

(IN)ACCESSIBLE ROADS TO PERFORMING ARTS

An interview-based study in the Viaductus project



VIADUCTUS



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Interviews conducted by the Viaductus project in 2024.

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The photos used in the study have no connection to the individuals who participated in the interviews.

We extend our warmest gratitude to all the artists who contributed to this survey and shared their knowledge and experiences.

Viaductus is a three-year project (2023–2026), funded by the Allmänna Arvsfonden in Sweden. The project is lead by Moomsteatern, ShareMusic & Performing Arts and Skånes Dansteater. Its mission is to identify where the gaps between performing artists with disabilities and the professional performing arts sector exist in order to create opportunities for these performing artists to have professional work and access to our stages.

Conclusions of the survey

The Viaductus project is operated by three organisations: Moomsteatern, ShareMusic & Performing Arts and Skånes Dansteater. This interview-based study was conducted in 2024 as part of the project, involving both current and aspiring professional artists with disabilities. Its aim is to shed light on artists' experiences and perceptions of the sector, including their working conditions and careers. The study seeks to highlight the current state of the performing arts industry in Sweden, identify the factors affecting disabled artists' participation, and outline what is needed to support and enable them to become professionally active.

The results of the study show that excessively restrictive recruitment practices and artistic norms prevent artists from entering the labour market. When job opportunities do arise, they are often limited to projects specifically framed around disability. Even when hired, artists are frequently not offered appropriate working conditions; inaccessible work processes, systems, and stage venues lead to exhaustion and, in some cases, an inability to continue working. Artists also highlight a widespread lack of knowledge about how to adapt the work environment. They debate whether the performing arts sector actively avoids recruiting outside the norm, rather than acquiring the necessary competence to support broader inclusion.

Artists have identified government systems that are intended to support them are, in practice, making it more difficult for them to be professionally active. Additional external factors—such as mobility services and public transport—also limit their ability to access and maintain employment. The lack of accessible application processes prevent many artists from applying for funding or being accepted into higher education. Without higher education, they can't compete on equal job terms.

According to the artists there are opportunities to influence the situation, by increasing visibility of works by and with artists with disabilities in the public sphere. They see career opportunities, but these usually rely on individuals, whereas opportunities should be available via consistent and stable societal structures. Sector development is dependent on the artists themselves, which increases workload and the fear of being perceived as a liability or burdensome.

Many prefer to work solely as artists and consider it essential that employers are receptive to their individual needs and take responsibility for the making of a work environment.

The Viaductus project argues that a person's capacity to work depends on the conditions surrounding them—and that disability becomes an individual burden only when no one takes responsibility for the work environment. The consequences of this are costly—for both individuals and society. The performing arts sector must therefore reflect on and evolve its attitudes and approaches in order to bring about real change. According to the project, the core issue is not a lack of knowledge, but rather the absence of clear directives and sustainable infrastructures. The solutions lie within the artistic practice itself—through making, experimenting, and exploring. The project hopes that the sector will actively engage with the findings of this study and work toward concrete solutions to the barriers it identifies.

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Introduction

Today, very few career opportunities are available to performing artists with disabilities. The Viaductus project is focused on long-term, sustainable change in the Swedish performing arts sector. The project aims to show pathways to a professional practice for performing artists, and to raise awareness in the sector of alternative approaches and methods.

To effect change and regeneration, we need new structures and different pathways that complement and develop the existing cultural ecosystem. We know that there is significant interest in the sector, and that many organisations have a desire and ambition to work more inclusively but they do not quite know where to start.

As part of Viaductus, this extensive research activity was launched, including in-depth interviews to gather information on the current conditions for future and professional artists with disabilities. What obstacles and opportunities have they encountered on their path to a professional career?

This survey is one of few compilations of its kind in Sweden. It is based on interviews conducted in 2024. Our ambition was that the study would provide insights into how artists experience and describe the labour market, their working conditions and their careers.

The purpose is to present a picture of the relevant factors and what needs to be done to achieve more professionally active artists in Sweden.

Parts of the survey have provided the background for a coalition process led by the Forum for Social Innovation at Malmö University. Within this intersectoral coalition model, key actors met to discuss the results of the survey and the way forward.



Survey structure and questions

The survey was conducted in the form of in-depth interviews with eight professional artists with disabilities aged 29 – 56, who have worked in the performing arts for at least a decade. They represent theatre, dance, music and literature. The material also includes interviews with two artists embarking on their career, aged 19 and 36.

Five of the eight respondents work as freelance artists and/or are employed on a project basis. Three have permanent positions, one of whom also does freelance jobs on the side. Those with permanent jobs are employed in organisations that straddle both arts and disability.

The artists were requested to:

- Introduce themselves as individuals and artists
- Describe their artistic career path and milestones
- Describe the obstacles they have encountered and how they have overcome them
- Propose issues the Viaductus project should address
- Offer ideas for solutions

The survey responses were organised according to the following themes:

- Employment
- Work environment and accessibility
- Recruitment, representation and advocacy
- Training, further education and growth
- Opportunities and conditions based on regulations
- Other influencing factors

All quotes in this report are from the interviewed artists.



Employment

The artists' responses reveal that

- there are few job opportunities, most are project-based and often in specific “disability” projects, i.e. outside the mainstream performing arts.
- financial insecurity of freelance work causes a great deal of stress. They want security, predictability, and permanent or long-term employment. Some say that they appreciate the freedom of being able to manage their own time.
- not having a fixed base or anyone to consult - on pricing, billing, and contractual agreements, for example, means missing out on access to sector specific knowledge.

Work environment and accessibility

In the interviews, artists discuss various aspects of accessibility:

Physical – access to the premises/stage.

Psychosocial – being regarded and treated as an equal.

Communicative and cognitive – availability of support at work, and time to absorb, understand and process information.

Economic – for instance, funding for buying aids.

Geographical – living in the “right” place or having the possibility to get to and from work.

“If you’re a performing artist – whether you’re a dancer, actor, choreographer or director – with a disability who wants to do something beyond a more protected context, it is crucial that the institutions are open to this. But it’s also important that they do not recruit just anyone but maintain a professional standard.”



In the interviews with artists, it emerged that

- deficiencies in the psychosocial environment are just as important to address as those in the physical environment. Inaccessible work processes, fast work pace, high stress and too few breaks were examples mentioned.
- these deficiencies lead to fatigue, exhaustion and loss of the ability to work.
- it is important that employers are receptive, take the individual's needs into account and are willing to assume responsibility for the work environment.
- they are worried about being perceived as difficult if they communicate needs that concern their work environment and disability. This in turn could cause them to lose job opportunities.
- there are reasons that performing arts institutions are questioned with whose responsibility it is in regard to inclusion and accessibility.
- they experience a major lack of knowledge on how to adapt the work environment, and rather than learning, institutions avoid recruiting outside the norm.
- there is an expectation that the artists are considered norm-breaking primarily, and as artists secondly. That is, the artist is expected to educate both the employer, the audience and others in disability issues.
- artists themselves are often expected to serve as role models or pioneers, when they are actually hired for an artistic assignment.

“I’ve noticed that many norm-breaking artists experience an initial need to educate others, but over time I’ve realised that it’s not always my duty to do that. I feel like I just want to get on with my job. I’m not interested in talking anymore.”

Deficiencies in the work environment, be they physical or psychological, are obviously a health hazard – regardless of disability. Recurring themes in the interviews are low self-esteem and self-confidence among the respondents. Several established artists relate how they, despite broad professional experience and many years in the sector, still get the feeling that they are incapable of doing anything and that it is hard for them to identify with their professional role.

“It feels like I’m the problem if I can’t cope. I feel like a failure because I’m not as strong. At the same time, I know that there’s something wrong with the whole sector, many others feel the same way but nobody does anything about it.”

Recruitment, representation and advocacy

The question of (lacking) representation is one of the topics most frequently raised in the artists' interview responses, and the problems have many forms and layers, such as actually being rejected for roles due to their disability or typecasting – such as being recruited specifically for your disability. Both are problematic and consolidate negative structures and stereotypes.

The respondents noted, for instance, that

- they are hired only to portray characters that have a disability, and that they are not considered for other roles.
- they are only recruited for projects focusing on disabilities.
- they are not treated as equals but that the disability is acknowledged first, and then the individual.
- the disability has to be constantly in focus and is never left unaddressed. They refer to international TV productions as positive examples of a more inclusive approach and that it would be desirable if the performing arts sector could learn from this approach.
- additional occupational strain is caused by having to carry out the artistic assignment while also driving the process of changing the workplace.
- the threshold for performing arts institutions to recruit artists with disabilities seems high.
- there are few examples of performing arts activities that seem to actively promote change.
- they have thoughts on the (lack of) courage or knowledge preventing broader recruitment.

“A lawyer in a TV series could be in a wheelchair. But that’s not the case today. The norm dictates that you should stand on two legs, but it’s time we challenge that norm – a lawyer could just as well sit down as stand up. Neither musicality nor acting skills are affected by a wheelchair or mobility.”

“A while ago, I was offered to do the voice in a youth series, for a character who had a skeletal disorder like me. I accepted, but it was also amusing how they thought about it: I mean, you can’t even see me. I could voice any character!” ”

Some of the artists state that they consider their very presence to be a form of advocacy. But opinions differ: some appreciate feeling like “agents of change”, while others “just want to be an artist”.

Moreover, artists express

- the importance of being taken seriously and not being seen as an extraterrestrial or a charity case.
- the need for the general public to realise that the question of who is allowed to be visible on stage is universal.
- that there is a huge potential for advocacy, by placing works with and by artists with disabilities in the public sphere.
- thoughts on why more progress has not been made in art as a platform for social change.

“I would like to see more of an element of surprise in the theatre context. When you look at who is in the ensembles at the big theatres, it’s still pretty normative: people with disabilities are often only included in specific projects and rarely part of the regular ensemble. I wish we had come further and that these issues permeated the work more continually, in order to achieve sustainable change. At present, it’s like we only engage with these issues in short projects, which doesn’t lead to long-term solutions.”



Training, further education and growth

Among the respondents, all except two lack higher education in the creative fields where they are active. More than half say that they wouldn't even consider applying for higher education because they believe they would not be accepted for reasons connected to their disability, such as physical requirements, poor accessibility, various artistic norms, or because they lack the basic entry requirements due to their special needs schooling. They emphasise that education also means opportunities for internships which could be a chance to get out into the field to obtain work experience and build networks. This could be important for their future as a freelancer.

“Acting has always been my dream, but I never considered applying to drama school. One of the requirements was that you never had any vocal problems, and my vocal cords were permanently damaged when I was very young. So the thought never even occurred to me. Why expose myself to something when it states clearly that this is not going to work?”

Instead, artists have been forced to find other, more or less creative roads to work. Induction activities, such as amateur groups or other opportunities for creative development, are described as being essential; but access to these depends on the location.

“What's the situation like for a young person today in upper secondary school who wants to pursue dance or acting but doesn't live in a city like Gothenburg but in the countryside, like I did? Where do they get the support and courage to apply to a dance school or Stockholm University of the Arts?”

Several artists respond that opportunities for further education through their workplace were crucial to their development, especially for those who are unable to benefit from conventional training. A professional network is especially important, as it offers both security, context and deeper understanding, besides opening doors and offering possibilities for further training through interpersonal learning.

Opportunities and conditions based on regulations

The energy that artists with disabilities need to invest in administrating, understanding and navigating the government organisations' systems and rules is depleting and thus affects their capacity to work. The artists wish the processes of applying for, obtaining and maintaining support – regardless of whether they are for individual support or support for an arts project – were more adapted to the people involved.

Artists describe the problems and difficulties of

- being professionally active while also being in the social security system. Irregular project employment and varying work schedules, which are fundamental conditions and the existing reality for the arts sector, are incompatible with the regulations of the social security system.
- turning down jobs for fear of losing their support from government authorities such as Försäkringskassan (the Social Insurance Agency). There is also a fear of having to repay any received benefits if they appear to have a greater work capacity than previously established.
- navigating the public support system itself, with little to no help available to find answers, to understand the rules and to interpret and keep up with the government authority's terminology.

“How can you set limits as a freelancer? If you're freelancing and do not have an employer. How do you decide the scope? If I have two different jobs and also need that 25 per cent I get in support. How do I make that sustainable?”

Artists also state that

- there is a great risk of becoming dependent on help from family and friends or relying on the hope of meeting understanding employers or individual officials who are willing and have the educational skills to explain the rules.
- when they encounter government bodies each person's individual opportunities and rights vary, and these can depend on who they have the luck, or misfortune, to meet.
- whilst there are solutions, the knowledge needed to find/see solutions within the system can vary depending on the respective official. This can affect finding employment in the arts labour market.
- hidden disabilities can make it harder to obtain the right support and assistance in navigating the system. Artists with hidden disabilities state that they feel invisible.
- the difficulties navigating the system is often mistaken for a lack of intelligence or skill and that their own needs, knowledge and perspectives are obscured by several layers of invisibility — particularly when others speak on their behalf, even when they are present.

“The contact I had with Försäkringskassan during a particular period meant that I had to read an enormous amount of material and text. I needed to understand it and absorb it, and I had to cope with it all on my own. I’m expected to manage, and it’s not for lack of wanting to, but I simply can’t. And so that is yet another degradation, not being able to cope, which leads to incredible guilt and shame.”

“I sat with my boss and a person from Arbetsförmedlingen. The person from Arbetsförmedlingen only addressed my boss, even though the meeting was about me, and my situation in the workplace. That felt really weird, when we were sitting in a room supposedly discussing my experiences! It’s about my needs, but they’re not talking to me! You’re there in the room, and yet you’re somehow invisible.”

“I’m thinking of representation among the people working at Arbetsförmedlingen and Försäkringskassan. What would have happened if some people working there had some kind of disability?”

Being an artist with a disability still means limited opportunities in higher education in the arts, which in turn affects job opportunities and the right to register with Arbetsförmedlingen Kultur Media (the Public Employment Service for the arts and media). Job seekers who cannot present documents that fulfil Arbetsförmedlingen Kultur’s criteria regarding higher education and previous work experience in the field are referred to the ordinary Arbetsförmedlingen, where the knowledge of the Arts sector is very limited. It also emerged that several of the artists were unaware of Arbetsförmedlingen Kultur Media and how to register there.

“There was a period when I was burnt out and was trying to get back into playing music again, and was offered a job as a lorry driver on the grounds that it would suit me (I had no training as a lorry driver). So, I actually asked ‘Do you even have a clue what I was doing before?’ And of course they didn’t, and I think that is really problematic. There’s no personal contact, I do not feel like a human being in that procedure, it’s just ticking boxes!”

Other influencing factors

Assisted travel and public transport

There are other factors that affect the artists' ability to take or keep a job. One example that is mentioned repeatedly in the interviews are problems with assisted travel and the rules around it:

“I had a great job that suited me perfectly. The problem was getting to my workplace from home... I applied for permission to use assisted travel for work, but the regional boundaries made it complicated. I struggled with this arrangement for more than a year and ended up getting injured: it was hard getting on and off trains, which resulted in an injury that meant that the signals from my arm got blocked. It's incredible... that I can't get myself to work without getting hurt. In the end, I had to hand in my notice. I was devastated.”

Working away from one's hometown is also a time-consuming challenge, since the aids on public transport often do not work. This means that artists who depend on these aids are unable to get on and off trains or buses. They can't count on arriving on time to work, either due to cancelled transport or they are delayed due to poor accessibility. In addition, there is often no access to toilets on longer journeys.

Arts funding and application systems

Another example of external factors impacting opportunities for disabled artists is how funding and support are distributed in the arts sector today.

Freelance artists highlight the difficulty in applying for funding singlehandedly for their own projects, productions and artistic practice. They report that the current application and report systems are not designed for or made accessible for artists with disabilities.

”Abroad I've heard that they have disability coordinators who can provide support and assistance.”

”It would be great if there was someone who checked who they reach and how they inform people of their existence. And definitely one person, at least one, who assists and is available for these particular issues. How do you apply? And if you are granted funding, what contact will you have later on with the funding body?”

Conclusion

When the disability moves in

When you feel like a liability – vis-à-vis an employer, government agency or other party – this can undermine self-confidence and self-reliability. When the artist is required to do an activity or job but the situation prevents them doing it, there is a risk that their disability becomes a problem for them, and they internalise this. This then affects their self-esteem and raises the bar to pursue an artistic career even higher.

Dependence on individuals

Several respondents say that their road to and within the arts sector depended on specific individuals who worked in the arts or healthcare sector, and who helped them progress in one way or another. The way forward is dependent on individual people helping which is a recurring problem in Sweden; as long as there are no sustainable political or legal structures, progress will continue to rely on personal commitment as the driving force. This leads to a precarious situation for both society and those affected.

The relativity of working capacity

Working capacity is relative to the conditions surrounding an individual: being in an inaccessible environment will obviously have a negative impact on people – whether or not they have a disability. People with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to this.

How much a person can work depends partly on the conditions surrounding them, and any disabilities they need to negotiate in their immediate and work environment. For example, energy may run out more quickly when working in a cognitively inaccessible environment, and a physically inaccessible environment may cause injuries. Both examples affect an individual's ability to do their job. It is vital that all parties understand that work capacity is relative to the environment where the individual is employed. Consequently, they must strive to create a working environment that provides the best possible conditions for individuals to reach their full potential and reduces strain on the individual, the employer and the government agencies.

Artistic processes and production work

This survey, and the Viaductus project in general, reveal that the way performing arts organisations recruit, plan and implement work on productions and artistic processes is dependent on how inclusive a workplace is. Planning a new production or project should account for the needs of all participants: what does everyone need to do their job in the best possible way? It is vital that employers and managers of artistic teams act accordingly, challenging, developing and adapting their approach and to keep reflecting on their artistic vision and the end result.

Collaborations for change

A key factor mentioned in every interview is that artists need the right conditions to access the labour market. But how can these conditions be provided?

For a start, looking at the obstacles highlighted in this report is a step towards solutions. The hope is that this project will help the performing arts sector to identify and scrutinise the areas for improvement in their respective organisations. How they can contribute to change through assignments, in general, or for individual artists?

Looking ahead, the Viaductus project identifies the necessity of intersectoral collaboration, with public authorities and institutions working together and interacting to achieve long-term, sustainable change. The conclusion of this project is that there is a lack of knowledge, but also a lack of directives and infrastructure, from government level down, that encourage and facilitate expertise, exchange knowledge and share solutions.

Concluding quotes from the artists:

“This is a process that is developing continuously. We need to discover what doesn’t exist, and create and produce it, and a new vocabulary to use. Both verbally and physically and together with others.”

“Ultimately, when you produce art projects relating to disability perspectives, you should dare ask for help and consult the experts.”

