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VET4ALL



Supporting Erasmus+ international trainees
with disability - a host organisation-employer
perspective





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About the project and objectives of the report

VET4ALL Project (2021-1-PL01-KA210-VET-000034602) was a strategic partnership project in the area of vocational education implemented between December 2021 and November 2023 in a partnership of five entities:

LEADER: Zespół Szkół Ponadpodstawowych w Bystrzycy Kłodzkiej (Poland)

PARTNERS: Istituto per la Formazione, l'Occupazione e la Mobilità (Italy)
Dobre Kadry Centrum badawczo-szkoleniowe Sp.z o.o. (Poland)
Asociacion Mundus – Un Mundo a Tus Pies (Spain)
South-Eastern Finland University of Applied Sciences XAMK (Finland)

The main objective of the project was to strengthen sending, hosting and intermediary organisations in the implementation of vocational training activities involving students with disability from technical schools. The project developed four mini-reports dedicated to supporting different target groups involved in student mobility projects. The target groups in the project were technical schools, teachers and accompanying persons during international student internship trips, institutions organising students' internship trips and employers hosting students for internships under the Erasmus+ application.

This report is dedicated to supporting Erasmus+ international trainees with disability from the perspective of employers volunteering to host students. As the literature often shows a strong positive correlation between knowledge of disability issues and openness to work with people from this group, we have devoted a lot of space in the report to characterising various types of disability. In this way, we wanted to show the diversity of people with disability and help to understand their behaviour and needs in the workplace. We also wanted to ,disenchant' disability as it were, to reduce it to an aspect of normal life.

Disability in numbers, or the prevalence of the phenomenon

According to data gathered by Eurostat, almost 25% of European Union citizens (24.7%) aged 16 and more are people with some or severe limitations. In absolute numbers, this is **at least 110 million people**. According to global estimates, the number of people with disability exceeds one billion, or 15% of the world's population. Figure 1

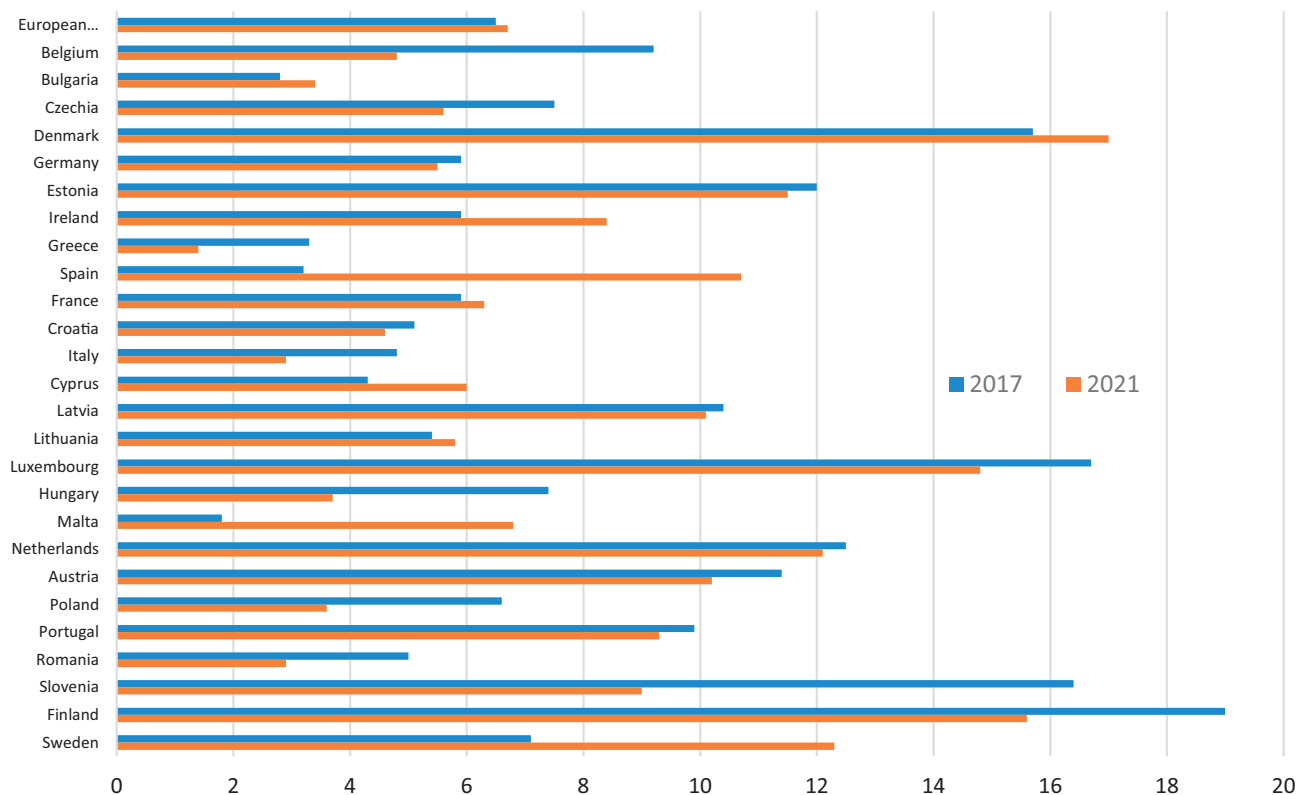


Figure 1. Self-perceived long-standing limitations in usual activities due to health problem. Age: 16-19 years. Some or severe (%)
Source: Eurostat. Note: due to the lack of data on Slovakia in 2021, the figure does not include information about this country.

presents statistics showing the percentage of people aged 16-19 in each EU country with various types of difficulties (some or severe), whereas Figure 2 – data relating only to people with severe limitations. On average in the European Union, approximately 6.5% of potential VET students experience difficulties. This means that **on average 1 in 15 students** falls into this group.

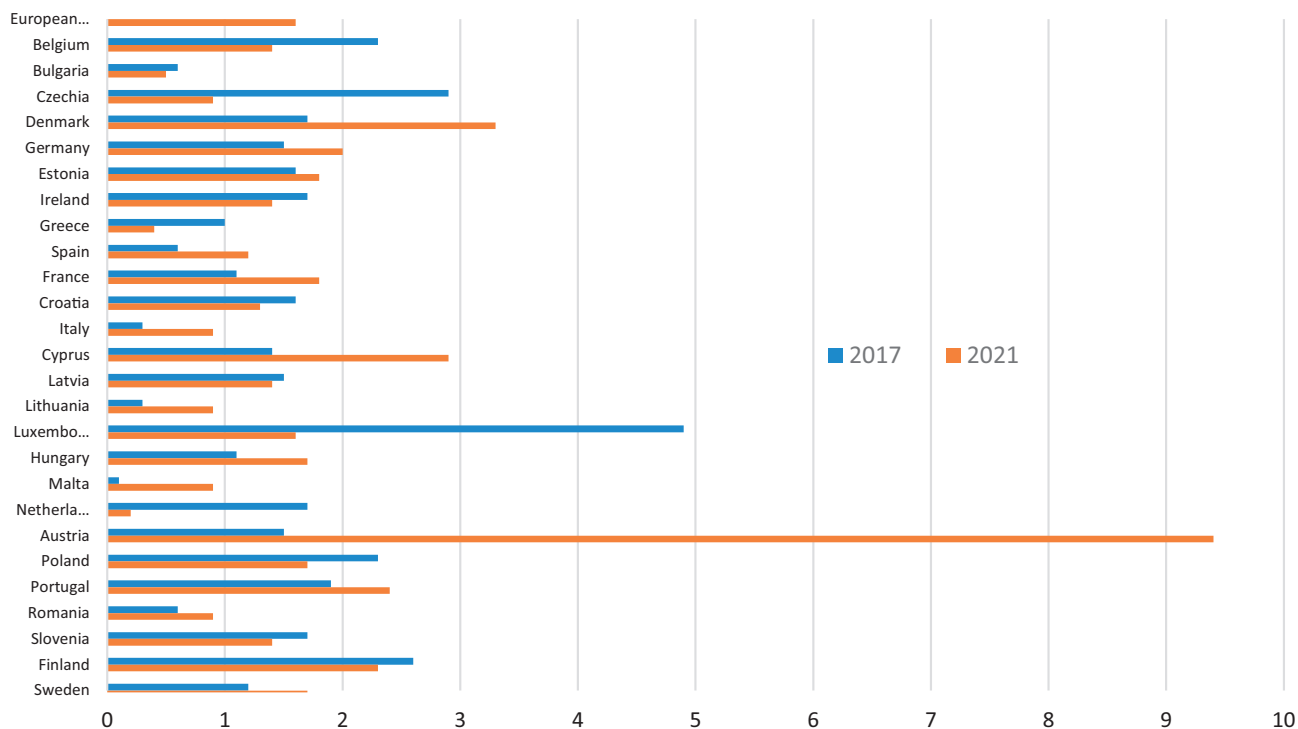


Figure 2. Self-perceived long-standing limitations in usual activities due to health problem. Age: 16-19 years. Severe (%)

Source: Eurostat. Note: due to the lack of data on Slovakia in 2021, the figure does not include information about this country.

The data presented in Figures 1 and 2 show that there is an increasing likelihood of meeting a person or people with disability in a student group participating in an international traineeship. These are the encounters for which both parties should be prepared – both the student with a disability and the host institution – traineeship providers

and employers where the traineeship it is carried out. Good preparation of employers ensures a high level of openness to the needs of people with disability, that is, readiness to employ and cooperate with them, which is a prerequisite for the full inclusion of people with disability in the labour market. It is difficult to find an answer in the literature to the question of what shapes the attitudes of employers and potential co-workers, and how it increases openness towards people with disability in the workplace. Undoubtedly, what one should consider in the first place are factors within the company that employers can influence, such as **disseminated knowledge and experience** connected with hiring and working with people with disability, the culture of the organisation and the infrastructure adapted to the needs of people with different types of disability. However, the culture of a given organisation is also influenced by factors from outside the company, such as legal solutions and cultural patterns popularised in a given society (Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010; Meyer, 2010). In this report, we focused on what we believe is most important and universal – the dissemination of knowledge about different types of disability and the identification of good practices in this area. When presenting the problem, we relied on the models developed in the ESF *Go4Diversity*¹ project, which aimed to increase the motivation of employers to employ people with disability on the open labour market.



1. The Go4Diversity project (No. POWR.04.03.00-00-0039/18) was implemented in a Polish-Belgian-Swedish partnership and financed by the European Social Fund. More: www.dobrekadry.pl

Types of disability

According to the results of research on the perception of disability in the public space, for the majority of the population of any country, disability is associated with a wheelchair. Why is that? Probably because we associate it with a symbol of wheelchair marking parking spaces dedicated to people with disability. Or maybe because people on wheelchairs are the most visible. The truth is, however, that we are surrounded by people with different types of disability – those with motor, sensory or cognitive problems, or those with problems resulting from rare diseases. Therefore, it is worth learning about the specifics of different types of disability – at least in a nutshell – which have been presented in Table 1. It should be remembered that, regardless of the type of disability, **openness starts in your mind**. Disability is a characteristic of a given person, not his or her defect. Just like the colour of their eyes, hair or skin.

Table 1 Types of disability

INTELLECTUAL	BECAUSE OF MENTAL ILLNESS	SENSORY		MOTOR	CHRONIC DISEASES
Reduced intellectual performance	Reduced social functioning – disorders of nervous and emotional balance as well as mental health	Lack, damage or impairment of sensory functions Disorders		Reduced motor skills	Diseases characterised by long duration and slow progression of lesions
		Hearing	Eyesight		

Source: own elaboration based on existing legislation.

Disability requires an individualised approach. What is perceived well by one group may be a major barrier for others. Why is it so? Because it all depends on people's specific needs. In the following subsections, we make recommendations on how to take into account the needs of trainees with selected disability types.

3.1

The deaf and hard of hearing

It is worth remembering that **deaf people are not deprived of speaking skills**, and that using non-verbal language does not mean being unable to communicate. Some people who are hard of hearing use verbal, whereas others – sign language. There are also people who are able to read from the speaker's mouth, or simply use writing. Sometimes the spoken language they use might be difficult to understand – therefore, if there is something you do not understand, ask them to repeat what they have said, use gestures, or write a message. When talking to a deaf or hard-of-hearing person, look at them and try to speak clearly and slowly. Do not shout or raise your voice. Instead, try to establish **the most appropriate way to communicate**. If you want someone to pay attention to what you want to say, raise or wave your hand, or tap them on their shoulder. You can use a light signal (e.g. in a production hall), also in situations concerning occupational health and safety. When speaking to a deaf person, face them, but do not perform any other activities (such as typing on a computer or walking around the room). Avoid having a strong source of light behind your back – it is your face that should be fully visible to the person you speak to. When you communicate with a person who is hard of hearing, make sure there is good acoustics in the room – try to eliminate any unnecessary noise that makes their speech difficult to understand, and speak to them at a normal pace – not too fast, but not too slow either. When having a conversation with a group of people, make sure that everybody has a chance to speak uninterrupted. Avoid telephone communication as it can be very difficult for people with impaired hearing. Instead, use text messages.



*When talking to a deaf/
hard of hearing person, do
not cover your mouth.*

Author: H. Parylak-Skawińska

3.2

The blind and visually impaired

People who are visually impaired may experience a wide range of vision problems – some of them have a narrowed field of vision, whereas others blurry vision; some people are able to distinguish light and shadow, while others cannot distinguish specific colours. Many have a good sense of direction and are able to navigate in familiar surroundings. Generally, blind or visually-impaired people feel the presence of other people around them or see them, but may not notice their interlocutor remaining outside their zone of contact. In order to get the attention of such a person, try to tap them on their shoulder, always saying who you are and what your role is (e.g. you are a colleague, a boss or a security guard). A blind person should be able to **explore thoroughly the place** in which he or she is going to live or work – they should be guided through it and allowed to become familiar with it. It is also necessary to inform them about any pieces of equipment changing their location. A visually-impaired trainee/employee should be informed about changes taking place in their environment, and you should not reposition any equipment without letting them know about it. Do not put things in the aisles, do not rearrange things on their desk, and do not hang any protruding objects on the walls at body-level height. When entering a room, signal your presence, and do the same when you are about to leave. When assisting a blind person, try to use as many verbal messages as possible, e.g. informing them about obstacles in the way, describing the room. Visually-impaired people may require clearer, larger print or contrasting letters, a larger screen or better lighting (not too bright). Contrasts in the environment, such as the colour of the door contrasting with the walls or light switches, also play an important role. **Before you provide any assistance always ask if they need any and if they do – in what form.**



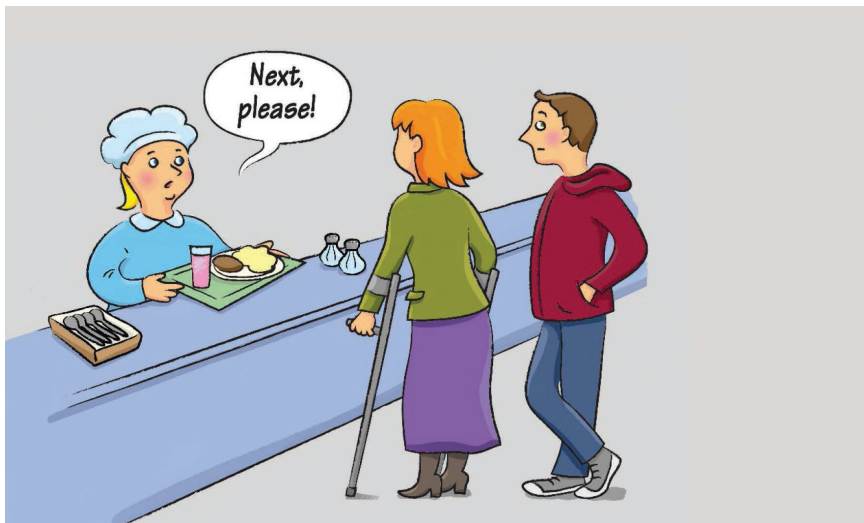
Before helping, ask if and what kind of help the person needs.

Author: H. Parylak-Skawińska

3.3

The physically impaired

People with physical impairments are usually those who use wheelchairs, crutches or prostheses, but some of them also suffer from arthritis, multiple sclerosis, spinal diseases or low stature. Wheelchair users may have very different disability and what follows – different needs, and may require various types of facilities. However, what they need in the first place is adequate space for themselves, free passage in circulation areas and sufficient space around the car in the car park. When interacting with a person in a wheelchair, do not touch their wheelchair or put your belongings on it. When talking to them, try to maintain eye contact (e.g. it is a good idea to sit down instead of standing). Remember that wheelchair users cannot get everywhere, therefore place as many necessary items as possible within the reach of their hands. **Having a lift in the building is not enough** – do not forget about other elements of the infrastructure, as what seems unproblematic to able-bodied people (e.g. a small step) may be a serious barrier for a person with a mobility impairment. A person walking with crutches or a stick may require additional handrails. Last but not least, do not start a conversation with them when standing – always make sure that both you and your interlocutor take a comfortable position.



Solutions that are good for some may turn out to be a nightmare for others.

Author: H. Parylak-Skawińska

3.4

People with autism spectrum disorder (ASD)

The term 'spectrum' refers to the varying severity and impact on functioning of the main symptoms: difficulties in establishing and maintaining social relationships, verbal and non-verbal communication, repetitive patterns of behaviour, activities and interests. ASD is a distinct set of disorders that often occur with other issues, with anxiety being the most common. Despite difficulties, people with ASD need social contact and they do enter into relationships, especially with people they know. It is suggested that they have one person in the office/company to whom they could turn with questions and problems. It is worth noting that such people **tend to get attached to certain rules**, rituals and even patterns. They often do not understand metaphors, mental shortcuts, some gestures or non-verbal messages. For example, if you end a meeting with such a person, you have to say that explicitly. When setting a task, use simple and clear words, e.g. 'This is a set of data, arrange it in a table and analyse it'. In social interactions, it is useful **to take into account specific differences in terms of seeking and maintaining contact** as well as sensitivity to stimuli (e.g. whether someone is reserved, passive, active, hypersensitive or hyposensitive). In order to make it easier for a trainee/employee with ASD to function as part of a team, it is important to get to know their specific behaviour and communication patterns, and adapt your style to their abilities and needs.



We are different, let's respect individual differences in our interactions.

Author: H. Parylak-Skawińska

Identification of good practices

There is more and more talk in Europe and in Poland about the need to ensure full accessibility for people with special needs. However, we often tend to equate the lack of accessibility with architectural barriers, forgetting that eliminating such barriers is not enough. The hardest thing to change is people's mentality. The literature often highlights that employers who have experience of working or living with people with disability are much more likely to hire people with disability, or more even people with disability. Why? Because they know more about disability; they know that people with certain impairments are good employees, and that it is worth trusting their skills and competences rather than physical limitations. The role that co-workers play when hiring or working with people with disability is not to be overestimated – without their openness to otherness or atypicality, and their full acceptance in the team, it is much harder for those who are indeed 'atypical' to live and function in a given workplace. It is worth bearing in mind that **the more people know about the phenomenon called 'disability', the more open they become towards it**. Below are the views of several organisations met during the project, which show how easily attitudes to disability can change and how simple it is to ensure in practice that people with disability are fully included in the team.



A global corporation

Certainly, when choosing the best candidate, you should focus on their skills and career ambitions, whereas workplace adjustments may come as the next step. We had a sincere discussion about what adjustments an employee would need in order to fulfil his or her potential, during which all the doubts were dispelled. We didn't try to imagine that or pretend that we knew better, we simply asked questions. The manager of the department informed his employees about their new colleague, his role, and also the fact that I was using a wheelchair. He told them about all dos and don'ts (e.g. Is it OK to say "let's GO and eat something"?). The preparation took one week, during which employees could ask questions about cooperation with a colleague with a disability. All the tips that we received from the employee allowed us to prepare his workplace and also create an atmosphere of frank and open dialogue. In case of any doubts, it is advisable to seek help in an organisation specialising in the professional activation of people with a given type of disability because they have vast experience in that and can always give some useful advice. Questions or doubts should be consulted with experienced specialists or experts, or with a person with a disability themselves. An employer should be free from any stereotypes. They should focus on the value which a new employee brings into their organisation and support him or her in order to make the most of it. The culture of the organisation is not without significance. In our firm, they do their best to ensure 'diversity'. Even when doing such a seemingly small thing like a presentation, it is well-seen when different people (e.g. older and younger, with a different skin colour, with a disability) are engaged in it. They also organise annual training in corporate standards concerning, among others, openness and non-discrimination.

Marshal's Office

First of all, we need to understand and accept the fact that we are surrounded by people with special needs, for whom the employer should do all they can to make sure that they feel comfortable and can effectively fulfil their potential. It is obvious that a workstation for a person with a mobility impairment should be adjusted to this type of dysfunction. A visually – impaired person, on the other hand, needs appropriate computer programmes and a friendly environment at the workstation. It is better when a potential employee determines his or her own needs on their own. Co-workers who share the room with such a person quickly realise that he or she is a valuable human being, and they often determine the rules for help and cooperation on their own. In the case of the Marshal's Office, job offers give preference to people with a disability certificate. The employer should not be afraid of anything. A person with a disability who takes on a challenge in an unfamiliar environment is usually apprehensive enough, and if you add to this the employer's apprehension, you might expect nothing but misunderstandings. Instead of being afraid of hiring people with disability, ask what they expect from the position and their new co-workers. This will certainly help them make the most of their potential. The employer should also be aware of the psycho-physical capabilities of a person struggling with some dysfunction. Employing a person with a disability usually helps the team to develop and improve their social skills. It also motivates them to work out solutions together and opens their minds.

Cafe Równik, Wrocław

Establishing Café Równik and employing there people with intellectual disability proved that all it takes is the right preparation of the workplace and co-workers. People with this type of disability really need to be professionally active. Work is great inspiration for them, but they cannot work alone without their assistants – healthy and able-bodied people who are always near them and who act like friends that accept certain – and sometimes inevitable – excess. People with intellectual disability are physically fit and have a lot of energy, but require a special approach. When at work, they must be accompanied by specialist therapeutic staff, which actually should be ensured as part of the systemic approach (the provision of therapists, professional responses, constant monitoring of emotions and reacting when necessary). When encouraging employers to hire people with intellectual disability, it is worth emphasising their genuine kindness and friendliness. However, one should also pay attention to an appropriate reaction when such workers make mistakes – you cannot be too lenient or too harsh, but you need to give a clear message that someone has made a mistake and that they should correct it. People with intellectual disability, even when they are adults, mentally behave a bit like children, so it is necessary to be both caring and consistent, depending on the circumstances. It is necessary to create an environment in which they feel that they are accepted or even liked by others. The right conditions make it possible to overcome barriers, to surprise in a positive sense, and to gain a fantastic or even unusual employee.

Conclusions and recommendations

The statistics quoted in section 2 of the report show that people with disability are an important part of any society. Full inclusion requires openness to diversity. The inclusion of people with disability in international mobility projects under the Erasmus+ programme implies appropriate preparation on the part of all parties involved, i.e. sending institutions (schools, teachers), host institutions (host institutions and companies hosting students on internships) and students themselves and their parents.

How can the situation regarding openness and accessibility be improved? First of all, it is worth learning about the specific characteristics of different disability types. This can be done, for example, by attending dedicated training courses or by reading guides on working with people with disability. Increased accessibility usually does not involve spending a lot of money but rather skilful use of knowledge about the specifics of different types of disability in practice. European Social Fund projects often offer employers the opportunity to train and prepare their employees to work with people with disability free of charge.

In the case of companies accepting students for internships under the Erasmus+ programme, at the organisation stage, it is worth asking such screening questions as:

- **Are staff resources provided to enable an internship for a person with disability?**
- **Has the internship site been adequately prepared for the needs of people with disability?**
- **Has an internship plan been prepared that is tailored to the needs and expectations of the student (tasks for a person with a particular type of disability, adequate time to complete the task taking into account the disability and its type, etc.)?**

If the answer is ,no' to any of these screening questions, it means that the employer offering internships to students with disability needs help to prepare properly. If this is the case, it should be up to the exchange organiser (host institution) to ensure contact with the institution dealing with people with disability in the exchange country. Through contacts with specialised institutions (usually NGOs working for the benefit of people with disability), employers can acquire/deepen their knowledge about different types of disability, learn about facilities/support forms for people with disability.

What should an employer accepting students with disability know before accepting an internship?
First of all:

- **What difficulties might a person with disability have? (weaknesses)**
- **What are these difficulties caused by? (type of disability)**
- **What is the person good at? (strengths)**
- **How does this person behave in times of stress?**
- **Who do you contact in an emergency?**
- **How do you communicate with a person with disability? (savoir vivre)**
- **What accommodations, if any, can be made at the internship site?**
- **How to ensure safety in the workplace for a person with disability?**

We are afraid primarily of what we know little about.

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