



DIFFERENCES IN THE WORK READINESS OF PEOPLE WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES: THE ROLE OF SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC AND DIAGNOSTIC FACTORS

RAZLIKE U SPREMNOSTI ZA RAD OSOBA S INTELEKTUALNIM TEŠKOĆAMA: ULOGA SOCIO-DEMOGRAFSKIH I DIJAGNOSTIČKIH ČIMBENIKA

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ABSTRACT

Work readiness is a key prerequisite for the successful integration of people with intellectual disabilities (ID). However, there is a lack of research that systematically examines how readiness varies in relation to the combination of key factors. This research aimed to investigate whether there are statistically significant differences in the work of adults with ID with respect to selected socio-demographic elements (gender, age, education, family status, work experience) and a diagnostic factor (degree of ID). A convenience sample of unemployed individuals with ID in Bosnia and Herzegovina (N = 72) was assessed using the Work Readiness Scale. The results of the applied non-parametric tests show that there are no statistically significant differences between socio-demographic elements and work readiness. In contrast, the degree of ID proved to be highly important: people with mild ID achieve statistically significantly higher results compared to people with moderate ID ($U = 294.00$, $p = 0.003$, $r = -0.35$). These findings indicate that basic functional capacities play a primary role in shaping readiness, going beyond the influence of standard demographic characteristics. The analysis also uncovers critical systemic issues: a severe lack of early work experience, insufficient functional family support, and education misaligned with labour market needs. The practical implications emphasise the need for differentiation of support programs according to functional profiles that best reflect the degree of ID, urgent implementation of a system for gaining work experience, and strengthening the quality of support in the family

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and community while simultaneously removing structural barriers on the labour market. The findings should be viewed in light of the study's limitations, including the convenience sample, cross-sectional design, and the question of the comprehensiveness of the scale, which suggest the need for future longitudinal research with more representative samples.

Keywords: intellectual disabilities, work readiness, socio-demographic factors, degree of intellectual disability

SAŽETAK

Spremnost za rad ključan je preduslov za uspješnu integraciju osoba s intelektualnim teškoćama (IT), no malo je istraživanja koja sustavno ispituju kako se spremnost razlikuje s obzirom na kombinaciju ključnih čimbenika. Cilj ovog istraživanja bio je ispitati postoje li statistički značajne razlike u spremnosti za rad kod odraslih osoba s IT s obzirom na odabrane socio-demografske čimbenike (spol, dob, obrazovanje, obiteljski status, radno iskustvo) i dijagnostički čimbenik (stupanj IT). Na prigodnom uzorku nezaposlenih osoba s IT u BiH (N = 72) primjenjena je Skala spremnosti za rad. Rezultati primjenjenih neparametrijskih testova pokazuju da nema statistički značajnih razlika između socio-demografskih čimbenika i spremnosti za rad. Nasuprot tome, stupanj IT se pokazao visoko značajnima: osobe s lakšim IT postižu statistički značajno više rezultate u odnosu na osobe s umjerenim IT ($U = 294,00$, $p = 0,003$, $r = -0,35$). Ovi nalazi ukazuju da temeljni funkcionalni kapaciteti imaju primarnu ulogu u oblikovanju spremnosti, nadilazeći utjecaj standardnih demografskih obilježja. Interpretacija rezultata otkriva i zabrinjavajuće sistemske nedostatke: gotovo potpun izostanak ranih radnih iskustava, te indikacije o nedovoljnoj kvalitativnoj (funkcionalnoj) podršci obitelji i ograničenoj relevantnosti obrazovanja. Praktične implikacije naglašavaju potrebu za: diferencijacijom programa podrške prema funkcionalnim profilima koje najbolje odražava stupanj IT, hitnom implementacijom sustava za stjecanje radnog iskustva, te jačanjem kvalitete podrške u obitelji i zajednici uz istovremeno uklanjanje strukturnih barijera na tržištu rada. Nalaze treba sagledati u svjetlu ograničenja istraživanja, uključujući prigodan uzorak, presječni dizajn i pitanje sveobuhvatnosti ljestvice, što upućuje na potrebu za budućim longitudinalnim istraživanjima s reprezentativnijim uzorcima.

Ključne riječi: intelektualne teškoće, spremnost za rad, socio-demografski čimbenici, stupanj intelektualnih teškoća

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive employment of people with intellectual disabilities (ID) is a fundamental goal of contemporary social policy and human rights practice, enabling them to achieve economic independence, social inclusion and full participation in the community (CRPD; UN, 2006). Despite these aspirations, employment rates for people with ID remain significantly lower than those of the general population (Siperstein, Parker, & Drascher, 2013). In the EU, for instance, only about 10% of adults with ID are participating in the labour market (Inclusion Europe, 2023). This gap points to a complex system of barriers that can be categorised

according to the Biopsychosocial Model of the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF; WHO, 2001).

According to the ICF model, a person's functioning, and thus their work readiness, is the result of a dynamic interaction of health status or biological components (e.g., the degree of ID), personal factors (e.g., age, gender, education) and environmental factors (e.g., employer attitudes, legal framework). Research attention in the field of employment of people with ID has traditionally been focused on environmental (external) barriers. Numerous studies have found that all environmental domains influence employment (Shahin et al., 2020; Jacob et al., 2023), with discrimination (Jacob et al., 2023; Meltzer, Robinson, & Fisher, 2020) and employer attitudes (Alfawzan & Alkahtani, 2021) being particularly highlighted. Employers believe that the employment of people with ID is difficult because people with ID lack the skills needed for the job, as well as because of legal problems (Alfawzan & Alkahtani, 2021; Kocman, Fischer, & Weber, 2018). Co-workers generally hold more positive attitudes than employers toward employing people with ID. These positive attitudes are further strengthened by prior contact and work experience with individuals with ID (Elahdi & Alnahdi, 2022). Organisational and legal barriers that make it difficult to employ people with ID in the open labour market are inflexible models and the issue of financing, lack of knowledge and experience of employers, and insufficient training and support for people with ID (Joyce et al., 2024).

In parallel, the role of individual work skills as a prerequisite for employability has also been researched (Mastam & Zaharudin, 2024). While effective communication, analytical problem-solving, collaboration, and adaptability are essential for securing and maintaining employment, individuals with ID often face significant challenges in acquiring these core work skills (Mastam & Zaharudin, 2024). However, relatively less attention has been paid to the internal heterogeneity of the population with ID and the question of how different combinations of personal and diagnostic factors are associated with a key predictor of success – work readiness. Work readiness is defined here as a multidimensional construct that encompasses skills, motivation, self-confidence and perception of one's own ability to engage in work, and which develops in the continuous interaction of the individual with the environment (Caballero, Walker, & Fuller-Tyszkiewicz, 2011; Peersia, Rappa, & Perry, 2024). Individual studies have provided fragmented insights. The findings suggest that older age, lack of need for support in performing daily activities, greater family support, greater professional ability (J. Y. Park & E. Y. Park, 2019), and higher level of education (Milanović Dobrota et al., 2021; Radić Šestić, Milanović Dobrota, & Radovanović, 2013) are associated with greater interest of people with ID in employment. Three key factors are positively associated with greater interest among people with ID: prior work experience (Radić Šestić et al., 2013), engagement with employment services (Milanović Dobrota et al., 2021), and stronger general self-efficacy (Li & Goh, 2011). However, significant inconsistencies persist in the literature, especially in relation to the roles of gender and age. Studies have yielded inconsistent results regarding gender, with evidence for greater interest in both men (Radić Šestić et al., 2013) and women (Hennessey & Goreczny, 2022), as well as findings of no difference (Milanović Dobrota et al., 2021). When it comes to age, findings are similarly mixed: while some indicate no difference (Hennessey & Goreczny, 2022; Radić-Šestić et al.,

2013) others suggest that older respondents show greater readiness (Sarada & Rita Suguna Sundari, 2022). This latter finding may be explained by factors such as accrued life experience and longer engagement with vocational training systems (Ortega-Camarero, Cuesta-Gómez, & de la Fuente-Anuncibay, 2021), highlighting how variations in contextual exposure, rather than chronological age per se, might drive differences in readiness.

A review of the research reveals an almost complete lack of comparative analysis that would simultaneously and on the same sample assess the relative contribution of socio-demographic factors and the fundamental diagnostic factor – the degree of ID. Without a comprehensive understanding of which factors are most pronounced employment preparation interventions risk remaining generalised and ineffective, rather than being targeted toward the distinct risk profiles within this heterogeneous population. Services are often delivered using a generic, "one-size-fits-all" model, lacking a precise evidence base for how users' key characteristics connect to their readiness.

Therefore, addressing this gap constitutes the primary aim of the present study. Specifically, this research aims to conduct a comparative analysis that simultaneously assesses, on the same sample, the relative contribution of key socio-demographic factors (gender, age, education, family status, work experience) and the degree of ID to work readiness among adults with ID in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Through this analysis, the study seeks to answer the following question: Are differences in work readiness primarily linked to diagnostic characteristics, or can socio-demographic profiles identify subgroups with distinct support needs?

Consequently, this study aims to contribute theoretically by deepening the understanding of the determinants of work readiness in this population, and practically by offering an empirical basis for differentiating and individualising labour market programs.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Sample of participant

The sample consisted of unemployed adults with ID from Bosnia and Herzegovina (N = 72). The sample included individuals with mild ID and moderate ID whose IQ scores were closer to the upper limit of moderate ID. In relation to socio-demographic factors, the sample consists of slightly more men (56.9%) than women (43.1%). Participants were predominantly aged 26–35 (55.6%), with 30.6% over 35, and 13.9% between 18 and 25 years old. Most respondents (58.3%) had not completed primary school. Those with completed primary education accounted for 27.8%, and the smallest group (13.9%) had attained a secondary school level. The majority (66.7%) lived with both parents, followed by those living with one parent (29.2%), with a guardian (2.8%), and in a foster family (1.4%). Only 5.6% of respondents have work experience, while 94.4% of them have no work experience. A large majority of participants (70.8%) were diagnosed with a moderate intellectual disability, while 29.2% had a mild intellectual disability.

Method of conducting research

The study was conducted across several institutions, day care centers providing educational and rehabilitation services to people with ID in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Participants were adults diagnosed with mild or moderate ID. Before data collection, formal requests and detailed research protocols were submitted to each institution. Research commenced only after institutional consent was granted. All participants, or their legal guardians in cases of legal incapacity, provided informed consent. Participants were fully informed about the study's purpose, the anonymous and voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. Surveys were administered individually in familiar environments to ensure comfort. The instrument was a short and simple scale, requiring approximately 10–15 minutes to complete. To facilitate comprehension, visual supports (e.g., "smiley" scales) were available and used with one respondent. Special attention was given to ensuring understanding of questions containing negative statements (items 5 and 8), with additional verbal explanations provided as needed.

Measuring instruments

Participants' work readiness was assessed using the Work Readiness Scale (WRS; Rose et al., 2010), a 13-item self-report measure designed for unemployed individuals with ID. Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). To facilitate comprehension, visual aids ("smiley" faces) were available, with five faces representing strong agreement and one face indicating strong disagreement. Two negatively worded items (items 5 and 8) were included to mitigate acquiescence bias and were reverse-scored. Total scores range from 13 to 65 (mean score is 39), with higher scores indicating greater work readiness. The scale demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency in its original validation ($\alpha = 0.73$; Rose et al., 2010) and excellent reliability in a Serbian adaptation ($\alpha = 0.92$; Milanović Dobrota et al., 2021). In the present sample, reliability was also excellent ($\alpha = 0.93$).

A General Questionnaire was administered to collect data on key sociodemographic variables (gender, age, education level, family status, work experience) and the primary diagnostic factor (degree of ID).

Data processing methods

Preliminary analysis assessed the normality of the distribution for the total Work Readiness Scale score using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. The result was statistically significant ($KS = 0.156$, $df = 72$, $p < .001$), indicating a significant deviation from a normal distribution. Consequently, non-parametric statistical methods were employed for hypothesis testing. Specifically, the Mann-Whitney U test was used to examine differences in work readiness based on dichotomous variables (gender, work experience, and degree of ID). For variables with more than two categories (age, family status, and education level), the Kruskal-Wallis H test was applied. All analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics, Version 25.0.

RESULTS

Table 1 displays group differences in work readiness across key sociodemographic (gender, work experience) and diagnostic (degree of ID) variables.

Table 1. Differences in Work Readiness by Gender, Work Experience, and Degree of Intellectual Disability

Var.		N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	Mann-Whitney <i>U</i>	Wilcoxon <i>W</i>	Z	p
Gender	male	41	35.10	1439.00	578,000	1439,000	-,655	,512
	female	31	38.35	1189.00				
WE	Yes	4	50.38	201.50	80,500	2426,500	-1,367	,172
	No	68	35.68	2426.50				
DID	MiID	21	48.00	1008.00	294,000	1620,000	-2,998	,003
	MoID	51	31.76	1620.00				

Legend: WE – work experience, DID – degree of intellectual disability, MiID – mild intellectual disability, MoID – moderate intellectual disability

As shown in Table 1, no statistically significant differences in work readiness were found for the sociodemographic factors of gender ($U = 578.00$, $Z = -0.655$, $p = .512$) or prior work experience ($U = 80.50$, $Z = -1.367$, $p = .171$). However, a significant difference emerged for the diagnostic factor – degree of ID ($U = 294.00$, $Z = -2.998$, $p = .003$), with a medium to significant effect size ($r = -0.35$) according to Cohen guidelines (1988, as cited in Pallant, 2016). Analysis of mean ranks (Table 1) indicated that individuals with mild ID ($MR = 48.00$) reported significantly higher work readiness than those with moderate ID ($MR = 31.76$).

Differences related to other sociodemographic variables – age, education level, and family status – are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Differences in Work Readiness by Age, Education Level, and Family Status

Var.		N	Mean Rank	Kruskal-Wallis <i>H</i>	df	p
Age	from 18 to 25 years old	10	33.65	1,551	2	,461
	from 26 to 35 years old	40	34.69			
	over 35 years old	22	41.09			
Education Level	unfinished ES	42	37.63	2,543	2	,280
	completed ES	20	30.88			
	completed high school	10	43.00			
Family Status	with both parents	48	35.48	1,570	3	,666
	with one parent	21	36.90			
	with guardian	2	53.75			
	foster family	1	42.50			

Legend: ES – Elementary School

Results of the Kruskal-Wallis *H* tests (Table 2) revealed non-significant effects of sociodemographic variables on work readiness. Specifically, no significant differences were

associated with age ($H(2) = 1.551$, $p = .461$), education level ($H(2) = 2.543$, $p = .280$), or family status ($H(3) = 1.570$, $p = .666$).

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to investigate the key determinants of work readiness within a specific and often overlooked population: unemployed adults with ID in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The central goal was to empirically determine whether differences in work readiness are primarily linked to diagnostic characteristics or whether sociodemographic profiles can identify subgroups with different support needs. The results reveal a clear and compelling pattern that challenges some conventional assumptions and carries significant implications for both theory and practice. Specifically, while a range of sociodemographic factors – gender, chronological age, formal education level, family structure, and prior work experience – showed no statistically significant association with work readiness scores, the diagnostic factor of ID degree emerged as a strong and significant differentiator. This finding suggests that for individuals with ID, foundational neurocognitive and adaptive capacities (partially reflected in the degree of ID) may constitute a primary filter through which other life experiences exert their influence, effectively overshadowing the predictive power of standard demographic categories within a context of systemic barriers.

The Insignificance of Sociodemographic Factors: A Question of Context and Quality

The consistent lack of significant findings for sociodemographic variables is a noteworthy outcome that merits interpretation beyond a simple conclusion of “no effect.” The absence of substantial gender differences in work readiness aligns with certain contemporary studies (e.g., Milanović Dobrota et al., 2021; Sarada & Rita Suguna Sundari, 2022). However, this result contrasts with other research reporting gender-based variations in vocational interest (Hennessey & Goreczny, 2022) or general work motivation (Radić Šestić et al., 2013). One possible interpretation is that gender may not be a primary differentiator for generalised work readiness, even if it influences specific occupational preferences. This discrepancy likely underscores the role of environmental and cultural mediators. In a labour market with severely limited opportunities for any person with ID, as suggested by the demographic data of this sample, intrinsic gender differences in interest may fail to manifest in generalised readiness scores. The practical implication is that gender-specific programming may be less critical than fostering individual vocational interests and aspirations, which can then be matched to appropriate training and job roles, irrespective of gender norms.

Regarding the non-significant finding for age, the present result is consistent with several studies (Hennessey & Goreczny, 2022; Radić Šestić et al., 2013) but contradicts research indicating greater readiness among older adults (Sarada & Rita Suguna Sundari, 2022; J. Y. Park & E. Y. Park, 2019). A key methodological limitation is the small size of the younger adult subsample (aged 18–25, $N = 10$), which constrains robust statistical comparison and the generalizability of findings for this age group. However, a substantive interpretation points to a systemic failure in transition planning for youth with ID, which, according to Branch (2024), can diminish their work readiness. In a system, lacking structured transition programs and early vocational exposure – a deficit starkly evidenced by the near absence of work

experience in the data – chronological age fails to distinguish work readiness. The critical issue is not age itself, but the quality and timing of age-appropriate preparatory experiences, which appear to be missing across the board.

The non-significant result for formal education level presents a particularly complex picture. The expected differences in relation to education level and work readiness, well documented in international research (Milanović-Dobrota et al., 2021; Radić-Šestić et al., 2013), were absent in this study. Consequently, this finding challenges the vocational relevance and quality of the participants' specific educational pathways, rather than negating the fundamental value of education per se. This divergence likely stems from two sources. Methodologically, the uneven distribution of educational attainment – particularly the small subsample with secondary education ($N = 10$) – limited statistical power and likely obscured potential associations between higher education and work readiness. More fundamentally, it questions the functional relevance of the attained education. Possessing a certificate of primary or secondary education does not automatically confer the marketable vocational skills, digital literacy, or workplace social competencies required for employment. This finding urges a shift from measuring educational attainment as a formal credential to evaluating the quality and vocational applicability of the academic content received by individuals with ID.

Perhaps the most thought-provoking non-significant finding relates to family status. While literature strongly emphasises family support as a cornerstone of employment success (Wilson & Campain, 2020), the data revealed no significant difference in work readiness based on parental co-residence (i.e., living with one vs. both parents). This suggests that the mere physical presence of family may be less critical than the quality and functionality of the support they provide. This apparent paradox may be resolved by distinguishing between the physical presence of family and the functional quality of family support. Merely living with parents does not guarantee the provision of high expectations, proactive career guidance, or opportunities to model work behaviour. This finding, therefore, does not negate the importance of family; rather, it highlights that future research must move beyond categorical descriptors (e.g., "lives with parents") to assess the dynamic processes within families – their attitudes, expectations, and practical support – that truly foster readiness.

A Systemic Crisis: The Near-Total Absence of Work Experience

Beyond the analysis of group differences, one descriptive finding stands out as profoundly alarming: only 5.6% of respondents reported any prior work experience. This is not merely a statistical detail but a glaring indicator of a broken process. Extensive research identifies early work experience as the single strongest predictor of later employment for individuals with ID (Enticott & Dew, 2025; Molfenter et al., 2017; Nevala et al., 2019; Petcu, Chezan, & Van Horn, 2015; Southward & Kyzar, 2017; Wehman et al., 2018). It provides a crucial arena for developing not only hard skills but also the soft skills, work habits, self-efficacy, and social integration essential for job retention (Radić-Šestić et al., 2013). The absence of such experience in the lives of participants in this study represents a critical systemic failure that effectively pre-empts work readiness. This implies that interventions targeting "work readiness" in isolation, without parallel creation of authentic early work pathways (e.g.,

internships, supported trials) treat the symptom while neglecting the underlying cause. This deficit demands urgent, systemic action to institutionalise transition programs that connect education with real-world work exposure.

The Defining Role of Intellectual Disability Severity

In stark contrast to the sociodemographic factors, the degree of ID was a statistically robust and practically meaningful differentiator, with a moderate effect size ($r = -.35$). Participants with mild ID reported significantly higher work readiness than those with moderate ID. This finding is consistent with international evidence (Sarada & Rita Suguna Sundari, 2022) and validates the core diagnostic characteristic as a primary axis for individualising support. The implication is clear and actionable: intervention models must be differentially calibrated. Individuals with mild ID may benefit most from focused vocational skill training (Sigstad & Garrels, 2022; Venkatesh, Reddy, & Angothu, 2023), job-search assistance (Whitney et al., 2021), and time-limited onboarding support, aiming for competitive employment in the open labour market. For individuals with moderate (and severe) ID, these measures are necessary but insufficient. Their path to employment is fundamentally dependent on supported employment models, characterised by continuous, individualised job coaching, systematic job carving or customisation, and long-term support to ensure job retention (Branch, 2024; Venkatesh et al., 2023). Recognising disability severity not as a barrier to employment but as a guide to the type and intensity of support required is a paradigm shift from exclusion to tailored inclusion.

Theoretical Synthesis and a Proposed Hierarchical Model

The collective results support a hierarchical, interactionist model of work readiness for people with ID. A foundational element in this hierarchy is the individual's functional capacity – often indexed by the degree of ID – which establishes key parameters for learning velocity, task complexity, and the necessary intensity of support. This intrinsic capacity acts as a primary filter. At the next level, environmental and experiential factors – such as the quality of education, the functionality of family support, and access to early work experiences – interact with this foundational capacity. In a resource-poor environment where these experiences are uniformly low in quality or absent (as suggested by the data on work experience and the interpretation of family/education findings), their potential to create variance in work readiness scores is minimised. Consequently, the remaining, most salient source of variance is the foundational diagnostic factor itself. This model, therefore, accounts for the non-significance of sociodemographic categories in this study and simultaneously identifies the critical processes – quality, functionality, and access – that should become focal points for future research and intervention.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

The conclusions of this study are necessarily constrained by its limitations, which also chart a course for future inquiry. The use of a convenience sample from day centres limits generalizability to the wider, more heterogeneous population of adults with ID, including those not engaged with service systems. A key limitation stems from the cross-sectional

nature of the data, which prevents the establishment of causality or directionality in the identified associations. While the Work Readiness Scale demonstrated excellent reliability, its brevity may not capture the full multidimensionality of the construct, which could encompass practical skills, emotional preparedness, and environmental perceptions.

Future research must prioritise longitudinal designs to trace the development of work readiness and its translation into employment outcomes. Qualitative methodologies are essential to unpack the “black box” of variables like “family support” or “educational quality,” exploring the lived experiences and interpersonal dynamics that quantitative scales cannot capture. Furthermore, studies must expand the ecological model to include macro-level variables such as employer attitudes, national policy frameworks, and the availability of supported employment services, which ultimately determine whether individual readiness can be realised in actual employment.

CONCLUSION

This study makes a significant contribution by empirically mapping the determinants of work readiness for people with ID in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It demonstrates that within a context marked by systemic gaps – most critically, the absence of early work experience – work readiness cannot be usefully predicted by standard sociodemographic profiles. Instead, the severity of the disability itself emerges as the key differentiator, urging a decisive move away from generic programs toward precisely individualized support plans.

Progress, therefore, hinges on a two-pronged strategy: first, the systematic implementation of scalable programs that create authentic early work pathways; and second, the development of professional expertise capable of delivering a continuum of long-term support – ranging from foundational skills training to intensive workplace coaching – precisely tailored to individual functional profiles.

Ultimately, fostering work readiness is inseparable from the broader project of building an inclusive and responsive ecosystem that is itself ready to receive, value, and sustain the contributions of people with ID.

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