox"/> European <input type="checkbox"/> International
<i>Responsible organization</i>	European Software Institute - Center Eastern Europe (ESI CEE). The project has been implemented in partnership with Autism Association, Adapta Foundation, Spain, Černorizec Hrabar Varna Free University and the Bulgarian Association of Software Companies (BASSCOM)
<i>Year/Duration</i>	2007 - 2015
<i>Website of the practice</i>	https://esicenter.bg/node/38 https://switchu.esicenter.bg/
<i>Description of the good practice</i>	<p>The European Software Institute carries social initiatives which promote the talent of people with ASD for IT and express the willingness of IT companies – members of BASSCOM (Bulgarian Association of Software Companies) to provide employment for persons with disabilities in the IT sector.</p> <p>The project was implemented in several steps, including different initiatives/sub-projects, respectively in 2007, 2011-2012 and 2014:</p> <p>In 2007 ESI CEE developed a unique methodology which prepared young people with ASD to find highly qualified work, supported their parents and provoked employers to hire these people. It included four phases - identification and selection of candidates, evaluation and development plan; training involving all stakeholders - families, professionals, employers, as well as young people and children with ASD; work in a simulated work environment; and work in a real business environment.</p> <p>In 2011-2012 ESI CEE implemented a project “Model for IT training and employment of people with ASD”. It involved 20 young persons with ASD in ICT training and ICT internship in 8 ICT organizations. The project was promoted by the EC as one of the initiatives that helped people with autism to get a foothold on the employment ladder in Bulgaria.</p>

	<p>In 2014 ESI CEE further developed the employment model with the project “Society and work inclusion technologies for children and youths with ASD” (SWITCH YOU) funded by the European Economic Area and Norway Grants Fund for Regional Cooperation. A functioning model was created for the inclusion of people with disabilities in education and the labour market with the support of all stakeholders via trainings, communication with employers and involvement of the families. The developed model enabled all stakeholder organizations to continue to provide the service or organizations that plan to provide the service from the beginning with the help of the tools developed, i.e. the methodology, technological elements, results from the communication campaign.</p>
<p>Target group(s)</p>	<p>People with disabilities People with ASD Employers working with people with ASD</p>
<p>Impact</p>	<p>The project involved as direct beneficiaries 24 children and young people with autism, 32 families of people with disabilities and 10 employers.</p>
<p>Conclusions</p>	<p>The goal of the project was to support the inclusion of people with ASD in the open labour market. To achieve this a methodology was developed to help young people with ASD to find a high quality employment; individual work plans were developed and used with the chosen candidates; training was provided to all stakeholders - people with ASD, future employers of people with ASD and the families of people with ASD. The success of this initiative has led to increasing the awareness of the employability of people with ASD in the open labour market, as being an asset and a resource to the company.</p>

<i>Title of the good practice</i>	PATHWAYS FOR GUIDING EMPLOYMENT SKILLS FOR ASD
<i>Country</i>	Spain,Italy, United Kingdom, Bulgaria
<i>Level</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Local <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> National <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> European <input type="checkbox"/> International
<i>Responsible organization</i>	Foro Technico de Formacion (Spain)
<i>Year/Duration</i>	01-10-2017 to 30-09-2019
<i>Website of the practice</i>	https://pagesproject.eu/
<i>Description of the good practice</i>	<p>The project focuses on people with ASD and is articulated around three axes: intervention, education and inclusion in the labor market.</p> <p>The main objectives of the project cover:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Train people with ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder) to join the labor market. • Contribute to a methodology of inclusion of people with ASD in the labor market. • Facilitate a positive working environment for the ASD people training and also for employers, managers. • Guide the companies for the recruitment of people with ASD and facilitate the adaptation to the jobs. <p>As part of the project a written document was created for Employers: “Autism @work - Good practices for companies to create a suitable environment and a good deal for people with ASD”</p> <p>It covers information, guidelines and good practices in terms of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Autism spectrum condition and the working environment • Recruitment • Work performance • Professional trainings • Integration • Workplace Safety and others <p>As part of the project the following outputs have been developed and initiatives have been introduced:</p> <p>Intellectual output - Recommendations for Hiring People with ASD - a document outlining the different pathways for guiding employment skills for ASD.</p>

	<p>Interactive Map of Employment Support - territorial networks between related organizations of the community which gives employers and autistic individuals information in their countries about support they can access when seeking employment or when recruiting autistic people into a role.</p> <p>TP Theater Methodology - the Interactive Theater is a method with the help of which social issues and problems are raised and discussed.</p>
Target group(s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • people with ASD • Experts and professional who work with people with ASD • Professional working with ASD, employers, technicians and experts on labour inclusion issues
Impact	<p>The document provides very in-depth guidelines for employers to be able to be more prepared to integrate people with ASD in their companies.</p>
Conclusions	<p>The project was successful in producing comprehensive guidelines for employers to be able to meet the needs of people with ASD in providing the necessary environment and conditions of work. The project reached the conclusions that it is possible with small adjustments and understanding the needs of the individual, especially sensorial and behavioural needs of people with ASD to facilitate their integration and also their working performance in terms of accomplished tasks and human interaction and cooperation with colleagues.</p> <p>For this to happen, the first and most important prerequisite for implementing these measures is the existence of a culture of inclusion throughout the organisation from senior management (in order to ensure a tailored decision making process) to the working team (in order to ensure the correct implementation of given instructions).</p>

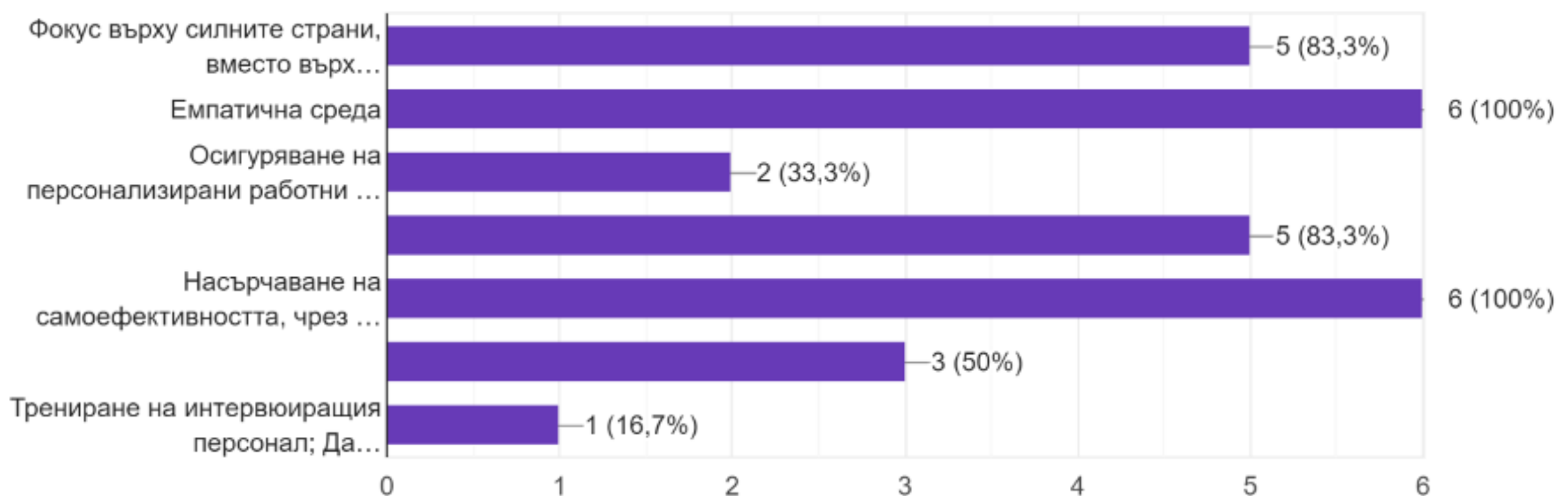
Title of the good practice	Neurodiversity Inclusion Program
Country	USA / Bulgaria
Level	<input type="checkbox"/> Local <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> National <input type="checkbox"/> European <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> International
Responsible organization	VMWare
Year/Duration	to be implemented
Website of the practice	https://www.vmware.com/company/diversity/neurodiversity-inclusion.html
Description of the good practice	<p>VMware's Neurodiversity Inclusion Program is a hiring initiative tailored towards individuals with autism. It includes enablement for recruiters, hiring teams, and candidates to engage in an interview process that is inclusive of neurodiverse individuals. It also provides a recruiting and hiring process designed to remove unconscious bias. Candidates hired through this program have access to mentorship and formal job coaching to ensure success and satisfaction in their new role. The program is part of the company's overall effort to recruit and retain a diverse staff.</p> <p>This program is mainly available in the US headquarters of the company, but the Bulgarian office has taken steps towards implementing this initiative in the Bulgarian office as well. It is an ongoing endeavor.</p> <p>The first step in this direction was the organization of an open event/talk on the topic of "Welcome Autism to the Workforce" in October 2020. The event focused on neurodiversity and the autistic spectrum. The focus was on the non-standard skills of people from the spectrum and their value as part of the workforce, in making the company more creative, more tolerant, humane and innovative. Emphasis was also put on creating an inclusive workplace and how to overcome prejudice. This initiative is intended to be one of many events, aiming to raise the awareness of this group of people.</p>
Target group(s)	People with ASD
Impact	The impact is still to be determined.
Conclusions	Still to be determined.

6. Desk research – Interviews' evaluation

Six different experts from Bulgaria participated in the field research, which is part of the first phase of the project: a career consultant in a university who is a parent of a child with ASD, a clinical psychologist working with children with ASD, ergotherapist, HR Specialist and owner of a recruitment consultancy company, pedagogical advisor in a vocational school, Team manager in an IT company and parent of a child with ASD. Due to the limitations imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic, they answered the survey questions online and shared their point of view on how to improve the services and aids of organizations and institutions to meet the needs of disadvantaged people in the field of professional inclusion.

According to the interviewed participants, the most important aspects needed for people with ASD in order to feel good and confident when entering the labour market are the **finding an empathic environment** and **promoting self-efficacy creating an autism-specific employment focusing on people capabilities to organize and perform specific tasks. All six experts have indicated these conditions as being really important.** Five of them have also indicated as necessary to create an office space/zone which is free of sensory stimuli, and also the need to focus on the strengths rather than the weaknesses.

1. Какво е необходимо, за да може хората от аутистичния спектър да се чувстват добре и уверени при навлизане на пазара на труда? * Отбележете всички приложими отговори.
6 отговора

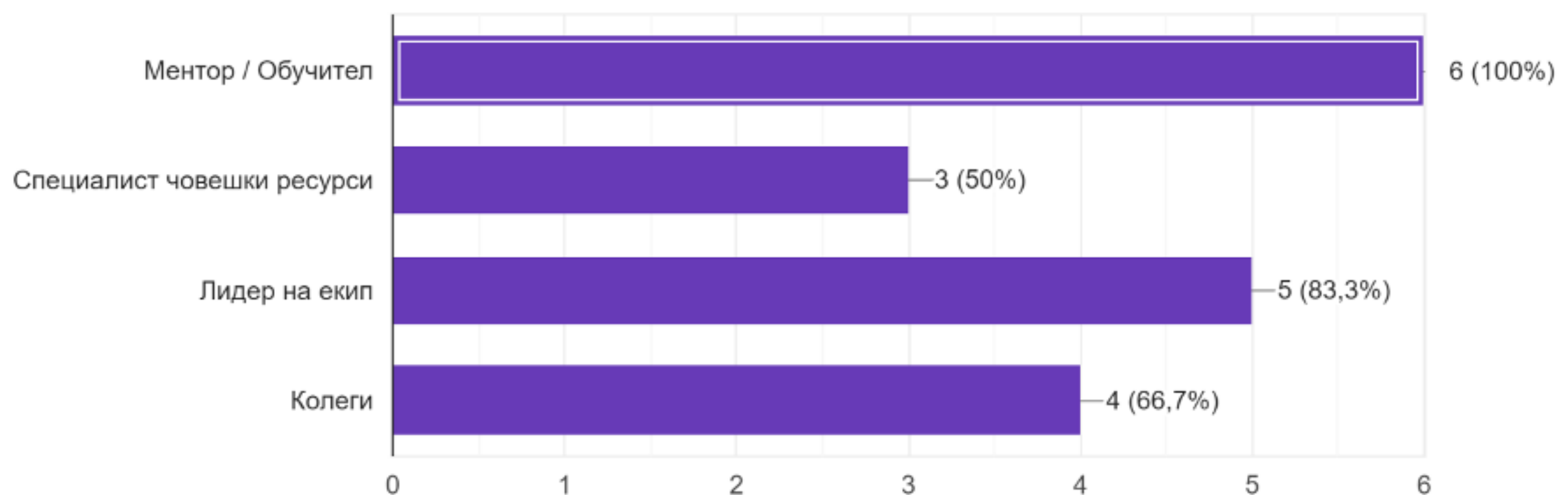


The opinions of the interviewees about the main difficulties for a person with ASD when starting a job are diverse. However, the summarized results show that the specialists consider **teamwork** to be the greatest difficulty - four of the 6 participants have given the maximum score of 5 to this possible answer, and the other two have rated it with the next grade - 4. Three participants have given the maximum score of 5 on each of the possible answers "Meeting specific requirements of an employment during the selection phase", "Difficulty in the adaptation to the new job routines: mismatch between personal and work rhythm", "Misunderstanding in social communication", as well as "Prejudices".

All participants in the field research in Bulgaria are definitive that after employment, people with ASD need to meet with a **mentor** as a matter of priority. Five of them have indicated as being important the meeting with a **team leader**, four of them have indicated meeting with a **colleague** and only three have indicated the **HR Specialist** as an important person to meet.

3. Кои са лицата, с които хората от аутистичния спектър е нужно да се срещнат приоритетно, след като получат работата?

6 отговора



To the question “In which way could ASD be a challenge in the labour market? How can we adapt this in order to change things?” most of the participants in the survey provide similar answers. According to them the main challenge is not the people themselves, but rather the prejudices about them and the low level of awareness “in society about their specifics in behaviour and social interaction”. Some of the comments confirm the challenge that has already been indicated in the report above, that “these people are usually “being hidden” at home from an early age and society has no idea what to expect of them”.

Participants have also indicated the following possible challenges:

- the fear of employers “of the inability to release a person with ASD that has been hired, if they don’t meet the standards” (due to protection by the law), which leads to them not being hired in the first place
- challenges in the socio-emotional field and specifics in the sensory processing of information
- difficulties in the adaptation to work relationships

The interviewees indicate that the most important action to overcome these challenges is to raise the awareness of the society as a whole and/or of specific target groups (employers, HR specialists), “about the possibilities and abilities of people with ASD, as well as their real limitations”.

Part of raising the awareness might be achieved by demonstrating good practices from other countries; personal stories and encouragement by government institutions to companies who have suitable social policies to create internship programs for people with ASD.

As additional actions needed to overcome the challenges of inclusion of people with ASD in the labour market, the experts indicate “the adaptation of the environment and the organization of the work process in order to reduce the stress factors and the creation of predictable work tasks through routine activities”, as well as the need for the hired people with ASD “to be integrated correctly not only in the work process, but also in the team, so everyone can feel comfortable with each other”.

According to the interviewees, people with ASD could be a resource and chance to the labour market, mostly with their specific skills and highly developed abilities, mainly in areas “where social skills are not a key component”. For the higher-functioning people with ASD these are the technical fields - IT, engineering, science, accounting, and for the lower-functioning - production sector (agriculture, cooking and confectionery, etc.).

Other qualities that can distinguish people with ASD in the labour market are their diligence, rigidity and pattern following (which would be beneficial for fields of work where such type of qualities are required), responsible execution of routine tasks, high attention to detail, analytical thinking, dedication to the work process and motivation, and last but not least, high level of loyalty to the employer and the people who treat them with understanding and acceptance.

According to one of the participants, people with ASD could be an opportunity for the labour market in Bulgaria in the role of “teachers of tolerance”.

To the question “How tutors/mentors can prepare the staff to the arrival of a person with ASD”, the interviewees answer definitively that the way to do this is by providing information to all hierarchy levels in the company - employers, managers, specialists/experts about the way of functioning of people with ASD, their personal characteristics and peculiarities, strengths and possible challenges, ideas and guidelines for being able to successfully work with these people, etc.

To be more specific, they add that this information can be disseminated by organizing talks on this topic; through audio-visual means; by presenting good practices and personal stories; by conducting workshops in which employees can generate ideas how to successfully work with people with ASD and also by role play; or by having a ready “kit” with information, techniques and everything that is required so that employers can feel prepared to successfully hire people with ASD.

In response to this question, the interviewees also indicate the need to “create comprehensive programs for developing communication and interaction skills for people with ASD”, “development of social programs which support the education process at an early stage - primary and secondary education”; “mutual activities - volunteer based - between institutions where children with ASD are educated and companies, because social skills need to be developed and maintained even before graduation of secondary school”.

The participants in the interview also share their recommendations to the question “What are the most suitable environment features? What accommodations and/or information are needed before employing a person with ASD?”

Some of the answers are more specific, others more general, but all of them indicate the understanding that the environment is an important factor for the successful adaptation of people with ASD.

According to the experts, the environment needs to be without stimuli, if possible to “provide an individual workplace which is isolated from any external noises and visual stimuli”. They also share that an open-space environment would be a challenge for people with ASD.

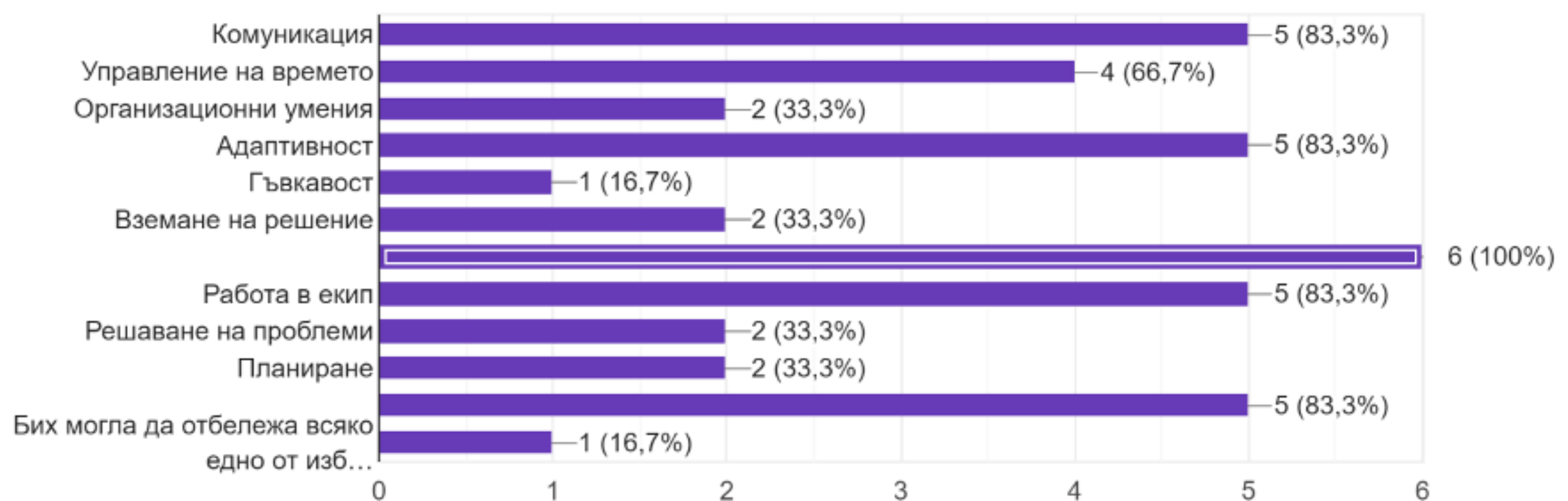
Others are very specific in their recommendations and they indicate that it is important to provide a space “which has the possibility for reducing tension as a result of hyperstimulation - a sensory room with equipment which is tailored to the specifics of the persons concerned, depending on their individual sensory “diet” - prepared on the basis of their level of hypo or hypersensitivity - tactile, proprioceptive, vestibular, auditory and visual system”.

Although all interviewees are aware that the changes in the characteristics of the environment will be specific to each individual and therefore it is necessary to clarify their personal characteristics, work skills, behavior, interests, etc., they also indicate some general specific parameters that employers need to take into consideration, namely lighting, ventilation, arrangement of the office space, phone-booth, isolation rooms, headphones, noise cancellation headphones, fidget spinners, work from home and others.

Along with all the recommendations, one of the participants in the study summarizes that it is also important to think from the point of view of employers and that from this perspective it is necessary to see which are the minimum changes in the work environment, but also the most necessary for people with ASD, “because the more an employer is expected to have to adapt to an employee, the lesser the chance of being open to the idea of hiring such a person”.

All participants in the survey are definitive that the **ability to work independently** is the important and needed skill for people with ASD to feel confident in the labour market. In addition, the following have been indicated as needed skills: **communication, adaptability, teamwork and knowledge about one's own ASD diagnosis and how it affects the person him/herself** - each one of these competences was chosen by five of the interviewees.

8. Кои са необходимите умения/компетенции, които човек от аутистичния спектър трябва да притежава или трябва да придобие, за да навлезе/за да се чувства уверен на пазара на труда?
6 отговора



To the question “How can we promote the added value for an organisation to hire someone affected by ASD in their working environ”, the interviewees give different answers.

The need and the opportunity to share good practices and develop policies in this direction are mentioned again, as well as the need for tax relief or financial support by the state. In some of the answers the idea that employers need to be more informed of the opportunities and limitations of people with ASD is mentioned again and the need to help their integration in the labour market.

The organization of seminars for employees, in which the focus is on the benefits of diversity and the development of tolerance for differences, is emphasized as an adequate and appropriate action to be taken. Another participant specifies this idea even more by proposing that employees be involved in discussion groups with cases of people with ASD or to have brainstorming sessions to discover the benefits of hiring people with ASD.

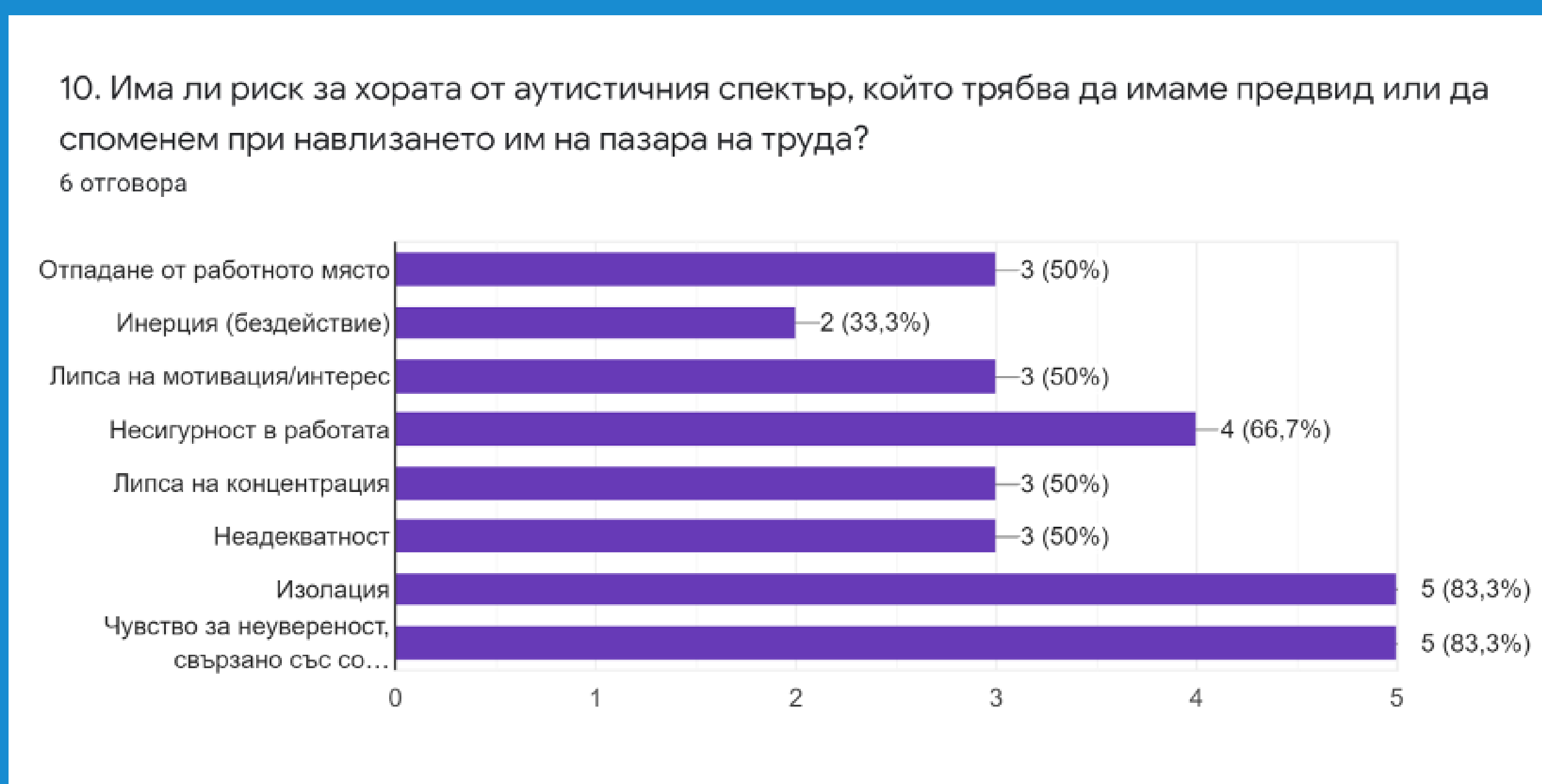
The following actions are also pointed in the answers:

- highlighting the specific skills of people with ASD for the respective business;
- focus on showing that a given person could fulfil the respective job if given the respective remuneration;
- establishment and financing of a coordination center to support people with ASD and function as a link between employers and people with ASD. The experts in this center could develop a profile of the specific person with his/her strengths and present it to companies where his/her abilities would be most applicable.

Of course, there are pessimistic attitudes in the answers as well, according to which such actions are hard to implement, especially if “the organization is mainly focused on profit and high production efficiency”.

The answer of one of the participants in a way summarizes the opinions of all the other experts - according to him the adequate actions are “being informed, supporting materials and legislation changes”.

Regarding the risks for people with ASD that are important to consider when entering the labour market, 5 respondents indicated as such the **isolation** and the **unconfident feeling related to his/her own diagnosis**. The answer **“Job insecurity”** has gathered 4 of the interviewees’ votes.



Experts believe that in order to avoid or reduce any risk for the organization, as well as for the target group, what managers and supervisors need to develop mostly is **emotional intelligence and mentoring** - these two skills have been indicated by all participants in the interview. Five of them have also indicated **communication skills** and four of the participants have chosen **flexibility**.



In summary of what was shared by the participants in the interview, we will point out some of the knowledge, skills and competencies that they think are important to be included in the "Inclusion Champion Profile" - the profile of the expert who has the knowledge and the skills required to facilitate the inclusion of people with ASD in the labour market.

Knowledge	Skills	Competences (Autonomy and Responsibility)
<p>Knowledge on the specifics of people with ASD - abilities/strengths, limitations, specifics, behavior, and specifics in terms of their way of functioning.</p> <p>Know the fundamentals of human rights protection and advocacy.</p> <p>Knowledge about the techniques and strategies for integrating people with disabilities.</p>	<p>Empathy</p> <p>Emotional intelligence</p> <p>Communication skills</p> <p>Caring and support</p> <p>Fair, honest and non-judgmental</p> <p>Tolerance</p> <p>Problem solving skills</p> <p>Flexibility</p>	<p>Be sensitive to the issues and needs of people with disabilities</p> <p>Be creative and take initiative</p> <p>Promote positive and inclusive work environment</p> <p>Inspire and motivate</p> <p>Mentorship</p>

7. Conclusions

Despite the fact that many organizations in Bulgaria already understand the importance of providing employment opportunities to people with disabilities, in particular to people with ASD, employers and people with disabilities themselves still face serious challenges and barriers. These barriers prevent people with ASD from fully exercising their fundamental rights and limit their equal participation in society. The legislation in our country is directed to people with disabilities in general and though providing a certain foundation for the social, work and general inclusion of this vulnerable group of people, it still does not take into consideration the specific needs of the different groups of disabilities, not to mention that laws remain unfulfilled without proper practical implementation. Consistent and targeted policies, actions and measures in this aspect are needed, which is something that is still underdeveloped in Bulgaria.

There are no provisions to support lifelong learning/continuous vocational training for people with disabilities. The challenges to provide a learning/school environment which is adapted to the specific educational needs of people with ASD often leads to early dropouts and young people who are not prepared enough for the needs of the open labour market, reducing their chances of finding a high-quality and well-paid employment.

Despite the efforts of the state to encourage companies to hire people with disabilities by introducing a quota system in Bulgaria, employers are often afraid to onboard people with disabilities due to the lack of experience in treating people who have special needs, lack of human resources prepared to work with people with ASD and integrate them in the workplace, the need to adapt their work environment and last but not least, concern that people with disabilities have higher level of protection by the law.

Often employers perceive people with disabilities as people that have the right to employment provided by the law, however there are no enforced sanctions or penalties if companies do not or refuse to hire people with disabilities, with the result that many companies do not fulfil the quota requirements. The challenge for companies to see people with disabilities as a real resource and benefit to the company's workforce is often due to their lack of knowledge and also lack of experience. That is why our project could be one of the steps in that direction, which proves support in fulfilling the idea of inclusion of people with ASD in the labour market.

8.References

National Mental Health Program 2017 - 2023. The state of Mental Health Care in Bulgaria

National strategy for the people with disabilities 2021 - 2030
[/https://www.mlsp.government.bg/odobrena-e-natsionalna-strategiya-za-khorata-s-uvrezhdaniya-za-perioda-2021-2030-godina/](https://www.mlsp.government.bg/odobrena-e-natsionalna-strategiya-za-khorata-s-uvrezhdaniya-za-perioda-2021-2030-godina/)

National Health Strategy 2020

Attitudes of society towards mental health and towards mentally ill. Results of a sociological survey conducted within the framework of the project "We understand and support you" under the program BG07 "Public Health Initiatives"; 2016

National Program for employment of people with permanent disabilities [/https://www.az.government.bg/pages/nacionalna-programa-zohtu/](https://www.az.government.bg/pages/nacionalna-programa-zohtu/)

Employment Promotion Act

[/https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/natlex4.detail?p_lang=en&p_isn=60386/](https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/natlex4.detail?p_lang=en&p_isn=60386/)

Research project "Inclusion of people with disabilities in the labour market"

https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Ralitsa-Simeonova-Ganeva/publication/319532581_Vklucvane_na_pazara_na_truda_na_horata_s_uvrezhdania/links/59b1a7e5458515a5b4893d00/Vklucvane-na-pazara-na-truda-na-horata-s-uvrezhdania.pdf

National Alliance for Social Responsibility

<https://naso.bg/13-news-naso-bg/3289-analiz-na-naso-zaetost-hu-2019>

SOCIETY AND WORK INCLUSION TECHNOLOGIES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTHS WITH ASD

<https://switchu.esicenter.bg/>

PAGES:PATHWAYS FOR GUIDING EMPLOYMENT SKILLS FOR ASD

<https://pagesproject.eu/>