

Inclusive employment and education

The labour market, employment and vocational training research is being implemented by Info Sapiens within the framework of the Multi Donor Initiative Skills4Recovery, which is jointly co-financed by the European Union, Germany, Poland, Estonia, Denmark, and is implemented by Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH and the Solidarity Fund PL (SFPL).

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Conclusions and recommendations

Survey data on vulnerable groups: key findings

Respondents from inclusive groups — internally displaced persons (IDPs), people with disabilities, veterans, single parents, and parents of children under 3 years old — present a paradoxical picture: whilst their stated willingness to look for work and pursue education is high, their actual behavior often shows signs of a perfunctory rather than an active search. A significant proportion of those who describe themselves as ‘active jobseekers’ have been looking for work for over a year (almost one in three among people with disabilities), and this period is longer precisely among those who are not working or who only have occasional odd jobs — this is more reminiscent of social apathy than a shortage of vacancies in a labor-shortage environment. This is also confirmed by the pattern of trust in job-search sources: job sites, despite their widespread use, receive below-average ratings for trust and effectiveness, whilst employment centers, which are used much less frequently, inspire greater trust — the gap between the scale of use and the quality of the experience constitutes a barrier in its own right.

A significant proportion of respondents (25–39% depending on the group) have never worked in their chosen field, which diminishes the value of formal education as a barrier to reskilling — people are already accustomed to working outside their field of specialization. The criteria for a ‘good job’ are almost unanimous: salary and a convenient working schedule rank highest for all groups, whilst working in one’s chosen field and the prestige of the position rank lowest (9–20% and 5–11% respectively), which opens up opportunities for reskilling. At the same time, there are significant differences across the groups: for internally displaced persons, formal employment is important; for people with disabilities, work is often a means of socialization and self-fulfillment (which prolongs their job search – they are not prepared to take just any vacancy); for single parents, stability is key; and for parents of young children, self-fulfillment is paramount. Willingness to retrain is high across all groups (60–86%), but for blue-collar occupations specifically, it drops sharply amongst people with disabilities (only 33% would agree, compared with 44–53% in other groups) — this is a direct consequence of physical barriers, rather than perceptions. The key drivers for retraining are universal — a guarantee of employment and free training — but each group adds its own specific requirements: internally displaced persons (IDPs) need flexible timetables and financial support whilst

studying; people with disabilities require adapted programs; and single parents and veterans need the opportunity to combine study with work.

Stakeholder perspectives: the SES, employers and labor market experts

Specialists at the State Employment Service accurately identify who finds it most difficult to find work (people with disabilities – 85%, the long-term unemployed – 83%, veterans and those aged 50+ – 82%, women with children – 81%, internally displaced persons – 72%), and correctly identify the barriers, which largely lie outside the service itself – health issues and unsuitable workplaces, a lack of nurseries, and mismatched salary expectations. However, 91% of State Employment Service staff also believe that the service already takes sufficient account of the needs of vulnerable groups — in other words, the institution effectively fails to recognize its own responsibility for the quality of support provided, even though an objective assessment of the effectiveness of its services (based on clients' own feedback) is below average.

Employers claim to be almost fully prepared to recruit members of vulnerable groups (88–94% are willing to hire people with disabilities, veterans and internally displaced persons), but 71% do not plan to incur any additional costs or make any organizational efforts to support the integration of such employees — their willingness is largely merely declarative. It is also telling that employers are most concerned about the challenges of integrating young people under 30, rather than veterans or people with disabilities, who objectively require significantly more support; — this points to an idealized, rather than realistic, view of inclusive recruitment, which risks leading to disappointment and the swift termination of the working relationship once the first difficulties arise.

Labor market experts (Work.ua, robota.ua, the Ukrainian Veterans' Fund, 'Right to Protection') unanimously emphasize that traditional job-search tools — both job sites and offline campaigns — barely reach the most vulnerable section of these groups. The only approach that works effectively is a proactive one, where specialists reach out to communities themselves and provide comprehensive support to individuals — legal, psychological and social — before moving on to job-seeking. In their view, the main barrier to reskilling is not a reluctance to learn, but the risk of losing income whilst studying; the most promising model is training with a grant or salary and guaranteed employment afterwards. For veterans, the psychological compatibility of the team is critically important — a clash of values with civilian colleagues is a common cause of early resignation.

Large businesses are moving towards inclusive practices much faster than small ones — not because small businesses are less prejudiced, but due to a lack of resources and evidence-based economic models.

Testing research hypotheses

Hypothesis 1. ‘Vulnerable groups face systemic barriers to access’ — confirmed. These barriers are complex and mutually reinforcing, and span all levels: institutional (limited capacity of the State Employment Service, lack of adapted vocational training programs), communication (the gap between formally neutral job advertisements and the actual experience of rejection), mental (persistent employer stereotypes and a low sense of self-agency among members of vulnerable groups themselves) and physical (inaccessible workplaces, lack of transport links, shortage of nurseries). Focus groups have documented numerous examples of a single person facing several barriers simultaneously (for example, rejection due to disability and then due to age), which confirms the systemic, rather than sporadic, nature of the problem.

Hypothesis 2. ‘Services are insufficiently adapted to clients’ specific needs’ — confirmed. Although the State Employment Service correctly identifies vulnerable groups and even acknowledges the lack of specialized support programs (primarily for mothers with children, the long-term unemployed and people with disabilities), 91% of the service’s specialists consider their own level of adaptation to be sufficient — this represents a contradiction between acknowledging the problem at the level of individual departments and the absence of systematic self-criticism at the level of the institution as a whole. Similarly, the lack of adaptation of VET infrastructure for people with disabilities is evident: respondents refer to this as an unresolved problem rather than a hypothetical risk.

Hypothesis 3. ‘The level of actual inclusion is lower than that declared’ — confirmed. This hypothesis is a recurring theme: employers declare 88–94% readiness to hire, but 71% are not prepared to invest resources in adaptation; The State Employment Service declares that 91% of its own measures are adequate, whilst the effectiveness of its services is objectively below average; job advertisements are formally neutral regarding age and health status, but jobseekers consistently report the opposite experience during the actual selection process. In each of these cases, the discrepancy arises precisely between the stated position and actual behavior or resource allocation decisions.

Recommendations

Overcoming institutional barriers. The State Employment Service should shift the focus of its self-assessment from ‘are we doing enough?’ to objective indicators of service effectiveness and client satisfaction, and adopt the proactive, case-management-oriented approach (legal, psychological and social support to assist with job-seeking) already in place in the public sector, rather than waiting for individuals to come forward themselves. Vocational education and training institutions require a targeted program of physical and methodological adaptation for teaching people with disabilities, rather than one-off project-based solutions. For veterans, extended unemployment benefits (up to one year, given the longer rehabilitation period) and peer-to-peer support should be considered.

Overcoming communication barriers. The gap between formally neutral job vacancies and the actual experience of rejection requires a substantive practical review (for example, an audit of actual hiring decisions), rather than an additional survey of intentions. Employers and recruiters should be specifically trained in realistic expectations and inclusive recruitment practices — it is precisely unrealistic expectations (underestimating the difficulty veterans and people with disabilities face in adapting compared to young people) that pose the main risk of businesses becoming quickly disillusioned and scaling back inclusive initiatives.

Overcoming mental barriers. Members of vulnerable groups demonstrate a low sense of agency and do not see a way to overcome barriers on their own. They rely on support models incorporating a peer-to-peer element (particularly for veterans) and guidance that restores confidence in their own ability to find work, rather than merely formal information about job vacancies.

Overcoming physical barriers. Some barriers — such as a lack of nurseries and schools, the inaccessibility of workplaces by public transport for IDPs from rural areas, and the unsuitability of workplaces and vocational training institutions for people with disabilities — cannot be resolved at the level of the employment service or by individual employers. This requires an inter-agency policy involving local authorities, social services and civil society organizations, including the restoration of childcare infrastructure, the development of remote and flexible forms of employment and training, as well as programs to compensate for the costs of adapting workplaces and ensuring transport accessibility.

Acronyms and abbreviations

IDPs internally displaced persons

SES State Employment Service of Ukraine

NBU National Bank of Ukraine

NGOs non-governmental organizations

PwD people with disabilities

VET vocational education and training

TOT temporarily occupied territories

FGD focus group discussion

VET Centre Centre for Vocational and Technical Education

CAWI (*Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing*) — an online survey conducted via a web interface

NEET (*Not in Employment, Education or Training*) — young people who are not in employment, education or training

Chapter 1. Vulnerable groups in the labor market

A labor shortage has been evident since the start of the large-scale invasion and has worsened over the last few years, as evidenced by numerous regular business surveys¹. The chronic nature of this problem has become a driving force behind a profound transformation of the labor market, in particular the development of inclusion as one of the factors that could provide solutions to the existing challenges. In particular, employers are increasingly realizing that groups previously overlooked can help fill part of the labor shortage. As will be shown below, large businesses were the first to realize this. On the one hand, the scale of labor shortages at large enterprises is forcing them to seek systemic solutions rather than merely 'plugging the gaps'. On the other hand, large businesses have the resources to identify and implement such solutions. Consequently, Ukrainian enterprises are being forced to adopt more flexible and socially oriented recruitment policies.

As for the groups of the population that until recently were less in demand on the labor market, this report focuses primarily on people with disabilities, demobilized veterans returning to civilian life, and people raising children without a partner (most often mothers), as well as parents of children under three years of age and internally displaced persons (collectively referred to as 'inclusive population groups').

A comparison of survey data from respondents in inclusive groups with that from other target audiences revealed the following:

- People from inclusive groups generally demonstrate one of the highest levels of **readiness for training and retraining** among all audiences: 32% of them already have experience of acquiring a different specialism or retraining as adults (this is the second-highest figure after older people, Fig.1), and the proportion of those who have taken part in at least one government-funded retraining program stands at 22–23% — on a par with young people and higher than in the other demographic groups (Fig.2). These results refute the notion that this group is passive.

¹ NBU survey <https://bank.gov.ua/ua/statistic/nbusurvey>, the Institute for Economic Research's monthly business survey http://www.ier.com.ua/ua/proekt_dilova_dumka/survey; Advanter Group Business Activity Index <https://advanter.ua/>

Fig.1 . Do you have any experience of learning as an adult (roughly after the age of 25 or after you had already started working)? (% of responses, mass survey²)

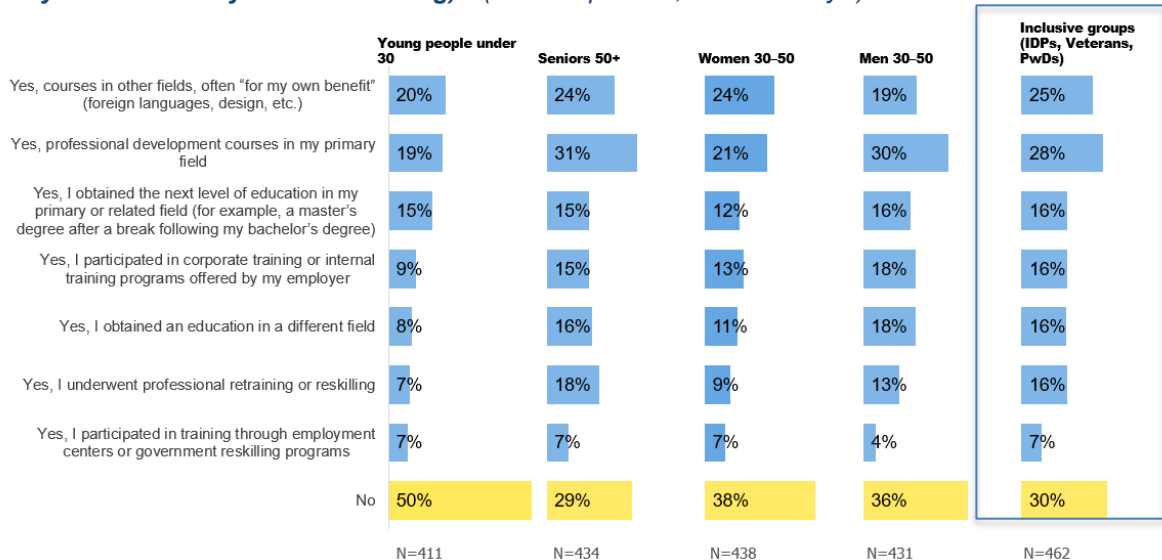
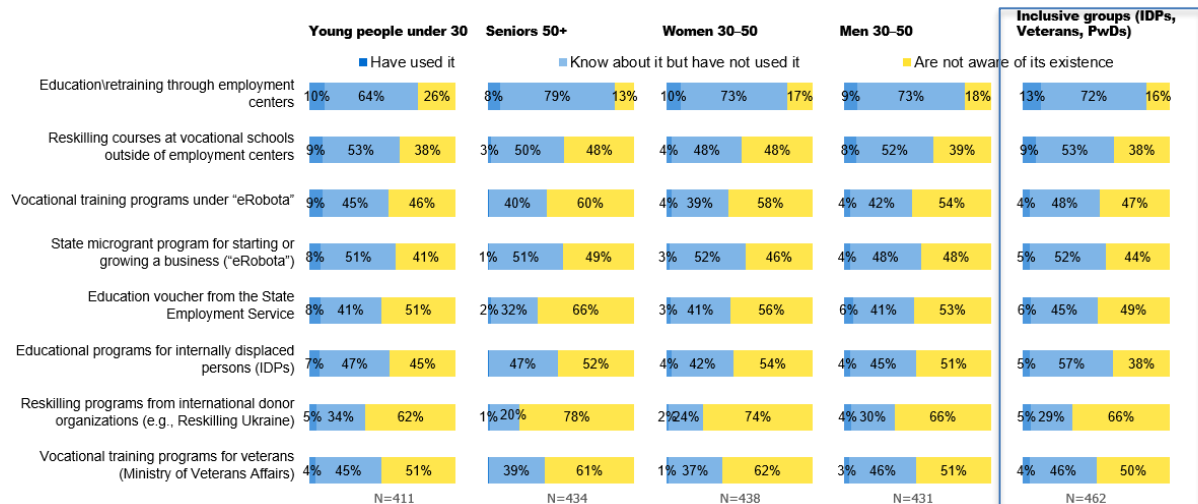


Fig.2 . There are several government-run retraining programs in Ukraine. Please read the list and indicate to what extent you are familiar with each of them (% of responses, mass survey)



² Here and below, unless otherwise stated, survey data are presented on a total of all respondents

- Trust in education and retraining institutions is slightly higher among inclusive groups than among other groups: it is within this audience that the highest proportion of those who ‘fully’ (rather than just partially) trust retraining programs has been recorded — 23%, which is higher than in any other target group. This high level of trust (largely ‘placed in advance’) is one of the strongest assets for engaging this audience in reskilling programs.
- The main barrier for this audience is **physical exertion**: concerns about the required stamina have one of the highest levels of agreement among all groups (64%), and switching to a blue-collar profession whilst holding another qualification is the most significant barrier for them compared to all other audiences (Fig.3). At the same time, despite these limitations, it is precisely among members of inclusive groups that the most positive attitude towards blue-collar occupations as ‘good jobs’ is recorded compared with other audiences — that is, the negative image of these professions is less pronounced here, and the barrier is purely physical rather than image-related (

- Fig.4).

Fig.3 . Please rate to what extent you personally agree with each of the statements?
(balance of responses: proportion of 'agree completely or somewhat' responses minus the proportion of 'disagree completely or somewhat' responses, mass survey)

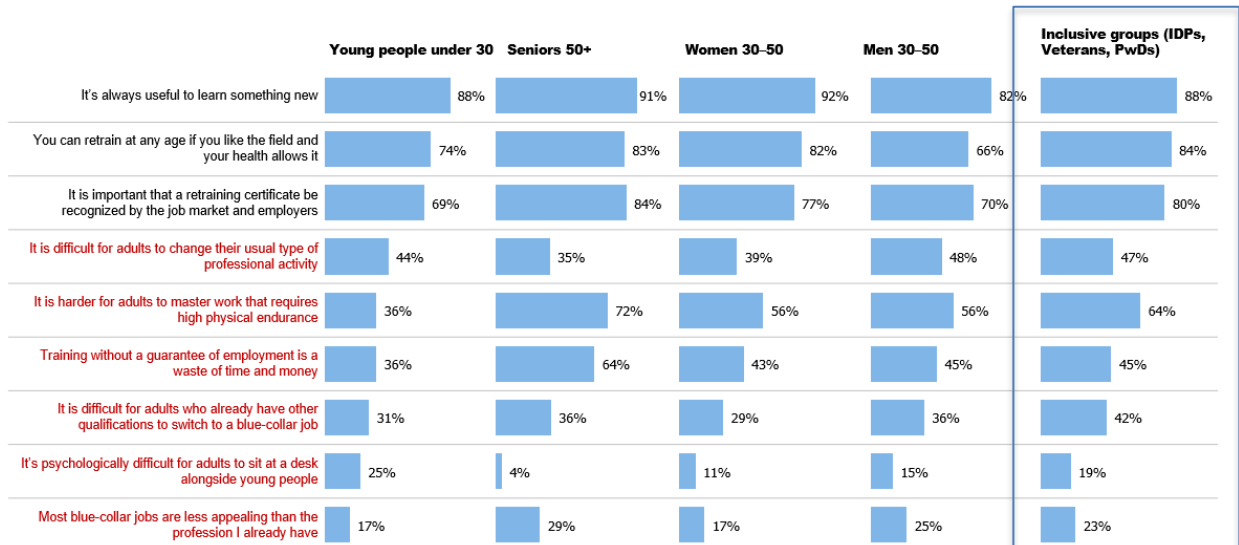
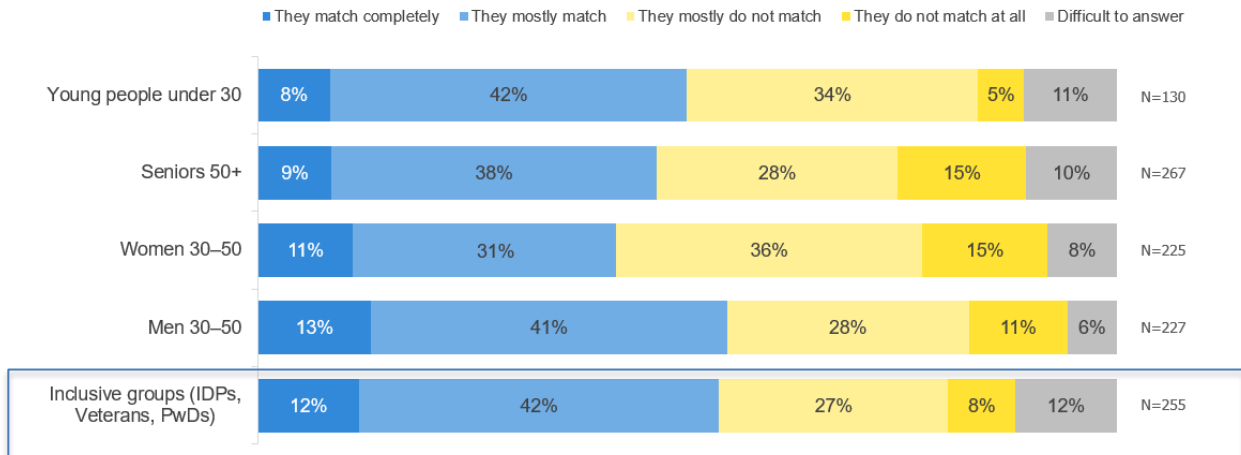


Fig.4 . The image of blue-collar professions (balance of responses: the proportion of ‘agree completely or to some extent’ responses minus the proportion of ‘disagree completely or to some extent’ responses, mass survey)



- For some in this group, the need for retraining has a different meaning altogether from changing one’s profession for career reasons — it is more a matter of adapting to new life circumstances.
- Financial uncertainty is even more acute for this group than for other audiences: respondents are not prepared to spend time and money on training without a guarantee of results, and the cost of courses is perceived as a barrier on its own, despite their desire to learn a new skill.

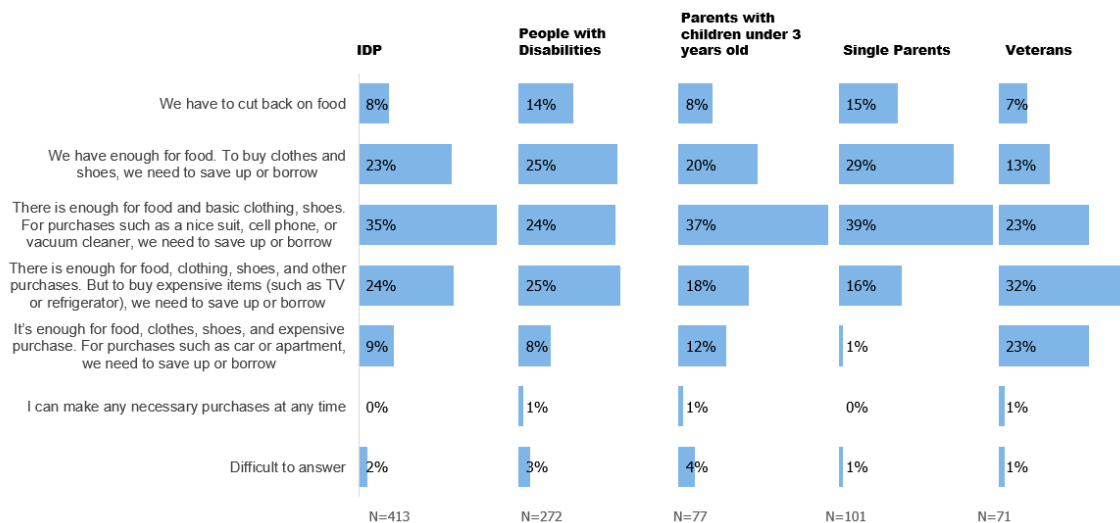
In this report, we will examine each of these inclusive groups separately.

Financial situation and job-seeking experience

The worst financial situation among the inclusive groups was recorded among people with disabilities and single parents (almost 80% of whom are single mothers, Fig.5). 39% and 44% of these groups, respectively, spend most of their household budget on food, whilst 14% and 15%, respectively, are forced to cut back on food. Among respondents who do not belong to any of the inclusive groups, 21% spend most of their household budget on food.

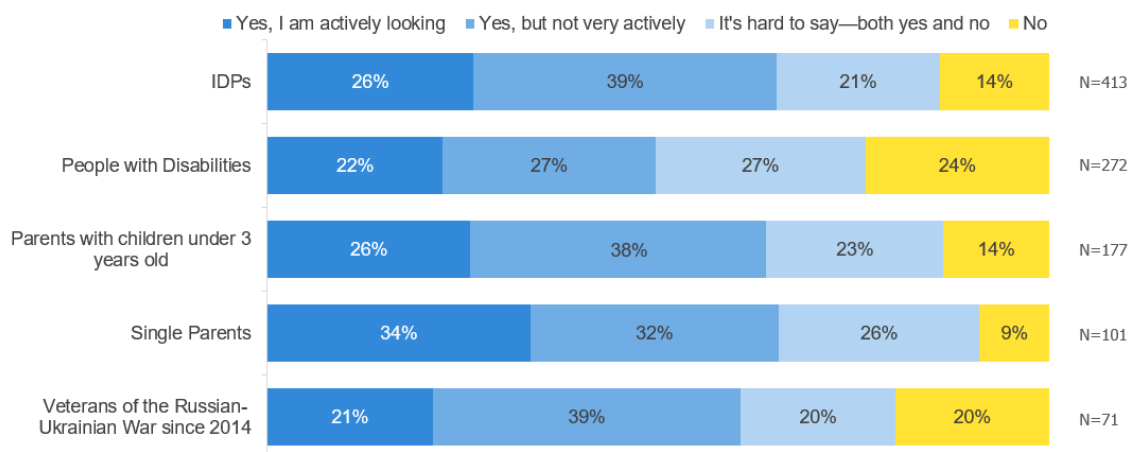
Among the inclusive groups, veterans are the most wealthy; more than half of this group can afford other necessary purchases (including expensive ones) in addition to food, clothing and shoes. By comparison, among other groups, the proportion of those who could be described as ‘well-off’ stands at around 30% for IDPs, people with disabilities and parents with young children, whilst for single parents it is just 17%.

Fig.5 . How would you describe your family's financial situation? (% of responses, survey of inclusive groups)



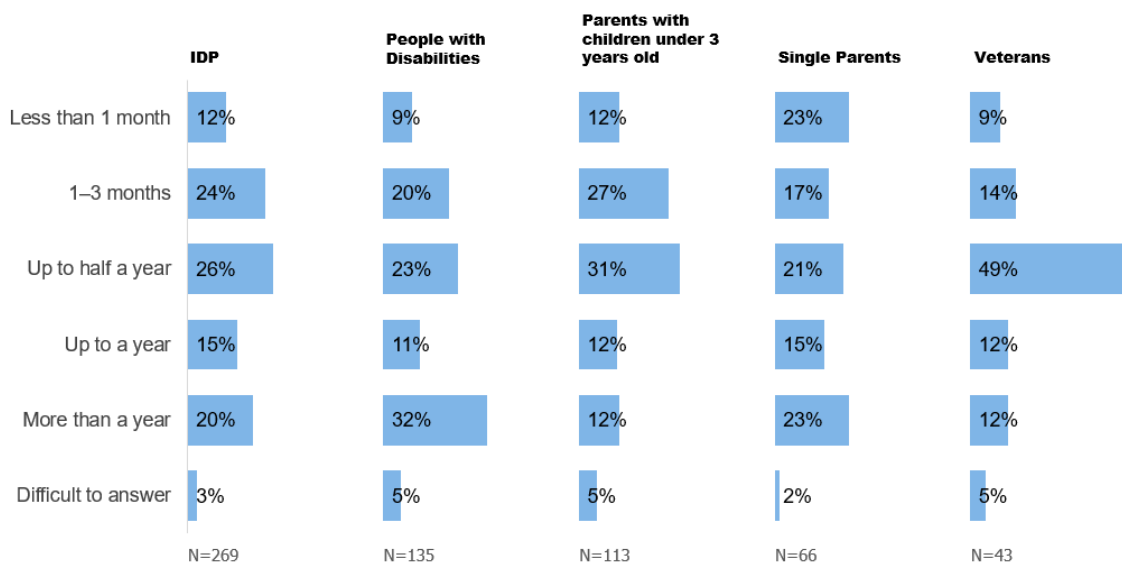
Unsurprisingly, it is single parents who are more likely than other groups to say they are actively looking for work (34%, Fig.6). Among other groups, IDPs and parents with children under 3 years of age are the most active in seeking work (26%). Among people with disabilities and veterans, the proportion of those actively seeking work is around 20%. At the same time, it is precisely among these groups that the proportion of those not looking for work at all is highest: 24% among people with disabilities and 20% among veterans.

Fig.6 . Would you say that you are looking for work? (% of responses, survey of inclusive groups)



However, respondents' self-reports of 'active' or 'moderately active' job-seeking do not align with data on the duration of their search (Fig.7). Given the labor shortage in the labor market, it is unlikely that a job search would last longer than three months. However, a significant proportion of job-seeking respondents have been looking for work for longer than this. For example, among people with disabilities, almost one in three have been looking for work for over a year. Furthermore, in most demographic groups, the proportion of those who have been looking for work for over a year is higher among respondents who are not in employment or who work only occasionally in casual jobs (this applies to groups such as IDPs, people with disabilities and single parents). Groups such as parents with children under three years of age and veterans are more active – their job search period is shorter. Thus, it can be concluded that social apathy, manifested in a formal approach to job seeking, may be prevalent in certain sections of the population. This phenomenon is characterized by the fact that job-seeking is not accompanied by active measures, such as researching the labor market or preparing and sending out CVs. This observation is supported by observations of the behavior of participants in focus group discussions. In particular, this relates to instances where the presentation of current vacancies sparked such keen interest among the group as if they had never seen similar vacancies before.

Fig.7 . How long have you been looking for work? (% of responses, survey of inclusive groups, among those seeking work)



Social apathy amongst members of vulnerable groups (although, in this respect, their behavioral profile does not differ greatly from that of other audiences) is illustrated by their level of trust in and assessment of the effectiveness of job search sources (Fig.8, Fig.9). Despite the high level of reported usage, the level of trust and assessment of the effectiveness of job vacancy websites is below average, indicating a lack of positive experience and, rather, a 'routine' use of this source.

It should be noted that, despite the relatively low level of use of Employment Centers' services, the level of trust is above average and ranks in the top three, immediately after such clearly trustworthy sources as 'personal contacts' and direct contact to employers. However, the assessment of the effectiveness of the State Employment Service (among those who have used it) is below average.

The problem with personal contacts as a source for finding work is that the social circles of socially apathetic people are often not very active either and do not help them break out of this state, in which a person may remain for years.

Fig.8 . Trust in various job-search sources by usage experience (% of 'trust very much' and 'have used' responses, survey of inclusive groups, among those aware of the source)

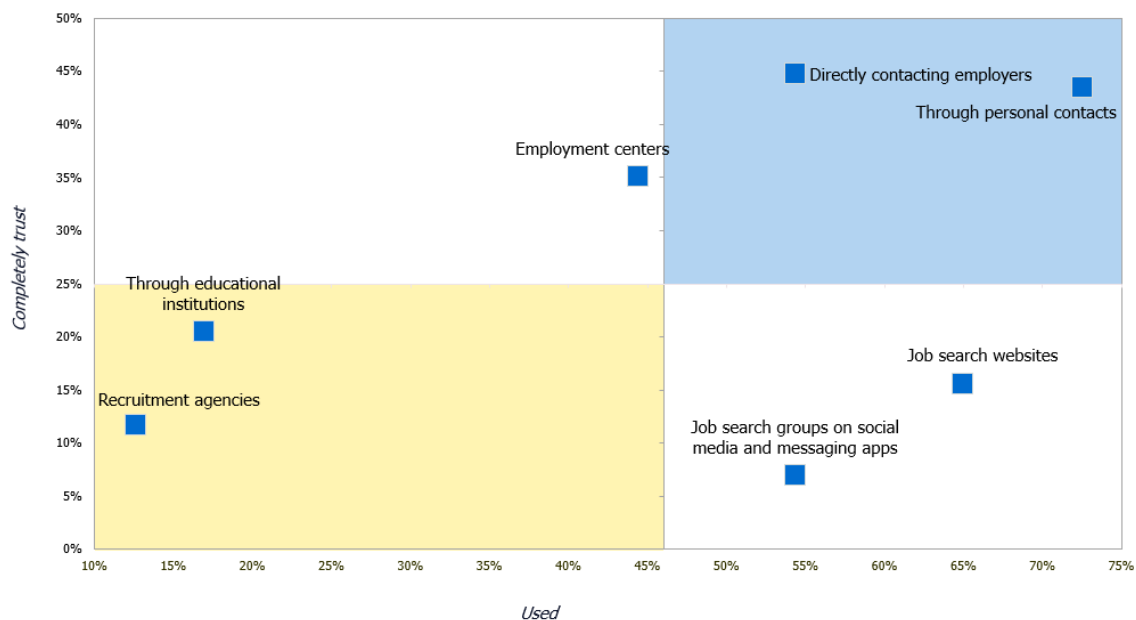
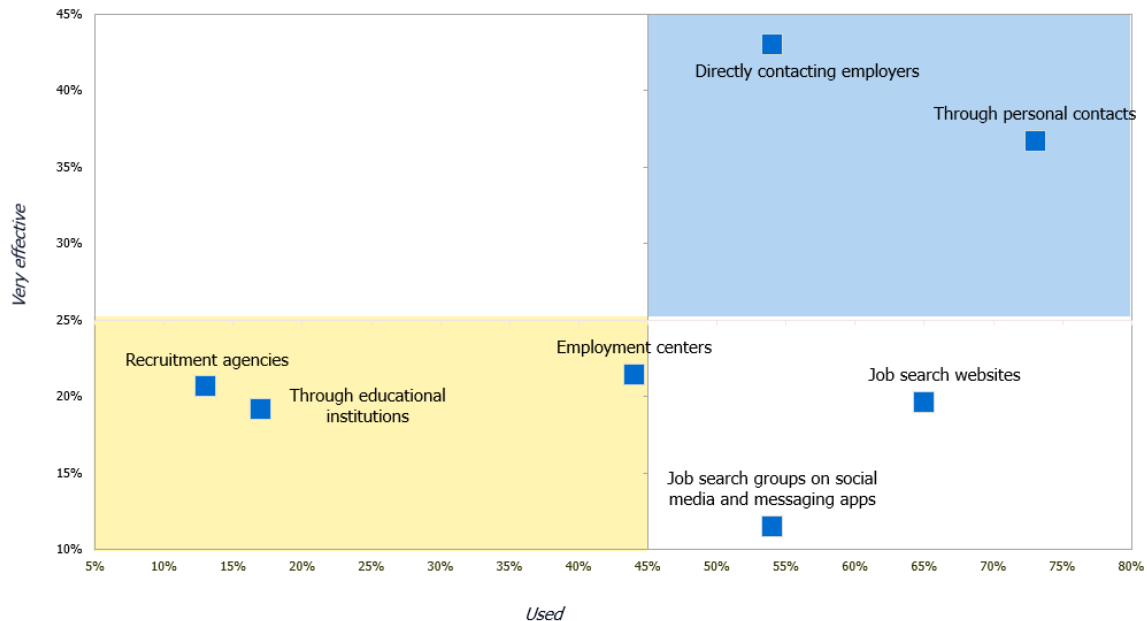


Fig.9 . Assessment of the effectiveness of various job search sources in terms of user experience (% of 'trust it very much' and 'have used it' responses, survey of inclusive groups, amongst those aware of the source)

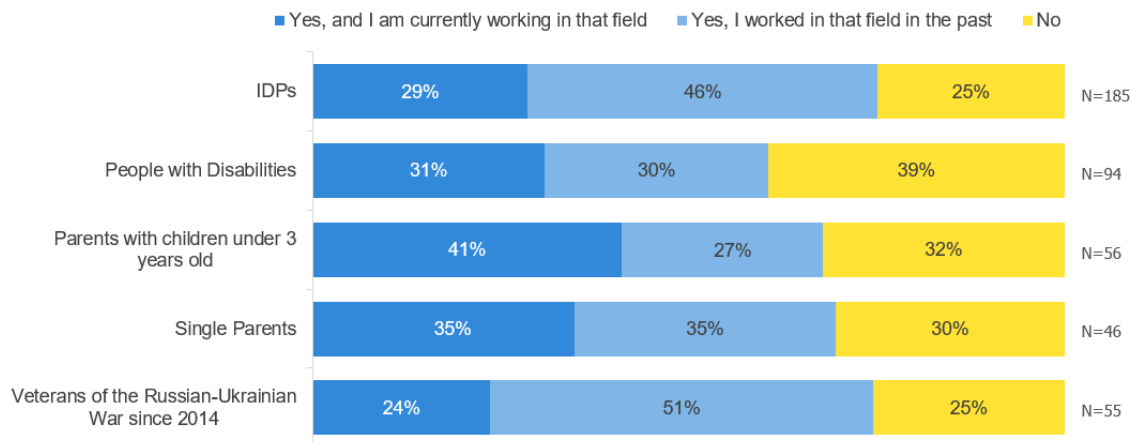


A significant proportion of respondents who are currently in employment (25–39% depending on the group) have never worked in their chosen field (this question was asked only of respondents who had completed vocational or higher education, Fig.10). The highest proportion of people who have never worked in their field of specialization is found among people with disabilities (39%), whilst the lowest is among veterans (25%).

Most have experience working in their chosen field, though a significant proportion of them are currently employed in other roles. The highest proportion of those employed outside their field of study is found among internally displaced persons (46%) and veterans (51%). Parents with children under three years of age are most likely to work in the field they studied for.

On the one hand, this situation indicates a waste of resources on education that will often go unused; on the other hand, it removes barriers both in terms of job offers that do not match formal qualifications and in terms of opportunities for retraining and reskilling.

Fig.10 . Have you ever worked in the field you qualified for after completing your education? (% of responses, survey of inclusive groups, among those in employment).



Characteristics of a ‘good job’

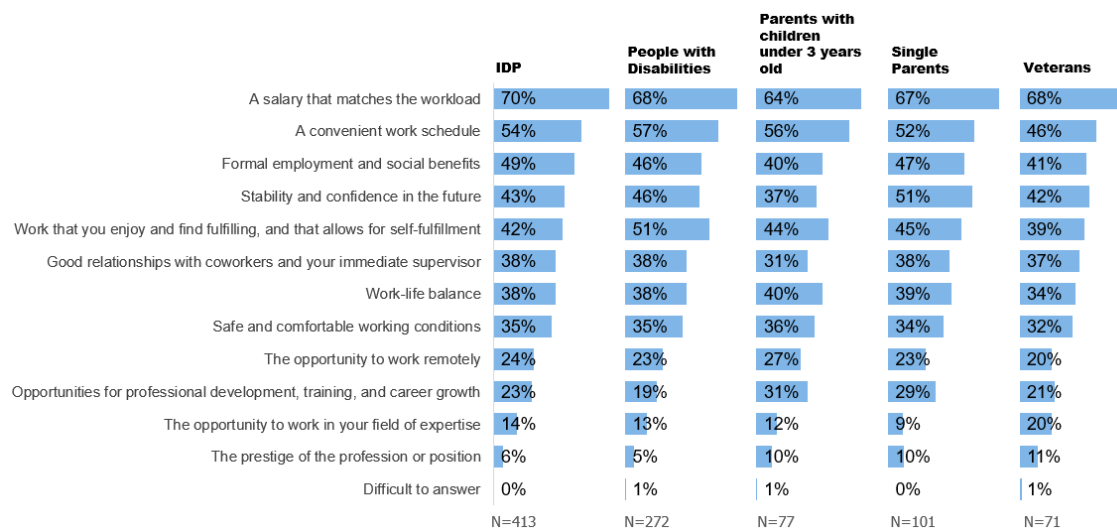
The basic characteristics of a ‘good job’ for all target audiences (both those belonging to inclusive groups and others) are broadly the same – these are salary level and a convenient working schedule (Fig.11). Therefore, differences in perception can be found in less important criteria. However, it should be noted that for veterans and single parents, the difference in how they rate the importance of salary and other criteria is the greatest; salary outstrips other factors by a wider margin than in other groups. And whilst in the case of single parents this is explained by their financial situation and the need to cover their children’s expenses, the reasons for the greater importance attached to salary levels among veterans warrant separate investigation.

As for less important factors, different groups of respondents highlight different aspects. For IDPs, formal employment is of greater importance; they rank this factor third, after salary and working hours. People with disabilities often view employment as a means of socialization; therefore, it is important to them that their work is fulfilling and promotes self-fulfillment (this may explain the longer job-search period for this group, with almost one in three jobseekers having been looking for work for over a year). Parents with young children also value the opportunity for self-fulfillment. Single parents value stability and confidence in the future almost as highly as a flexible working schedule; 51% of respondents selected this factor. Interestingly, stability and confidence do not always correlate with formal employment; 47% chose this factor.

The opportunity to work in one's field of expertise ranks lowest in the ratings across all target groups (this factor is chosen by 9–20%), which opens up opportunities for retraining. The prestige of a profession or position is also not important to respondents (5–11%).

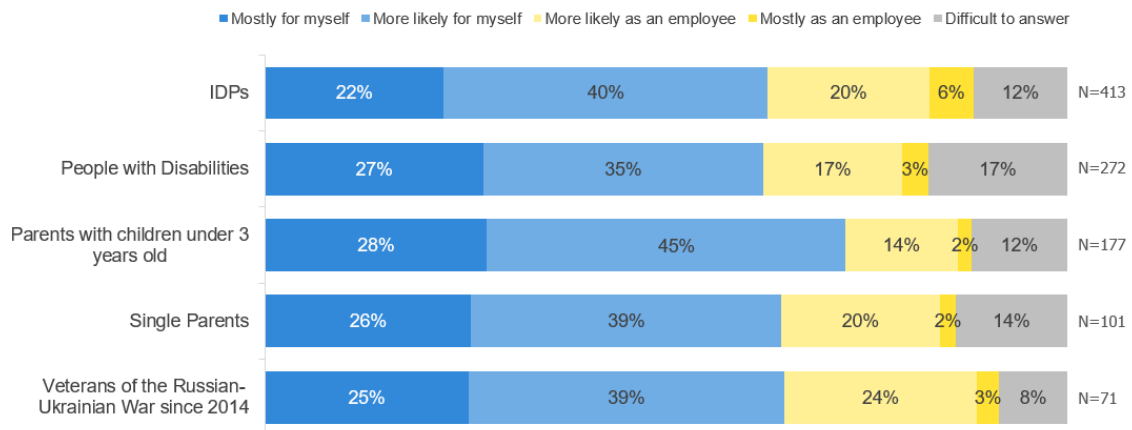
The opportunity to work remotely is important to 20–27% of respondents (depending on the target group, most notably for parents with young children), which makes it possible to promote blue-collar professions as a viable option in the labor market.

Fig.11 . What constitutes a good job for you? (% of responses, survey of inclusive groups)



Ukrainians' perceptions of self-employment or salaried employment are still rather idealized (Fig.12). The majority prefer to be self-employed. According to the focus group discussion results, the motivating factors for this choice are autonomy and independence, self-fulfillment and vocation, a flexible schedule and the ability to combine work with care responsibilities (particularly relevant for women), as well as the fact that the results of one's labor depend not on a 'boss' but on one's own contribution. Behind these advantages, respondents often fail to see the downside of self-employment – the need to take full responsibility for a project, the need to work without days off, the nuances of pricing products or services, and the lack of effective demand from potential buyers or clients. In fact, the description of self-employment as perceived by respondents can be used as a description of 'ideal employment' and to highlight the most important factors in recruitment proposals.

Fig.12 . Would you prefer to be self-employed (sole trader, own business) or employed by an employer? (% of responses, survey of inclusive groups)

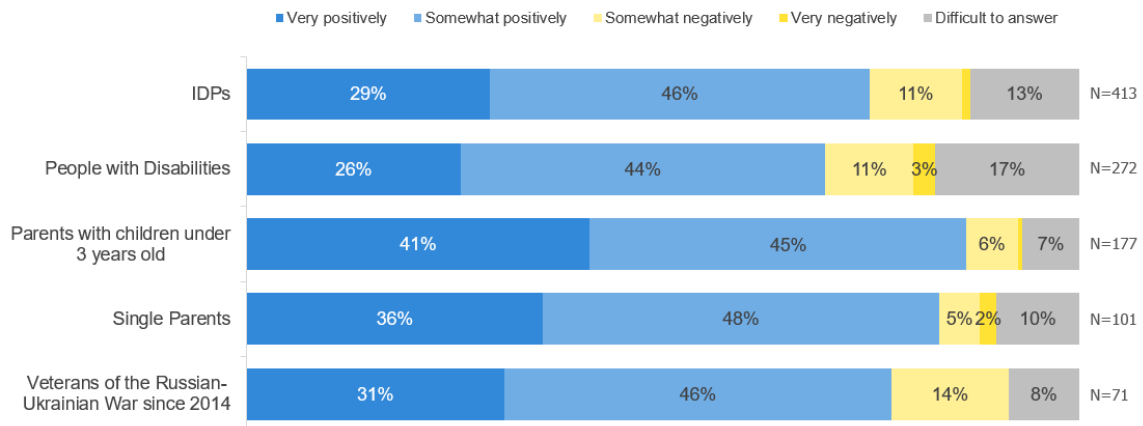


Attitudes towards retraining and learning in adulthood

Attitudes towards retraining and learning among vulnerable groups are positive, at least in principle (Fig.13). Parents with children under 3 years of age show the greatest willingness to learn (86% have a very or somewhat positive attitude, including 41% who are very positive) as do single parents (84% have a very or somewhat positive attitude, including 36% who are very positive). The least positive attitude is found among people with disabilities, but even here 60% of respondents approve of the idea of learning a new profession in adulthood (including 26% who are very positive).

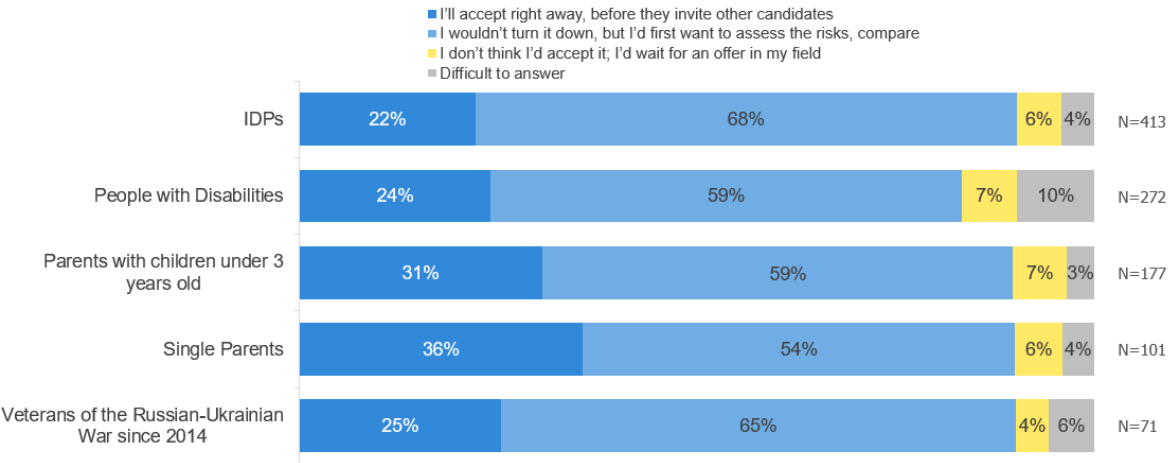
Even if such attitudes are largely expressed only in principle, they indicate the existence of a social consensus regarding the approval of the ideas of learning and acquiring a new profession at any age (lifelong learning).

Fig.13 . How do you feel about the idea of learning a new profession at your age? (% of responses, survey of inclusive groups)



If training and retraining are offered with a view to securing a ‘good job’ in the future, a significant proportion of respondents are inclined to agree as quickly as possible (Fig.14). Once again, the highest level of enthusiasm was recorded among the groups ‘parents with children under 3 years old’ and ‘single parents’ — 31% and 36% of respondents from these groups, respectively, chose the answer option ‘I would agree quickly, before they invite other candidates’. Whilst for the group of parents with young children this attitude towards training may be due to their younger age (almost half are under 30), for other groups, being older does not prevent them from responding to a vacancy that requires retraining.

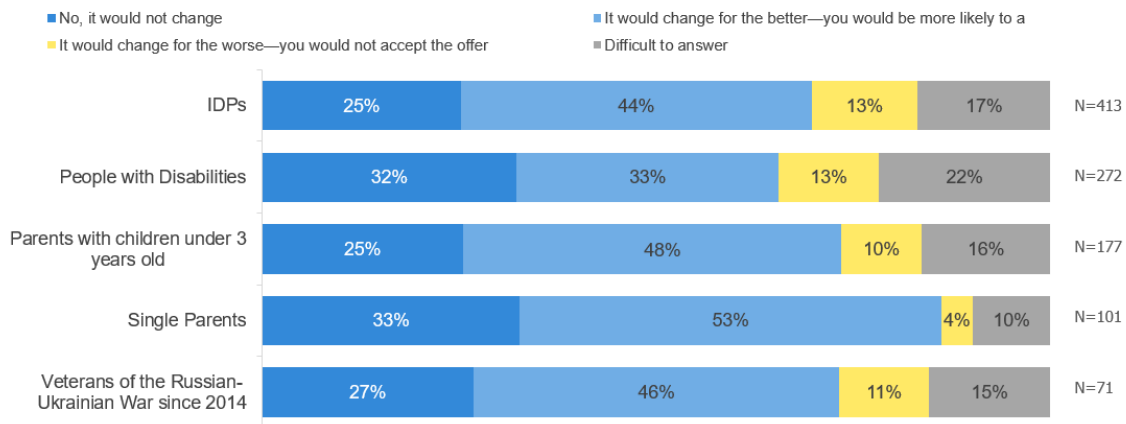
Fig.14 . Imagine you have been offered a ‘good job’ for which you need to change your specialism, i.e. undergo training or retraining (the terms and duration of the training suit you, and your future employer will pay for the training). Select the statement that best describes your attitude (% of responses, survey of inclusive groups)



Attitudes towards the idea of retraining, where this relates to employment in a blue-collar role, become more negative only for a small proportion of respondents: 4% in the single-parent group and between 10 and 13% in other groups (Fig.15). In contrast, a significant proportion say that their attitude would change for the better if the offer were for a blue-collar trade. Single parents are the most positive (53% would be more likely to accept the offer), whilst people with disabilities are the least positive (33% would be more likely to accept the offer). For people with disabilities, learning a blue-collar trade is associated with several barriers; for further details, see Section 3.

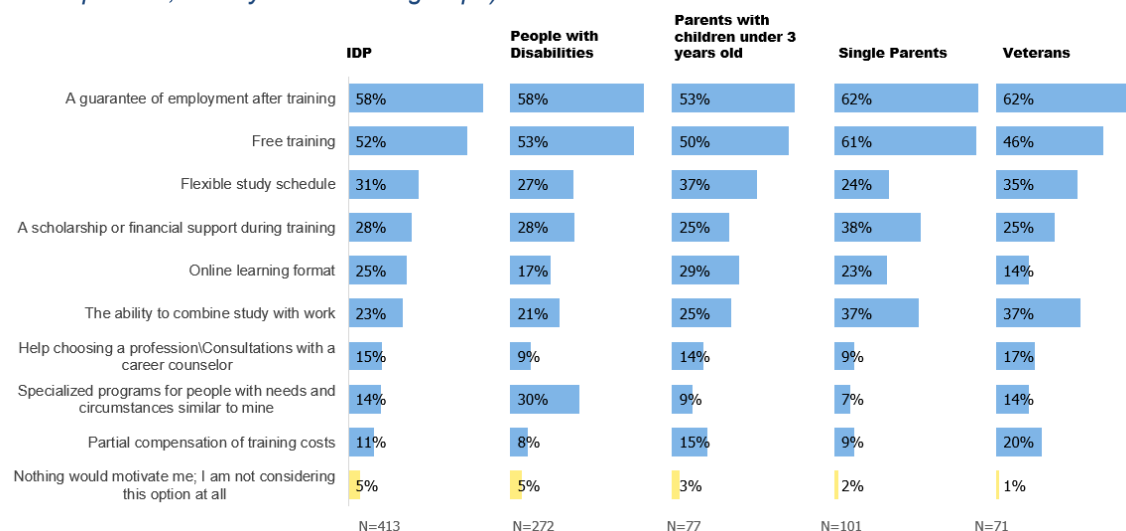
Among members of other groups, the proportion of those who would be more likely to accept the offer, provided it involved training for and employment in a blue-collar trade, ranges from 44% to 48%.

Fig.15 . Would your opinion on retraining change if this good job involved training and subsequent employment in a blue-collar trade? (% of responses, survey of inclusive groups)



To summarize the factors that might encourage respondents to consider learning a new profession or undergoing retraining, *the guarantee of employment* and *free training* take first and second place by a wide margin (Fig.16). Half or more of those surveyed select these two factors in almost all groups. As for third place, there are nuances specific to certain groups. For example, for internally displaced persons (IDPs), a flexible timetable and financial support during their studies are important (31% and 28% respectively). For people with disabilities, programs for people with special needs are an important factor (30%). Parents with children under 3 years of age also value a flexible study schedule (37%). For single parents and veterans, the ability to combine study with work is important (37%).

Fig.16 . What might still encourage you to consider learning a new profession or retraining? (% of responses, survey of inclusive groups)

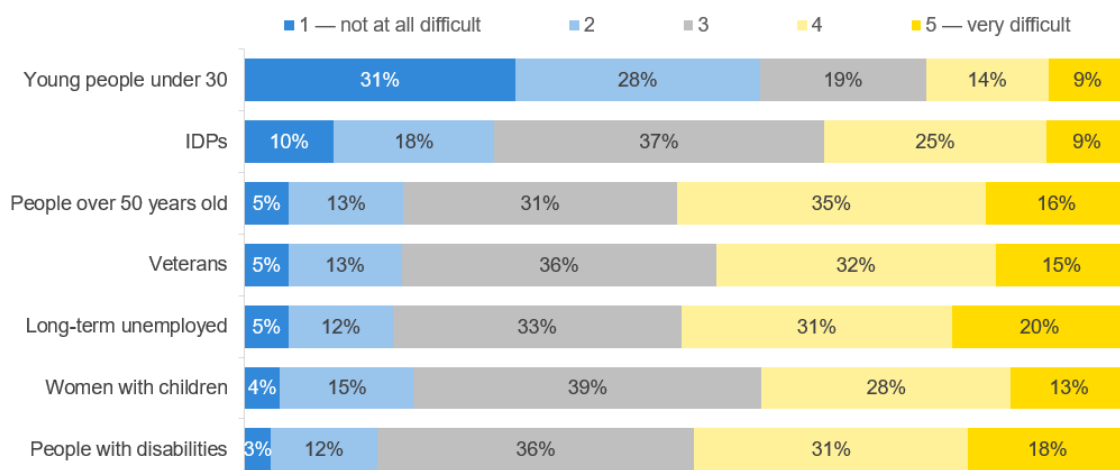


Section 2. Vulnerable groups in the labor market ‘through the eyes’ of stakeholders

The State Employment Service’s perspective

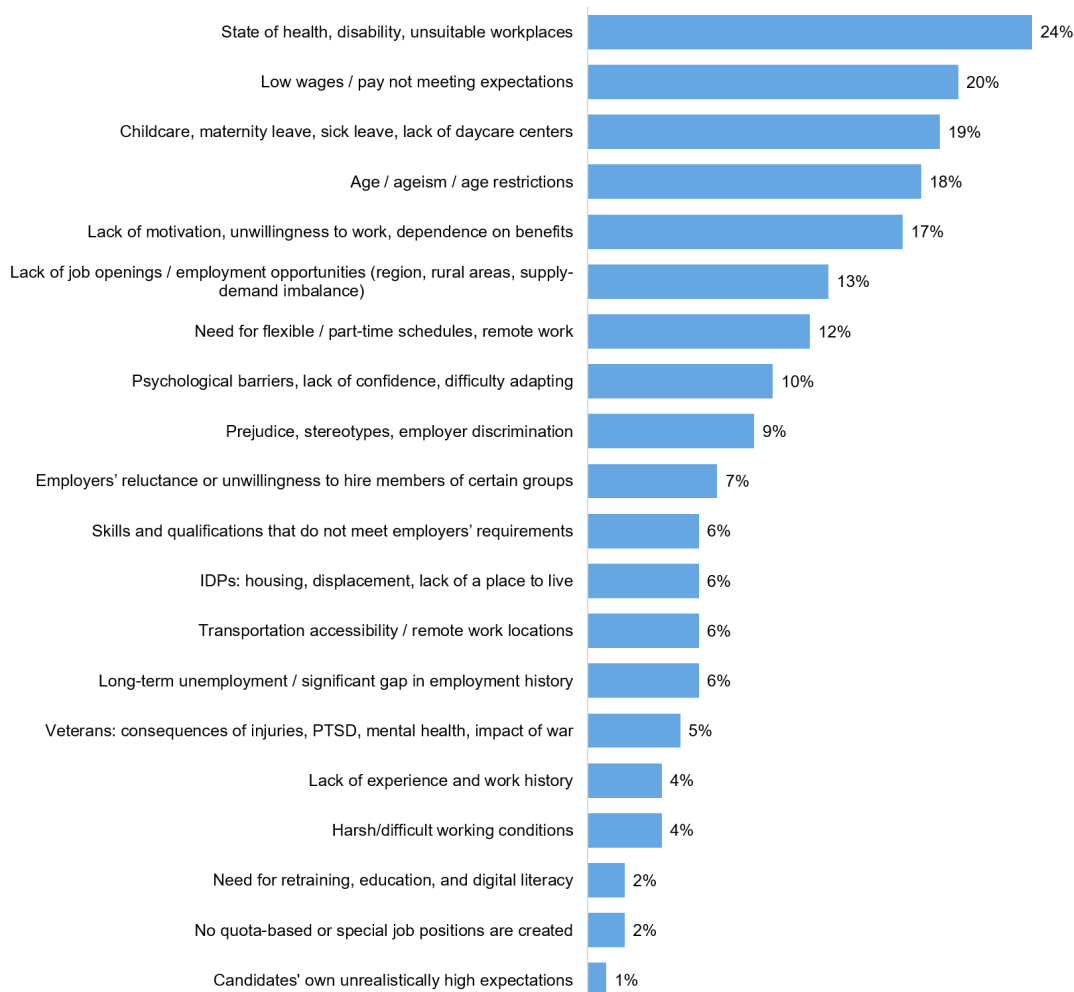
Staff at the Service identify the following groups of people who find it most difficult to find work (Fig.17): people with disabilities (85% of State Employment Service staff rated the level of difficulty as between 3 and 5, where 1 means *not at all difficult* and 5 means *very difficult*), the long-term unemployed (83%), veterans and people over 50 (82%), and women with children (81%). The proportion of State Employment Service staff who believe that it is difficult for internally displaced persons (IDPs) to find work stands at 72%. Young people under 30 are not considered to be a group for whom it is difficult to find work.

Fig.17 . How difficult is it for the following groups to find work? (% of responses, survey of State Employment Service staff)



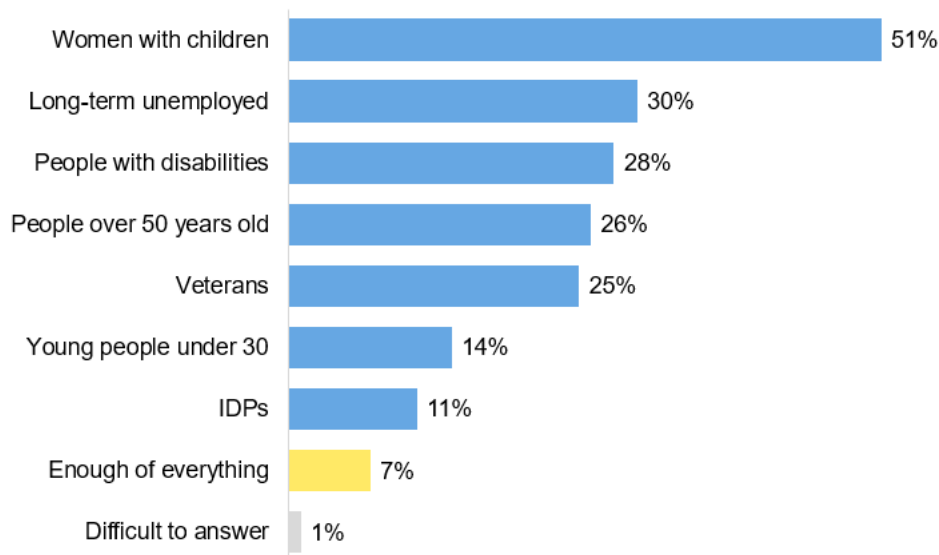
Among the factors that complicate the recruitment of inclusive groups, according to SES specialists, the most significant are those related to candidates’ health and the unsuitability of workplaces to their needs (mentioned by 24% of the SES specialists surveyed, Fig.18). Second place, with figures of 17–20%, was shared by the following factors: pay not meeting expectations (20%), a lack of daycare (19%), age restrictions (18%) and a lack of motivation (17%). In third place, with figures of 10–13%, were: a lack of job openings in the candidate’s region of residence (13%), need for flexible working hours or remote working (12%) and psychological barriers (10%). Other factors were mentioned by fewer than 10% of SES staff. Thus, employers’ reluctance to hire members of certain groups, lack of experience, mismatch in qualifications and the need for retraining are not significant factors hindering the employment of inclusive groups, from the perspective of SES specialists.

Fig.18 . You noted that it is very difficult for certain groups to find work; in your opinion, what are the greatest difficulties? (% of responses, survey of SES staff)



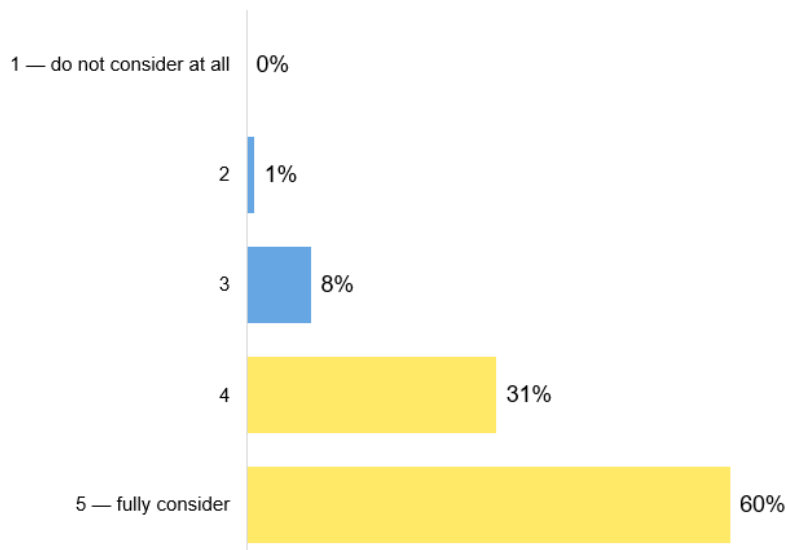
As can be seen, one of the biggest barriers hindering the employment of inclusive groups is the lack of infrastructure to facilitate care work for mothers with children. Consequently, it is this group that is most in need of support programs. More than half of Employment Centre staff share this view (Fig.19). The second-most affected inclusive groups lacking support programs are the long-term unemployed and people with disabilities (30% and 28% of responses respectively).

Fig.19 . Which groups are currently most in need of specific support programs? (% of responses, survey of State Employment Service staff)



It is interesting to note, however, that the State Employment Service excludes itself from the list of actors responsible for implementing and applying such support programs, as 91% of respondents state that the State Employment Service takes sufficient account of the needs of vulnerable groups (Fig.20).

Fig.20 . Does the State Employment Service take sufficient account of the needs of vulnerable groups? (% of responses, survey of State Employment Service staff)



However, the small proportion of SES specialists who indicated that the needs of vulnerable groups are not sufficiently taken into account believe that it is primarily employers who should take steps to accommodate these groups. Moreover, work should be carried out in several areas: information and educational initiatives with employers, which the State Employment Service could organize; additional incentives and support for employers in the process of employing inclusive groups, to be introduced by the government (and which may be administered by the State Employment Service); and, finally, the creation and adaptation of workplaces that meet the needs of inclusive groups, both in terms of physical accessibility and working conditions (remote working, flexible hours, part-time work). State Employment Service experts believe that an important area of focus is overcoming employers' prejudices, encouraging them to offer formal employment and simplifying working conditions for vulnerable groups.

Among other measures, SES experts emphasize that all initiatives aimed at supporting vulnerable groups must be based on needs assessment and a proactive approach. In particular, it is necessary to conduct systematic surveys, interviews and public consultations to identify real needs at the level of each community. Some State Employment Service experts also propose changing the approach to work — analyzing the needs not only of those who approach employment centers themselves, but also actively seeking out people within communities (it should be noted that this approach is currently being implemented by non-governmental organizations, such as charitable foundations and non-governmental organizations).

Overall, respondents emphasize that real change requires a shift in the philosophy of government support – from the formal provision of services to the creation of an inclusive environment where each person receives the level of assistance and support that is specific to their needs. In particular, this involves moving away from one-size-fits-all solutions in favor of an individualized approach to each person, taking into account their state of health and life circumstances, whilst addressing their needs in a comprehensive manner (housing for IDPs, medical care, nurseries), which requires the employment service to partner with local authorities, civil society organizations and foundations.

As regards specialized support for veterans in the labor market, this should be designed and implemented separately, taking into account the specific needs of this particular group. In particular, it is proposed to increase the amount and duration of unemployment benefits for veterans (up to one year), as they require

a longer period of rehabilitation and adaptation to civilian life (for example, veterans often seek services much later after their discharge due to medical treatment). Furthermore, veterans often require comprehensive support based on the 'peer-to-peer' principle.

Issues relating to education and retraining were also raised by State Employment Service specialists during discussions on support programs for inclusive groups. In particular, respondents suggested expanding the list of occupations available for retraining and adapting vocational education and training centers (VET centers) for people with disabilities.

Employers' perspective

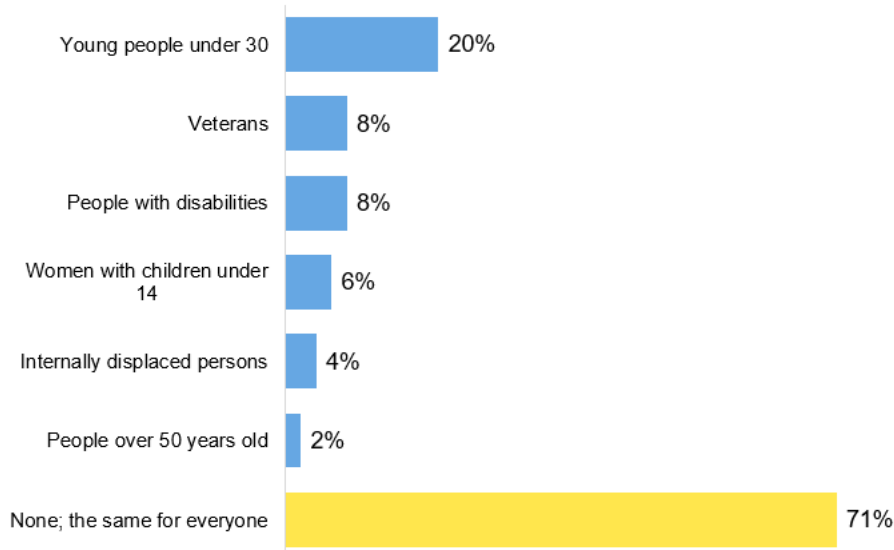
Employers state that they are fully prepared to hire staff from inclusive groups. According to a survey conducted by the State Employment Service³, 88% of respondents are prepared to hire people with disabilities, 91% are prepared to hire war veterans, and 94% are prepared to hire internally displaced persons (IDPs). As for older people, the State Employment Service survey focused on those aged over 60; the proportion of employers willing to hire such staff is slightly lower, at 66%.

However, in interviews with employers, we found that the vast majority (71%) do not anticipate any additional costs or organizational efforts when hiring and integrating employees belonging to inclusive groups (Fig.21). This suggests that the willingness to hire members of inclusive groups is most likely merely declarative, and will in fact disappear as soon as it becomes apparent that hiring and integrating such an employee requires additional costs or effort.

Among those who do anticipate additional financial or organizational costs, the majority are preparing for the complex process of integrating young people under the age of 30. Paradoxically, other categories that will clearly require more attention (such as veterans or people with disabilities) are mentioned by 2.5 times fewer respondents. This may indicate either a practical reluctance to hire members of such groups or an idealized view of working with them, which risks leading to disappointment after the first unsuccessful attempts. Thus, the relevance of training programs for employers on inclusive recruitment – as discussed by State Employment Service staff – is confirmed by the results of the employer survey.

³ <https://www.dcz.gov.ua/stat/statsurvey>

Fig.21 . For which categories of employees does the organization expect the greatest additional costs or organizational efforts during recruitment and induction? (% of responses, employer survey)



Experts' perspective

Labor market experts unanimously note that the Ukrainian labor market finds itself in a fundamentally new situation compared to the pre-war period. Whereas previously there was a surplus of candidates in many sectors, today virtually all sectors are facing staff shortages. According to estimates by Work.ua experts, even professions traditionally characterized by high competition (such as law) are now seeing a significant reduction in the number of applicants. The overall labor shortage, as estimated by the Ministry of Economy, stands at 40–50%, which is driving most current trends in the labor market.

Against this backdrop, the situation for blue-collar professions is changing significantly. According to experts from Work.ua and robota.ua, these professions are currently one of the most promising segments of the labor market. The shortage of skilled workers is leading to rapid wage growth, whilst modern manufacturing enterprises are increasingly utilizing automated equipment, digital technologies and artificial intelligence. Consequently, the traditional image of a blue-collar profession as low-paid, physical labor no longer corresponds to reality to a large extent. At the same time, experts emphasize that public perceptions are changing much more slowly than the labor market itself, which is why the majority of the population continues to be guided by outdated stereotypes.

An additional challenge is the demographic structure of blue-collar professions. According to experts' estimates, workers of pre-retirement age predominate in many manufacturing specialisms, whilst young people are hardly entering this segment of the labor market at all. This situation creates the risk of a further deepening of the labor shortage, even against the backdrop of active economic development and Ukraine's post-war reconstruction.

A separate issue raised by all the experts was the barriers to accessing the labor market faced by various sections of the population. In their view, a significant proportion of these barriers lie beyond the remit of the employment service or employers themselves. For example, for women with young children, the key problem remains the lack of functioning nurseries and schools, which effectively makes it impossible for them to return to work, regardless of the number of vacancies. For people with disabilities, internally displaced persons and some other groups with limited mobility, the ability to work remotely or have the most flexible working hours possible is of crucial importance.

At the same time, experts point out that discrimination in the labor market continues to exist, although it is increasingly rarely manifested openly. Most often, it affects older candidates, women with young children and certain other groups. Formally, employers justify their decisions by citing the selection of a stronger candidate; however, in practice, preference is often given to younger applicants or those without family responsibilities. People of retirement age, even if they possess the necessary qualifications, are often only able to apply for the most basic roles.

At the same time, experts note that modern job-seeking is increasingly concentrated in the online environment. According to their observations, attempts to attract candidates through traditional offline channels (such as print advertisements or QR codes in public places) yield virtually no results. If a person is actively looking for work, they mainly use specialized job sites. If, however, they do not use digital tools, they most often find work through personal contacts, acquaintances or recommendations, which is particularly common in small communities.

At the same time, experts emphasize that traditional job-search tools do not reach a significant proportion of the most vulnerable sections of the population. Representatives of the 'Right to Protection' charitable foundation note that many people in need of employment do not use job sites or do not actively seek work at all due to difficult life circumstances. Therefore, a proactive approach proves

effective, whereby career advisers work independently in areas where internally displaced persons (IDPs) live, at humanitarian aid centers or other locations where potential candidates are concentrated. At the same time, helping such people find employment can almost never be a stand-alone service. It requires comprehensive case management, which simultaneously includes legal assistance, psychological support, and addressing social and domestic issues, with the job search coming only afterwards.

The issue of reskilling was also considered by experts in a much broader context than simply organizing training courses. In their view, the main barrier to changing careers in adulthood is not a reluctance to learn, but the risk of losing income whilst studying. This is precisely why experts consider the most promising model to be programs implemented in partnership with employers, which provide for the payment of a grant or salary during training, followed by guaranteed employment. It was also noted that blue-collar professions are increasingly becoming the basis for self-employment and the development of one's own small business, which can serve as an additional motivation for retraining.

Experts also emphasize that changing careers in later life is gradually becoming the new norm in the global labor market. Whereas previously a career path was built around a single specialism throughout one's life, today retraining after the age of 40 or even 50 is no longer the exception. Accordingly, government policy and the vocational education system should be geared not only towards young people, but also towards adults who need to regularly update their professional skills.

A separate set of questions in the interviews with experts concerned veterans. Representatives of the Ukrainian Veterans' Fund emphasize that veterans' economic inactivity is largely due not to a lack of motivation to work, but to a combination of physical injuries, the psychological consequences of war and difficulties with social adaptation. At the same time, veterans often show a heightened interest specifically in blue-collar and technical professions, where the results of their work are tangible and clear. They regard specialized career counselling as one of the key elements of support, as it helps to transform military experience into skills that are understood by civilian employers. In addition, experts highlight the importance of psychological compatibility within teams, as conflicts of values between veterans and civilian staff often lead to the rapid termination of employment relationships.

Finally, experts point out that the development of an inclusive labor market depends to a large extent on the willingness of businesses to invest in adapting workplaces. According to their observations, large companies are much quicker to implement inclusive practices, as they are able to assess their economic impact and have the necessary resources. Small businesses, on the other hand, more often require practical economic models and evidence that employing members of vulnerable groups not only fulfills a social function but can also be economically viable. This partly explains why experts, as well as staff at the State Employment Service, emphasize the need for more active awareness-raising work with employers and the development of programs to support inclusive recruitment.

Chapter 3. Identification and analysis of practical barriers to labor market entry for vulnerable groups: qualitative research

The focus group discussions conducted confirm the findings of the expert interviews regarding the complex nature of the barriers hindering the employment of vulnerable groups. Research participants describe not isolated instances of discrimination, but a systemic combination of age-related, gender-related, social, economic and institutional barriers, which often overlap.

Age discrimination

One of the most common barriers, mentioned by virtually all groups of respondents, is age discrimination. It was mentioned particularly frequently by older people and people with disabilities, who have significant professional experience but face rejection as early as the selection stage.

Respondents note that employers often impose informal age limits, viewing older candidates as having less potential or as finding it harder to adapt to new conditions.

‘...you’re all suitable for us – education, experience – but there’s the issue of your age. We’re looking for someone aged 35 at most.’ (57-year-old man, member of a vulnerable group)

For men, the age barrier is often compounded by the difficulties of changing careers after the age of forty or fifty, whilst women report that they begin to experience discrimination as early as around the age of 35, particularly in sectors where employers favor younger workers.

Disability and health

Disability is an equally common barrier. At the same time, respondents describe two different patterns of employer behavior. The predominant experience is being refused a job once the employer learns of a person's disability status.

“As soon as they found out I had a disability, they immediately said: ‘You’re not right for us.’” (Male, aged 41, member of a vulnerable group)

Participants explain this by employers' reluctance to look into individual rehabilitation programs or adapt workplaces to the specific needs of the employee.

At the same time, some respondents also point to another practice, whereby people with disabilities are hired on a purely formal basis to meet quotas or secure tax benefits.

“On the contrary, they hire them... because they need to have people with disabilities on their books.”
(NEET woman, aged 20–24)

That said, even young people who have not personally encountered this problem perceive discrimination against people with disabilities as a common occurrence.

“People with disabilities aren’t hired in many places.” (Male NEET, aged 16–19)

Thus, disability is perceived by respondents as one of the most significant risk factors when looking for work.

Family status and care work

For women, having children is the most specific barrier. Virtually all the relevant accounts relate to employers' reluctance to hire mothers due to expectations of future sick leave or maternity leave.

‘If you have a young child, they don’t want to hire you at all, because you’ll be taking sick leave all the time.’ (35-year-old woman, member of a vulnerable group)

Some respondents noted that even the absence of children does not guarantee freedom from discrimination.

“You’ll be hired now, but then you’ll go on maternity leave, so you’re not right for us.”

(57-year-old man, member of a vulnerable group, recounting an acquaintance's experience)

According to the study participants, the problem worsened significantly during the war due to reduced access to nurseries and schools, making it even more difficult to balance work and childcare.

IDP status and geographical accessibility of work

The employment of internally displaced persons emerged as a separate issue. According to respondents, the barrier is not only IDP status itself, but also transport access to work.

"I'm from a rural area; they won't take me in the city. How am I supposed to get there?" (NEET woman, aged 20–24)

Thus, even where vacancies exist, geographical constraints can effectively exclude people from the labor market.

The complex nature of discrimination

The most telling accounts are those of respondents who face several forms of discrimination simultaneously. For example, one participant describes a situation where, after being rejected on the grounds of disability, they were subsequently rejected on the grounds of age, and also cites an example of discrimination against women based on their family status.

Such stories demonstrate that individual risk factors do not operate in isolation, but reinforce one another.

Opportunities to overcome barriers

Unlike the experts, members of vulnerable groups themselves see almost no opportunities to overcome existing barriers on their own.

Most respondents associate potential change primarily with the role of the government, which should not only create incentives for employers but also provide effective protection against discrimination.

'I believe that the government must come first and foremost.'
(47-year-old woman, member of a vulnerable group)

‘...the government should also encourage this. And, in addition, the level of social awareness among the population needs to be raised.’
(47-year-old woman, representative of vulnerable groups)

Some respondents believe that legal aid is the only effective means of protection, yet at the same time express doubts that, even after winning a case, a person will be able to find work due to informal practices in the local labor market.

‘The only person who could help is a lawyer... But I’m not sure anyone would have taken me on afterwards.’ (Woman, aged 41, member of a vulnerable group)

It is telling that even vocational retraining is not seen by many participants as a sufficient solution to the problem.

“Further training... but in my own experience, it’s like some sort of mafia that I just don’t understand at all...” (Woman, aged 41, member of a vulnerable group)

Overall, the focus group results indicate that respondents perceive the problem of employment for vulnerable groups as systemic. In their view, overcoming age discrimination, ensuring genuine inclusion of people with disabilities, and creating conditions that allow for a balance between work and family responsibilities require a comprehensive government policy, changes in employers’ practices, and the development of effective support mechanisms for jobseekers as they enter the labor market.

Appendix. Methodology

WP1. Focus group discussions

Method: Focus group discussions (FGDs)

Format: online

Sample: 10 FGDs

Target audiences:

- [1] NEET young people (not in employment, education or training), various age groups
- [2] Unemployed people who are ready to take up employment, various age groups
- [3] Vulnerable groups (people with disabilities, demobilized veterans, single parents)

All FGD participants are currently not in work but are considering the possibility of finding employment (levels of motivation and job-search activity vary: from actively seeking work to passively considering opportunities). Each group includes at least two respondents with IDP status.

Geography: They reside throughout Ukraine, except in the temporarily occupied territories (TOT) and areas of active hostilities, or in areas where the security situation does not allow for a safe place of residence for the entire duration of the FGD.

Fieldwork dates: 27 May 2026 – 3 June 2026

Details:

No.	Target group	Gender/age	Date
1	NEET young people	Males, aged 16–19	3 June 2026
2	NEET young people	Women, aged 20–24	3 June 2026
3	NEET young people	Men, aged 25–29	27 May 2026
4	NEET young people	Women, aged 30–34	27 May 2026
5	Unemployed	Men, aged 35–44	28 May 2026
6	Unemployed	Women, aged 45–54	28 May 2026
7	Unemployed	Men, aged 55–64	29 May 2026
8	Unemployed	Women, aged 65 and over	29 May 2026
9	Vulnerable groups	Women aged 18 and over	2 June 2025

10	Vulnerable groups	Men, aged 18 and over	2 June 2025
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WP2. Stakeholder survey

Method: Interviews

Target audiences:

- [1] Experts: In-depth interviews via the ZOOM online platform
- [2] Employers: telephone interviews
- [3] Representatives of the State Employment Service and Employment Centers: the survey was conducted in two stages:
 - [I] – an email campaign sent to the State Employment Service and Employment Centers to gather quantitative data and contact details for follow-up
 - [II] – telephone interviews

Sample size: 100+ interviews

Fieldwork dates: June–July 2026

Geography: Interviews were not conducted in the temporarily occupied territories of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, the city of Sevastopol, the Donetsk and Luhansk regions and other areas under occupation, nor in territories where Ukrainian mobile network coverage is unavailable.

RP3. Mass survey of target audiences

Method: Online survey using the CAWI method

Samples: 5 surveys, each comprising 400 (or more) respondents.

Survey specifications:

Survey 1. Young people, men and women (aged up to 30), who meet the following criteria:

- are unemployed,
- or are in work but are dissatisfied with their current situation,
- do not rule out the idea of changing their field of study.

Label on slides: *‘Young people under 30’*

Survey 2. Men and women aged over 50 who meet the following criteria:

- are unemployed,
- or are in work but are dissatisfied with their current situation,
- do not rule out the idea of changing their field of work.

Labels on the slides: *'Older people aged 50+'*

Survey 3. Women aged 30–50 who meet the following criteria:

- are unemployed,
- or are in work but are dissatisfied with their current situation,
- do not rule out the idea of changing their field of work.

Label on slides: *'Women aged 30–50'*

Survey 4. Men aged 30–50 who meet the following criteria:

- are unemployed,
- or are in employment but are dissatisfied with their current situation,
- do not rule out the idea of changing their profession.

Label on slides: *'Men aged 30–50'*

Survey 5. Groups requiring additional inclusive support (internally displaced persons, veterans, people with disabilities)

Labels on the slides: *'Inclusive groups (IDPs, veterans, people with disabilities)'*

Breakdown of respondents by gender and age:

Gender	IDPs	People with disabilities	Parents with children under 3 years of age	Single parents	Veterans
Men	41%	56%	19%	22%	89%
Women	59%	44%	81%	78%	11%

Age	IDPs	People with disabilities	Parents with children under 3	Single parents	Veterans
18–30	22%	10%	49%	17%	14%
31–49	50%	46%	51%	59%	66%
50 and over	28%	45%	1%	24%	20%

Fieldwork dates: June–July 2026

Geography: Residents throughout Ukraine, excluding the temporarily occupied territories and areas of active hostilities

Disclaimer: The specific nature of the online panel survey method should be taken into account. There may be a systematic bias in the sample towards people who are more digitally literate and more active. Consequently, estimates obtained through the CAWI survey should be interpreted as the upper limit of the values for the indicators under study. Further research using other methods may be useful and could reach a wider audience.

RP4. Mystery shopping

Method: Mystery shopping – unannounced visits

Sample: 11 mystery shopping campaigns

Profile of ‘mystery shoppers’:

- [1] NEET young people (not in education, employment or training)
- [2] Unemployed people
- [3] Vulnerable groups of unemployed people

Fieldwork dates: 11 June 2026 – 27 July 2026

Geography: Dnipro, Zaporizhzhia, Kyiv, Kryvyi Rih, Lviv, Odesa

Details: The initial visit was made to an employment center. Following this, the mystery shopper went through all the stages of interaction provided by the employment center, with the aim of assessing how the employment system functions through this job-search channel (as well as retraining and upskilling mechanisms).