



Leadership skills
for inclusive & diverse teams

Leaders with disability for more equal opportunities in the labour market

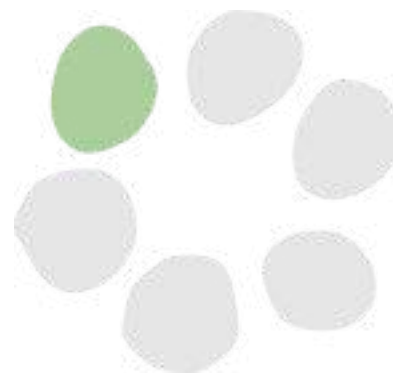
FIT2LEAD POLICY PAPER

2023-1-AT01-KA220-ADU-000159508

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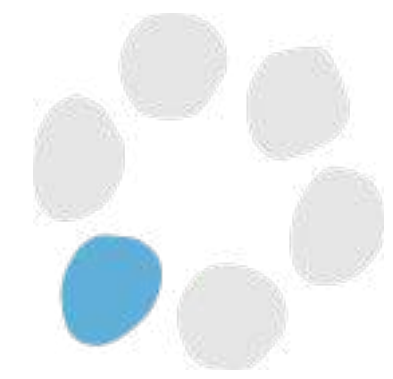


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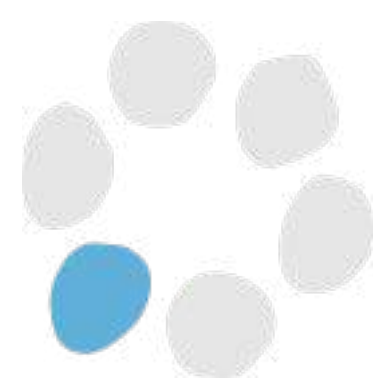
Introduction

This policy paper sets out a practical agenda to increase the participation of persons with disability (PwD) in leadership across Europe and to embed inclusion as a driver of organisational performance. It targets EU-level policymakers and social partners, while remaining directly usable by companies and public employers. The action case is both economic and rights-based for inclusion. Evidence from European firms links disability-inclusive employment to stronger financial performance and corporate reputation when roles are well matched and proportionate adjustments are in place. Yet across the Union, the disability employment gap remains wide, Eurostat's most recent data release estimates a **24.0 percentage-point employment gap in 2024** ([Eurostat, 2025](#)).

The paper proceeds in four parts. First, it reframes disability employment from “charity” to performance, presenting the business case and dispelling common misconceptions. Second, it examines barriers that inhibit the progression of PwD into senior roles and synthesises effective organisational practices—mentoring and sponsorship, accessible recruitment and development, and inclusive leadership behaviours.

Third, drawing on the Fit2Lead project, it outlines a blended training pathway and a competence evaluation approach tailored to inclusive leadership. Finally, it proposes policy actions at the EU and organisational levels to scale impact. The goal is to equip decision-makers with actionable measures that improve competitiveness and equity, while advancing the EU's Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030 and the Disability Employment Package.

This Policy Paper was created as a result of the Erasmus+ Project fit2LEAD.



Diverse teams for performance and productivity

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Diverse teams for performance and productivity

Employment of PwD is too often framed as compliance or philanthropy, with a negative bias on the performance of workers with disability. For example, through indulgent attitudes and perceived lower capabilities of workers with mental disability by managers (Cavanagh et al., 2017), and concerns about performance and safety behaviors (Bonaccio et al., 2020).

However, **evidence shows a different reality: workers with disabilities are productive, and firms can improve in innovation, talent retention, and brand equity.** A longitudinal study of European companies from various productive sectors finds that employing PwD can be associated with financial performance and corporate reputation, concluding that workers with disabilities' competencies and performance should be considered on equal footing with their non-disabled peers (Jurado-Caraballo & Quintana-García, 2024).

From a diversity management perspective, teams with PwD can showcase a higher quantity and quality of idea generation, fostering the creativity and novelty ideation of the entire team, through increased cognitive flexibility and diversity (Dwertmann et al., 2025).

Other myths that persist, that have been debunked, such as having a negative impact on colleagues, and recruitment and selection entanglements (Bonaccio et al., 2020), provide a complete picture of the lack of cost and value of the opportunity of developing talent with disability.

These findings refute the notion that disability hiring is a net cost; rather, it is a human-capital investment with measurable returns.



Diverse teams for performance and productivity

The macro context underscores why shifting from charity to performance matters. The EU disability employment gap remains large: the Commission's Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities reports 50.8% employment among PwD versus 75% for others, signaling persistent underutilization of human capital (European Commission, 2021).

These gaps reflect missed business opportunities as much as social inequity.

Barriers persist, and they are not solely physical. Disability employment gaps have been stubbornly stable, with PwD 2.3 times more likely to be unemployed than others, pointing to inefficiencies from untapped skills (OECD, 2023). Employer bias in hiring shows that context and support measures shape attitudes toward applicants with disability (Berre, 2025). These findings are aligned with interview evidence from fit2LEAD: **leaders who focus on standard performance indicators, co-design adjustments with employees, and make accessibility routine, not exceptional, reduce stigma, and unlock value.**





Leaders with Disability - Barriers to leadership and career development

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Barriers to leadership and career development

People with disability face a complex web of barriers in accessing and advancing into leadership roles. Structural obstacles are common: workplaces, political institutions, and public spaces may lack accommodations (i.e., accessible buildings, adaptive technologies), effectively excluding many PwD from full participation (Waltz & Schippers, 2021; Samosh, 2021). Even when physical barriers are removed, policy-related barriers can persist. For instance, **benefits systems can inadvertently disincentivise career advancement (fear of losing disability benefits), and equal opportunity laws sometimes do not cover elected or senior positions, leaving disabled leaders without legal protection from discrimination** (Waltz & Schippers, 2021).

Also pervasive are the cultural and attitudinal barriers rooted in ableism. **Negative stereotypes and low expectations about disability can create a “trust deficit,” whereby others undervalue the talents, credentials, and potential of aspiring leaders with disabilities** (Samosh, 2021). Research highlights that notions of the “ideal leader” are often unconsciously equated with being able-bodied and without mental health challenges – a bias that pressures many leaders with non-visible disabilities to hide their conditions to fit the prototype (Roberson & Perry, 2022). Additionally, a documented “hierarchy of impairments” means certain disabilities (particularly intellectual or psychosocial disabilities) carry greater stigma in leadership contexts than physical impairments (Waltz & Schippers, 2021). Such biases can result in qualified disabled candidates being overlooked for promotions or high-responsibility projects.



Barriers to leadership and career development

Professionals with disability also frequently encounter exclusion from informal networks and mentoring opportunities that are crucial for leadership development (Samosh, 2021). In a European study of politicians with disabilities, Waltz and Schippers (2021) found that many barriers stem from lack of recruitment pipelines and mentorship for PwD, limited access to campaign resources, and exclusion from political party networks (Waltz & Schippers, 2021; Waltz & Schippers, 2021). Without strong professional networks or senior mentors to champion them, PwD are less likely to be tapped for leadership tracks. In sum, structural inaccessibility, policy gaps, prejudicial attitudes, and network exclusion all contribute to the underrepresentation of PwD in leadership. These barriers operate at multiple levels – from workplace practices to societal norms – reinforcing one another and making it difficult for PwD to attain leadership roles. Part-time leadership can also become a structural hurdle, especially relevant for PwD.

26,8% EU population with a disability

31,6% of PwD with tertiary education

1% of politicians with disability

No representative data on leadership positions in organisations

Barriers to leadership and career development

These barriers, as illustrated by the data presented, shrink the talent pipeline for leadership roles.

Fewer opportunities to gain experience



Promotion and hiring biases



A stark absence of disabled people in executive suites, boardrooms, and other top-tier positions.

Barriers to leadership and career development

The number of high-level business leaders with disclosed disabilities remains “negligible.” Often, those who do rise to senior roles feel pressure to conceal disabilities due to stigma (Samosh, 2021). **This invisibility further skews leadership demographics and can create a false perception that disabled talent is not available for leadership.** Many PwD have the skills and ambitions to lead but face a systemic lack of representation.

The European Disability Strategy 2021–2030 acknowledges this gap and calls for action to ensure PwD can participate in all areas of life on an equal basis, including in leadership and decision-making positions. Increasing representation is not only a matter of equity and rights, but as research suggests, diverse leadership leads to more innovative problem-solving and inclusive organisational cultures (Roberson & Perry, 2022; Samosh, 2021). **Thus, closing the disability leadership gap is both a social imperative and beneficial to institutions. This was emphasized in Fit2Lead focus groups with experts in leadership and inclusion, highlighting that Representativeness is crucial to deal with these issues, following the motto ‘nothing for us without us’.**



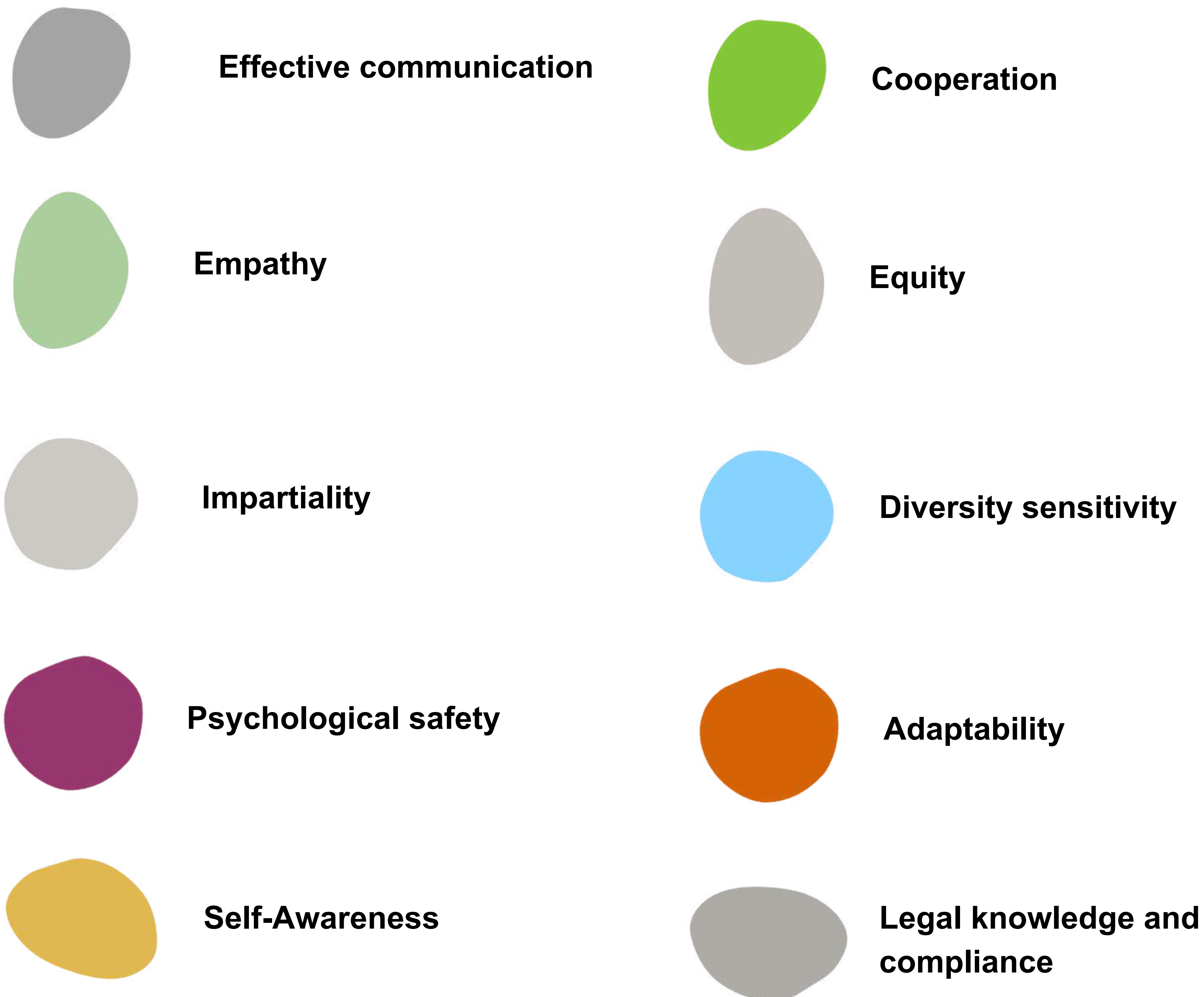


fit2LEAD – Training for inclusive leadership and Skills Assessment

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fit2LEAD - Training for Inclusive Leadership

The fit2LEAD consortium identified, through primary and secondary data, key competencies for inclusive leadership, providing the training modules and assessement:



**Check the fit2LEAD
Competencies Catalogue
and Methodical Didactic
Concept here!**

fit2LEAD - Training for Inclusive Leadership

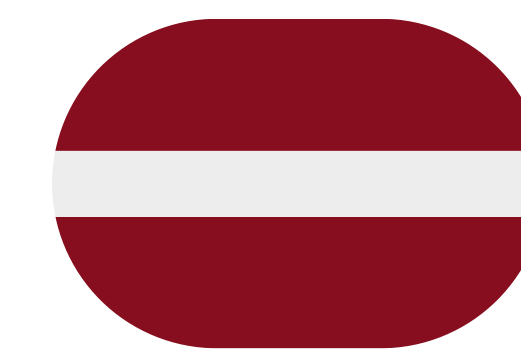
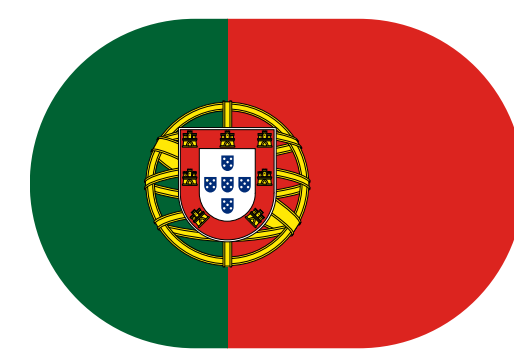
Training programs for all employees are crucial to fostering an inclusive workplace culture where people with disabilities are respected and supported. Broad-based disability awareness and unconscious bias training can dispel stereotypes and reduce stigma, leading to more positive attitudes toward colleagues with disabilities. **Dedicated training for leadership and HR professionals is equally important, as these groups design and implement the policies that drive inclusion.** Inclusive leadership programs help managers develop the competencies to lead diverse teams effectively and confidently address disability-related needs. Studies show that training HR managers on recognising and countering implicit biases, understanding accommodation practices, and implementing inclusive recruitment strategies can reduce discriminatory barriers. Training covering disability inclusion best practices, bias education, and problem-solving through case studies is essential to reduce workplace stigma. In line with EU policy frameworks, **empowering leadership and HR teams through training ensures that disability inclusion is not ad hoc, but rather a strategic priority embedded in organisational practices** (European Commission, 2023; OECD, 2022).

fit2LEAD - Training for Inclusive Leadership

The importance of training leaders and teams to understand disability is highly regarded as a best practice, providing teams and individuals with the skills and knowledge to leverage the benefits of diverse teams with PwD.

For fit2LEAD, a blended training course with 10 Modules, including face-to-face synchronous sessions and online sessions through an e-learning platform. The training was piloted and tested, presenting promising results.

45 Trainees

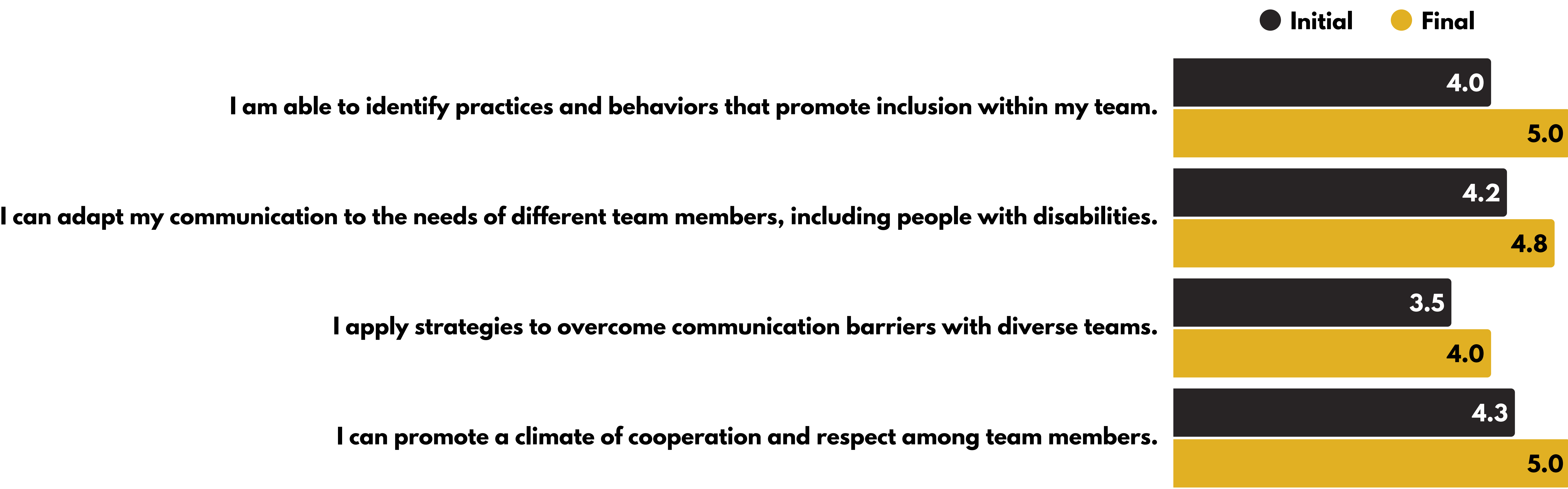


21 Trainees with a disability

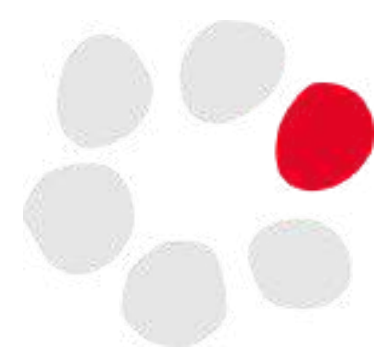
100% of respondents classified their satisfaction at the highest level

fit2LEAD - Training for Inclusive Leadership

Participants in the Portuguese pilot also answered 12 statements, connected with the learning objectives, before and after the training. The graph below showcases the evolution of a selected number of competences, providing evidence of the impact of learning for inclusive leadership.



Graphic 1: Initial and Final Assessment of Selected Competences (n=8)



fit2LEAD – Policy Actions

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fit2LEAD – Policy Actions

Inclusive Recruitment, Quotas and Representation Targets: Proactive measures can be taken to bring more PwD into leadership pipelines. Companies and public institutions can set representation goals or inclusive hiring policies for management roles. Some EU countries enforce disability hiring quotas (generally for overall staff), expanding these to leadership levels or tying them to executive diversity goals can spur progress. By mandating or incentivising a critical mass of PwD in leadership, such policies help overcome inertia and signal that people with disabilities are valued in leadership. However, quotas need to go hand in hand with awareness-building and embedding an understanding of the benefits of inclusion in companies, with special focus on the sensitivity and impact of the quota system.



fit2LEAD – Policy Actions

Building strong professional networks: It helps counteract exclusion from informal opportunities. Research on the career advancement of managers with disability finds that social support networks are one of the three essential steps for success, alongside personal self-advocacy and inclusive organisational context. Thus, robust networks and mentoring relationships directly tackle the isolation and lack of guidance that many PwD report in their leadership journeys. This is especially important for a minority that faces barriers in networking settings and opportunities.



fit2LEAD – Policy Actions

Mentoring and Networks: Establishing formal mentorship programs, sponsorship, and peer networks for employees with disabilities is a widely cited best practice. Workplace evidence shows that social conditions such as team climate, leadership quality, and belonging are central to the work experience of employees with disability, reinforcing the value of mentoring and affinity networks that provide psychosocial safety and advice (Teborg et al., 2024). In parallel, bias and uncertainty, rather than performance deficits, drive many managerial concerns, which mentoring/sponsorship and visible networks can counter by signaling competence and offering structured support (Bonaccio et al., 2020). Mentors can provide guidance on navigating career progression and serve as advocates for promotions. In addition, “reverse mentoring” – pairing senior executives with junior staff who have disabilities – has gained attention to open leaders’ eyes to inclusion added value.

fit2LEAD – Policy Actions

Workplace Accessibility: Ensuring workplaces are accessible is fundamental. This means not only complying with accessibility laws but going further to create a barrier-free environment. Examples include providing assistive technologies, accessible transportation options, sign language interpreters or captioning in meetings, flexible scheduling or location arrangements, and adapting evaluation criteria to focus on outcomes rather than how work is performed. Organisational flexibility and proactive accommodation are critical contextual resources that enable PwD to realise their leadership potential. When needs are met, employees with disabilities can focus on performance and leadership growth rather than struggling against an unaccommodating environment. This can start with the recruitment and selection process. Nonetheless, organisations and PwD need to remember that inclusion is a journey, and don't consider a “perfect” accessible workplace as an obstacle to start hiring and developing talent with disabilities.

fit2LEAD – Policy Actions

Job crafting: self-initiated changes employees make to tasks, relationships, and perceptions to improve the person's job fit and productivity. In practice, employees create a structured plan that identifies potential changes to their work, which can be task-related, relationship-related, or cognitive-related.

It offers a practical bridge between formal accommodations and everyday inclusion (Roczniewska et al., 2023). Robust evidence shows that job-crafting interventions raise work engagement and, in some cases, job performance (Oprea et al., 2019; Frederick & VanderWeele, 2020; Silapurem et al., 2024).

For persons with disability, job crafting can complement reasonable adjustments by enabling employees to shape how work is done (i.e., reordering tasks, leveraging assistive tech, or renegotiating interaction), thereby reducing barriers and building agency.

It can be usual for employers and HR departments to adapt the standardized job vacancy or role due to the needs of the talent. This can improve systems and methodology, and should be seen as an opportunity instead of a cost. For this, job crafting is specially tailored since it puts the worker with disability at the forefront of the process, engaging in a structured way with management.

Because crafting amplifies resource, autonomy, support, and manages demands, it supports sustained participation, career development, and retention – areas highlighted in EU policy aims to close the disability employment gap (European Commission, 2021; European Commission, 2024).

fit2LEAD – Policy Actions

Training and Awareness Campaigns: Many barriers are attitudinal, so effective solutions involve shifting mindsets within organisations. Regular disability awareness training, inclusive leadership workshops, and visible commitment from top management can reduce stigma. By educating non-disabled peers and decision-makers about unconscious bias and the capabilities of disabled colleagues, organisations foster a culture of respect. Several EU institutions and companies have launched internal campaigns highlighting successful leaders with disabilities as role models to challenge stereotypes. Such initiatives cultivate an expectation that leadership teams should be diverse and inclusive. Over time, this can erode the “able-bodied leader” stereotype and build a corporate culture where asking for accommodations or celebrating difference is normalised



fit2LEAD – Policy Actions

Public policy should explicitly recast disability employment as a competitiveness and productivity agenda. First, embed performance-based narratives in EU and national communications (i.e., AccessibleEU and the Disability Employment Package) and require that public guidance and toolkits quantify business outcomes of inclusion. Second, expand manager-facing training and advisory services that help SMEs assess roles, co-design adjustments, and measure ROI, and target HR decision-makers where knowledge gaps are binding. Also, align public procurement and disclosure regimes to reward demonstrable inclusion (employment, progression and leadership of PwD) in value-chain due diligence and sustainability reporting. Finally, use demonstration projects in the public sector to normalise inclusive recruitment and advancement, and publish comparable indicators so employers can benchmark progress. These measures promote informed employer behaviour, reduce stigma and support efficient labour-market matching, delivering both social and economic returns.

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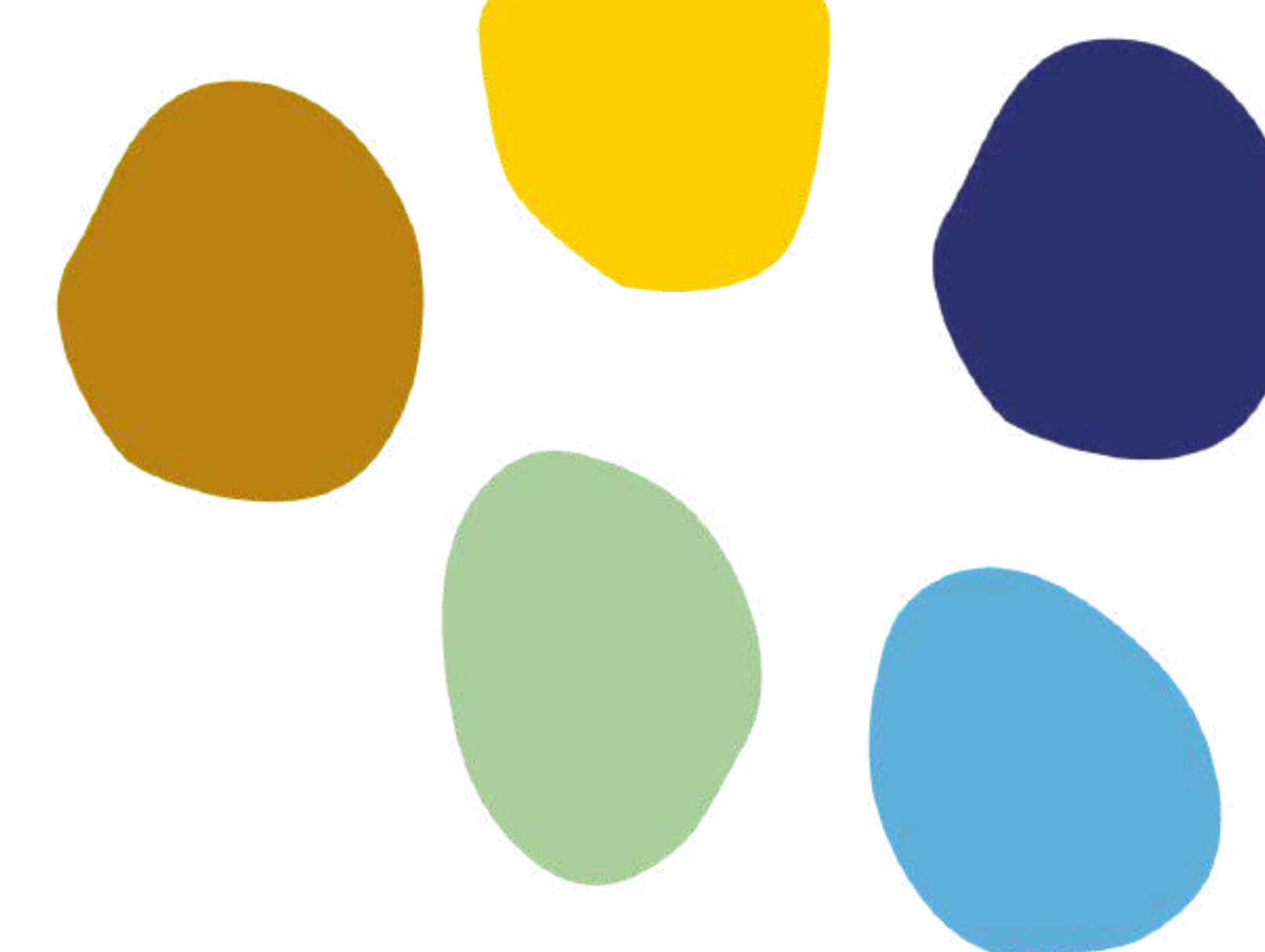
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