

# The Guardian Network

*Redirecting Corporate Infrastructure towards a More Inclusive European Labour Market*

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## Abstract

Europe's employment paradox sits in plain sight. Member states report millions of unfilled vacancies alongside persistent unemployment. Standard policy responses focus on training supply, credential recognition, and recruitment incentives. They leave largely untouched one of the most significant underused assets in the European economy: the social responsibility infrastructure that large companies already maintain.

This paper proposes the Guardian Network, a replicable framework that redirects corporate volunteer time, training capacity, and mentorship structures towards measurable employment outcomes. The model serves trailing spouses of mobile professionals, career returners, refugees with work authorisation, and others facing structural barriers to employment. It requires no new public funding. It adapts to national labour market contexts. And it compounds over time, as early participants become future mentors.

The paper situates this proposal within foresight practice, arguing that closing the gap between imaginative policy and actionable infrastructure requires exactly this kind of systemic reallocation.

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## 1. The Problem Europe Has Not Fully Imagined

Europe's labour market challenge is well documented but not yet well imagined. The dominant narrative frames the problem as a mismatch between supply and demand: not enough skilled workers in the right places, doing the right things, speaking the right languages. Policy responses have followed this logic. Governments invest in training programmes, simplify credential recognition, and fund language learning. These interventions help. But they leave the demand side largely unexamined.

Companies across the EU carry significant untapped social infrastructure. They allocate volunteer hours, run internal training academies, maintain mentorship programmes, and report on corporate social responsibility commitments. Much of this activity produces little measurable employment impact. It satisfies reporting requirements and builds brand goodwill. It does not systematically close the employment gap.

Germany reports over 1.7 million job vacancies alongside rising unemployment. France shows skills mismatch in digital sectors despite qualified jobseekers. Spain struggles with youth unemployment while tourism and technology companies cannot fill roles. Italy faces similar challenges in northern industrial regions. These are not separate national problems. They share a structural pattern.

This is the imaginative failure the Guardian Network addresses. The question it asks is simple: what if existing corporate capacity were redirected, systematically and measurably, towards people facing structural barriers to employment?

## **2. Who Falls Through the Gap**

The employment gap is not uniform. Several populations face persistent structural barriers across multiple member states, regardless of policy effort.

Trailing spouses of mobile professionals are one of the clearest examples. When a skilled professional relocates from one member state to another, their partner often cannot easily re-enter the labour market. Professional networks must be rebuilt. Language differs. Cultural expectations in hiring vary. Credential recognition, though simplified by EU directives, still involves delay and bureaucracy. Meanwhile, the family income depends on one earner. If the professional then receives a better offer elsewhere, the family leaves. Talent mobility becomes talent leakage.

The same structural barriers face career returners after parental leave, refugees with employment authorisation, older workers facing age discrimination, people with disabilities seeking workplace integration, and young people in NEET status. These populations are not marginal. Together, they represent a substantial reserve of untapped labour market capacity.

Current policy addresses each group in relative isolation. The Guardian Network treats them as a shared challenge with a shared structural response.

## **3. The Framework: What the Guardian Network Proposes**

The Guardian Network operates on a single core principle: redirect existing corporate social infrastructure towards measurable employment outcomes.

It does this through three interconnected mechanisms. Companies reallocate existing volunteer time towards structured mentorship of people facing employment barriers. This is not new activity. It is reframed activity, measured differently. Companies also adapt their existing training modules to bridge skills gaps for specific target populations. The infrastructure already exists. The framework gives it a new direction. And early participants in the network become mentors for later participants. The network grows without requiring increased corporate resource allocation.

The self-sustaining mentor chain is the model's central innovation. Year one participants become year three mentors. Employment impact compounds. The network grows through demonstration, not mandate. By year ten, hundreds find employment through infrastructure that costs nothing beyond initial coordination.

The Guardian Network does not impose standardisation. It provides a replicable framework that each member state adapts to its own labour market context. German companies build on dual vocational training systems. French companies integrate with formation professionnelle frameworks. Nordic countries connect with tripartite labour market institutions. Spanish companies link with existing pactos territoriales. The core principle stays constant. Local implementation varies.

## **4. Why This Is a Foresight Intervention**

This proposal belongs at a foresight conference for a specific reason. The Guardian Network is not simply a policy recommendation. It is a proposal to reimagine how corporate capacity enters public purpose.

Current EU employment policy operates primarily on the supply side. It trains people, recognises qualifications, and funds language learning. It imagines the labour market as a pipeline problem: fill the supply, and employment follows. The demand side, meaning the companies that hire, is treated largely as a given.

This imaginary is increasingly inadequate. The Green Deal and just transition require workers to move between sectors. Demographic change is shrinking the working-age population. AI is reshaping skill requirements faster than training systems can respond. The assumption that supply-side policy alone can manage these transitions is a product of an older imaginary, one built for a more stable economic environment.

The Guardian Network proposes a different future. In it, corporate social infrastructure is not separate from public employment policy. It is part of the same ecosystem. Companies do not simply report CSR activities. They produce verifiable employment outcomes. The line between private workforce development and public labour market policy becomes productively blurred.

This shift requires imagination before it requires legislation. Foresight can help produce that imagination. It can show what the labour market looks like when corporate capacity is systematically engaged. It can explore scenarios in which the talent retention gap, a gap that currently causes mobile families to leave member states within two years of arrival, closes because structured support existed. The Guardian Network is a foresight tool as much as it is a policy proposal.

## **5. EU-Level Coordination: What It Should and Should Not Do**

EU coordination adds value in this model, but not through central management. The Commission's role is enabling rather than mandating.

Three functions are worth highlighting. First, EU coordination can establish a cross-border learning platform. Implementation knowledge is valuable. One member state discovers that volunteer time reallocation works best when companies frame it as talent pipeline development. Another finds that training module adaptation requires several iterations before quality stabilises. A third learns that language flexibility in hiring increases placement rates significantly. These insights benefit all member states. A shared platform captures them, documents what works, and enables rapid iteration.

Second, EU coordination can align the framework with existing reporting requirements. The Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive requires large companies to report social impact. The Guardian Network provides a concrete mechanism for demonstrating employment outcomes. Guidance recognising employment placements through volunteer time reallocation as a valid social impact metric would create market incentive without mandate. Companies already investing in CSR want meaningful impact metrics. Guardian Networks deliver trackable outcomes.

Third, EU coordination can integrate the framework with EU talent partnerships. These partnerships recruit third-country nationals for sectors facing labour shortages. Arrivals include professionals with families. Guardian Networks provide spouse employment

pathways in destination countries. This strengthens retention, making talent partnerships more sustainable. Spouse employment becomes a standard component of talent partnership packages rather than an optional addition.

The framework also aligns directly with the European Pillar of Social Rights, specifically Principle 4 on active support to employment and Principle 5 on secure and adaptable employment. It complements the Skills Agenda for Europe by addressing skills mismatch through targeted bridging rather than broad training programmes.

## **6. Implementation Pathways**

Three pathways offer practical routes to scale.

### **Pathway One: ESF+ Integration**

The European Social Fund Plus could pilot Guardian Networks in five member states representing different labour market models: a Nordic country such as Sweden or Finland, a Continental country such as Germany or France, a Mediterranean country such as Spain or Italy, an Eastern European country such as Poland or Czechia, and a smaller advanced economy such as Ireland or Austria. ESF+ funding covers coordination costs, outcome tracking systems, and cross-border learning platforms. Companies provide volunteer time and training capacity at no public cost. After three years, the evidence base demonstrates whether the model produces employment outcomes across diverse contexts. Successful pilots then scale nationally without continued EU funding.

### **Pathway Two: Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive Link**

The CSRD requires large companies to report social impact. Early adopters of the Guardian Network gain competitive advantage in sustainability reporting. Others follow. The model spreads through demonstration rather than regulation, reaching companies that might not respond to a mandate but will respond to market incentive.

### **Pathway Three: Talent Partnership Integration**

Implementation here requires coordination between DG HOME, DG EMPL, and member state integration agencies. Companies participating in talent recruitment commit to Guardian Network implementation. Retention strengthens. The case for the model grows as data accumulates.

## **7. Challenges Worth Naming**

Three challenges require honest acknowledgement.

Labour market institutions vary significantly across member states. Codetermination arrangements in Germany give workers seats on corporate boards. French formation professionnelle is state-regulated. Nordic flexicurity combines flexible hiring with strong social protection. Mediterranean countries maintain insider-outsider labour market divisions. Eastern European countries show rapid structural change. Guardian Networks must adapt to these contexts. EU coordination should focus on principles and learning, not operational requirements. Too rigid, the framework fails. Too flexible, it loses coherence.

Language and credential barriers are real. Intra-EU mobility involves 24 official languages. A Polish spouse in Portugal needs Portuguese. A Greek spouse in Estonia needs Estonian. Guardian Networks can provide initial employment in roles requiring limited local language, with on-site learning support. But this works only in certain sectors. Credential verification, though simplified in principle, still involves delay in practice. The network cannot eliminate these barriers. It can support people navigating them.

Corporate participation incentives vary across Europe. Companies participate when they see clear benefit. CSR framework strength differs by country. Some companies treat social responsibility as strategic. Others treat it as compliance. Guardian Networks work best where companies already value social impact and face genuine recruitment challenges. Initial EU pilots should target these contexts. Success there builds the evidence base for broader adoption.

## **8. Conclusion**

Europe's employment paradox will not resolve itself. The supply-side interventions currently in place are necessary but not sufficient. Corporate capacity, already extensive and already partially directed towards social purposes, remains largely untapped as a policy instrument.

The Guardian Network proposes a reallocation, not a new invention. The volunteer time exists. The training infrastructure exists. The mentorship culture, in many companies, already exists. What is missing is a framework that redirects these assets systematically, measures their impact clearly, and allows the resulting knowledge to travel across borders.

This is fundamentally a question of imagination. The future in which corporate and public employment infrastructure operate as a coherent ecosystem is not distant. It is simply not yet the default. Foresight can help make it one. The Guardian Network is a proposal to begin that work at European scale.