ERAMUS+ PROJECT

Building inclusion-driven dual VET
2025-1-BG01-KA210-VET-000349537

TRAINING RESOURCE

GUIDE FOR WORKPLACE MENTORS

Inclusive Mentorship in Dual VET

for Qualifications in Digital Marketing and Internet Applications

GUIDE • SUPPORT • EMPOWER



Co-funded by the European Union

INCLUSION DRIVEN DUAL VET

FOREWORD

The modern world of work is changing rapidly and placing increasingly high demands on professional skills, adaptability, and organisations' ability to develop their human potential. In this context, dual VET has become established as an effective model for connecting education with the real workplace. It provides trainees with opportunities to acquire professional competences through practical participation in real production and organisational processes.

The true value of dual VET cannot be measured solely through the professional skills acquired by trainees. Its success also depends on the workplace's ability to provide equal opportunities for participation, development, and professional fulfilment to all trainees, including people with disabilities and others who may encounter additional barriers during the transition from education to employment.

This practical guide has been developed to support workplace mentors in companies participating in dual VET in building an inclusive workplace culture. It is intended for professionals who possess practical experience and expert knowledge in their field, but who need additional support in fulfilling an increasingly important role: the role of a mentor who provides training and creates conditions in which different trainees can develop.

The mentor's work within inclusive dual VET extends beyond teaching specific professional skills. The mentor introduces the trainee to the organisation's culture, supports their adaptation, strengthens their confidence, and provides opportunities for full participation in real work processes. Through their decisions, mentors influence whether trainees are regarded as active participants and future professionals or as people whose presence merely needs to be tolerated.

Inclusive mentoring is based on the understanding that differences among people are a natural part of the modern workplace rather than an obstacle to professional development. Every trainee has an individual way of learning, a different pace of development, and specific strengths. The mentor's responsibility is to create conditions in which these differences can be managed and transformed into a resource for learning and development.

The guide offers practical guidance on the main challenges mentors may encounter when working with trainees with disabilities. It examines the importance of including people who experience particular barriers in traineeships and dual VET programmes, the need to prepare mentors for their role, ways of overcoming initial uncertainty and resistance, the different stages of adaptation to the workplace, the individual approach, and the process of finding appropriate support.

The central idea underpinning this guide is that successful inclusion does not happen automatically when someone gains access to the workplace. It requires intentional action, an understanding of individual needs, and the organisation's willingness to create genuine opportunities for participation. The mentor is one of the central figures who turn these principles into everyday practice.

This document does not aim to provide universal solutions for every situation that may arise. Working with people always requires flexibility, careful observation, and the ability to adapt. The guide instead offers a framework for reflection and practical approaches that can help mentors build confidence and develop the skills needed to support different trainees effectively.

Inclusive dual VET represents an investment in the individual trainee and in the future of the organisation. Companies that create conditions in which different people can develop build more sustainable teams, improve the quality of their learning processes, and contribute to a fairer and more accessible labour market.

The mentor's role in this process is indispensable. Through their professional knowledge, human approach, and willingness to support the development of others, mentors become a central factor in the success of inclusive learning. Every trainee who receives an opportunity to demonstrate their abilities in a supportive environment shows that when differences are accepted and managed appropriately, they can become a source of strength for individuals, organisations, and society.

INTRODUCTION



Dual VET is becoming increasingly established as one of the most effective ways of preparing qualified professionals because it combines the acquisition of theoretical knowledge with real professional practice in the workplace. The advantage of this model lies not only in the faster acquisition of professional competences, but also in the opportunity for trainees to gradually develop work habits, confidence, and a professional identity. Through their daily participation in real production processes, they become familiar with the requirements of the profession, develop teamwork skills, and gain practical experience that would be difficult to acquire solely within a school environment.

In recent years, the development of European policies in the field of vocational education and training has placed an increasing emphasis on inclusion as a fundamental principle for ensuring equal access to high-quality education and training. This means that the dual VET system should provide genuine opportunities for the professional development of all trainees, regardless of their individual characteristics, social status, or disability. Inclusion extends beyond providing access to training. It requires the creation of conditions in which every trainee can participate actively in professional activities, develop their potential, and gradually reach the required professional standards.

The workplace mentor plays a central role in this process. Although the mentor's primary role has traditionally been associated with introducing trainees to work processes and passing on professional knowledge and skills, modern dual VET significantly expands this role. The mentor becomes an organiser of the learning process in a real workplace, an intermediary between the educational institution and the employer, a role model for professional behaviour, and above all, the person who creates daily opportunities for learning, development, and active participation.

This role becomes even more important when working with trainees with disabilities. Practice shows that the successful inclusion of people with different functional limitations depends to a far greater extent on the way the workplace is organised than on the disability itself. Barriers to participation often arise from insufficient information, inappropriate organisation of workplace tasks, inadequate communication, or a lack of necessary support rather than from the trainee's individual abilities. For this reason, the professional preparation of mentors is one of the most important prerequisites for building successful and inclusive dual VET.

For many mentors, their first experience of working with a trainee with a disability involves a natural degree of uncertainty. They often have questions about whether they will be able to provide the necessary support, whether they will make mistakes in their communication, how they should organise the work process, and whether the trainee will be able to meet the professional requirements. These questions are entirely understandable, particularly when the mentor has no previous experience of working with people who have different needs. In most cases, the initial uncertainty arises from a lack of sufficient knowledge and practical guidance on organising the learning process rather than from the disability itself. Experience shows that when mentors have appropriate tools, clear working principles, and access to expert support, these initial concerns gradually give way to confidence and professional satisfaction.

This practical guide aims to support this process. It has been developed as a practical resource for mentors who train or are preparing to train people with disabilities within dual VET programmes. It does not offer universal solutions for every situation that may arise because each person has their own individual abilities, needs, and potential for development. Instead, it presents principles, practical guidance, and professional approaches that can help mentors organise an effective and inclusive learning process.

The main idea running throughout the guide is that inclusion does not mean lowering professional requirements or creating privileges for particular groups of trainees. Inclusion means creating conditions in which every person receives a genuine opportunity to reach the required level of professional competence through appropriate support, equitable treatment, and access to meaningful learning opportunities. This requires mentors to bring professional experience to their role, as well as a willingness to continue learning, flexibility in their approaches, and an understanding that differences among people can serve as a valuable resource for the development of both the individual trainee and the organisation as a whole.

In the current context of shortages of qualified professionals and a growing need for sustainable human resource development, companies are increasingly recognising that investment in inclusive dual VET is an investment in their own future. Companies that create opportunities for the professional development of people with different abilities and life experiences fulfil their social responsibility while building more sustainable, adaptable, and competitive teams. The mentor is the person who turns this organisational philosophy into everyday practice by creating a workplace in which every trainee has the opportunity to learn, contribute, and develop as a future professional.

PART 1.
HOW DO COMPANIES BENEFIT FROM INCLUDING PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES IN DUAL VET?



In a rapidly changing labour market, companies increasingly face serious challenges related to shortages of qualified professionals, the need to adapt quickly to technological change, and the development of sustainable human potential. Dual VET is gradually becoming established as an effective mechanism for addressing these challenges because it enables future professionals to develop their competences in a real workplace while they are still completing their training. For employers, this provides an opportunity to take an active role in preparing future employees and to train them in accordance with the company's specific technological processes, organisational culture, and professional standards.

In this context, the inclusion of people with disabilities in dual VET should not be viewed solely as fulfilling a social commitment or as a form of corporate social responsibility. A growing body of international research shows that organisations which create opportunities for people with different abilities and life experiences to participate develop greater organisational resilience, a stronger capacity to adapt to changing circumstances, and a more firmly established culture of cooperation. Diversity within teams creates opportunities for a wider range of perspectives to contribute to solving professional tasks, stimulates innovation, and supports the development of a workplace founded on mutual respect and trust.

People with disabilities represent a significant source of human potential that remains insufficiently recognised and developed. In many cases, the main barriers to their professional fulfillment arise from limited access to high-quality vocational training, practical experience, and genuine opportunities to demonstrate their professional potential rather than from a lack of ability or motivation to work. Dual VET creates precisely this kind of opportunity. Through gradual involvement in work processes, trainees can acquire professional knowledge and skills while developing confidence, work habits, and a sense of belonging to a professional community.

For employers, this creates an opportunity to observe the trainee's development under real working conditions, assess their strengths, and invest in a future employee who already understands the organisation, its work processes, and the values of the team.

Practice shows that when people with disabilities receive access to high-quality training and appropriate support, they often demonstrate strong motivation to work, responsibility for assigned tasks, and a high level of commitment to the organisation. For companies, this can become a significant advantage, particularly in sectors where retaining qualified employees presents an increasing challenge. Investing in the training of motivated young people at the beginning of their professional journey often leads to the development of more stable and long-term employment relationships than traditional recruitment practices focused on finding people who are already qualified.

The benefits of inclusive dual VET extend beyond the preparation of future employees. The mentoring process itself has a positive influence on the organisation's development. Working with trainees encourages experienced professionals to organise their knowledge systematically, improve their communication skills, and reflect on their own professional practices. Mentoring gradually becomes an instrument for organisational learning through which the trainee acquires new knowledge and the mentor develops new competences. This contributes to a culture of knowledge sharing and mutual learning, which holds particular value for modern organisations.

Including people with disabilities in the learning process also has a positive influence on the working atmosphere. When a team works in an environment in which differences are accepted as a natural part of human diversity, its members gradually develop skills in cooperation, mutual support, and constructive communication. Colleagues begin to understand more clearly the importance of clear instructions, effective feedback, and respectful attitudes towards each person's individual characteristics. In this way, the organisational culture gradually becomes more open and trusting, with a greater willingness to solve problems collaboratively.

A widespread misconception suggests that including people with disabilities inevitably leads to lower productivity or a significant increase in organisational costs. Most necessary adaptations are related to better organisation of the training process, clearer structuring of tasks, gradual introduction to work processes, and regular feedback rather than expensive technical solutions. These are effective mentoring practices that improve the quality of training for all trainees, regardless of whether they have a disability. Investment in inclusive mentoring therefore improves the quality of the entire vocational training process and benefits a broader group than one specific target group.

Companies that actively develop inclusive practices also become more attractive to both current and prospective employees. A growing number of young people consider the organisation's values alongside working conditions and remuneration. Employers that demonstrate respect for differences and invest in the development of all their trainees build a positive employer image and strengthen trust among employees, partners, clients, and educational institutions.

Successful inclusive dual VET develops through a consistent organisational policy rather than isolated initiatives or campaigns. The company's management, mentors, and other members of the team need to share the understanding that every trainee should receive a genuine opportunity to develop their potential. This involves creating conditions for the gradual acquisition of professional activities, the equitable allocation of learning opportunities, and the timely provision of support when difficulties arise. In this environment, people with disabilities can demonstrate their abilities, while companies can identify motivated and competent future employees.

The benefits of including people with disabilities in dual VET extend far beyond social responsibility. They become visible through more effective human resource management, the development of a sustainable pool of skilled professionals, the improvement of mentors' professional competences, the strengthening of organisational culture, and the creation of a workplace that encourages learning, cooperation, and mutual respect. Companies that view inclusion as a strategic investment rather than an additional obligation create stronger conditions for sustainable development and for successfully responding to the future challenges of the labour market.

PART 2.
THE MENTOR AS A FACTOR IN THE TRAINEE'S SUCCESSFUL INCLUSION



In dual VET practice, people often assume that the successful inclusion of a person with a disability depends primarily on the extent of the person's limitations or the availability of specialised technical support. The experience of companies that have worked with trainees with different needs over a long period presents a different picture. The most significant factor in successful inclusion is usually the quality of the mentoring and the way the workplace is organised around the learning process.

The mentor is the first person in the company with whom the trainee builds a professional relationship. Through their behaviour, the mentor creates the trainee's first impression of the organisation and influences whether the new trainee perceives the workplace as a space for development or as a place where they constantly need to prove their right to participate. This is why the mentor's role extends far beyond the transfer of technical knowledge and skills.

When a trainee with a disability joins a company, the mentor often faces two simultaneous responsibilities. On the one hand, the mentor needs to ensure high-quality vocational training and compliance with production standards. On the other hand, the mentor needs to create conditions in which the trainee feels sufficiently secure to ask questions, make mistakes, and gradually assume more demanding responsibilities. The balance between these two responsibilities forms the foundation of successful inclusive mentoring.

It is particularly important for mentors to avoid forming expectations in advance based solely on information about the trainee's disability. Two trainees with similar medical characteristics may have entirely different professional abilities, levels of motivation, previous experience, and learning styles. For this reason, the most effective approach is for the mentor to get to know the individual through observation of their work, conversations, and gradual involvement in real professional activities.

The assessment should be based on demonstrated skills and potential for development rather than prior assumptions. During the first weeks of training, many people with disabilities experience increased uncertainty. They often worry about whether they will be able to keep up with the pace of work, whether their colleagues will accept them, and whether they will become an additional burden on the team. The mentor can reduce this tension considerably through clear communication, specific expectations, and consistent support. When the trainee knows what is expected of them, whom they can approach when they encounter a difficulty, and how their progress will be assessed, their sense of control over the situation increases and their stress gradually decreases.

One of the most common mistakes during the initial stage involves either protecting the trainee excessively or, at the opposite extreme, assigning tasks that are too demanding without sufficient preparation. Both approaches can lead to failure. Excessive caution limits opportunities for development and creates a sense that the mentor does not trust the trainee's abilities. Assigning excessively demanding tasks at the beginning can lead to an accumulation of unsuccessful experiences and a loss of confidence. A gradual approach is more effective, with tasks increasing in complexity step by step and the level of support being adapted according to the trainee's progress.
Successful inclusion also depends to a great extent on how the mentor distributes learning opportunities. In many organisations, demanding and highly visible tasks are naturally assigned to the most experienced or fastest trainees. When this happens systematically, people who need more time or support remain limited to routine activities and receive no opportunity to develop a higher level of competence. An inclusive mentor understands that allocating tasks also means allocating opportunities for professional development.

The way feedback is provided is also highly significant. Trainees with disabilities are often particularly sensitive to signals that they may perceive as judgements of their personality rather than assessments of their performance. Feedback should therefore be specific, focused on the task, and accompanied by clear guidance for improvement. Instead of making general judgements such as "you are not doing well," the mentor should identify which elements have been completed successfully and which specific actions would improve the result. This approach protects the trainee's motivation and makes mistakes part of the learning process.

Working with trainees who learn at different rates requires flexibility while maintaining professional standards. Some trainees learn new activities through observation and independent attempts, while others need more structured instructions, visual examples, or additional time to practise. The mentor's responsibility is to adapt the way support is provided, while maintaining the expected final level of professional competence. This distinction is essential to inclusive dual VET.
Building trust is an important aspect of mentoring. Trust develops gradually through consistent actions, including fulfilling commitments, treating the trainee respectfully, providing timely feedback, and being ready to offer support when difficulties arise. When trainees feel respected and accepted, they are far more willing to share problems at an early stage, seek help, and participate actively in the learning process. This allows the mentor to respond proactively before small difficulties develop into serious barriers to learning.

The mentor's influence on the rest of the team should also be recognised. The way the mentor introduces the trainee, allocates tasks, and responds to mistakes creates a model of behaviour for all colleagues. If the mentor demonstrates respect, patience, and confidence in the trainee's potential, the team is far more likely to adopt the same approach. In this way, the mentor gradually becomes a representative of the organisation's culture of inclusion.

The successful inclusion of a person with a disability in dual VET is rarely the result of a single decision or special measure. It results from numerous everyday actions, including the way the trainee is welcomed, the clarity of expectations, the equitable allocation of tasks, the quality of feedback, the willingness to provide support, and attitudes towards differences. The mentor brings all these elements together into one consistent process, which is why their role is decisive in turning dual VET into a genuine instrument for professional and social inclusion.

PART 3.
PREPARING THE MENTOR:
FROM PROFESSIONAL EXPERT TO INCLUSIVE TRAINER



In the traditional understanding of vocational training, the mentor is often regarded primarily as a highly qualified professional who possesses the necessary practical experience and can show the trainee how to carry out a particular professional activity. Professional expertise undoubtedly remains the foundation on which effective mentoring is built. Trainees need someone who understands real work processes, knows the requirements of the profession, and can demonstrate good professional practices. In inclusive dual VET, this role expands. The mentor is no longer solely an expert in the profession, but also a person who organises the learning process, creates conditions for participation, and supports the trainee's development as a future professional.

This change requires a different way of thinking. Being a good specialist in a particular field does not automatically mean being able to train other people successfully. Professional competence and mentoring competence are closely connected, but they are not the same. An excellent specialist may complete demanding tasks quickly and effectively, but passing their knowledge on to someone who is just entering the profession requires additional skills, including the ability to explain, patience, observation, adaptation of the approach, and an understanding of the trainee's individual characteristics.

These mentoring skills become even more important when working with people with disabilities. The mentor does not need to be an expert on a particular disability to fulfil their role successfully. Mentors are not expected to understand the medical aspects of every condition or resolve every potential difficulty on their own. Their main responsibility is to understand how the individual learns and works most effectively, which conditions help them demonstrate their abilities, and which barriers may restrict their participation. The person, together with their skills, interests, motivation, and potential, should remain at the centre of the mentoring process rather than their diagnosis.

One of the most important changes in the mentor's attitude involves moving from the question, "What is this trainee unable to do?" to the question, "Under which conditions can this trainee perform at their best?" This change may appear small, but it has a significant influence on the way the training is organised. When attention focuses mainly on limitations, the trainee risks being placed in a passive position and receiving only limited opportunities. When the focus shifts towards opportunities, the mentor begins to look for ways to encourage development, make adaptations, and gradually expand the trainee's responsibilities.

The mentor's preparation begins with the understanding that differences among trainees are a natural part of the learning process. Even people without disabilities differ considerably in their pace of learning, the way they process information, their confidence at work, and their previous experience. These differences may be more visible or require a specific approach among trainees with disabilities, but the underlying principle remains the same: effective training rests on an individual understanding of each trainee rather than the application of one identical model to everyone.

The mentor needs to develop the ability to observe the learning process. Initial impressions in the workplace can often be misleading. A trainee who works more slowly at the beginning may gradually develop a high level of accuracy and independence. A person who finds verbal instructions difficult may perform extremely well when a task is structured visually or when they have an opportunity to practise it several times. For this reason, the assessment of the trainee should be a dynamic process based on observing their development rather than a judgement made at a single point in time.

The ability to divide demanding professional tasks into smaller and understandable stages is particularly important for mentors. In many professions, experienced specialists perform numerous actions simultaneously and automatically, often without being consciously aware of all the individual steps required to achieve a particular result. These steps need to be made clearly visible to a trainee who is new to the profession. When mentors structure the process in this way, they support trainees with disabilities and improve the quality of training for all new employees.

An inclusive mentor also needs to develop sensitivity towards the different ways in which people demonstrate their abilities. Traditional workplaces often place considerable value on speed, rapid responses, and confident behaviour. These characteristics are not always direct indicators of professional potential. Some trainees need more time to adapt, but after this period they can achieve a high level of independence and quality in their work. The mentor's responsibility is to create conditions in which the trainee's potential can emerge rather than allowing initial impressions to restrict it.

Preparing the mentor also involves developing communication skills. Clear and predictable communication is particularly important when training people with disabilities.

The trainee needs to understand what is expected of them, how their performance will be assessed, and whom they can approach when they experience difficulties. Unclear instructions, assumptions, and a lack of feedback can create uncertainty and hinder the learning process. Open dialogue and respectful treatment, on the other hand, build trust and encourage active participation.

Mentors need to accept that they are not required to have an immediate answer to every question. One characteristic of effective mentoring is a willingness to seek solutions together with the trainee and, when necessary, with other professionals. If a difficulty arises in relation to work organisation, communication, or adaptation, the mentor should not face it alone. Seeking support from the school, the dual VET coordinator, support specialists, or representatives of the organisation demonstrates professional responsibility rather than a lack of competence.

Working with a trainee with a disability for the first time often causes mentors a certain degree of anxiety. They may worry that they will not find the right approach, that they will be too demanding, or that they will set expectations that are too low. These concerns are natural, and mentors can overcome them by gradually building experience and understanding the central principle that the best form of support does not remove every difficulty. It helps the person develop the ability to manage those difficulties.

In this sense, preparing the mentor involves more than acquiring new knowledge and techniques. It represents a change in professional identity. The mentor develops from a person who passes on established skills into a person who creates conditions for development. The mentor does not carry responsibility for removing every challenge the trainee faces, but does carry responsibility for ensuring that the trainee has a genuine opportunity to participate, learn, and demonstrate their potential.
This change makes inclusive dual VET successful. When mentors combine professional expertise with an understanding of individual differences, the company does more than train one person for a particular profession. It creates an environment in which people can develop their abilities, while the organisation builds a culture of learning, respect, and sustainable development.

PART 4.
OVERCOMING RESISTANCE AND INITIAL STRESS WHEN WORKING WITH DIFFERENT TRAINEES



Including a person with a disability in a real workplace often places the mentor in a new professional situation. Even when mentors are willing to support the trainee, they may experience uncertainty, tension, or doubts about whether they will fulfil this role in the best possible way. These reactions are natural, particularly when mentors have no previous experience of working with people who have different educational, physical, or communication needs. It is important to understand that initial uncertainty does not indicate a lack of readiness or a negative attitude. In most cases, it results from encountering an unfamiliar situation and needing to acquire new skills.

One of the most common causes of anxiety among mentors is the fear that they will not find the right approach. Many professionals worry that they may unintentionally say or do something inappropriate, fail to understand the trainee's needs, or make a mistake in the way they organise the training. This fear often leads to excessive caution and distancing. The mentor may begin to avoid more difficult conversations, provide fewer responsibilities, or restrict the trainee's participation in an attempt to protect them from difficulties. Although such behaviour is motivated by good intentions, it can unintentionally become a barrier to development.

The main principle that should guide the mentor is that direct and respectful dialogue with a person offers the best way to understand their needs. There is no universal model for working with all people with disabilities because people differ in their abilities, experience, motivation, and ways of learning. Instead of searching for a ready-made solution in advance, the mentor should build a relationship of trust in which the trainee can speak openly about what helps them and the situations in which they experience difficulties.

Another common source of resistance is the belief that working with a trainee with a disability will require significantly more time and place an additional burden on the other members of the team.

Such concerns are understandable, particularly in dynamic professional environments in which deadlines and productivity are important. Well-organised mentoring should be regarded as an investment in human resource development rather than an additional obstacle. More time may be required for induction during the initial period, but the trainee gradually becomes independent and begins to contribute actively to the team.

Mentors need to recognise that the time dedicated at the beginning to clear instructions, demonstrations, and feedback reduces the need to correct mistakes constantly in the longer term. This principle applies to all new employees, regardless of whether they have a disability. The difference in inclusive training is that the mentor plans the process intentionally so that the trainee receives the necessary support at the appropriate time.

Resistance to including people with disabilities may sometimes also relate to expectations about their productivity. Some organisations still hold the view that a person with a disability will be unable to meet professional requirements or will require constant assistance. These perceptions are often based more on stereotypes than on an actual assessment of the individual's abilities. An inclusive mentor should replace assumptions with observation and give the trainee an opportunity to demonstrate their skills. Finding the right balance between support and independence is important throughout this process. If the mentor constantly completes tasks on the trainee's behalf or controls every step they take, the mentor restricts the development of confidence and independence. If the mentor leaves the trainee without sufficient preparation and guidance, the risk of failure and discouragement increases. Effective mentoring rests on the gradual withdrawal of support. The mentor is more actively involved at the beginning, while the trainee assumes increasing responsibility as the training progresses.

Preparing the entire team is another important aspect. Difficulties sometimes arise in the trainee's relationships with other colleagues rather than between the mentor and the trainee. If the team does not understand the aims of dual VET and the importance of inclusion, misunderstandings or distancing may occur. The mentor therefore plays an important role as a facilitator in the creation of a positive environment. They can help colleagues understand that the trainee is more than a person receiving support. The trainee is a future professional preparing to become a full member of the team.

Working with different trainees also requires a change in the understanding of the pace of learning. Speed is often highly valued in a production environment, while training needs to consider whether the person is gradually developing the required competences alongside how quickly they complete a task. Some trainees need more repetition, more time to adapt, or a different way of receiving information. This does not necessarily indicate lower potential. In many cases, a more thorough learning process leads to a stable acquisition of skills and greater independence in the future.

Overcoming initial stress requires mentors to shift their focus. Instead of asking, "Will this trainee succeed?", a more helpful question is, "How can I create conditions in which this trainee has an opportunity to succeed?"

Such concerns are understandable, particularly in dynamic professional environments in which deadlines and productivity are important. Well-organised mentoring should be regarded as an investment in human resource development rather than an additional obstacle. More time may be required for induction during the initial period, but the trainee gradually becomes independent and begins to contribute actively to the team.

Mentors need to recognise that the time dedicated at the beginning to clear instructions, demonstrations, and feedback reduces the need to correct mistakes constantly in the longer term. This principle applies to all new employees, regardless of whether they have a disability. The difference in inclusive training is that the mentor plans the process intentionally so that the trainee receives the necessary support at the appropriate time.

Resistance to including people with disabilities may sometimes also relate to expectations about their productivity. Some organisations still hold the view that a person with a disability will be unable to meet professional requirements or will require constant assistance. These perceptions are often based more on stereotypes than on an actual assessment of the individual's abilities. An inclusive mentor should replace assumptions with observation and give the trainee an opportunity to demonstrate their skills. Finding the right balance between support and independence is important throughout this process. If the mentor constantly completes tasks on the trainee's behalf or controls every step they take, the mentor restricts the development of confidence and independence. If the mentor leaves the trainee without sufficient preparation and guidance, the risk of failure and discouragement increases. Effective mentoring rests on the gradual withdrawal of support. The mentor is more actively involved at the beginning, while the trainee assumes increasing responsibility as the training progresses.

Preparing the entire team is another important aspect. Difficulties sometimes arise in the trainee's relationships with other colleagues rather than between the mentor and the trainee. If the team does not understand the aims of dual VET and the importance of inclusion, misunderstandings or distancing may occur. The mentor therefore plays an important role as a facilitator in the creation of a positive environment. They can help colleagues understand that the trainee is more than a person receiving support. The trainee is a future professional preparing to become a full member of the team.

Working with different trainees also requires a change in the understanding of the pace of learning. Speed is often highly valued in a production environment, while training needs to consider whether the person is gradually developing the required competences alongside how quickly they complete a task. Some trainees need more repetition, more time to adapt, or a different way of receiving information. This does not necessarily indicate lower potential. In many cases, a more thorough learning process leads to a stable acquisition of skills and greater independence in the future.

Overcoming initial stress requires mentors to shift their focus. Instead of asking, "Will this trainee succeed?", a more helpful question is, "How can I create conditions in which this trainee has an opportunity to succeed?"

This change transforms the mentor from a passive observer of the trainee's abilities into an active creator of opportunities. It is also important to accept that difficulties will arise. Inclusive mentoring does not mean a process without problems. Every trainee, regardless of their individual characteristics, may experience difficulties when learning new activities, working in a team, or adapting to professional requirements. The difference lies in the way the organisation responds to these difficulties. In an inclusive environment, problems are viewed as a signal that a more effective form of support needs to be found rather than as evidence of inability.

The mentor's confidence ultimately develops through practice. The first successful conversation with the trainee, the first task completed independently, and the first situation in which the trainee overcomes a difficulty gradually change attitudes and reduce initial fears. Many mentors who initially questioned their own readiness later report that working with different trainees has made them better professionals and more effective team leaders. Inclusive mentoring begins with a willingness to accept difference as part of professional reality. A person with a disability should not be regarded as an exception for whom an entirely separate system needs to be created, but as a trainee who needs clear objectives, high-quality training, and appropriate support. These are the same fundamental conditions required by every person who is beginning their professional journey.

PART 5.
STAGES IN THE ADAPTATION OF A TRAINEE WITH A DISABILITY TO THE WORKPLACE



The transition from an educational environment to a real workplace represents a significant change for every young person. Regardless of their vocational preparation, the beginning of practical training is a period during which trainees need to become familiar with a new environment, understand the organisation's rules, build relationships with colleagues, and gradually find their place within the professional team. For people with disabilities, this transition may sometimes involve additional challenges, but these challenges are not an inevitable consequence of the disability itself. To a great extent, they depend on how well the workplace is prepared to welcome the new trainee and provide the support they need.

Adaptation to the workplace should be understood as a process of gradually developing professional confidence and a sense of belonging. It includes acquiring specific occupational skills alongside understanding the organisation's unwritten rules, its ways of communicating, its expectations regarding behaviour, and each person's role within the team. The mentor plays a central role in this process because they guide the trainee through their first steps in the professional environment and help them transform the unfamiliar into a clear and manageable process.

The first stage of adaptation begins before the trainee starts performing professional tasks. This is the moment of initial contact with the company, when the foundations of the future relationship between the mentor and the trainee are established. The way the trainee is welcomed has a strong influence on their confidence and motivation. The first meeting should introduce the workplace and its rules while creating a sense of acceptance and belonging.

During this initial period, the mentor should dedicate time to getting to know the trainee as a person and a future professional. The conversation should not focus exclusively on limitations or necessary adaptations.

Specific needs related to the organisation of work should, of course, be discussed when they exist, but the main focus should remain on the trainee's abilities, interests, and professional goals. This approach creates a different starting point. Instead of being perceived as a person who arrives with certain limitations, the trainee is regarded as someone who brings potential for development.

During the initial stage, the mentor should pay particular attention to the clarity of the information provided. Many situations within the company are unfamiliar to a new trainee, from the way the working day is organised to the specific requirements for completing tasks. Experienced employees sometimes regard certain rules as obvious because they follow them every day, but these rules need to be explained explicitly to a new person. This includes the technical aspects of the work, as well as communication practices, the process for asking questions, feedback procedures, and expectations regarding professional behaviour.

The next stage involves the trainee's gradual introduction to real work processes. One of the mentor's most important responsibilities is to find the right balance between support and independence. At the beginning, the trainee needs more guidance, demonstrations, and opportunities to practise. Over time, however, they need to begin completing tasks independently, making decisions, and taking responsibility for the results of their work.

There is often a risk of overprotecting trainees with disabilities. This usually comes from a good intention: the desire to prevent failure or an uncomfortable situation. When mentors continually reduce the level of challenge or assign only the easiest activities, however, trainees lose opportunities to develop their abilities. Genuine support does not mean removing every difficulty. It means providing the conditions a person needs to learn how to manage those difficulties.

The trainee's gradual inclusion within the team is an important part of the adaptation process. A sense of belonging is an essential element of professional integration. A person may be physically present in the workplace, but if they have no opportunity to participate in communication, shared activities, and real professional processes, their inclusion remains limited. Mentors can support this process by encouraging interaction with colleagues, involving the trainee in team tasks, and demonstrating through their own behaviour that the trainee is a full participant in the workplace.

The next stage of adaptation involves the development of professional confidence. This confidence grows through genuine experiences of success. Small achievements have considerable value, particularly at the beginning of the training. When trainees see that they can complete a task independently, solve a problem, or contribute to a shared result, their motivation increases. Mentors should create such opportunities intentionally by assigning tasks that are sufficiently challenging while remaining achievable with appropriate support.

Feedback is an essential tool throughout every stage of adaptation. It should be regular, specific, and focused on development. It is particularly important that mentors do not wait for a serious problem to arise before discussing the trainee's progress. Short conversations about what is going well, which difficulties have been observed, and what the next steps will be create a sense of support and predictability.

Moments of disappointment or reduced motivation may arise during the adaptation process. Trainees may compare their pace of development with that of others, worry about making mistakes, or question their own abilities. In such situations, the mentor's role extends beyond providing technical advice. The mentor should help the trainee view their development from a broader perspective. Progress in vocational training is rarely entirely linear. Periods of difficulty form a natural part of the process and should not automatically be interpreted as a lack of potential.

As the training progresses, the mentor's role gradually changes. At the beginning, the mentor is the trainee's main source of information and support. At a later stage, their responsibility is to encourage independence. This means providing more space for decision-making, allowing the trainee to explore their own solutions, and encouraging them to take responsibility for their professional development.

Successful adaptation does not mean that the trainee needs to adjust completely to the existing workplace. Genuine inclusion is a two-way process in which the organisation also develops so that it can create better conditions for participation. Small changes to the way work is organised, communication takes place, or tasks are allocated can sometimes make a considerable difference to successful inclusion.

The adaptation of a trainee with a disability to the workplace is ultimately a process of building trust: the trainee's trust in their own abilities, the mentor's trust in the trainee's potential, and the team's trust that differences can form part of a successful professional environment. When this process is supported with understanding, patience, and professionalism, dual VET becomes more than a way of acquiring a profession. It becomes a genuine opportunity for participation, development, and independence.

PART 6.
AN INDIVIDUAL APPROACH, SEEKING SUPPORT AND ADAPTING TO THE TRAINEE'S INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS



One of the main characteristics of inclusive dual VET is the understanding that there is no single way in which people learn and develop professional skills. Every trainee enters the workplace with their own previous experience, individual abilities, motivation, confidence, and way of processing new information. Among people with disabilities, these individual characteristics may be more visible or may require certain adaptations, but the main principle remains the same: effective mentoring begins with getting to know the individual rather than applying preconceived ideas.

The individual approach is often misunderstood as providing special treatment or lowering the requirements for the trainee. In practice, it means creating conditions in which every person has an opportunity to meet the required professional standards in a way that is appropriate for them. Equity in the workplace does not mean that everyone receives exactly the same support. It means that people receive the support they need to participate fully and develop their abilities.

For mentors, this requires careful observation and continuous dialogue with the trainee. From the beginning of the practical training, it is important to understand how the person prefers to receive information, the situations in which they feel confident, and the areas in which they experience difficulties. These questions should not be treated as an examination of the trainee's limitations, but as part of the normal professional induction process. The mentor would ask the same question about any new member of the team: how can this person be supported so that they can develop successfully within the organisation?

The way the mentor asks questions is particularly important. When a conversation focuses exclusively on difficulties from the outset, the trainee may feel that they are being assessed primarily through their limitations.

A more appropriate approach begins by identifying the person's strengths and interests, followed by a joint discussion of the conditions that would support their participation. For example, instead of asking, "What are you unable to do?", it is far more constructive to ask, "What helps you perform tasks at your best?" or "Which learning approach helps you acquire new skills most successfully?"

Adapting to the trainee's individual characteristics does not mean changing the nature of the professional activity. It means adapting the way the person develops the required competence. In some cases, the trainee may need more time to practise. In others, they may need more clearly structured instructions, visual examples, or more frequent feedback during the initial period. Sometimes the most important support relates to building confidence and reducing anxiety when beginning a new activity rather than to the performance of a specific task.

The mentor should remember that adaptation is not a one-time action. The trainee's needs may change as their skills develop. Support that is necessary during the first few weeks may gradually become unnecessary as the person gains confidence and independence. Inclusive mentoring is therefore a dynamic process in which the mentor continually assesses whether the support being provided is still necessary or can gradually be reduced.

One of the fundamental principles is to avoid creating dependency. A mentor who is motivated by a desire to help may sometimes begin solving problems on the trainee's behalf. This may lead to tasks being completed more quickly in the short term, but it restricts the development of independence over time. The mentor's aim is not to become a permanent source of support without which the trainee cannot function. The aim is to gradually develop the trainee's ability to find solutions independently, make decisions, and take responsibility for their work.

The principle of reasonable accommodation is particularly important when working with people with disabilities. It involves making appropriate changes to the organisation of training or the workplace that allow the person to participate effectively without imposing a disproportionate burden on the organisation. In many cases, these changes require better planning and organisation rather than significant financial investment. Clear instructions, presenting tasks in advance, gradually increasing their complexity, and providing regular feedback are practices that improve the learning experience for all trainees.

The mentor should not remain alone when additional support is needed. One important characteristic of successful inclusive training is the presence of a network of cooperation among the different participants involved in the process. Depending on the specific situation, support can be sought from teachers and representatives of the educational institution, dual VET coordinators, support specialists, or other professionals with experience of working with people with disabilities.

A more appropriate approach begins by identifying the person's strengths and interests, followed by a joint discussion of the conditions that would support their participation. For example, instead of asking, "What are you unable to do?", it is far more constructive to ask, "What helps you perform tasks at your best?" or "Which learning approach helps you acquire new skills most successfully?"

Adapting to the trainee's individual characteristics does not mean changing the nature of the professional activity. It means adapting the way the person develops the required competence. In some cases, the trainee may need more time to practise. In others, they may need more clearly structured instructions, visual examples, or more frequent feedback during the initial period. Sometimes the most important support relates to building confidence and reducing anxiety when beginning a new activity rather than to the performance of a specific task.

The mentor should remember that adaptation is not a one-time action. The trainee's needs may change as their skills develop. Support that is necessary during the first few weeks may gradually become unnecessary as the person gains confidence and independence. Inclusive mentoring is therefore a dynamic process in which the mentor continually assesses whether the support being provided is still necessary or can gradually be reduced.

One of the fundamental principles is to avoid creating dependency. A mentor who is motivated by a desire to help may sometimes begin solving problems on the trainee's behalf. This may lead to tasks being completed more quickly in the short term, but it restricts the development of independence over time. The mentor's aim is not to become a permanent source of support without which the trainee cannot function. The aim is to gradually develop the trainee's ability to find solutions independently, make decisions, and take responsibility for their work.

The principle of reasonable accommodation is particularly important when working with people with disabilities. It involves making appropriate changes to the organisation of training or the workplace that allow the person to participate effectively without imposing a disproportionate burden on the organisation. In many cases, these changes require better planning and organisation rather than significant financial investment. Clear instructions, presenting tasks in advance, gradually increasing their complexity, and providing regular feedback are practices that improve the learning experience for all trainees.

The mentor should not remain alone when additional support is needed. One important characteristic of successful inclusive training is the presence of a network of cooperation among the different participants involved in the process. Depending on the specific situation, support can be sought from teachers and representatives of the educational institution, dual VET coordinators, support specialists, or other professionals with experience of working with people with disabilities.

Seeking support should not be regarded as evidence that the mentor lacks competence. On the contrary, it demonstrates professional responsibility.

Communication with the trainee also plays an important role in this process. The person with a disability should be an active participant in decisions that affect them. The mentor should not assume what is best for the person without asking for their opinion. The trainee is often the best source of information about what supports them and which strategies work most effectively for them. Respect for the trainee's autonomy is a fundamental element of inclusive practice.

Maintaining high professional expectations is important when applying an individual approach. There is sometimes a risk of so-called "positive discrimination," in which the desire to help leads to expectations being set too low for the trainee. This may appear supportive, but it restricts opportunities for development. Genuine inclusive practice rests on the belief that the person can achieve professional success when they receive appropriate conditions and the support they need.

Adapting to the trainee's individual characteristics is, above all, a process of professional partnership. The mentor and the trainee build the path towards independence together. During this process, the mentor provides knowledge, experience, and support, while the trainee gradually develops confidence, competence, and a professional identity. When this relationship is founded on respect and trust, differences cease to be barriers and become a natural part of workplace diversity.

The quality of inclusive dual VET is ultimately determined by the company's willingness to seek solutions together with the trainee, rather than by whether it can remove every difficulty. The individual approach is not an additional mentoring task. It forms the essence of mentoring. Through the ability to see the person beyond the disability, the mentor creates conditions in which the trainee can develop their potential and become a confident future professional.

PART 7.
BUILDING A CULTURE OF INCLUSION WITHIN THE COMPANY



The successful inclusion of people with disabilities in dual VET does not depend solely on the relationship between the mentor and the trainee. Although this relationship provides the foundation for the entire process, sustainable inclusion becomes possible when it forms part of the organisation's everyday culture. The workplace is more than a space in which people perform professional tasks. It is a social environment in which people interact, build relationships, share knowledge, and shape perceptions about who belongs and who receives opportunities to develop.

This is why the mentor's role extends beyond the individual training of one trainee. Through their actions, mentors influence the way the entire team perceives and responds to differences. When mentors demonstrate respect, trust, and confidence in the trainee's potential, they establish a model of behaviour that the other members of the team naturally follow. Conversely, if mentors demonstrate doubt, excessive caution, or low expectations, they may reinforce existing stereotypes and hinder genuine inclusion.

A culture of inclusion begins with the understanding that differences among people are a natural part of the professional environment. Every organisation employs people with different experiences, ways of thinking, communication styles, and working speeds. People with disabilities are not an exception to this reality. They form part of the human diversity present in every professional community. When differences are accepted as a normal characteristic of the team, the perceived need for special treatment gradually diminishes, allowing each person's professional qualities and contribution to come to the forefront.

For mentors, this means supporting the trainee and the other members of the team during the adaptation process. Colleagues may sometimes experience the same uncertainty that the mentor experiences at the beginning.

They may not know how to communicate with the trainee, how to respond when a difficulty arises, or what kind of support would be appropriate. This uncertainty should not be interpreted as a negative attitude, but as a natural need for information and experience.

One of the mentor's most important responsibilities is to encourage normal professional interaction. A trainee with a disability should not be placed in an isolated position in which all communication and decisions pass exclusively through the mentor. Inclusion means that the person forms part of the team, participates in shared processes, and gradually builds professional relationships with colleagues. Support is necessary, but it should not replace natural interaction.

The way people speak about the trainee within the organisation is particularly important. Language influences attitudes. When a person is continually described in terms of their disability, the disability risks becoming the main characteristic through which other people perceive them. An inclusive approach emphasises the person's professional abilities, development, and contribution. The disability may form part of the trainee's individual circumstances, but it does not define their professional potential.

Building a culture of inclusion also requires a change in the way mistakes are understood. Mistakes form a natural part of the learning process in every professional environment, particularly when a person is acquiring new skills. If a trainee's mistakes are treated as evidence of inability, this may result in their opportunities being restricted. When mistakes are approached as opportunities for feedback and development, they become a tool for professional growth.

The mentor also plays an important role in creating a psychologically safe environment. This means that trainees can ask questions, acknowledge when they do not understand a task, and seek help without fearing a negative reaction. In rapidly developing professional fields, including digital professions, the ability to continue learning is an essential competence. An organisation that punishes uncertainty and questions restricts the development of all its employees, including trainees with disabilities.

An inclusive culture is also built through equitable access to opportunities. One of the most significant risks faced by people with disabilities in the workplace is formal inclusion combined with actual exclusion from the central professional process. This occurs when they receive only repetitive or secondary tasks, do not participate in team activities, or have no opportunity to develop more advanced skills. The mentor's responsibility is to ensure that the trainee gains access to genuine professional experiences and gradually expands their role.

Sustainable inclusion requires the organisation to regard mentoring as a long-term process rather than a one-time activity. Mentors also need support, opportunities to exchange experiences, and possibilities for development.

When more than one person in the company performs a mentoring role, sharing good practices and discussing challenging situations create conditions for the continuous improvement of mentoring approaches.

It is important to emphasise that official rules and procedures alone do not create an inclusive culture. This culture becomes visible through small everyday actions: the way a new trainee is welcomed, the patience shown when explaining a task, the willingness to provide an opportunity for development, and the response to mistakes. These daily practices demonstrate whether the organisation genuinely supports inclusion or whether inclusion remains only a formally stated value.

Building such a culture brings long-term benefits to companies participating in dual VET. Organisations that know how to work with different people are generally more adaptable, more open to change, and better able to develop their human potential. Inclusion does not support only one particular group of trainees. It improves the way the organisation trains, communicates with, and develops all its employees.

The mentor's role in this process is particularly valuable because the mentor turns principles into real actions. Through the way they organise training, communicate with the trainee, and interact with the team, mentors demonstrate every day what an inclusive professional environment looks like. This is why mentors do more than train future professionals. They become drivers of change towards a fairer, more supportive, and more sustainable workplace culture.

Inclusive dual VET achieves its purpose when the trainee is no longer perceived as a person who needs special assistance and is instead recognised as a future professional who needs high-quality training, clear expectations, and an opportunity to demonstrate their abilities. This change in perspective captures the essence of a culture of inclusion. It goes beyond allowing different people to enter the workplace and creates an environment in which they can participate fully, develop, and become valued members of the professional community.

CONCLUSION



Inclusive dual VET represents far more than an opportunity to acquire professional knowledge and skills. It is a process through which young people receive an opportunity to develop confidence in their own abilities, find their place within the professional community, and take their first steps towards an independent working life. This process is particularly important for people with disabilities because access to a real workplace and high-quality vocational training often determines whether their potential will be recognised and developed.

The mentor stands at the centre of this process. The mentor transforms the workplace from a place where tasks are performed into a space for learning, development, and professional growth. Through their actions, mentors can create an environment in which trainees feel accepted, confident, and motivated, or conversely, an environment in which differences become a barrier. This is why the mentor's role extends beyond the transfer of professional skills. It includes building relationships founded on trust, respect, and belief in each person's potential.

Working with trainees with disabilities does not require mentors to have ready-made solutions for every situation that may arise. It requires professional readiness to observe, listen, ask questions, and seek the most appropriate approach for the individual. Every trainee follows their own path of development, and the mentor's responsibility is to create conditions that make this path possible. Support does not mean removing every difficulty. It means providing the conditions a person needs to gradually develop confidence and independence.

One of the most important changes required by inclusive mentoring is a change in the way differences are perceived. A person with a disability should be viewed primarily through their abilities and professional potential rather than their limitations. When the mentor begins from this position, they create a different learning dynamic.

The trainee is no longer a passive recipient of assistance, but an active participant in their own professional development.

Companies that invest in inclusive dual VET support individuals while developing their own organisation. They build a more mature culture of learning, improve their employees' skills, and create more sustainable teams. The ability to work effectively with different people is becoming an increasingly important professional competence in the modern world of work.

The mentor occupies a unique position in this process because their influence extends far beyond the individual trainee. Through their everyday decisions, mentors show the entire team what equitable treatment looks like, how opportunities are created, and how differences can become a resource. When a mentor successfully supports a trainee with a disability, they do more than train one future professional. They contribute to changing the culture of the entire organisation.

Inclusion is an ongoing process of improvement rather than a one-time activity. It requires a willingness to analyse experience, learn from difficulties, and seek better solutions. In this sense, a good mentor is not someone who never encounters challenges, but someone who responds to them with professionalism, respect, and a willingness to find a solution.

The most important message for every mentor is that successful inclusion begins with attitude. Before every adaptation, support measure, and professional strategy comes the understanding that every person has the right to an opportunity to develop their potential. When this idea becomes the foundation of everyday work, dual VET fulfils its true purpose: connecting people with professions, creating opportunities, and building a more inclusive world of work.

This guide does not offer a ready-made formula for every situation because inclusion always begins with a particular person in a particular environment. It provides a direction towards mentoring founded on trust, professionalism, and respect for differences. By following this direction, mentors can turn dual VET into a genuine mechanism for the professional inclusion and sustainable development of both trainees and organisations.





Funded by the European Union.
The views and opinions expressed are solely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the Human Resources Development Centre as the National Agency for the Erasmus+ Programme. Neither the European Union nor the funding authority can be held responsible for them.





