

# EMBRACING DIVERSITY

HOW ROMA CAN BE  
BETTER INCLUDED IN  
THE WORKPLACE



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Full employment is one of the objectives set by the European Union. Yet, the Roma people still face [obstacles](#) in entering the labour market including but not limited to stereotypes, harassment and/or discrimination. In Bulgaria, according to the [national census from 2021](#), a total of 2,825,388 people were in the labour force. Out of them, 2,548,691 people were employed, and 286,697 people were unemployed. In view of the stereotypes imposed on the Roma population, some would assume that most unemployed people in Bulgaria are of Roma origin. But what do the national statistics show about the Roma in the national workforce?

People who identify themselves as Roma in the labour force and are of working age (15-64) constitute only 2.76% of the overall labour force in Bulgaria. For reference, the respondents who self-determine as Bulgarians constitute 83%, while the respondents who identify themselves as belonging to the largest ethnic minority, the Turks, cover less than 7% of the overall labour force. According to the [NSI 2021 data](#), 44% of the Roma people of working age were in the labour force, and almost 49% of them were employed. In comparison, 92% of the Bulgarians in the labour force were employed, and the employment rate of the Turkish minority in the workforce was 79%.

Although the Roma are a minority in the labour market, their unemployment rate is higher compared to the one of the Bulgarian and Turkish population. A plausible explanation why Roma are relatively less employed among others is their unequal position in the labour market due to the [past structural macroeconomic changes](#) in Bulgaria. Along those lines, Roma people face challenges in entering the labour market in the first place because of a [myriad of factors](#) such as the recruitment processes, where employers or recruitment teams reject the Roma applicants due to stereotypes and bias, and their oftentimes uncompetitive education background, qualifications, and skills.

**Thus, this blogpost is dedicated to practices for the inclusion of people of Roma ethnicity into Bulgarian workplaces.** Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) policies aimed at improving integration of the Roma population into the employment sector need to be embraced for various reasons. First, it will shrink the unemployment rate, social isolation and inequality. Second, D&I practices addressing Roma will contribute to increased appreciation of the [Roma culture as part of European identity](#) that celebrates multiculturalism and fundamental values. Additionally, the inclusion of Roma increases their incomes, improves their overall wellbeing, reduces poverty, and decreases their reliance on social assistance. To enhance the access of the Roma into the Bulgarian labour market and include them better in the workplace, the best practices for their professional inclusion should cover different stages of employment – hiring, career growth, skill building, etc. This blogpost suggests nine promising practices implemented by companies around the world that could facilitate the professional inclusion of Roma.

First and foremost, it is imperative that several policies are set up in every workplace to facilitate the inclusion of the Roma. Those include a **zero-tolerance policy for discrimination and harassment, equitable hiring practices** that are required by the [Protection Against Discrimination Act, notably Article 24 \(1\), 25 and 26](#), and a **diversity management policy**.





### Practice 1: Ethics Training on Employees' Responsibilities and Company's Policies and Norms

It is important to **educate the Roma in the working place about all policies, responsibilities, norms and laws in place**. This is because only 33% of Roma are informed about laws prohibiting discrimination based on ethnic origin, religion or skin colour as provided in Article 21 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and Article 6 of the Bulgarian constitution. Therefore, the training needs to be accessible and comprehensible for everyone. By using concrete situations and practical examples, the attention of the audience can be secured. Several companies such as Starbucks, Sony Co., and Microsoft have ethics training in place that ensures that employees are treated fairly and equally. Those trainings are also often conducted by professional third parties in Bulgaria, such as The Knowledge Academy. As a result, the employees' motivation and effectiveness can increase, and unwanted problems and misbehaviours potentially decrease.

### Practice 2: Diversity and Cultural Competence Trainings

To enhance the understanding and respect of the Roma in the workplace, a diversity and cultural competence training can be useful. Through such training, employees can learn more about each other's diverse backgrounds and, thus, **become acquainted with Roma culture**. Training should cover individual work values and standards, and how to interact with colleagues in a way that ensures that everyone is treated equally, respectfully and fairly. Additionally, various cultural-sensitive communication styles are discussed. Typically, training also extends to topics around bias, stereotypes, self-awareness, and how cultural preferences transpire in the workplace. For instance, the Dutch organisation Inclusive Works conducts such trainings. By means of such a training, inclusion can be successfully implemented in the workplace and the barriers the Roma face can be dampened.

### Practice 3: The Use of Inclusive Language

Being aware of the impact that certain words can have, especially towards co-workers from underrepresented groups, is crucial when aiming for the successful inclusion of the Roma. Therefore, **inclusive language** can create a working environment in which everyone feels empowered to speak and make their voice heard. That way the Roma can socialise and get integrated more easily in the workplace. Apple and MasterCard have become two prime examples where inclusive language is used. There are also companies that help with the application of inclusive language in the workplace or offer inclusive language training, like Clarkston Consulting. In Bulgaria, the Neutral and Inclusive language in Corporate Environment (NICE) project is developing training on the use of inclusive communication reflecting the national context. Eventually, the use of inclusive language can foster collaboration between employees, improve their morale, and decrease biases and discrimination against the Roma.

### Practice 4: Roma as Role Models

One of the recommendations by the Bridge to Business programme (BtB) was to enhance Roma employment in private companies through the organisation of **discussions with successful Roma employees** working in different companies. Through this practice employees' mindsets could be positively changed. This is because they would communicate directly with the Roma who have climbed up the corporate ladder and are well qualified, opposing the stereotyped image of Roma as inadequate low-skilled workforce. On another note, Roma women are even more disadvantaged than men. Thus, **visits of successful Roma women in schools** could increase young girls' awareness of successful women of Roma descent and spur their interest in pursuing a career. Overall, direct





interaction between Roma as role models and non-Roma, as well as the example that Roma role models set for younger generations, can challenge stereotypes and facilitate their access into the Bulgarian labour market.

### Practice 5: Mini-Internships for Roma Graduates

Another recommendation from the Bridge to Business programme (BtB) was a practice called '[mini-internships](#)', where Roma people could undergo **training for the company and a one-day visit to understand the work process and meet members of the company**. Senior and middle management of the company would engage in valuable conversations on discrimination, diversity management, and hate speech by asking Roma directly about their experiences. In this way, training and workshops could be tailored to Roma people, empathy and understanding of the Roma could be fostered, and employees could learn how to accept and actively include Roma in the workplace.

### Practice 6: Flexible Work Arrangements

Work should be [flexible and last for a long time](#). Flexible working practices can include flexitime and staggered hours, compressed hours, part-time jobs, unlimited time-off, and annual hours. Examples and descriptions of these flexible working practices can be found [here](#). These practices are beneficial because they **allow the Roma employees to pursue job training and education next to their work**. Through flexible work arrangements a more inclusive and supportive workplace can be created, where the well-being and work-life balance of employees is valued. [Nike, Microsoft, Apple, and Google](#) offer flexible working options that have shown positive results in business productivity and employee satisfaction.

### Practice 7: Job training

All workers have the right to get support and training conforming to the [fifth principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights](#) and [Article 24 \(2\) of the Protection Against Discrimination Act](#). Through job training, **people of Roma ethnicity can gain job-specific knowledge and develop relevant skills**. In 2022, a [project of Integro Association](#) started on vocational opportunities for young Roma not in education, employment, or training. Those projects should ideally be extended to cover more people of Roma descent across Bulgaria. For already employed Roma, companies could invest in its employees through training and development programmes. [Seattle Genetics](#), for example, offers courses on job-related skills and job-related conferences and seminars. [Amazon](#) offers a training and leadership program prior to hiring the person. Ultimately, job training and development can increase employee performance, increase motivation and engagement of employees, and foster innovation.

### Practice 8: Mentorship Programmes for Roma

Mentorship programmes within companies could connect Roma employees with experienced leaders who can **help them advance their careers and empower the Roma to follow suit**. Mentors and mentees both benefit from the mentorship programmes as they can **gain valuable skills and grow professionally**. At [Intel](#), employees are matched with mentors based on their skills and interests. PayPal offers its employees a [unity mentorship programme](#) including certification courses and live mentor sessions. Through such mentoring programmes, employees of Roma origin can be encouraged in their personal development, helped to define and pursue their professional goals, and to fill any of their potential knowledge gaps.





### Practice 9: Encouraging Employee Resource Groups

Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) allow Roma employees to take action themselves. This is because ERGs provide a **platform for employees to come together, support each other, and advocate for their needs within the organisation**. Participation in ERGs is voluntary. Typically, ERGs have a clear objective that could be to achieve any of the above practices, for example. Thereby, the employees with Roma background can push for training, workshops, or programmes that meet their needs. If the Roma members of the ERG feel well served by proactive responses from senior staff, the Roma will enjoy a sense of inclusion. In turn, this can increase productivity and drive engagement in the workplace.

The above practices are suggestions, and do not all need to be implemented at the same time. In fact, it depends on the internal policies and needs of the company or organisation. Above all, the inclusion of Roma in the workplace must be tailored to their needs. These practices can be a step towards a much-needed effort to include Roma people in the workplace, but even small steps can make a big difference.



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