

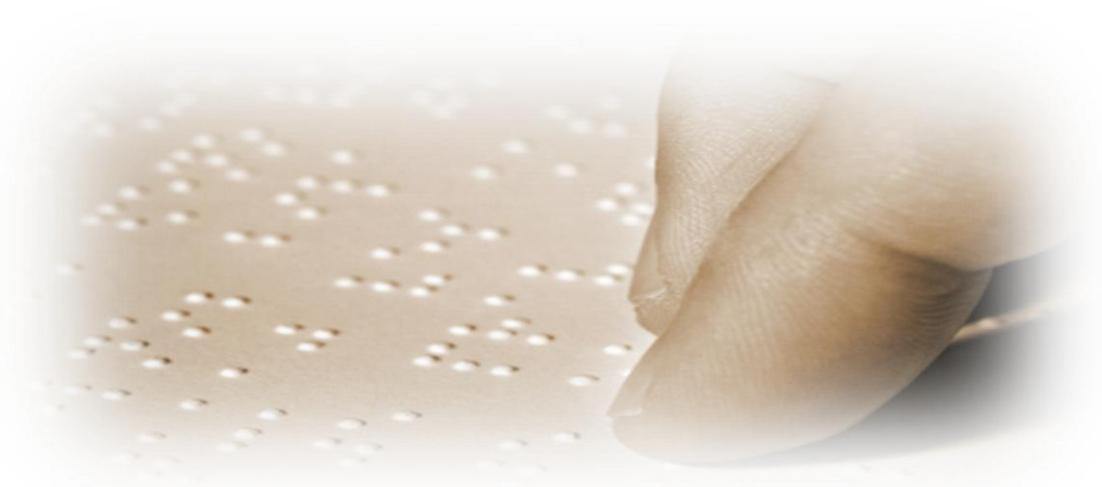


# All about VIPs in Europe

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[www.viewsinternational.eu](http://www.viewsinternational.eu)



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## *All about VIPs in Europe*

### **Introduction**

This brochure, entitled “**All about VIPs in Europe**”, is the tangible result of the project “**VIP Awareness raising on unemployment**”, financed by the European Commission under the Erasmus+ Programme Key Action 2 Strategic Partnership in the field of Education, Training and Youth. The partner countries are Belgium, Germany and Italy. Started in October 2015, it will end in April 2017.

Erasmus+... partner countries... that's all well and good, we already hear you say. But what is this project actually about?

First of all, it aims to develop a **strong partnership** between the partner organizations (two from Germany, two from Italy and one from Belgium). Its goal, very ambitious but more than necessary in the current job situation, is to urge more job-related institutions to **take on or offer internships to young visually impaired people** (henceforth **VIPs** in this brochure). And that's where **awareness-raising sessions** come into play: we want to inform institutions, job-related services and employers like you that recruiting a VIP is entirely possible. And not just that: that having him in your team can even give you a lot of benefits. In a word, the idea behind the whole project is that it is essential to eliminate prejudices and wrong behaviors on the part of employers, replacing them with **the right knowledge about VIPs' assets and strengths**.

You may be wondering how we put these nice principles into practice. Well, each organization **hosted a visually impaired youth mobility worker** from one of the partner countries for a period of three months. The youth workers played a key role in the project, helping the hosting organization with various tasks, such as:

- organizing awareness-raising sessions;
- holding presentations to give a better insight on visual impairment;
- drawing up a booklet about the job situation of VIPs in the partner countries.

Their joint efforts came together in this brochure, which would like to reach out to all of you, European employers. Perhaps you've never met a blind person before, except for crossing one or two in the street, and the thought of recruiting one has never even crossed your mind. Or, if it has, you have pictured it so full of **drawbacks and obstacles**, that you've just stored it in a remote drawer of your mind.

Well, this brochure wants to help you take that idea out of the drawer, because **there was nothing crazy about it!** First of all, though, we'll need to get some of the most common prejudices out of the way: how can you see all the benefits offered by a VIP, if your view is completely blocked by useless unfounded clichés? That's why the first part focuses on **VIPs in general**: what's the difference between totally blind and partially sighted, how VIPs can lead perfectly normal lives with some small adaptations... You'll hear how they manage to move from place to place, and how modern technology has empowered them in an astonishing way. Last but not least, we'll give you some advice on how to interact with them without being neither rude nor overly careful.

The second part will specifically focus on **employment**: the most common jobs performed by VIPs, job-related laws in the partner countries, assistive technology on the workplace, etc.

Many of the anecdotes/experiences that you will hear throughout this brochure come from the very lips of VIPs (two per country), who are currently employed and were interviewed by the mobility workers.

## **PART I. GENERAL OVERVIEW**

### **Blind vs. partially sighted: what's the difference?**

There is still quite a lot of confusion about **visual impairment**: when is it that someone is totally blind? And if he can see a bit, how much is that "bit"? Sometimes, people can't even conceive that someone looking very active and fulfilled doesn't see anything at all: "But you see a bit, don't you?".

Another thing: when they see someone walking with a white cane, they automatically assume he's blind. By the same logic, they assume that a partially sighted person doesn't need a white cane. Unfortunately, things are not that straight-forward when it comes to visually impairment.

So much confusion and ambiguity is quite understandable: though it is true that a totally blind person doesn't see anything at all, there are many degrees of visual impairment, and the differences between them are quite blurred. Let's try to clear up some misconceptions.

The World Health Organization (WHO) states that a person is visually impaired **when he sees 30% or less**. However, VIPs can be:

- **moderately visually impaired** (also defined as having **low vision**): someone who can see between 30% and 10%;
- **severely visually impaired** (also defined as having **low vision**): someone who sees 10% or less;
- **highly partially sighted** (already considered as being **blind**): someone who sees 5% or less;
- **blind**: someone who only sees 2% or less. From a medical point of view, though, blind people are those who cannot even see the light.

Another important difference is whether or not **a person is blind or partially sighted from birth**. Of course, people who were born with the visual impairment had the time to adapt and find alternative ways to cope with daily problems. It maybe be that they were born visually impaired because of **genetic diseases** (such as retinoblastoma, an eye cancer, or retinitis pigmentosa), or **other causes** (prematurity, congenital glaucoma, problems before or during birth).

People who lose their sight, or part of their sight, later on in life, usually go through a very difficult transition time, and, if they lose their sight completely, have to learn a radically new way of living (writing Braille, using a white cane etc.). Besides **accidents**, the most common diseases leading to the partial or total loss of sight are **cataract** (the main cause of blindness worldwide), **retinitis pigmentosa**, **glaucoma**, **age-related macular degeneration**, **corneal opacities**, **diabetic retinopathy** and also **childhood blindness**. It is worth noting that 90% of these diseases are avoidable.

Being visually impaired is as different as having a cold for every individual. Having a cold may range from, just having a running nose, a sore throat, a bit of cough or in the worst case all symptoms at the same time and often in different degrees, ranging from light to severe symptoms.

The same counts for visually impaired persons. Each individual conceives and experiences his sight loss in a different way and has his or her **unique set of methods to deal with it**. Some visually impaired persons have difficulties in recognizing faces or objects, due to a very limited range of vision.

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They are perceiving things like looking through a very narrow tunnel, which greatly impairs their sight, and makes it difficult for them to recognize the entire face or object and to maintain the eye contact in a personal conversation.

Other types of visual impairments, make the concerned like looking through a blurry veil. Their sight is often dimmed, compared to a very foggy and misty day. Other types of visual impairments, have an effect on the eye movement. Some visual impaired persons find it challenging to maintain focus and to control and navigate their eyes movements resulting in an eye tremor. Numerous different ways of experiencing visual impairment could be described, but to be really sure, how a visually impaired person experiences and perceives his surrounding, always ask himself. Most people with that condition, are happy for someone who really wants to understand, which effect their visual impairment has on their daily life.

Ninety per cent of VIPs worldwide live in developing countries. A very common and terrible eye disease which commonly occurs in parts of Asia, Africa, Central and South America, is **trachoma**, an infection caused by the bacterium *Chlamydia Trachomatis*; repeated (and untreated) trachoma infections can lead to permanent blindness if the eyelids turn inwards.



*The Italian youth worker Paola during her mobility in Lieges (Belgium)*

## Mobility

Unless they decide that being constantly guided is much more comfortable after all, severely visually impaired or blind people have two options at their disposal, when it comes to moving around: they can either use a **white cane**, or enjoy the company of a **trained guide dog**. (People with a moderate visual impairment can still count on their residual sight and thus do not use either of these aids).

As for white cane users, they first need to learn **the basics of cane usage**: how to grasp it correctly, how to move it properly on the ground in order to get the right information... Remember that the cane needs to replace someone's sight, which gives it quite a big responsibility: if used incorrectly, it can become a burden rather than an aid. That's why there are **instructors specially trained** to teach blind people how to use a cane in the safest of ways: after teaching them the basics, they help them learn the routes they need, finding the best solutions when it comes to critical points on the route (difficult crossings, unmarked shops, etc.).

Some blind people also use **navigation systems**, such as GPS on their phone. That is especially useful when the person hasn't learnt the route yet and has never walked it before. **Google Maps** on an iPhone is one of the most commonly used, and it's fully accessible. Using a smartphone while moving around, indeed, is extremely handy when it comes to public transport: blind people can check bus or train timetables on relevant apps, provided they are accessible (which, unfortunately, is not always the case). For instance, there are bus apps that show which busses are about to arrive at a given bus stop, and that synchronize with the user's location once he's on the bus: this way, he can be constantly informed of the route that the bus is taking, and he can get out at the right stop without anyone's warning. (Be assured, bus drivers can forget to tell you that the next stop is yours, though they swore they would!).

**Guide dogs users**, too, often make use of this kind of apps. Only, they hold a leash in their hand, rather than a white cane. The most commonly used dogs are **Labradors and Golden Retrievers**, whereas **German shepherds** are used less and less compared to the past (they are very beautiful creatures, but they turned out to get sick very easily and to have a personality which doesn't really fit the perfect guide dog's profile). These dogs get trained when they are puppies, and retire when they get too old and tired. Yes, because being a guide dog is quite **a tiring business!** They can't smell around or play with other dogs, if they are in working mode. Unfortunately, most people are not aware of this, and what they see is just a nice, cute dog. And what do you do with nice, cute dogs? You stroke them of course! Imagine that you have to hurry up because you're late for an appointment; being stopped every 20 seconds by someone who desperately needs to stroke your dog is not always ideal!

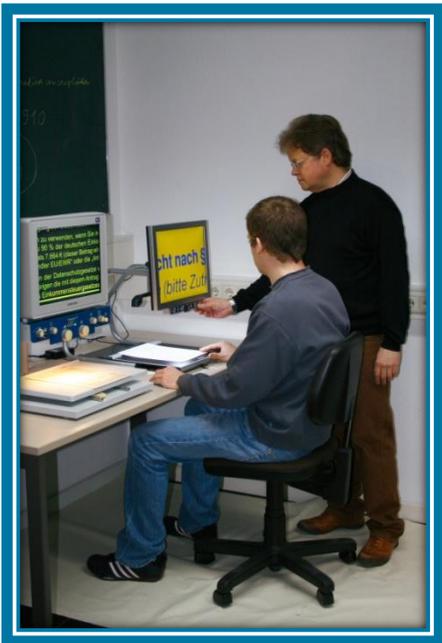
Guide dogs **are allowed** to accompany their owners wherever they go, including public transport: they can get on trains, busses and planes without any extra fee. Unfortunately, though, what's written in laws and directives doesn't always translate into reality: it happens way too often that guide dogs are refused by taxi drivers... and by airlines! Just to give you an example, an English man had to miss a conference because the airline he had to fly with demanded some non-existing documents related to his guide dog. It goes without saying that refusing to accept a guide dog is discriminating against the person holding its leash.

Guide dogs are (or should be at least) also allowed to accompany their owners to their workplace, and to stay with them while they work. A cute guide dog sleeping under the desk, while his owner is busy working, is a very nice recurring image).

## Assistive technology

As you may already have guessed from the previous chapter, technology has made great progress also when it comes to VIPs. Nowadays, they can use computers, smartphones and other common devices such as mp3 players, tablets, ebook readers etc., just like any sighted person. And all of this, that goes without saying, has empowered them like never before.

“Using a computer without seeing the screen... WHAT?!”. Even today, in the 21st century, many people have no idea that such thing is possible, and automatically assume that blind people have no access to mail, Internet etc. Fortunately, no assumption could be more wrong! They can perfectly read the screen thanks to **screen readers**, softwares which transform what’s on the screen into audio (through speech) or **Braille** (Braille displays) output. Screen readers always have built-in speech **synthesizer** (with many languages to choose from); however, if the blind user is a proficient Braille reader, and doesn’t want to get a headache by reading everything with the rather dull, monotonous voice of the speech, he can connect a Braille display to his laptop and read the content of the screen with his finger.



The most frequently used screen readers are **JAWS** and **Window Eyes**<sup>1</sup> (quite expensive softwares) and **NVDA**<sup>2</sup> (open-source). All these screen readers are only compatible with Windows and need to be first installed on the computer, with the help of a sighted person (let’s remember that the computer doesn’t speak until the software is properly installed!). When it comes to Mac OS, however, it’s not even necessary to install a screen reader on the laptop: Apple integrated a very advanced and highly accessible screen reader, **VoiceOver**, in all its newest products (not only laptops and desktops, but also iPods, iPads and iPhones), so that blind people can have full access to their device as soon as they open the box.

As for Braille displays, they are compatible with all the most common screen readers, and it’s very easy to connect them and get them to work (either via USB or Bluetooth). They come in many different sizes: the smallest on the market has **12 Braille cells** (meaning you can “see” 12 characters per time), **the biggest 80 cells!** These amazing displays can also be connected to other modern devices, such as smartphones or tablets: the user may want to read a book with his tablet without relying on the assistance of speech! Finally, some Braille displays have also a **built-in 8-dot keyboard**, which enables the user to write in Braille; they also have internal memory, meaning that the user can store files and read them whenever he wants.

All the above mostly refer to totally blind people, who cannot read the screen at all. As for partially sighted people, they use screen readers and **other magnification softwares**, which enlarge the letters on the screen. The most frequently used magnification software is called **Zoomtext**<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.freedomscientific.com/Products/Blindness/JAWS>

<sup>2</sup> [www.nvaccess.org](http://www.nvaccess.org)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.zoomtext.com/products/zoomtext-magnifierreader/>

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Another device which blind people use very often is a **scanner**. If they get a paper document (bill, receipt, work/study material), they can scan it and turn it into a digitalized file, thanks to **OCR (Optical Character Recognition) softwares** such as Abbyy FineReader<sup>4</sup>. After OCR is completed, they can save the converted file in the computer and read it like any other document.

You are probably wondering how blind people can afford all this technology: Mac computers are definitely not cheap, and screen readers for Windows are also very pricey. Fortunately, this kind of assistive technology **gets usually reimbursed to blind people**. Let's see how that happens in the countries we're focusing on in this brochure: Belgium, Germany and Italy.

In **Belgium**, there are quite many organizations advising and assisting blind people on technology-related issues: AVIQ, Ligue Braille "La Lumière", "L'Oeuvre Nationale des Aveugles" and other specialised organization... Thanks to such organizations, acting as kind of mediators, blind people can be more informed on the newest pieces of technology and choose the ones that are most suitable to their disability and needs.

In **Germany**, assistive technology is financed by the health insurance, though we did not manage to ascertain whether it also covers the purchase of a smartphone. By the way, the mobility courses we described in the previous chapter are also covered by the same health insurance.

In **Italy**, too, assistive technology is financed by the health insurance. However, the covered amount and the technical aids that can be reimbursed can vary drastically from region to region, and also depend on the type of disability of the person in need.

## **Interacting with VIP**

**Sight** is probably the most important and cherished sense for the majority of people. Close your eyes and think for a moment: sunsets... beautiful landscapes... looking into your lover's eyes... Many surveys back this idea: **blindness is apparently the most feared disability in the world**. The kind of disability that most individuals wouldn't want to have.

That's probably why many sighted people **don't feel particularly comfortable** around the blind, and seem to be scared of making mistakes (saying or doing the wrong thing). For fear of offending them, they sometimes have the tendency to treat blind people as though they were made of porcelain, which makes them feel more disabled than empowered. If that's already annoying enough when it happens in a shop or at a restaurant, you can imagine how frustrating it can get when coming from your employer! How could blind people feel rewarded for their work, if they don't feel treated normally in the first place? In this chapter, we'd like to give you **some tips on how to interact with them in the most natural of ways**.

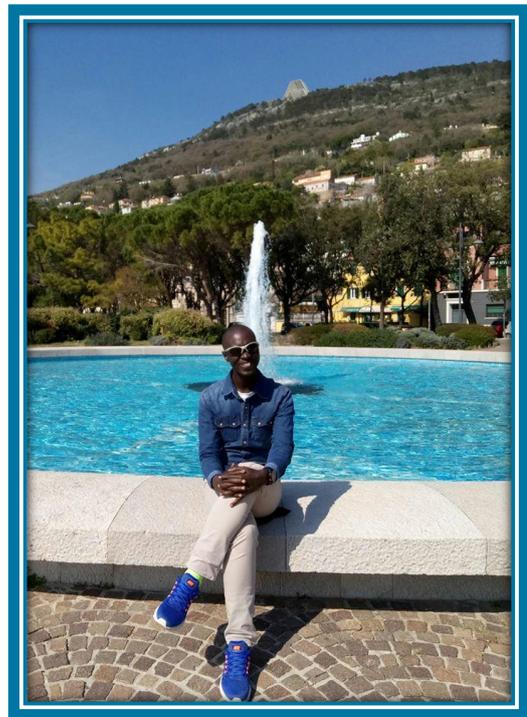
First of all, the word "blind", and all the other related terms. Many people are almost terrified to use any term referring to the field of vision, thinking that might offend the blind person. However, they should remember that the blind person in question has probably been blind long enough to have discovered this uncomfortable truth already! Being blind is just natural to him, which means there's absolutely no need to make a secret or a taboo of it! For example, when people want to say "Have you watched Woody Allen's last movie?", but think better about it and say "Have you wat... heard Woody Allen's last movie?" instead, they put more unnecessary emphasis on the person's disability, rather than being tactful.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.abbyy.com/en-eu/>

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Another thing. Sometimes sighted people would like to offer help to someone who's blind, but have no idea how to do that without being too invasive or offensive. Well, it is always good to ask if help is needed, but you shouldn't feel bad or embarrassed if you get a negative answer: it may very well be that the blind person in question doesn't need your help, but you definitely didn't offend him by asking! However, it is worth noting that some VIPs find it more difficult than others to accept their disability and are therefore more proud or susceptible. When asked if they need help, they might answer a bit rudely and seem offended (one of the writers of this brochure still remembers reducing a waitress almost to tears, because she had dared asking if a spoon may have worked better than a fork!). However, try to understand that similar reactions only happen with certain people and are all but universal. Also, don't insist offering help if the person says he doesn't need it: that can be very annoying, especially when it comes to walking. Many sighted people seem to assume that they perfectly know where the blind person has to go, though they've never even met him before: that's why they sometimes grab him by the arm and drag him (we swear it, that REALLY happens sometimes!) in the direction which is right only in their mind. Imagine how disorientating that can be for the blind person who has a mental map in his head and is trying to follow it!



*The Belgian youth worker Theo during his mobility in Trieste (Italy)*

**Guiding a blind person** can also pose some problems to people who are not used to it. First of all, if you have to start guiding a blind person, offer him your arm **by tapping his hand with the back of yours**; he will then take your arm just above the elbow. Never grab his arm or guide him by pushing or pulling: as we've already shown, that's really not advisable! You can walk normally while guiding: the only thing you need to remember is to **walk one step ahead of him**, except at the top/bottom of stairs or street crossings; in these cases, you should **pause** next to the blind person, so he knows that you are approaching either stairs or a crossing. Also, remember to always pause when you change direction or there is a step up or down. If you feel particularly inspired, you can also tell the person you're guiding about changes in terrain, narrow spaces etc., but that's not

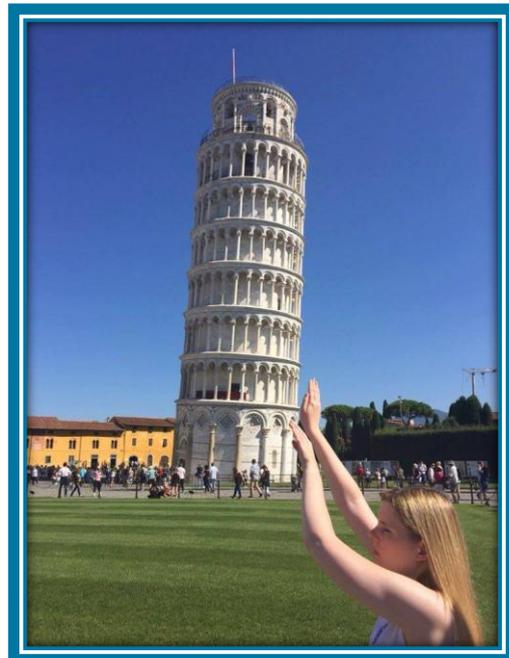
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imperative. (By the way, guiding techniques may need to be slightly adjusted, if the person has other disabilities besides blindness, so don't hesitate to ask!).

Something you probably don't know is that **you shouldn't leave the guided person in "open space"** (in the middle of a square etc.). So, if you have to leave him for a moment, it's always better to leave him next to a wall or another stable object. Moreover, if you have to guide him to a seat, **place the hand of your guiding arm on the seat**: the blind person will follow your arm and find the seat<sup>5</sup>.

Another very important aspect, when it comes to blind people, is **verbal communication**. Reflect for a moment: when you enter a shop, queue for the bus, look for a seat in the train, go to the disco... interaction often takes place without even speaking, but by looking at each other, nodding in a certain way, using a gesture rather than another, etc. Since they cannot count on sight, however, blind people replace all of this with words. We are aware that the lack of eye contact can be quite weird, sometimes even troubling, to many sighted people, especially when meeting a blind person for the first time: it doesn't always come natural to "verbalize" what you'd be inclined to express in other more visual ways. However, it's obviously better **to talk directly** to the blind person, even using his name when you know it: in a big group of people, the blind person doesn't always realize you're actually talking to him, though you may be looking in his direction. Another thing you shouldn't forget is to **"announce" when you leave the room**: of course, you're not used to verbalize such a thing, as most people can just see you get out of the door. But we assure you that many blind people, even some of the authors of this brochure, had many experiences of the sort: they kept on talking about a very urgent and crucial issue... only to find out that they had actually been having a **monologue** instead!

All of this may sound difficult to put into practice, but don't worry: **it's just a matter of habit**. Blind people's relatives and friends don't have any special guiding license: they just spent a lot of time with them and got used to their sometimes slightly different way to interact with the world.



The German youth worker Nina during her mobility in Pisa (Italy)

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.afb.org/info/friends-and-family/etiquette/being-a-sighted-guide/235>

## PART II. VIPS AND WORK

### Work-based assessment

It often happens that a **specialist in assistive technology** pays a visit to the workplace of visually impaired employees. This **work-based assessment** aims to evaluate the **technical support** already provided and to check whether something (equipment, software etc.) needs to be adjusted to better enable them to carry out their tasks. Furthermore, employees get a **training** about assistive technology and the equipment at their disposal can be adapted to meet their specific needs.

In **Belgium**, the **Ligue Braille** prepares and advises VIPs on work-related issues, both if they're looking for a job and if they want to ensure they don't lose the one they already have. Besides, the Ligue Braille helps raise awareness among visually impaired employees' colleagues and employers<sup>6</sup>.

In **Germany**, the work-based assessment is carried out either by **the producers of assistive software and by the enterprises** selling them or by public agencies, that spend the fines collected on the basis of the quota system on the vocational participation of people with disabilities.

In **Italy**, it is the **Italian Union for the Blind** which performs the assessment. VIPs are entitled to assistance both in terms of mobility (how to get to the workplace etc.) and technical equipment provided by the employer.

### The most common jobs for VIPs

“What kind of jobs can VIPs do... if any?”. This question probably comes to the mind of many people, especially those who are not acquainted at all with visual impairment. Perhaps, you've been wondering the same up to now, until you opened this brochure... it is hard to imagine jobs that don't require seeing: after all, wasn't sight the most popular sense of all?!

Fortunately, **there are many jobs that VIPs can do nowadays**, especially thanks to the advent of new technologies. Just to give you a couple of examples, some of them work as **switchboard operators or physiotherapists**; in Italy at least, these have been the jobs that most blind people would do in the past, though they are currently losing popularity to more qualified jobs. Other blind people work as **teachers**, both in mainstream and specialist schools. Others work in the **public administration**, working as **IT programmer, sound engineer** etc. And let's not forget the many **psychologists** and **lawyers**, as well as the increasing number of **translators** and **interpreters**! All these professions are particularly suitable for VIPs, as they mostly focus on the written and spoken word rather than on visual aspects.

In general, it seems like employed VIPs are pretty satisfied with their job. At least, that's the impression we got from the **six people we interviewed** for this project! Let's hope they reflect a general situation and are not just fortunate exceptions! **Carmen**, for example, is blind and works as **helpdesk analyst in a Belgian company**, testing whether a web platform of the European Commission is fully accessible to blind users. When she bumps into inaccessible parts of the platform, she creates an online report in order to improve them. As you can imagine, she does all of this with the help of a computer with screen reader.

Her blind colleague **Emoke**, who's 30 and is been working in the same field since October 2015, is quite satisfied with her job, but just sees it as a temporary phase of her life: “I definitely know it's

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.braille.be/en/about-us>

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not the job of my dreams, so I'll probably look for a new one soon: I'm young and I feel like there are many opportunities yet to explore! Of course, though, I feel really fortunate to have this job, which enables me to live quite comfortably". Just as Carmen, she uses a **screen reader** on her computer, . "If I ever had the possibility to talk to a politician responsible for employment issues, I'd urge him to give disabled people a chance to show their qualities and skills".

Another very inspiring example, from Germany this time, is **Stefan**, a 31-year-old partially sighted man working as **real estate agent** since 2006. "During my studies, I did an internship at a real estate agency. I learned a great deal and met a lot of interesting people, so I decided to work as real estate agent. In 2006, after graduating, I got a training place in the same agency where I had done my internship. To be honest, I think that the fact that people already knew me was a great advantage for me: they had already seen me work and knew I was reliable".

After the training, he got a job in the agency, but was on a fixed-term contract for the first three years. "It is a small enterprise and it's true that I need more time than my sighted colleagues to carry out the same task: for an account, for instance, I need to scan the document and read it with a magnification software. Whereas big enterprises are obliged to hire a fixed amount of disabled employees, small ones don't: that's why they observed me for quite a long while, to see what I was really capable of. After long discussions, though, my boss decided to change my fixed-term contract into an open-ended one".

As you can imagine, Stefan is extremely satisfied with his job situation. "I like my job very much! I mostly work in the office, preparing the accounts, talking to our renters and organizing the agency's events. I used to do quality checks in our flats as well, but I decided to leave it to my colleagues as I realized it was too much of a visual task".

Stefan uses the computer **with a very big screen, the magnification software Zoomtext and the Cobra Speech screen reader**. "in Germany, there are many different institutions financing assistive technology for visually impaired people, and sometimes it's complicated to know which one can finance what! It would be much easier if one single institution were responsible for all the financing".

**Trixi**, also from Germany, is 33 years old and **teaches English, Braille and Informatics in a school for the blind**. She loves her job, but finds it exhausting at times: "Kids are very sweet... but so loud and lively!".

She has a very good relationship both with her colleagues and the pupils. "My guide dog comes to school with me, and everybody absolutely adores him, both my colleagues and the kids!". Her sighted colleagues are perfectly comfortable with her visual disability and often come to her for advice and support.

For her work, she uses a **computer with screen reader, equipped with a Braille display and a Braille printer**. Regarding assistive technology, she admits: "I would like to decide myself which health insurance I want to have, but I feel that many insurances discriminate against disabled people. I also think that assistive technology advisers should provide more extensive training, so that blind people get a clearer overview of the different technologies at their disposal and can choose the one that suits them best".

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In Italy, many blind people are still unemployed, but fortunately not all of them. **Marialaura**, for instance, is a 30-year-old girl who's doing an **internship as secretary in a blind resource centre**. The internship has been financed by the region where she's currently living, and she found it thanks to the World Wide Web. "I'm very glad I got this internship, as it gives me the opportunity to prove that blind people can also work in different fields, not only as switchboard operators!.

She gets along very well both with her bosses and her colleagues: "I love this working environment, and I try to carry out my tasks at the best of my abilities". She works with a **computer equipped with screen reader**.

"If I had the chance to talk to an Italian politician responsible for employment issues, I'd try to organize an awareness-raising campaign, to explain how VIPs can lead perfectly normal lives, and to outline the difficulties they face when searching for a job". She thinks that the Italian society as a whole isn't yet prepared to offer VIPs working opportunities able to harness their skills and increase their self-confidence: "If I had the chance to talk to a national politician, I'd urge him to recognize the abilities of visually impaired people and give them the opportunity to work in an environment which helps them to be more included in society.

**Rocco** is an Italian blind young man working **as switchboard operator in the same blind resource centre** where Marialaura does her internship. "I attended a one-year training to become switchboard operator in 2015, and in November 2016 I was lucky enough to find a job, thanks to the support of the Italian Union for the Blind. My family has always supported my decisions, encouraging me to hold on and never give up!".

Rocco is very happy with his new job and has a good relationship with his colleagues: he spends a lot of time with them during breaks! He uses a **computer with a screen reader and a Braille display... and a phone of course!**

"If I had the chance to talk to a national politician responsible for employment issues, I would remind him that our Constitution rules that work is one of the fundamental rights of Italian citizens. That's why the government should make more efforts to increase job opportunities for VIPs as well".

### **The job search**

If employers don't know that, when supported by the right technology, VIPs can work like anyone else, it is very unlikely they'll feel inclined to hire them. That's why it is imperative they are well informed about assistive technology and all the other issue we've discussed above. **Awareness-raising campaigns** are perfect ways to achieve just that, but they should be organized more often and reach out to more employers.

In any case, it is clear that VIPs have **more difficulties to find a job** than sighted people. Fortunately, there are some associations specialized in supporting them in this hard quest. One of the most popular in **Belgium** is the NGO **DiversiCom**: it helps VIPs find a job, sign the contract and go to the workplace for the first time. The association also organizes awareness-raising sessions for the future colleagues, explaining them how to best interact with a VIP. Another Belgian association **AViQ (Agence pour une Vie de Qualité)** supports VIPs from the French-speaking part. It is a public service that is competent in the French speaking part for information, advices and support (also financial support) in order to promote the inclusion of disabled people. Each month, the association pays a percentage of the VIP's wage to his employer, as a compensation for the extra expenses he may incur (if the VIP needs help from his colleagues or works at a slower pace). Belgian employers can also get funds to pay for a monitor, who supports the VIP in case of need. Carmen, whom we've met in the previous chapter, gets support both by DiversiCom and AViQ.

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In **Italy**, the employment of persons with disabilities is regulated on the basis of legislative measures, the most important is **law n. 68 of 1999** on "**Regulations on the right to work of persons with disabilities**".

This law defines the various conditions of persons with disabilities from the employment perspective, as persons in working age affected by a physical, sensory, psychological or intellectual impairment which causes a reduced

working ability of 45% as certified by the competent medical committee for the recognition of "**civilian disability**".

Inactive persons belonging to one or more of the above mentioned groups may register in a list of so called protected working categories. **Public administrations employ persons with disabilities belonging to the so called protected categories on the basis of competitive entry examinations where blind persons can benefit from special time adjustments and use their adapted assistive technologies (regulated by law 104 of 1992).**

Public administrations and private ones employ persons with disabilities belonging to the "**protected categories**" following a well established quota system which sets progressive percentages on the basis of the number of non disabled employees

Private and public entities which do not comply with the legal obligations are subject to administrative sanctions, the revenue of which is allocated to a special fund for the employment of persons with disability held at regional level

In the quota system adopted by this law visually impaired people are included thanks to the special laws addressed to this target group (**L. 113/85 and L. 29/94**: telephone operators and masseurs-physiotherapists).

Qualifications equivalent to those of telephone operator or telephone based occupations:

Visually impaired people who have obtained one of these qualifications/diplomas through attendance of vocational training courses or school education, are in a position to be enrolled in the mandatory list of telephone operators held at province level. In other words, they can benefit from the same facilitations provided for in law 113/85 for telephone operators.

### **Current situation in the partner countries**

There are about **30 million blind and partially sighted people in the 45 countries constituting the European Blind Union**: one person in thirty is actually visually impaired. Furthermore, figures tell us that the average unemployment rate, in the case of VIPs of working age, is over 75%, and that there are more unemployed women than men.

In **Belgium**, many facilities have been put in place to foster the hiring of VIPs, without additional costs or loss of efficiency. The Ligue Braille, which we've already mentioned when we told you

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about the work-based assessment, informs and accompanies employers in the recruitment, retraining or retention of a VIP. Furthermore, the Belgian legislation provides for a tax reduction for companies hiring disabled people.

Furthermore, companies **get financial advantages** if they hire disabled people. For example, in the French speaking part there are different kinds of financial advantages for employers, which want to encourage the employment of disabled people or to help them maintain their current job (tax reductions, workplace adaptations...). Employers can also get a **financial premium** enabling them to choose a tutor who will facilitate the disabled employee's integration in the company and ensure a professional guidance during the first 6 working months.

There are also different **internship/training opportunities for disabled people**. They can be either long-term, in order for the employee to better integrate in the company, or short-term, in order for him to discover which job may match his expectations and skills.

Finally, the Belgian administration **is also obliged** to hire a certain percentage of people with disability. You can find more information about the advantages here:



[https://www.aviq.be/handicap/vosbesoins/se\\_former\\_travailler/employeurs/index.html](https://www.aviq.be/handicap/vosbesoins/se_former_travailler/employeurs/index.html)

Both in **Germany and Italy**, the law rules that enterprises are obliged to hire disabled people, the amount of whom varies according to the size of the enterprise. The companies which do not comply with this obligation must pay a very heavy fine: in Germany, for instance, the fine amounts to 125€/220€ and has to be paid every month. On a brighter note, in both countries enterprises which **DO** hire disabled people get some

financial support from the government.

In Germany, visually impaired employees are entitled to a **working assistant**: he can help the VIP to carry out his tasks, but it is essential that the latter does most of the work. Sometimes, the VIP receives money from the government in order to pay for the assistant, meaning he's actually the assistant's employer; in other cases, it is the employer himself who hires the assistant. However, VIPs need to apply for a working assistant every two or three years.

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### **Conclusion**

Here we are, at the end of this brochure. Of course, it was quite an **ambitious goal**, to show how VIPs live in such a short text! Probably you had many questions in your heads before you started reading, and we really hope we managed to answer at least some of them. Realizing that VIPs can **live perfectly normal, satisfactory lives** is the first step to see them as potential employees or colleagues. Don't you agree?

Besides, we hope that you enjoyed reading about the **working experiences** of these 6 visually impaired young employees in Italy, Belgium and Germany. No better way to show that working with a visual impairment is perfectly **doable and gratifying**, both for the employee and for the employer!

Though our overview of the working situation in the partner countries was far from exhaustive, we hope it helped you get a clearer idea on the **benefits and advantages** (also from an economic point of view) that a VIP could bring to your company. We strongly advise you to check the situation more in depth in your country, as this was just a general overview.

All in all, we are really glad that you took the time to read this brochure, and we hope it gave you a **new insight into the world of VIPs**, still unknown to so many people. And tomorrow, if a VIP comes into your office for a job interview and sits down in front of you, we hope that you won't feel neither embarrassed nor sceptical, **but comfortable and professionally curious**.



*Christina Baumann at work*



*Sabrina Fürher at work*

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The brochure was put together by **three youth mobility workers**, who wrote separately and stayed in contact mostly through Skype. Its aim is to give a general idea of the **employment situation**, but the information herein contained is far from complete. Nonetheless, we hope that this general overview was able to remove some of your doubts, and gave you an incentive to investigate these issues more in depth.

The following persons and teams have contributed to the contents of this brochure:

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*Jessica Schroeder (DBSV);*

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The brochure was produced in 2016-2017.



*VIP project team during the final translational meeting in Berlin*

## **Useful Links**

### **Belgium**

#### **Association that provides subsidies for disabled people (French speaking Community)**

- Website of the “Agence pour une Vie de Qualité” (AViQ) with focus on advantages for employers and employees

[https://www.aviq.be/handicap/vosbesoins/se\\_former\\_travailler/employeurs/index.html](https://www.aviq.be/handicap/vosbesoins/se_former_travailler/employeurs/index.html)

#### **Associations with a focus on employment/job creation for disabled people**

- Website of “Diversicom”, organisation that facilitates the employment of disabled people

<http://www.diversicom.be>

- Facebook site of “Handijob’project”, organisation that gives a business start-up assistance for disabled people

<https://www.facebook.com/handijobprojectasbl>

#### **Some associations which are particularly supporting blind and partially sighted people**

- Website of “Ligue Braille”, with a focus on job related topics

<http://www.braille.be/fr/services-et-aides-techniques/travailler>

- Website of “La Lumière”, active in the province of Liège

<http://www.lalumiere.be>

- Website of “L’Œuvre Nationale des Aveugles” (ONA)

<http://ona.be>

- Website of the foundation “I See”

<http://www.fondationisee.be>

#### **Public independent service that struggles discrimination and promotes equal opportunities**

- <http://unia.be>

**Italy**

**Ministero del lavoro e delle politiche sociali**

- <http://www.lavoro.gov.it>
- <http://www.lavoro.gov.it/stampa-e-media/campagne/Pagine/Diritti-delle-persone-con-disabilita.aspx>

**Unione Italiana Ciechi e Ipovedenti (U.I.C.I.)**

- <https://www.uiciechi.it/>

**Istituto per la Ricerca, la Formazione e la Riabilitazione Onlus (I.Ri.Fo.R.)**

- <http://www.irifor.eu/>

**Federazione Nazionale delle Istituzioni Pro Ciechi Onlus**

- <http://www.prociechi.it/>

**Handilex – Persone con disabilità e diritti**

- <http://www.handylex.org/>

**Agenzia delle Entrate**

- <http://www.agenziaentrate.gov.it/>
- [http://www.agenziaentrate.gov.it/wps/file/Nsilib/Nsi/Agenzia/Agenzia+comunica/Prodotti+editoriali/Guide+Fiscali/Agenzia+informa/pdf+guide+agenzia+informa/Guida\\_Agevolazioni\\_i\\_persone\\_con\\_disabilit%C3%A0.pdf/](http://www.agenziaentrate.gov.it/wps/file/Nsilib/Nsi/Agenzia/Agenzia+comunica/Prodotti+editoriali/Guide+Fiscali/Agenzia+informa/pdf+guide+agenzia+informa/Guida_Agevolazioni_i_persone_con_disabilit%C3%A0.pdf/)

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