



Let's level up:

Unlock the power of inclusivity and discover the potential of the disabled workforce.

Full Report



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Executive summary

Background

Currently, 55.9 per cent of working-age disabled people are not participating in the labour force.¹ At the same time, construction, engineering, infrastructure, logistics and manufacturing industries, which are core to Aotearoa New Zealand, are facing workforce shortages and an inability to meet future demand.² Disabled people, if properly understood, enabled and supported, can form a more meaningful part of the labour force, supporting industry to be more resilient and equipped for the future. However, for the potential of disabled people to be realised in this context, it is necessary to spark positive change at all levels, from quick wins to systemic shifts. This journey begins with understanding the voice and perspective of both disabled people and industry - and grappling with the current state so we can collectively head toward a more resilient and inclusive industry that works for everyone.

Hanga-Aro-Rau and Waihanga Ara Rau Workforce Development Councils commissioned research, resulting in this report, which provides key insights from disabled people working in the construction, engineering, infrastructure, logistics and manufacturing industries and from non-disabled industry leaders and employers. Our goal was to better understand the enablers of and the barriers preventing a disability-inclusive workforce for these industries. This report places equal focus on what is needed to achieve an affirming workforce for disabled people and what is required to support non-disabled people to champion this in their workplaces systemically.

Realising the potential of disabled people and, therefore, enabling this to strengthen industry in a meaningful way requires a collective commitment to confront bias and examine prejudices, which are often implicitly embedded in industry and are considered norms. By examining and changing our beliefs, we can move from exclusion to inclusion and from adversity to equity.

Research process and findings

The Northern B Health and Disability Ethics Committee approved this research. In total, 272 employers participated in the research, either as survey respondents, interview participants, or focus group

¹ (Statistics New Zealand, 2023).

² (Deloitte, 2022).

participants. This reflects industry enthusiasm for engaging in this kōrero, which should be celebrated and provides an optimistic foundation for change.

Additionally, the research findings indicate that employers have an awareness of disability as present in their workplace, with 44 per cent of industry respondents saying they have worked with disabled people. Conversely, 51 per cent of respondents reported that they had never had a conversation about disability or considered hiring more disabled people in their workplace. The absence of knowledge and confidence is a barrier, preventing disability workforce inclusion. Nearly half of industry employers surveyed indicated they wanted greater knowledge about disability. Ultimately, a desire for learning exists among industry. This desire, however, needs to be supported to transition into ongoing conversation, knowledge access and sharing to enable change and increased employment. This report seeks to begin scaffolding a path to support this change.

Employers also expressed persistent concerns about health and safety, which prevented the employment or inclusion of disabled people in the workplace. More than half of surveyed employers cited increased health and safety risks as a barrier to the inclusion of disabled people. Many employers also believed that their industry lacked suitable roles for disabled people, which also inhibited inclusion. The disabled people this research engaged with, and who had successfully managed health and safety demands in their sector, reflected that concerns around health and safety, and a lack of suitability, might be largely perceived rather than actual risks. When a better understanding of disability is built across the industries, these perceptions will likely begin to shift.

There were some bright spots across industry where efforts were being made to increase disability inclusion, but the passion and goodwill of an individual was relied on to enable this. Ultimately, this reinforces that disability employment is often considered a charitable endeavour, not an expected workforce feature; and this was a barrier to the meaningful inclusion of disabled people. There is a big opportunity to change this. We should help people in industry to believe in the holistic potential of disabled people. This is the groundwork required to enable sustainable and meaningful workforce inclusion.

Many disabled research participants working in industry had non-traditional employment pathways. Job-placement support, family connections or the advocacy of one person in their workplace enabled people to gain employment. Traditional employment processes often overlooked disabled people,

preventing their inclusion. Some participants had their credentials and had applied for several jobs, but had not been successful. Employment processes continue to be built without consideration for disabled people, and employers are affected by ingrained beliefs about disability. Together, these impinge upon disabled people's ability to contribute. The experience of disabled people was compounded by the enduring impact of racism, sexism and other legacy behaviours in industry.³ Māori, Pacific people and some women we spoke to were less likely to benefit from the family connections, advocacy or support that enabled others' workplace success. These legacy practices or beliefs need to be challenged and eradicated entirely.

In regional Aotearoa New Zealand, disabled people were more likely to benefit from their capabilities being known in their community and obtaining employment on this basis. In urban areas, disabled people's inclusion was prevented, because they were not always afforded the assumption of ability. Consideration should be given to how regionally allocated resources can provide momentum to enable disability inclusion since bright spots exist already.

Another key finding for disabled people was the importance of a diagnosis. A diagnosis had transformative power for disabled people working in industry, and was a critical tool for equipping individuals to understand themselves in the workplace or ask for help and support. Pathways to diagnosis need to be further enabled and accessibility needs to be embedded into standard industry practices for a more inclusive future.

Lastly, and most critically, many disabled people did not want to disclose their disability to their employer or had struggled to do so for fear of their job being lost or their pathway limited. Conversely, at times, employers desired more disclosure, and some felt they had a right to know about impairments. Undoubtedly, widespread disclosure of disability will support increased workforce inclusion, but a safe industry is required to enable this. Responsibility for creating a safe, disability-responsive space where people can share their access requirements, disabilities or concerns should be shared across industry, decision-makers, the disability community and government. The weight of disclosure and creating change should not rest solely on disabled people's shoulders. Stakeholders need to come together, to make a plan about how this load is best shared.

³ (Trade Careers, n.d).



Opportunities for consideration from the research

These can be taken up by various stakeholders across Aotearoa New Zealand to help make positive change.

Understanding the opportunities

The opportunities are divided into categories for employers, agencies working across disability employment and with workforce responsibilities, educators, government and policy makers. These opportunities are a collective responsibility, for different communities, organisations or businesses to take up. The opportunities take a whole-of-system approach to consider how changes made in workplaces, employment strategy, education, and the way policy is implemented and/or monitored will together make industry accessible, and inclusive, for disabled people. These opportunities, if comprehensively actioned, will benefit Aotearoa New Zealand economically, and increase the productivity, resilience and capacity of the industries studied. The opportunities span a spectrum—from more easily achievable steps to bold, systemic shifts. To create real impact, we must embrace change across all levels—small wins and game-changing movements alike.

Nothing about us without us

A “nothing about us without us”⁴ approach was taken in the design of these opportunities. This is particularly important given disabled people are part of every community in Aotearoa New Zealand, which means that the opportunities must reflect our obligations to Māori, and recognise the different roles disability plays in people’s lives and communities.

The structure of the opportunities

The opportunities are structured as the identified enablers discovered in the research, the potential opportunities the enablers represent, a set of actions to harness these opportunities, which lead ultimately to the outcomes should those actions be completed. In other words, the opportunity is what can be changed, or work to be done; the outcome is the impact of that action and how it supports the inclusion of disabled people in the workforce.

These opportunities should be considered by stakeholders alongside already existing and documented priorities for other communities.

⁴ (Khedr & Etmanski, 2021).

Opportunities for employers

Enabler:

Employers told us that they wished to attract and retain more talent. They want to understand what practical actions they can implement in their workplaces to understand and support disabled workers.

Opportunity:

Employers are provided with, and can access and apply the industry-specific knowledge, skills and tools they need to create an affirming environment for disabled people in their workplaces. Existing tools, like those on the [Whaikaha – Ministry of Disabled People’s website](#), provide a starting knowledge base.⁵

Action 1:

Identify the tools currently available to employers to inspire greater accessibility and determine if they are fit-for-purpose. Implement these into workplaces; existing industry bodies⁶ could be supported to do this. It may be that support for the development of specific resources to serve particular industry need/s is required. Tools that can be implemented immediately include flexible working and/or the use of appropriate assistive technologies such as text-to-speech.

Action 2:

An immediate action employers can take in their people and culture processes is to ask all employees and potential employees: “what support do you need to do your job?” This will help people begin the broader journey, to recognise implicit bias within recruitment, and demonstrate a willingness to engage in a conversation about what employees need to succeed. This will benefit both employers and employees. Similarly, asking how all people can be better enabled in the workplace, and creating space for a kōrero (conversation) about accessibility, would be beneficial for employers and employees. The tools mentioned in Action 1 can support this.

⁵ Other existing tools are viewable here: <https://www.workandincome.govt.nz/employers/help-with-recruitment/hire-someone-with-a-disability-or-health-condition.html>

⁶ In the research we found that industry bodies were a strong source of advocacy, but they would need to be resourced and supported to do this work.

Action 3:

Uplift knowledge and capacity about disability across whole organisations, and do this as a regular workplace function. The research gave some ideas for how this could look. For example, a worksite learning basic Sign Language, both as an effort to incorporate New Zealand Sign Language, and to help foster communication on noisy worksites, or a programme to identify industry role models with disabilities who can support others. Each business unit of a workplace could take up practices that meaningfully build their understanding of disability. Developing a common vision about why this is important is a critical first step.⁷

Outcome:

Employers have the tools and some actionable, relevant and tangible ways to ensure their workplaces are disability inclusive. Employees are provided the support/s they need to do their job well. This means that employees' ability to succeed is not necessarily dependent on the disclosure of their impairment, but rather through the purposeful development of an inclusive organisational culture, with the meaningful participation of disabled people.

Cross sector opportunities

Enabler:

Employers want help to access, navigate and apply available tools and support for attracting, retaining and better supporting disabled people in their workplaces.

Opportunity:

As part of their role in learner achievement and workforce development strategies, Hanga-Aro-Rau and Waihangā Ara Rau can use their functions to support employers to train, attract and retain a pipeline of talent.

⁷ Hanga-Aro-Rau and Waihangā Ara Rau are developing Disability Action Plans that will provide resources and tactical support to uplift knowledge.

Action 1:

Work with job placement organisations, employment agencies, disability support agencies and industry associations to establish workplace guidance materials. These would have an embedded review mechanism, allowing for employee feedback once implemented by workplaces, so the impact of the guidance materials on employer and employee behaviour and confidence is measured and can be adapted accordingly.

Action 2:

Create an ongoing and multi-jurisdictional awareness campaign that shines a spotlight on best practice examples of disability inclusion across industry. Use these to inspire others to make changes within their own organisations.

Action 3:

Work with support agencies and employers to establish post-job placement support for employers and their disabled employees so that disabled workers are retained and can advance/thrive in the workplace.

Action 4:

Promote understanding among educators of specific criteria for standards setting, programme endorsement, and assessment moderation, ensuring that accessible learning practices, like the use of reader-writers, are considered and effectively monitored.

Outcome:

Employers across industry develop and are supported to implement evidence-based, fit-for-purpose approaches⁸ to workforce disability inclusion. More disabled people are supported to enter and remain in the industries, becoming a larger and more visible part of their workforces.

⁸ Approaches need to be fit for diverse business size and operating models.

Opportunities in education

Enabler:

Learners who are holistically supported in education, and throughout their transition to work, have greater employment success than those navigating alone.

Opportunity:

Learners who are provided with accessible and equitable curricula, teaching and assessment practices experience fewer barriers to qualification achievement, and greater employability.

Action 1:

Establish programme quality assessment and education provider self-assessment practices that ensure that disabled learners' educational outcomes are monitored in work-based, online and on-campus learning environments. Ensure sufficient flexibility within these practices and assessments, so that providers are able to respond appropriately to different impairment types and cultural identities.

Action 2:

Identify and/or develop an industry tailored disability confidence education programme to build employer and employee skills, and contribute to more accessible workplaces.

Outcome:

All learners are supported in a way that best meets their needs, resulting in improved learner achievement.

Opportunities for government and policy makers

Enabler:

Current policy settings are long-standing and do not always meet the needs of disabled people or employers. Disability employment policies should be reviewed to better enable and support disabled people in industry and respond to research/community insights.

Opportunity:

Shift from supporting individual disabled people to enabling collective employer responsibility for disability employment by tying support funding to workplaces. Shifting the responsibility for disabled people's employment strategy and policymaking so that it is co-located with the employment strategies for other groups will support a shift in culture away from disabled people's employment as welfare and based on individualism. This will benefit the overall economy and strengthen disabled people's ability to see what is possible for their future.

Action 1:

Transition responsibility for disability employment strategy from the Ministry of Social Development (MSD) to the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE), creating a strategy and infrastructure for disabled people's employment that is not entangled with welfare connotations.

Action 2:

Consider additional ways to incentivise and fund employers to attract and retain disabled people in their workplaces.⁹ Incentives should not lessen the value of disabled people's contribution (i.e. via wage subsidies or the minimum wage exemption). A range of incentives should be considered to encourage greater flexibility in what is funded and how, and to target employer sustainability goals for their workforce. An example of this might be through the existing apprenticeship boost, or some kind of tax incentive.

Action 3:

Include incentivising ongoing, comprehensive employer disability confidence education as part of the employment strategy, alongside an awareness programme. This could involve attaching the requirement to complete the training as part of employer eligibility to receive funding incentives.

⁹ A range of supports are [available](#). The research reflected a need for these to be strengthened, diversified and industry-specific.

Action 4:

Create a body of evidence using data about disabled people's education (including the types of support they receive) and their transition into work in order to make decisions about what support enables successful outcomes, and in turn what support is funded.

Action 5:

Given the potential of people with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome Disorder (FASD) to contribute to industry,¹⁰ and FASD being a large part of communities in Aotearoa New Zealand,¹¹ FASD should be funded to give people access to workplace and other foundational support. The current funding status of FASD under the Disability Support Services system should therefore be reviewed and appropriate workforce support for all those with FASD should be developed, aligned with international examples of good practice.¹²

Action 6:

Given that transport to and from work or training is often required, consider how to provide more accessible and affordable transport options for disabled people engaging with industry, pair this with other wrap-around support services so that barriers to meaningful work are reduced and more disabled people can participate in industry training or employment.

Action 7:

Consider how to better leverage and support industries' disability inclusion efforts in regional / rural Aotearoa New Zealand, and within sector representative groups.

Outcome:

Overall economy is strengthened through the ability of employers to train, attract and retain more disabled people, and for disabled people to better access and sustain employment with appropriate levels of support.

¹⁰ (Makela, Kapasi, Pei & McFarlane, 2018).

¹¹ For example see [1 in 10 Far North children could be affected by fetal alcohol spectrum disorder \(Dinsdale, 2024\)](#).

¹² Currently, people with FASD are specifically excluded from accessing DSS unless they have an intellectual disability ([i.e. a diagnosed IQ of less than 70](#)) (Hunter, 2024b).



Introduction

In 2001, the then Labour Government produced **Pathways to Opportunity, from Social Welfare to Social Development**, a report in which they stated:

This Government intends to build the skills and talents of all New Zealanders to provide them with a pathway to opportunity so they can find meaningful work for real wages.¹³

More than two decades later, the position of the National Party, which is part of the current coalition government, is that “for those who are able to work, employment is the best way out of hardship. It provides individuals and families with greater independence, choice, and opportunity.”¹⁴

The kōrero amongst Aotearoa New Zealand’s political leadership over at least the last two decades¹⁵ has reinforced the core need for the workforce to welcome all New Zealanders. Focus has also been placed on workforce participation as a central component of increasing opportunity and equalising long-term outcomes for different groups. However, despite these commitments, little has changed for disabled people in employment. In fact, over the last two decades, the proportion of disabled people participating in the workforce has decreased.

In 2001, 57 per cent of disabled people aged 15-64 were employed, compared to 71 per cent of non-disabled people, a 14-point gap. Additionally, 36 per cent of disabled people were not in the labour force, compared to 18 per cent of non-disabled people, an 18 percentage point gap.¹⁶

As of June 2023, 45 per cent of working-age disabled people in New Zealand are employed, compared to 72 per cent of non-disabled people, creating a 27-percentage-point gap.¹⁷ In addition, 55.9 per cent

¹³ (Ministry of Social Development, 2001).

¹⁴ (National, 2024).

¹⁵ For example: The Access Programme, 1987 (Gordon, 1989); Jobs Jolt, 2003 (New Zealand Government, 2003); Trade Academies, 2011 (Education Review Office, 2015); Mana in Mahi, 2022 (Stuff, 2022).

¹⁶ (Ministry of Health, 2004).

¹⁷ (Statistics New Zealand, 2023).

of working-age disabled people are not in the labour force versus 15.3 per cent of non-disabled people, resulting in a 40.6 percentage point difference.¹⁸

While this gap persists and even grows, some of the country's most significant industries are in need of workers. The Manufacturing, Engineering, Logistics,¹⁹ Construction and Infrastructure²⁰ industries (hereafter the Industries) make a combined contribution of 132,747 billion dollars yearly to Aotearoa New Zealand's GDP.²¹ These industries are also in need of immediate support to meet workforce demand. For example, a 2022 report by Deloitte²² estimated that up to 17,000 manufacturing and 12,000 engineering roles in that year were vacant and needed to be filled in order to meet sector demands.

At the inaugural New Zealand Infrastructure and Construction conference in 2023, Ross Copland, Chief Executive of the New Zealand Infrastructure Commission, commented that Aotearoa New Zealand will have a projected shortfall of 118,500 construction workers in 2024,²³ putting significant strain onto the industry's ability to deliver. This is particularly acute in the context of ongoing rebuilding from natural disasters like Cyclone Gabrielle.²⁴ Further, with more than \$68 billion forecast to be spent on infrastructure projects over the next five years, this will require a sufficient workforce.²⁵ Achieving set targets and being responsive to needs as they arise will require more skilled workers.²⁶

More than 55.9 per cent of disabled people are not currently participating in the labour market.²⁷ There is significant potential to meet some of these projected workforce needs by supporting disabled people into long-term, fulfilling work in the Industries. However, we must commit to doing things differently in order to properly leverage this opportunity.

¹⁸ (Statistics New Zealand, 2023).

¹⁹ Industries that are represented by Hanga-Aro-Rau Workforce Development Council.

²⁰ Industries that are represented by Waihanga Ara Rau Workforce Development Council.

²¹ Combined contribution calculated from figures listed on the two Workforce Development Councils' websites – 80 billion (Hanga-Aro-Rau, 2024) and 52,747 billion (Waihanga Ara Rau, 2024).

²² (Deloitte, 2022).

²³ (MinterEllisonRuddWatts, 2023).

²⁴ (The Treasury, 2024).

²⁵ (The Treasury, 2024).

²⁶ (MinterEllisonRuddWatts, 2023).

²⁷ (Statistics New Zealand, 2023).

This report sets out a starting point for achieving the shift by speaking with employers, industry leaders and disabled people across the Industries to help us understand barriers and enablers of disabled people's participation, as well as employers' awareness and experiences of disability in their workforces.

This research aims to provide Hanga-Aro-Rau and Waihanga Ara Rau with the evidence required to support actions that will increase accessibility and disability inclusion in their own organisations and across the Industries. Increased pathways into the industries, and advancement within them, will be stronger, and the Industries more resilient and better able to achieve their ambitions in the long term.

Reading this report

This report is part of a series of outputs commissioned by Hanga-Aro-Rau and Waihanga Ara Rau. This report contains an extended analysis of themes and contextual discussions. The other outputs include:

- Employer and disabled person personas to support an understanding of the range of perspectives in the research.²⁸
- A short report with key insights, core analysis, discussion, and opportunities for how these can influence the sector.²⁹
- An industry pull-out of key information.³⁰

Hanga-Aro-Rau also produced a literature review³¹ which looked at national and international literature on the barriers to and enablers of employment for disabled people in workplaces in general, and where available, in Hanga-Aro-Rau and Waihanga Ara Rau industries specifically. Each of these documents can be read separately or together. Read together, they provide a comprehensive picture of disability awareness, experiences, workplace barriers and enablers as they relate to the Industries.

²⁸ Personas have been incorporated into each of the reports.

²⁹ (All is for All, 2024a).

³⁰ (All is for All, 2024b).

³¹ (Meares, 2024).

Background and context

Disability

Being under-represented in the labour market and facing adversity to obtain and sustain employment is just one dimension of the marginalisation disabled people experience across their lives, as represented by these statistics:

- 19.4 per cent of Pacific Disabled People and 17.9 per cent of Māori Disabled People live in rented homes that are damp.³²
- Disabled people are four times more likely than non-disabled people to report feeling lonely some or all of the time.³³
- Non-disabled people earn \$255.00 more a week³⁴ than their disabled peers. Across a year, this is a \$13,260.00 gap.³⁵
- 34 per cent of disabled women have no educational qualification, compared with 15 percent of non-disabled women.³⁶

While these statistics paint a picture of multiple points of marginalisation, it is also important to understand who is disabled and how societies respond to disability to get a sense of how disability is experienced within the Industries.

Who is disabled?

Aotearoa New Zealand ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2008.³⁷ The UNCRPD is a piece of international law that sets out what is required to realise the fundamental rights of disabled people and defines this community as follows:

³² (Statistics New Zealand, 2020).

³³ (Satherley, 2021).

³⁴ (Statistics, 2023).

³⁵ \$255.00 per week multiplied by 52 weeks.

³⁶ (Office for Disability Issues, 2023).

³⁷ (Office of the Ombudsman, 2019).

“Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which, in interaction with various barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.”³⁸

It is this international definition that guides our understanding of what constitutes disability. However, specific terminology and preferences have evolved since the drafting of the UNCRPD.³⁹ For this research, disability has been interpreted with the guidance of the UNCRPD to include:

- **Physical disabilities:** impairments impacting mobility or physical function, which may result in the use of mobility aids like prosthetic limbs, walkers, or wheelchairs.
- **Neurodivergence:** includes people who process information differently to what is expected or considered to be “typical”. This may result in “sensory, intellectual or mental” impairments under the UNCRPD. Neurodivergent is a strength-based term, which recognises differences in processing as variations, not deficits. Dyslexia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism spectrum disorder (ASD), dyspraxia, and fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) are neurodivergent experiences.⁴⁰
- **Learning or intellectual disabilities:** includes people who have a lifelong cognitive impairment that impacts on their ability to learn and process new information and skills, and they may need support with daily living.
- **Acquired or traumatic brain injury:** includes people whose brain injury is due to either a medical condition or illness (acquired brain injury), or trauma from an accident or incident that has impacted their processing or cognitive function.
- **Chronic health conditions / invisible disabilities:** includes people experiencing long-term chronic health conditions or long-term ill health. Chronic health conditions may be dynamic, so not consistently disabling. Often, chronic health conditions are invisible. Endometriosis, Cystic Fibrosis or Cancer are examples of these disabilities. Chronic health conditions / invisible disabilities may have physical, intellectual, cognitive or sensory dimensions.

³⁸ (Benchmark, 2018).

³⁹ (Baumer & Frueh 2021; Sharif, McCall & Bolante, 2022).

⁴⁰ (Harding, Pei & Richardson, 2023).

- **Deaf people, people who are Hard of Hearing (HoH), or people who experience hearing loss:** This group includes people who identify as part of the Deaf community, including its culture and language, and those who experience functional hearing loss or have difficulty hearing.
- **Blind People, those who have low vision and DeafBlind people:** includes people with complete or near-complete lack of vision, those with significant visual impairment that cannot be fully corrected, and the dual sensory impairment of both significant vision and hearing loss.
- **Psychosocial disability and / or mental distress:** includes people who experience ongoing impacts of a mental health condition and / or short term or episodic mental distress.

The UNCRPD considers disabilities as being long-term. In Aotearoa, some Crown entities define this as six months or longer.⁴¹ Long-term does not mean that disability is always permanent as disabilities can be episodic or dynamic.

Responses to disability

Variations of ability do not, in and of themselves, have a meaning or social significance; meaning is something societies make.⁴² Over time, social and cultural meanings and connotations have become attached to differences, including disability.⁴³ These meanings impact the way we think about and consider communities. It is important to identify these as they are visible in the findings of this research and continue to impact disabled people today. The models outlined below embody the meanings society has attached to disability over time.

The medical model

The **medical model** views disability as an impairment, abnormality, or dysfunction that is attributed to an individual person.⁴⁴ The **medical model** implies that disabled people are lesser, and considers disability a fault within a person's own anatomy which is best fixed or changed.⁴⁵ Under this model, the struggle a disabled person experiences is caused by the individual themselves - their difference is a deficit. In part, the **medical model** is about protecting the concept of normalcy by fixing, classifying or

⁴¹ For example, the Ministry of Social Development makes [eligibility for some of its supports](#) on the basis of a disability being likely to last six months or longer (Ministry of Social Development, n.d.a).

⁴² (Hulgin, O'Connor, Fitch & Gutsell, 2014).

⁴³ (Bogdan & Taylor, 1994).

⁴⁴ (Francis, 2018).

⁴⁵ (Areheart, 2008).

containing disabled people who are considered 'abnormal'.⁴⁶ The **medical model** is still heavily favoured in many communities and is the most common framework for thinking about disability.

The charity model

The **charity model** considers disability a tragedy or misfortune that must be erased by the 'goodwill' of non-disabled people.⁴⁷ While it is largely driven by compassion and the desire to help disabled people, this way of thinking removes autonomy from disabled people and reinforces the connection between disability and helplessness.⁴⁸

The social model

The **social model of disability** centres around the removal of barriers that disabled people experience in the world, so they can flourish while living with their impairments.⁴⁹ Instead of perceiving disability as an inherent deficit, the **social model** looks at disability as a social creation, arising from a failure by society to consider and respond to variations in function.⁵⁰ By removing barriers in spaces, mindsets, programmes, and places, society enables disabled people to lead full and meaningful lives. Instead of seeking to fix or change the individual, the **social model** asserts that it is our collective responsibility to collapse the disabling barriers present in society.⁵¹

The social-relational model

The **social-relational model** is based on the idea that disability is something imposed on top of impairment due to ideological, social and environmental circumstances.⁵² In this model, the role that society plays in perpetuating inaccessibility and creating a disabling culture is acknowledged alongside the fact that living with an impairment often comes with internal challenges. A third party cannot solve the latter, so it is not just about changing the environment.⁵³

⁴⁶ (Kingi & Bennion Law, 2023).

⁴⁷ (Francis, 2018).

⁴⁸ (Retief & Letšosa, 2018).

⁴⁹ The social model of disability lacks cultural based analysis, we note this as a limitation of the model.

⁵⁰ (Francis 2018).

⁵¹ (Retief & Letšosa, 2018).

⁵² (Francis, 2018).

⁵³ (Thomas, 1999; 2001).

The rights-based model

The **rights-based model** holds that fulfilling basic human needs, like access to employment, is a right rather than an act of charity.⁵⁴ The **rights-based model** focuses on empowerment, and particularly on ensuring the participation of disabled people as active stakeholders. This model also calls for accountability, referring to the duty of people in positions of power to uphold the rights of disabled people at all times while continuing to assess the quality of the implementation of those rights.⁵⁵

Summary of the models

Through these models, we can see that disability, both what it means and how it is used as a tool to organise society, are socially constructed ideas. Variations in the way that the body or mind function do not inevitably result in exclusion from the workforce or difficulty participating in the labour force. Disability results in exclusion or difficulty because of the actions and perceptions of people in society that enable and normalise this outcome.

Recognising compounding marginalisation

Disability is a dimension of every community in Aotearoa New Zealand, and it compounds the existing marginalisation of many communities. For example:

- Sixty per cent of Disabled Rainbow rangatahi reported having serious thoughts of suicide.⁵⁶ Twenty-one per cent of disabled learners from the Rainbow community reported feeling unsafe or very unsafe at school, compared with 11 per cent of non-disabled learners.⁵⁷
- Disabled Māori adults often have lower incomes than other Māori, with over two-thirds of disabled Māori having personal annual incomes of \$30,000 or less, and a quarter saying their household income doesn't meet their daily needs.⁵⁸
- A gender pay gap persists among disabled communities, where 71 per cent of disabled women received an annual income of \$30,000 or less compared with 55 per cent of disabled men.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ (Disability Advocacy Resource Unit, 2019; Rice, 2021).

⁵⁵ (Francis, 2018).

⁵⁶ (Fleming et al., 2020).

⁵⁷ (Fenaughty et al., 2022).

⁵⁸ (Statistics New Zealand, 2015).

⁵⁹ (Statistics New Zealand, 2014).

These statistical realities are not presented to create levels of suffering out of disabled people's experiences. Instead, they are used to support the understanding that not all disabled people are on the margins of society in the same way. Segments of the community are 'multi-burdened'⁶⁰ by oppressions that have varying impacts, and therefore are further pushed to the margins in comparison with others. Thus, disability inclusion and equity for all disabled people in the workforce is achieved through an approach that highlights how systems of oppression intersect. This approach considers the whole person, including their collective, whānau and context. Recognising how and when multiple and combined marginalisations impact disabled communities is critical to move everyone equitably from the margin towards the centre.⁶¹

For many years, the conversation about disability inclusion in the workforce has been on a 'single-axis,' focusing on impairment only.⁶² The disability sector and society at large have been slow to acknowledge and respond to the compounded barriers that many disabled communities endure.⁶³ This approach advances certain disabled people more than others by advocating for disability workforce inclusion while leaving other systems of oppression intact. This is illustrated in the quote below, which articulates how Māori have been made to struggle within a disability environment that has challenged disability exclusion, while still advancing Western ideas⁶⁴ and maintaining the notion of Whiteness.⁶⁵

“When we look at [disability] policies and services, they're very much based on the individual. And there's been a lot of talk over the last decade or so where there's an inclusion of family, but they're almost an add-on. The concept of collectivism hasn't yet embedded itself in [disability] policies or services. So we see this very separate way of identifying people with disabilities, which isn't part of Te Ao Māori. There was no [disability] separate identity as such. It wasn't that individualism that is very paramount within European cultures, and that's where we start to see a lot of conflict. Independence is a strong concept within all of our Disability Services, which is again counter to interdependence, which is the basis of tribal life. So as a Māori community, we're struggling with trying to be Māori within a disability environment.”⁶⁶

⁶⁰ (Crenshaw, 1989).

⁶¹ (Fleming et al., 2020; Wickenden, 2023).

⁶² (Crenshaw, 1989).

⁶³ (Ingham et al., 2022; Nine to Noon, 2023;)

⁶⁴ (Kingi & Bennion Law, 2023).

⁶⁵ (Garner, 2007).

⁶⁶ (Nine to Noon, 2023).

Relatedly, equitable disability inclusion in employment requires acknowledging and dismantling all systems of oppression affecting disabled people.⁶⁷ This begins with recognising and responding to disabled people in the entirety of their lived experience, not just on the basis of impairment.

Proximity to 'normal'

Supporting equitable disability inclusion in the workforce by responding to disabled people on the basis of their entire lived experience can be enhanced by an understanding of ableism and disablism. Ableism is a belief system that values certain bodies or minds, and devalues others according to what is considered 'normal' or acceptable.⁶⁸ In this sense, ableism describes the set of characteristics that society implicitly accepts.

Consider: the number of women CEOs

The S&P 500 is a stock market index that tracks the performance of 500 of the largest publicly traded companies in the United States. Up until 2018, the S&P 500 included more men with the same name than women. In 2019, the number of women CEOs was tied with the number of male CEOs named "James." It wasn't until 2022 that women really outnumbered men with the same name, after ten new women joined the S&P, including Jennifer Rumsey, CEO of truck-engine maker Cummins.⁶⁹ While this suggests change towards a more equal gender representation, it does not elevate all women. In 2023, the S&P 500 lost its sole Black woman CEO.⁷⁰

This example embodies ableism because it reflects the way that society values specific characteristics. The outnumbering of men to women in the S&P 500 exemplifies how systems are set up to enable the 'male' over the 'female'.⁷¹ The absence of Black women shows how systems are set up to disadvantage women of colour. It shows how the status quo, the norms of how systems work, bring with them privileges for certain groups.⁷² To marginalise or underserve some, we have to favour others.

⁶⁷ (Bixby, 2024).

⁶⁸ (Mirfin-Veitch et al., 2022).

⁶⁹ (Boyle & Green, 2023).

⁷⁰ (Green, Konotey-Ahulu & Abbey, 2023).

⁷¹ (Wolbring, 2012).

⁷² (Salvatore & Wolbring, 2021).

Ableism drives the underpinning value system, which results in favouring the Pākehā ethnicity, the cisgender,⁷³ the non-disabled person, the person who can work a 40-hour work week, and the person who is not poor because our society promotes the value and normalcy of these constructs and ideas, over others.⁷⁴ Ultimately, ableism informs what we believe to be 'normal.' People who embody these favoured characteristics encounter less friction and are more likely to be accepted, valued, or succeed within certain environments, including in the workforce.⁷⁵

Anyone who exists outside of the characteristics that ableism deems normal has a more difficult experience in the workforce, and in society in general, because they are not operating within a structure that recognises and rewards their inherent value. Instead, they are forced to negotiate a system designed for only parts of who they are, or at times, not designed for them at all.

Consider: the experience of different women

A White woman with affluence has a proximity to normalcy because of her economic and ethnic position. This means she faces fewer compounding marginalisations and is more likely to be accepted in facets of society that traditionally favour men. A non-White woman from a working-class family does not have the benefit of this same proximity. Her ethnicity and economic position are not valued under ableism. Therefore, she is less likely to be accepted in parts of society that traditionally favour men - because those parts also value wealth and Pākehā ethnicity. Marginalisation is not binary but is multi-faceted and the closer your proximity to 'normal', the more chance you have of acceptance within societal structures and systems.⁷⁶

Challenging ableism enables us to consider how we value certain characteristics over others. It therefore inspires inclusion, because it helps to illuminate that normality is a construct, not an inevitability.⁷⁷

The exclusion of disabled people from the workforce, and indeed from any other part of life, is not inevitable; it is perpetuated through the systems, structures and policies we build. We can build

⁷³ People whose gender identity matches the sex they were assigned at birth.

⁷⁴ (Wolbring, 2008).

⁷⁵ (Shue, 2021).

⁷⁶ (Matthews, 2018).

⁷⁷ (Mirfin-Veitch et al., 2022).

systems, structures and policies that account for people's impairments, but we most often choose not to do that because we are socialised by ableism to consider non-disabled people more valuable.

Impacts of institutionalisation and deinstitutionalisation

The employment of disabled people in industry needs to be appropriately contextualised within Aotearoa New Zealand's policy shifts over the last 50 years. For many decades, enabled by legislation, disabled people in Aotearoa New Zealand were institutionalised.⁷⁸ Institutions categorised and separated disabled people and children from the rest of society. This was due in part to the belief that disabled people were 'defective' and that the rest of the population needed to be protected from them. Institutions existed to 'care and train' disabled people, and to "meet the basic demands of life, shelter people with an intellectual disability from the demands of society and relieve society, particularly families, from the burden of dealing with people with an intellectual disability."⁷⁹

Within institutions, thousands of disabled people were hidden from Aotearoa New Zealand society, and Māori and Pacific Disabled People were not given the opportunity to know their whānau or culture.⁸⁰ Within some institutions, disabled people worked. For example, Levin Hospital and Training School had a cardboard box factory where disabled people worked; it supplied several local firms.⁸¹ Such work was said to be part of what supported the school to be 'somewhat self-sustaining.'⁸² Disabled people were not paid for this work. Unpaid labour, often in what would now be considered logistics or manufacturing, was a common feature of institutional life. Previously published research includes descriptions of the lives of the disabled people who undertook this labour. For example, "they make you a slave. When I was about 6 years old, I had to help. I never went to school. They wanted me for the work because I was so good at it... You didn't get any money, that's for sure. We didn't get any money."⁸³

⁷⁸ (Abuse in Care - Royal Commission of Inquiry, 2024).

⁷⁹ (Thomson, 1995 cited in Stewart & Mirfin-Veitch, 2008, p.2).

⁸⁰ (Faiva, 2022; Whānau Hauā & Bennion Law, 2022).

⁸¹ (Sullivan, 2018).

⁸² (Sullivan, 2018).

⁸³ (Sobsey, 1994, cited in Mirfin-Veitch & Conder, 2017, p.35).

Disabled people's work in institutions was not valued and was taken for granted.⁸⁴ When deinstitutionalisation occurred, there was little systemic support⁸⁵ in place for disabled people to integrate into the community, let alone to enter the workforce.⁸⁶ Furthermore, deinstitutionalisation 'introduced' many New Zealanders to the disabled people who were living among them. A family member of a deinstitutionalised person described it this way: "Thinking about how [before deinstitutionalisation] it was odd to see a person who was obviously IHC [Intellectually Handicapped] walking up town and I don't know – I mean I see people around town all the time and nobody seems to bat an eyelid that there is an IHC person walking by."⁸⁷

The history of institutionalisation and the transition to community care is an important grounding context of this report. The shadow of this time in history endures still, and impacts the way disabled people, particularly those with learning disabilities, are treated at work and in society.⁸⁸ Institutionalisation helped to normalise the devaluing of disabled people's labour, and supported the expectation that work done by members of disability communities could be un- or under-paid.

Today, contemporary policy is somewhat shifting towards greater choice and control for disabled people.⁸⁹ However, disabled people are still stigmatised and persistently disadvantaged,⁹⁰ for example, an earnings gap continues to exist between disabled and non-disabled people.⁹¹ ⁹² Contemporary legislation (i.e. wage exemptions) also enables some disabled people, often those with learning disabilities, to be remunerated differently. Under this legislation, disabled people are paid around \$7-10 an hour⁹³ for work such as packing in-flight amenity packs.⁹⁴ Lower remuneration rates are used in part because disabled people are deemed less 'productive'.⁹⁵

⁸⁴ (Mirfin-Veitch & Conder, 2017).

⁸⁵ Systemic describes what relates to or affects an entire system, systemic support is support that reaches the entire organisation.

⁸⁶ (Stewart & Mirfin-Veitch, 2008).

⁸⁷ (Stewart & Mirfin-Veitch, 2008, p.51).

⁸⁸ (Black, 2024; Fremlin, 2022; McRae, 2014).

⁸⁹ (Wevers, Spice & Edridge, 2024).

⁹⁰ (New Zealand Productivity Commission 2023; Whaikaha Ministry of Disabled People, 2023b).

⁹¹ (Statistics New Zealand, 2022; Whaikaha Ministry of Disabled People, 2023a).

⁹² Gaps among disabled women and disabled men also endure as do gaps among ethnicities.

⁹³ "There are around 900 people nationwide who are affected by this exemption, 70% of whom are paid less than \$5 per hour (Park, 2024).

⁹⁴ (Bremner, 2024).

⁹⁵ (Park, 2024).

While disabled people may have physically moved out of large-scale institutions and asserted their ambition for choice, control, and inclusion, the belief systems intrinsic to institutionalisation remain.⁹⁶ These attitudes, beliefs and presumptions continue to inform the employment opportunities and corresponding remuneration rates paid to disabled people, as well as perceptions of the value of the community's work.

Section summary

To place this report and its research findings in the full and appropriate context, this section has outlined:

- Who the disabled community is;
- The key models used when thinking about disability;
- The nature of compounding marginalisation and how it impacts disabled people;
- The need to challenge normalcy and ableism to achieve disability inclusion for all; and
- The legacy of institutionalisation.

⁹⁶ (Black, 2024).

Research purpose and questions

This research aimed to collect, analyse, and interpret insights from employers and disabled communities that can support growth in understanding and knowledge. The research had the specific aim of generating evidence to inform the development of a set of actions that could guide the work of Hanga-Aro-Rau and Waihanga Ara Rau, and provide a platform for disabled people and the Industries to drive disability workforce inclusion together.

The research questions that underpinned this research were:

- What are the barriers to and enablers of sustainable, fulfilling work for disabled people, Tāngata Whaikaha Māori and Pacific Disabled People in Hanga-Aro-Rau and Waihanga Ara Rau industries?
- What are employers' and business associations' awareness and experiences of employing disabled people, Tāngata Whaikaha Māori and Pacific Disabled People in Hanga-Aro-Rau and Waihanga Ara Rau industries?



Methodology

Positionality statement

As researchers, our team acknowledges the influence of our lived experience in this research. The disability-led nature of this research allowed for a richer integration of intersecting dimensions into the research, and influenced how engagement with industry was undertaken. The research team's lived experiences reinforced the importance of allyship, engagement with industry was therefore centred around ensuring that industry stakeholders felt a meaningful part of this research.

Values underpinning methodological approach

Nothing about us, without us

Some key values underpinned our methodology, principal among them is 'nothing about us, without us.'⁹⁷ This communicates the belief that communities must lead and inform research that impacts them from the project's inception. It was critical to us that the research methodology included people with lived and technical experiences of disability and that the project be guided by their voice and contributions. The research methodology was peer-reviewed and guided by a steering committee of disabled and Tāngata Whaikaha Māori people. Therefore, each aspect of the project's methodology was assessed by the reference group and has the benefit of their lived and technical experience. Industry voice was also represented on the reference group, to ensure the project was grounded in the appropriate collaborative context.

The research team had lived experience of disability or identified as long-term allies and subject matter experts, and included wāhine Whaikaha Māori, people with acquired or life-long impairments, a leader in the Pacific community and a disabled person in regional Aotearoa New Zealand. Based on their own experience, the research team recognised that recounting employment experiences may be an emotional experience for some disabled people. Time for relationship building and kōrero was

⁹⁷ (Khedr & Etmanski, 2021).

therefore in-built into the recruitment methodology. This meant that solid relationships were established that ensured disabled people felt safe to authentically engage, and so that they knew that the research team empathised with their experience.

Amplifying our community

Another value which underpinned our methodological approach is the recognition that not all disabled communities have an equal voice or opportunity to contribute to research-based kōrero. This meant that the research was committed to ensuring that the full range of disabled communities were present within the sample. Throughout this research, we have sought to reach and prioritise marginalised disabled communities by engaging specific experts, and community organisations to support our recruitment processes. These experts and community organisations connected us with disabled people living regionally, to people with learning disabilities and to other perspectives that were important to include. The research team ensured that every community organisation or expert who acted as a connector to the community was valued for their time.⁹⁸ To assist with the inclusion of voices traditionally not 'heard,' we built in more time to explain our methodology and key processes. For example, we communicated with potential participants to explain processes such as using Zoom, or signing into a digital PDF. Spending more time explaining to participants how to undertake these processes enabled us to talk to participants who might have otherwise disengaged.

Acknowledging the ongoing impact of colonisation

Underpinning our methodological approach is the understanding that colonisation (establishing control over tangata whenua) is not a historical event but an evolving and ongoing violence with continuing impacts.⁹⁹ The research team recognises that 'disability' is a tool of colonisation because disability, as a mechanism of social order, has categorised and controlled Māori within Westernised terms.¹⁰⁰

Similarly, as a research team we recognise that Tāngata Whaikaha Māori me whānau hauā must be delivered what they are promised under Te Tiriti o Waitangi, including having the right to define themselves in and on their own terms, and have these terms supported by health and social systems.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Through koha or payment to individuals.

⁹⁹ (Te Uepū Hāpai i Te Ora Safe and Effective Justice Advisory Group, n.d.).

¹⁰⁰ (Kingi & Bennion Law, 2023).

¹⁰¹ (Toki, 2017).

The current connotations and implications of the term ‘disability’ have no place in Te Ao Māori. The continued use of ‘disability’ as a tool for social order erodes whānau, forces assimilation in order to have needs met, and infringes upon collectivism and tino rangatiratanga.¹⁰² Our recognition of these issues, and the fact that Tāngata Whaikaha Māori me whānau hauā identity is intrinsically about being part of whānau, influenced the way we undertook this research. For example, our research team made sure that they engaged and communicated in a way that prioritised this collective identity. We also sought to give people space to shape their kōrero and share on their own terms. Disability was not always the centre of the conversations we had with Tāngata Whaikaha Māori participants.

The research team acknowledges that members of our team are Tāngata Tiriti¹⁰³ and this research project did not have a kaupapa Māori methodology. We took our role as partners in Te Tiriti seriously by working in partnership with project steering groups, applying a critical lens to our practice as researchers, and trying to move beyond a Eurocentric or single-axis analysis.¹⁰⁴

Ethical approval

After determining that the research met the criteria for [Health and Disability Ethics Committee](#) [HDEC] review, an application for ethical approval was prepared and sent to HDEC for consideration prior to commencing the study. The ethics application was prepared regarding the participation of disabled people, as their ability to give informed consent may be impaired. The research project did not require HDEC approval for the employer part of the project.

The ethics application outlined the research methodology, our research team values, and how potential participants would be valued for their time.¹⁰⁵ The HDEC application required that our methodology be peer reviewed by an expert. Grant Cleland, a thought-leader in disability employment and a member of the community himself acted as our peer reviewer.¹⁰⁶ Importantly, the ethics application described the

¹⁰² (Kingi & Bennion Law, 2023; Whānau Hauā & Bennion Law, 2022).

¹⁰³ Tangata Tiriti: those who belong to this land by right of te Tiriti o Waitangi.

¹⁰⁴ Focusing on European culture or history to the exclusion of a wider view of the world; implicitly regarding European culture as pre-eminent (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024).

¹⁰⁵ Participants received koha (vouchers).

¹⁰⁶ Grant Cleland has over 30 years’ experience working in the health and disability sector. Born with a physical impairment and using a wheelchair for mobility from childhood, Grant brings both lived and professional experience to the table.

process for ensuring informed consent and an appropriate understanding of the project. The Northern B Health and Disability Ethics Committee¹⁰⁷ [HDEC] approved this research on an expedited pathway, acknowledging it presented minimal risk to participants.

Informed consent process

The Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form [PIS/CF] were written in plain language in English and also made available in Te Reo Māori, Samoan, Tongan, Easy Read, Large Print, Braille, Audio and New Zealand Sign Language. Potential participants were sent a copy of the PIS/CF prior to the research so they could familiarise themselves with the process, ask questions and seek independent advice. The research team was also available to answer any questions about the PIS/CF, and emailed or called participants prior to the interview to ensure that they understood the consent process and the overall research project.

The research team was guided by the HDEC Informed Consent Checklist document regarding informed consent. At the beginning of each interview, the research team reviewed the Consent Form again, solidified participant understanding and answered any further questions. The Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form are included in **Appendix A**.

Accessibility provisions

In addition to the study information being available in a range of alternative formats, the research team also took steps to implement what we consider standard and expected accessibility provisions that realise the rights of participants. These provisions were detailed for HDEC and included, for example, the proactive availability of sign language interpreters, ability to engage online or over the phone instead of face to face, and ability to kōrero at each participant's own pace.

¹⁰⁷ HDEC Approval number (20003).

Data collection methods

The research team designed all data collection methods on accessible platforms. These platforms worked to maximise participants' device connectivity so they could more easily contribute to the research using a phone or computer.

The primary data collection methods used in this research were:

- a self-completion survey for employers;
- one-on-one interviews or multiple-participant focus groups for both disabled people and employers.

Survey for employers

The collection of survey data enabled us to reach a larger sample of employers so that the data could be analysed for key findings and trends. The survey was delivered on the **Survey Monkey** Platform¹⁰⁸ and is included as **Appendix B**. The survey took approximately 10 minutes to complete and was designed to collect both qualitative and quantitative data from employers. To maximise the data collected, the survey design included mostly closed-ended or multiple-choice questions, which were more time-efficient for employers to answer. The data helped us to answer the research questions in four areas of inquiry: barriers, enablers, awareness and experiences. The survey also collected demographic data about participants if they elected to provide this. Completed survey responses were recorded and aggregated into a dashboard, which formed the basis of data analysis.

Interviews / focus groups

Qualitative data was collected from disabled people and employers in interviews or focus groups. This data added dimension and depth, as it provided information-rich cases¹⁰⁹ and personal stories which brought the research questions to life. Both interview and focus group questions were structured based on areas of inquiry, so that participants could lead and shape the kōrero. The collection of qualitative and quantitative data enabled consideration of micro and macro perspectives, increasing the utility of the research.

¹⁰⁸ A range of these questions were compulsory, some were optional.

¹⁰⁹ (Benoot, Hannes & Bilsen, 2016).

Interviews and focus groups took between 45 minutes and two hours and were held mostly online. A few were completed in person regionally. Interviews and focus groups were designed around the four enquiry areas central to the research questions: barriers, enablers, awareness and experiences. Researchers asked questions in ways that meant the participant could express themselves on their own terms, including sharing information about ethnicity, gender and disability status. Each interview or focus group was recorded¹¹⁰ for the purpose of transcription, then coded to de-identify the data. The transcripts were then analysed thematically.

Data sovereignty

Data Sovereignty as a general concept refers to the fact that data is subject to the laws and governance structures of the nation where it is collected,¹¹¹ in this case Aotearoa New Zealand. However, within an Aotearoa New Zealand context, Māori¹¹² and Pacific Data Sovereignty¹¹³ must be observed. In the context of this work, we also believe the sovereignty of disabled communities over their data should be upheld. The following principles informed our approach to data sovereignty.

- Ownership: communities / people own and are able to request what they have shared from the research team.¹¹⁴ Participants were in charge of their kōrero, which is why questions were structured as areas of inquiry and demographic data was optional where not explicitly required to answer research questions.¹¹⁵ Interview participants could also withdraw their participation at any time.¹¹⁶
- Usefulness: Data was collected in a useful way (i.e., questions are appropriate, communities are not homogenised in the data collection) and can contribute to the advancement and understanding of communities, including by ensuring the results / findings are publicly available.
- Empowerment: collected data should empower communities, give them agency and for Māori, support tino rangatiratanga.

¹¹⁰ Audio was deleted once transcribed.

¹¹¹ (Te Mana Raraunga, n.d).

¹¹² (Te Mana Raraunga, 2018).

¹¹³ (Moana Research, 2019; 2021).

¹¹⁴ In the case of focus groups, participants can only request their own data, and others contributions are redacted.

¹¹⁵ Geographic data was explicitly required.

¹¹⁶ Focus Group participants could not do this due to the group nature of contributions, participants were advised of this limitation.

- Storage: where possible, data should be stored in Aotearoa New Zealand.

While these principles relate specifically to data sovereignty, they ultimately also align with the underpinning values of our methodology.

Recruitment by data collection method

Sample requirements

The sample included a broad range of employers and disabled people who reflect the diversity of the Construction, Engineering, Logistics, Infrastructure and Manufacturing industries, and the broader community.

For disabled people, our sample selection was informed by the need to include, to the best of our ability, a breadth of impairment experience. It was important that the following groups were represented in our sample including Tāngata Whaikaha Māori, Pacific Disabled People, and women. It was important that we included people from a range of ages and regional locations. The research team accounted for all these attributes, and primarily used snowball and purposive sampling to recruit participants.

Similarly, for employers, the total sample had to include all the relevant industries, as well as ethnic, gender, geographical, and age diversity. As with disabled people, the research team mapped these attributes and recruited based on this.

Employer survey

The survey was, in the first instance, the primary mechanism for recruiting employers to participate in the research by way of completion, and indicating if they would like to participate in interviews or focus groups. The survey was disseminated through digital networks, such as via email and LinkedIn, and industry networks, including industry newsletters such as Engineering New Zealand and the National Association of Women in Construction NZ. This functioned as snowball sampling.¹¹⁷ When the survey

¹¹⁷ Snowball sampling is where the researcher identifies one or more individuals from the population of interest. After being interviewed, these individuals act as informants to identify other members of the population (Robson, C., & McCartan, 2016).

was first disseminated, the research team intentionally connected with and ‘shoulder-tapped’ people (via social media) from those communities that are underrepresented in the industry to ensure the survey reached their networks. This functioned as purposive sampling.¹¹⁸

Hanga-Aro-Rau and Waihangā Ara Rau industry networks helped disseminate the survey, and recruitment was further supported by occasional reminders. The survey remained open until the end of the engagement period for the research.

Employer interviews and focus groups

Self-referral, purposive and snowball sampling were also the primary recruitment method for employer interviews and focus groups. Self-referral occurred when some employers elected to participate in an interview after selecting the relevant option in the survey. Employers largely chose to participate in one-on-one interviews, as these were shorter in length than focus groups and enabled a more private environment for them to freely share their experiences. Employers were largely recruited using the messaging function on online platforms like LinkedIn Premium. The research team used purposive sampling to identify relevant industry leaders to complete the sample frame, and particularly to ensure diverse representation.

The employers we interviewed often suggested others we could talk to, i.e. snowball sampling. We invested time in relationship building with employers so that participants felt comfortable coming forward themselves, or agreeing to be referred by others. Community experts were also engaged to support building trust among Māori, Pacific and regional employers. It was through these experts that we recruited some employers or were connected to others.

Disabled people sampling and recruitment

In alignment with our ethical approval, and in order to ensure fully informed consent, a survey was not disseminated to disabled people as it was to employers. For this research, disabled people could choose to participate in either a focus group or an interview, though most chose the latter. The main recruitment methods used were snowball and purposive sampling. Potential participants were first

¹¹⁸ Purposive sampling is built up on the basis of particular characteristics which enables the researcher to satisfy their specific needs in a project (Robson, C., & McCartan, 2016).

identified mainly using the research team's own networks (purposive sampling), which then led us to others (snowball sampling).

Successful recruitment was reliant on relationship building, which led to people feeling comfortable 'shoulder-tapping' others on behalf of the research team. The process also drew on the existing networks of the research team, or those working within the Industries from either of the two Workforce Development Councils. Individuals were identified through regional disability networks or at the suggestion of other participants. Social media did not yield any participants. We believe this is due to the concern disabled employees had about putting themselves forward too publicly and losing their jobs or 'outing' themselves to their peers or their employers.

Engaging recruitment support and expert voice

After experiencing initial challenges recruiting disabled people, we engaged support for our research team from community members with well-developed and diverse community networks. This was instrumental in recruiting additional Tāngata Whaikaha Māori participants, participants from the Pacific community and disabled participants from regional Aotearoa New Zealand. These participants were successfully recruited only because they had trust and confidence in the support person the research team engaged. Relationships, networks, trust and confidence were pivotal to recruitment within the disabled community.

Despite our best efforts, we were unable to speak with anyone working in one of the Industries living with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD). As the voice of people with FASD was absent, we sought the input of Dr Valerie McGinn,¹¹⁹ an expert within the FASD field. FASD is prevalent within many communities and has been excluded from disability support funding for a long time.¹²⁰ Dr McGinn's insights are an important dimension of this report.

¹¹⁹ Clinical Neuropsychologist and Clinical Director of the FASD Centre, Aotearoa.

¹²⁰ (Hunter, 2024a; 2024b).

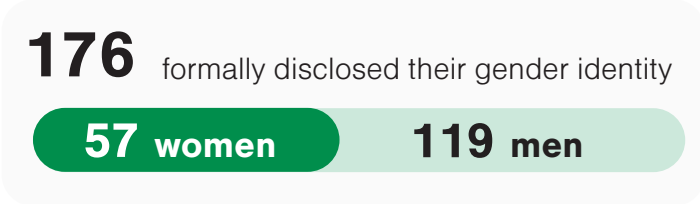
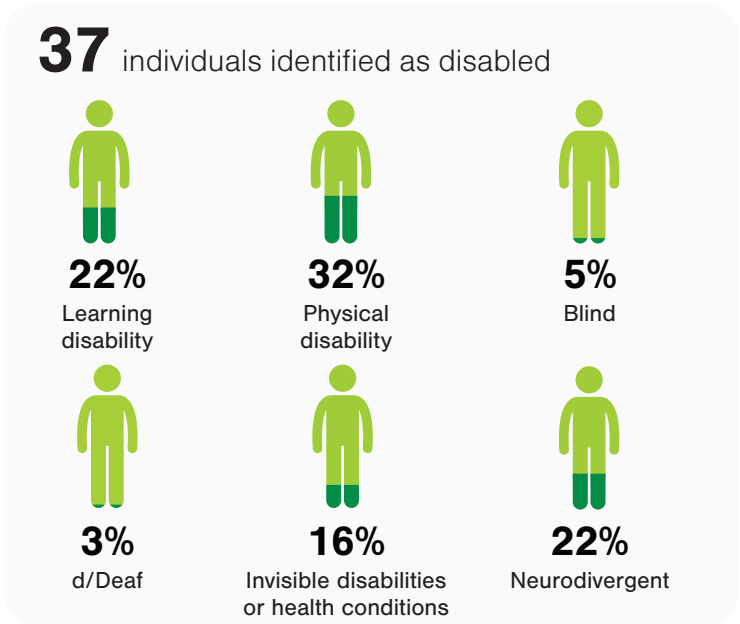
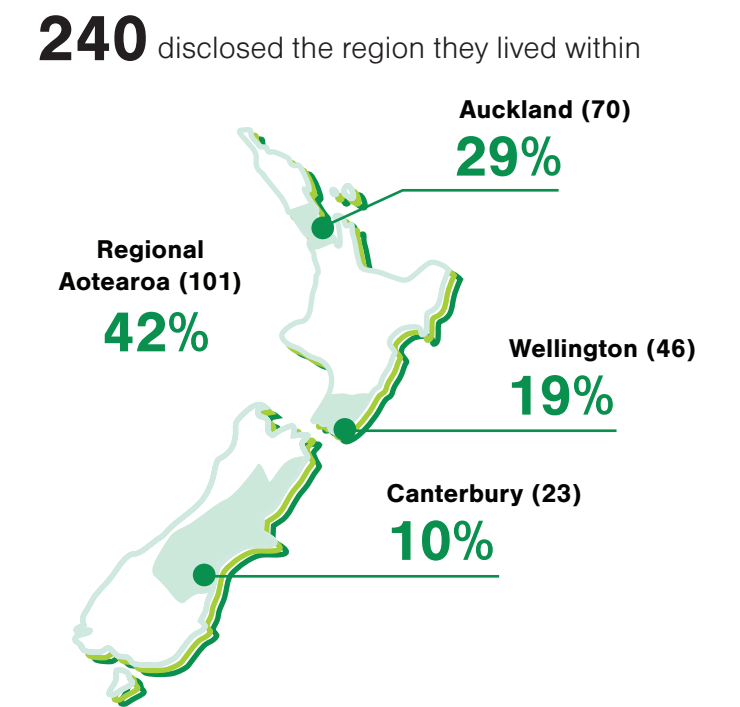
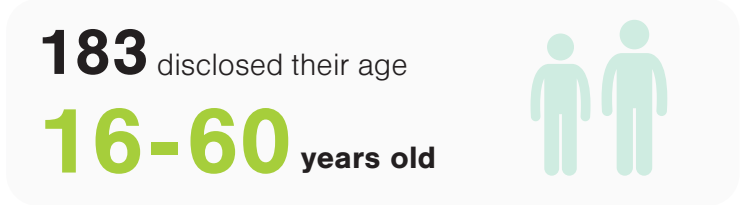
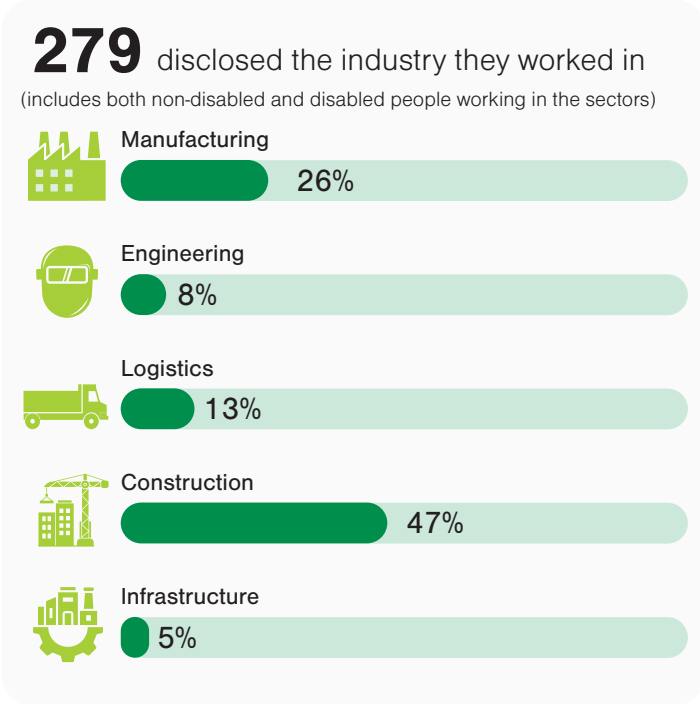
The final sample

When we designed the research, our intention was to have at least 60 participants for the qualitative interviews or focus groups. The intention was also to oversample disabled people so they comprised 80 percent of participants, with employers making up the balance at 20 percent. However, as the project progressed, recruiting disabled people became challenging due to what we understand to be a reluctance by disabled people to identify. Recruitment therefore took longer than anticipated and the composition of our sample changed.

At the conclusion of the study, the total interview and focus group sample was $n=59$, representing a final split of 34 disabled people and 25 employers. The employer survey had 247 responses, bringing the total participant sample, inclusive of the survey and interviews or focus groups, to $n=306$.

Participant demographics

We did not ask compulsory demographic questions in line with our research values. This provided participants with agency and control over what they shared about themselves. Across the total sample (employers and disabled people), the following demographic information was shared by participants:¹²¹



¹²¹ Results expressed in percentages may not sum to 100 because individual numbers are rounded.

Data analysis techniques

Data from the interviews and focus groups, as well as the qualitative data from the survey, were analysed thematically.¹²² For interviews and focus groups, the research team analysed each transcript for key themes in order to develop a set of common themes, illustrated by participant quotes. This was a collaboration between team members to ensure all key themes were identified and described with input from those with specific cultural and lived experience expertise.¹²³ Survey data was assessed using the Survey Monkey dashboard, which organises survey responses on the basis of common themes or trends.¹²⁴ The trends emerging from the responses to each question were assessed by team members and this was then detailed and collated. Where available, participant demographic information was collected in a spreadsheet and analysed to produce basic demographic information that contextualised participant voices. Interviews and focus group participants were asked to share their thoughts, reflections and experiences. As noted above, the participant group was diverse, and while there were areas of inquiry across interviews and focus groups, these took different shapes based on each participant's communication preferences. The identification of themes was undertaken in a reflexive manner, with researchers collaboratively examining and discussing the transcript. We also did this with survey data; the research team actively looked back on trends as they were emerging and considered their meaning. The research team actively made meaning from all collected data, with an emphasis on achieving different and richer interpretation of meaning through collaboration across the research team. The research team's differing lived experience of disability contributed to this, and often led to divergent points of thematic emphasis, which added nuance and depth to the analysis.

Once all transcripts and survey data had been collated, the researchers made an overall assessment of common themes, which illustrated the most notable findings and effectively answered the research questions.

¹²² (Naeem, Ozuem, Howell & Ranfagni, 2023).

¹²³ (Coates, Jordan & Clarke, 2021).

¹²⁴ (Gitlin, 2024).

Strengths and limitations

A strength of this research is its strong grounding in the lived experiences of the research team, which enabled access to an information-rich sample, likely because communities felt safe to share.

Researchers found some of the experiences employers shared difficult and sometimes confronting, though we believe that this demonstrates that participants felt comfortable about sharing their experiences. The breadth and depth of the sample is also a strength. Despite considerable difficulties with recruitment, a diverse group of disabled people shared their perspectives; these were information-rich cases that resulted in strong findings. Further, effective survey design and dissemination maximised employer engagement with the survey, increasing the quantity and quality of employer data.

The research would, in our view, have benefited from an anonymous mechanism through which disabled communities could share their experiences. It became clear through what was shared during the recruitment process that disabled communities had a deep fear of identifying themselves. This was due to the fact that for some people, acknowledging their disability status had led to job loss, or workplace stigma. Anonymous data collection methods were avoided for disabled participants to ensure that everyone who took part could provide informed consent. In future research, a mechanism that enables anonymity while still ensuring that participants can provide informed consent may lead to a more diverse sample of disabled employees.

Further, while every effort was made to engage Māori, Pacific, and other non-Pākehā people, we acknowledge that the proportion of these groups could have been larger. This is a limitation of this research, one which we hope will be addressed in future research.

Findings

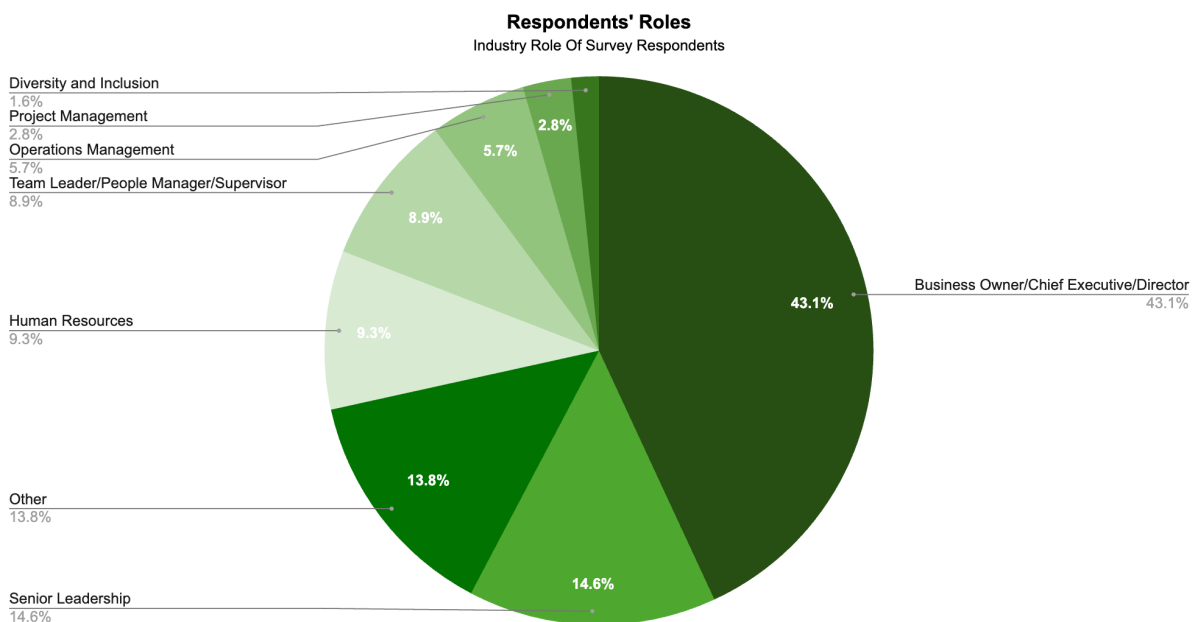
Employer survey findings

Of the 247 survey participants, 47 per cent worked for the construction industry, 26 per cent in manufacturing, 13 per cent in logistics, 8 per cent in engineering and 5 per cent in infrastructure. Employers worked in a range of business sizes, with most respondents working in organisations with over 100 employees (35 per cent) or small businesses with fewer than 10 employees (33.7 per cent). Businesses with 50 - 99 employees were the smallest proportion at 6.9 per cent of respondents.

Respondents' roles

Of the employers who completed the survey, Executive-level Managers and Business Owners were the most common respondent roles (43.1 per cent), followed by Senior Leadership team members (14.6 per cent). The survey insights, therefore, speak directly to the concerns, considerations and beliefs of industry decision-makers. **Figure 1.** shows the range of employers who completed the survey.

Figure 1: Respondents' Roles



The 'other' category (13.8 per cent) included training advisors, learning and development managers, senior employees, and other employees across the Industries.

Employers were asked about their awareness of disabled people in their workplaces: 44.2 per cent said they did have disabled people in their workplace, 43.2 per cent said they did not, and 12.4 per cent were unsure.¹²⁵ In the comment box related to this question, some respondents seemed uncertain about what was considered a disability. This may have influenced their responses and reflects a need to enhance foundational understandings of disability. For example, given that disability is present in the lives of at least one in four residents of Aotearoa New Zealand,¹²⁶ the high proportion of employers who believed they did not work with a disabled person is indicative of a culture of non-disclosure and/or a lack of disability awareness.

Barriers of concern

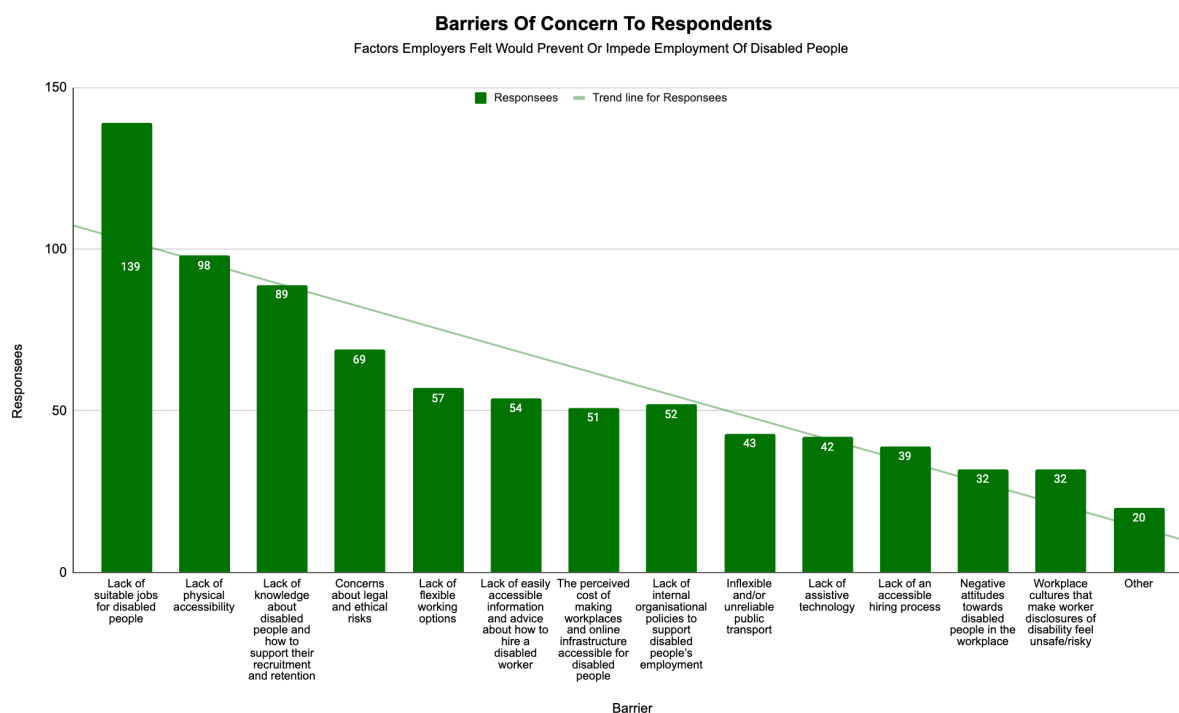
When asked to select the barriers that might impact disabled people in their workplace, lack of suitable jobs was considered the most significant barrier, with 139 respondents selecting this option (**see Figure 2**). Ninety-eight participants chose lack of physical accessibility, while 89 chose lack of knowledge about disabled people. This suggests a need to educate employers about the diversity of the disability community. Investment in promoting the diversity of available roles in the Industries would help to ensure employers consider the myriad ways in which disabled people could contribute to their workforce.

Furthermore, the data suggests that employers are still concerned about how to respond to disability. It is therefore important to meaningfully support employers to learn about disability, so that fear, stereotypes and a lack of knowledge do not continue to impede progress and negatively impact employers' experiences. 'Other' barriers identified by respondents included: a lack of respect for disabled parking; health and safety risks; and a lack of promotion of available jobs for disabled people in the Industries within disabled communities themselves. These answers show that while employers recognise some of the barriers that impact disabled people, there are still significant disability issues that employers and other senior workplace personnel are not aware of. Disabled parking, for example, is a small piece of the disability inclusion puzzle.

¹²⁵ The individual numbers are rounded and may not sum to 100.

¹²⁶ (Office for Disability Issues, 2023).

Figure 2: Barriers of Concern to Respondents



Employers were asked to rate, on a scale of one (completely unsuitable) to five (very suitable), how suitable they believed their workplaces were for disabled people. The question was broken down to see how employers felt about the suitability of their workplace for specific impairment types. Sixty per cent of employers believed that their workplace was **completely unsuitable** for people who are blind or who experience low vision, compared to only 0.5 per cent who felt that their workplace was **very suitable**. For people with physical disabilities, 33.8 per cent of employers said their workplace was **completely unsuitable**, and 34.3 per cent said **somewhat unsuitable**. In comparison, only 4 per cent said their workplace was **very suitable**, and 14.4 per cent said it was **suitable**.

For Neurodivergent people, 15.9 per cent of respondents said that their workplace was **very suitable** for this type of disability. Comparatively, 30.5 per cent of respondents said that their workplace would be **suitable** for Deaf employees, but only 3.5 per cent said their workplace would be **very suitable** for people with learning disabilities. However, in an earlier question asking employers about their awareness of disabled people in the workplace, many respondents used the comment box to say they employed people with learning disabilities within their business. This indicates a difference in employers' perception of their suitability for the workplace versus the reality of employing people with

learning disabilities. The survey data reflects a need to support employers in understanding different disability types and how people with these impairments can be integrated into their workforce.

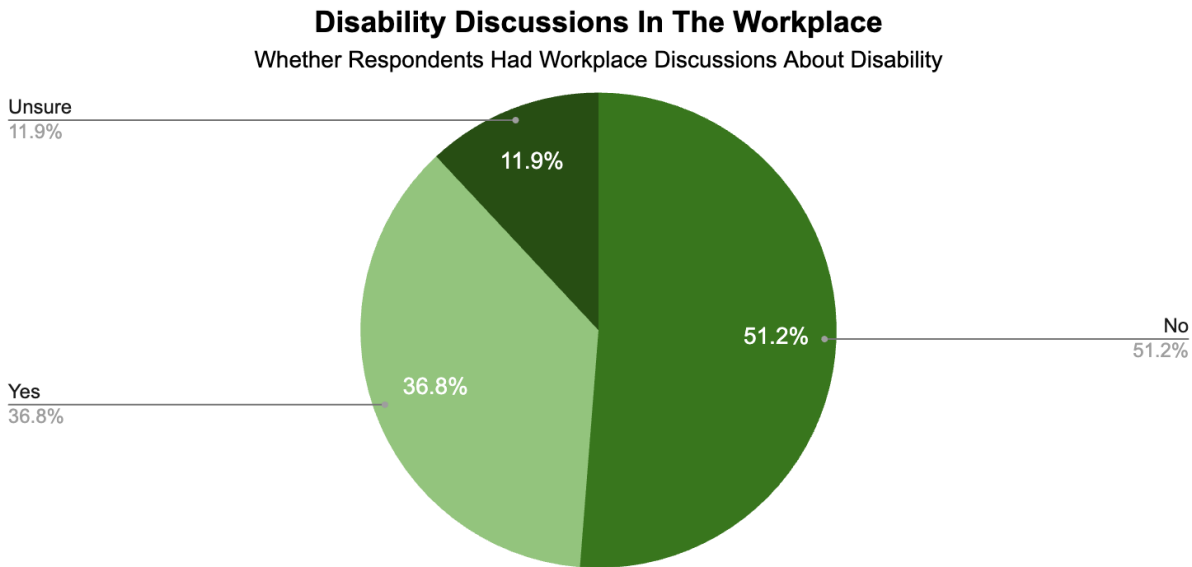
Figure 3 presents the results of a question about whether employers had ever had a conversation about disability, or conversations about hiring more disabled people, in their workplace. While 51.2 per cent of respondents said they had not, 36.8 per cent said they had, and 11.9 per cent were unsure. Many participants used the comment box on this question to reiterate the perceived unsuitability of their workplace for disabled people:

“On site construction is not suitable. It is dangerous enough with your wits about you. Let alone some of the disabilities you are talking about.”

“I'm deaf in one ear myself and have other health effects following brain surgery, but generally, my health and fitness is ok. The issue of disabilities is extremely broad. I would consider hiring a partially disabled person, depending on the disability. This is all very academic at present, as there isn't even enough work for the able bodied.”

These quotes illustrate that employers did not typically consider disabled people as having a place within their workforce, and that they viewed disability as a deficit.

Figure Three: Disability Discussions In The Workplace



Employers were asked a series of questions about how much they supported disabled employees within their workplaces. When asked if employers offered a network for disabled employees, 79 per cent of employers said no, 16 per cent were unsure, and only 5 per cent reported that they did. Reasons for not having a network included that they were a small business or did not have enough disabled employees. Some employers noted that while they did not have a network, they did offer support to disabled employees. When asked if disability was mentioned in any of their workplace policies, 42.3 per cent said no, 34.3 per cent were unsure, and 23.4 per cent said they did. This indicates that work is needed to create a consistent baseline for disability support, including in practical measures such as networks, as well as in workplace infrastructure such as policy.

Employers were also asked if they believed their workplace has a diversity and inclusion policy: 43.8 per cent said they did, 27.9 per cent said they didn't have a diversity and inclusion policy, 19.9 per cent were unsure, and 8.5 per cent said that they did not know. When asked if their diversity and inclusion policies included disability, 42.3 per cent of employers said no, 34.3 per cent were unsure, and 22.4 per cent said disability was included.

In the comments section for this question, several respondents explained that they had a policy but it did not include disability. Some said that their business was too small to need such policies, while others noted that they treat all employees equally regardless.

“There are so many elements of inclusion, if we were to look at disabilities in the workplace, the answer would be more towards the ‘no.’”

“This may be applicable to a large business, but it would be close to pointless for a small business such as my own.”

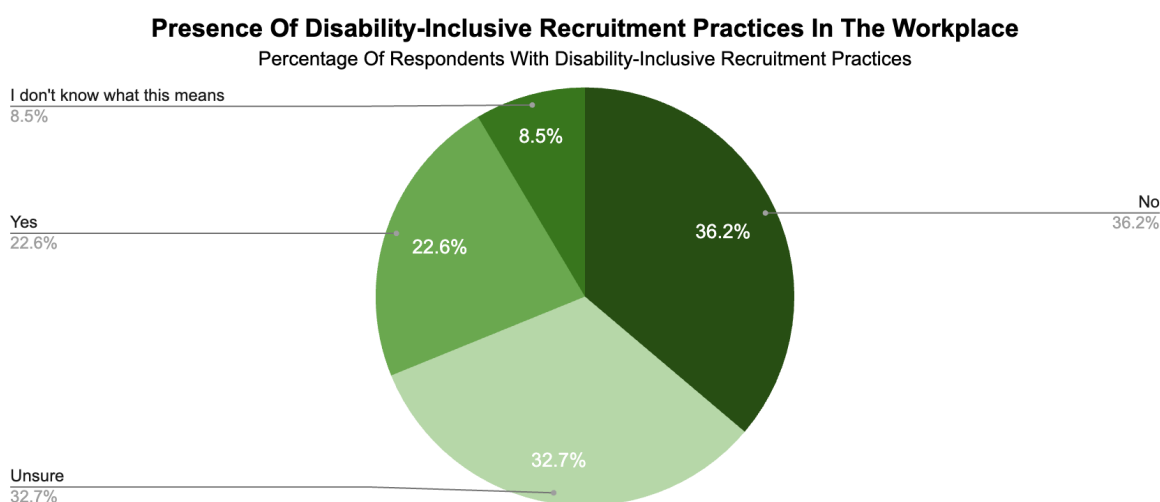
These findings show that investment is required to demonstrate the relevance of diversity and inclusion policies, including ensuring that disabled people are visible within these. Supporting employers to understand the difference between equity and equality in relation to inclusive employment practices is also important.

Employers were asked about their colleagues' awareness of such policies and whether they knew what they meant for their business; 41.8 per cent answered yes, 23.9 percent were unsure, 17.9 per cent said that they didn't have these policies, and 16.4 per cent said no. This finding reinforces the need to champion the relevance of these policies, and support employers in implementing them and monitoring their effectiveness.

With regard to inclusion, employers were asked whether they use disability-inclusive recruitment practices (see **Figure 4** below). Only 22.6 per cent of respondents said they did, while 36.2 per cent did not, 32.7 per cent were unsure, and 8.5 per cent did not know what was meant by disability-inclusive recruitment practices.

The comments for this question indicated that some employers use recruitment companies and needed clarification about their recruitment methods. Several respondents said they did not have a high staff turnover, so they rarely hired new staff while others noted that they did not believe inclusive recruitment was applicable. These responses suggest the need for a comprehensive assessment of recruitment practices in the Industries in order to understand them, and assess what can be done to minimise barriers to entry for disabled people.

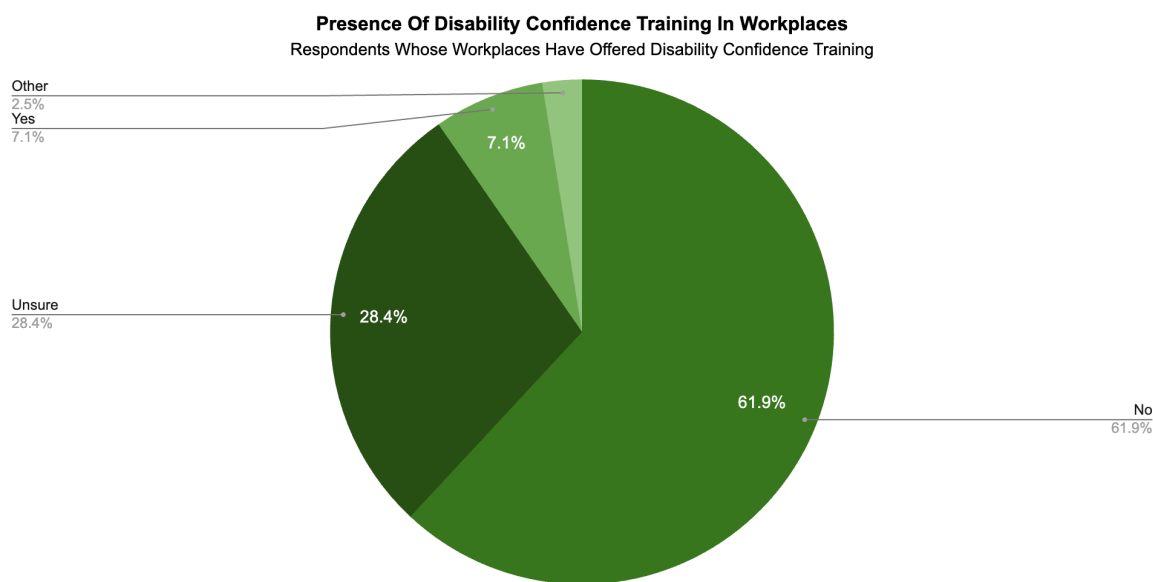
Figure 4: Presence Of Disability-Inclusive Recruitment Practices In The Workplace



Employers were asked to select which, if any, disability-inclusive programmes, policies, or supports they offer employees, including if they employ people who have disclosed a disability and/or been granted

accommodations. Nineteen per cent of respondents said they did not have any of the support identified, while 12.4 per cent said they had granted accommodations for disabled employees. Only 10.4 per cent of respondents said they had disability-confident staff and only 6.5 per cent said that they had offered disability awareness training for managers. This suggests that disability inclusive programmes, policies, or supports are not widely available in respondents' workplaces, and that they tend not to take diverse forms. In addition, taking into account insights from previous questions, it is likely that disabled people would need to advocate for their own support in these organisations because employers have considerable knowledge gaps. In short, this means the support burden is on the disabled person rather than the employer.

Figure 5: Presence Of Disability Confidence Training In Workplaces

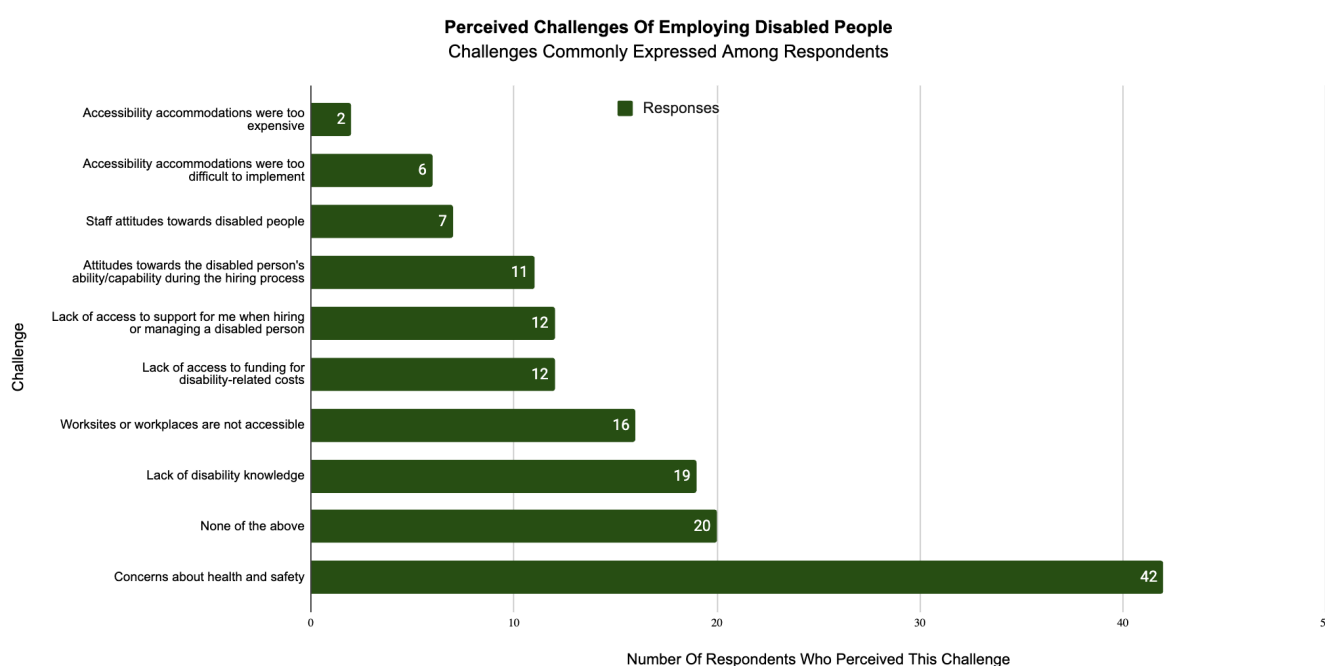


As shown in **Figure 5** above, most respondents (61.9 per cent) said they had not offered disability confidence training in their workplaces, with only 7.1 per cent saying they had. In the comments relating to this question, some respondents said they would be willing to provide training if a disabled person were on-site; while others explained that for small companies, such training is not financially viable. Of those who had training, none had explicitly learnt about the experiences or needs of Tāngata Whaikaha Māori or Pacific Disabled People.

This reflects a belief that training is only important once there is a disabled person in the workplace. However, this requires that a disabled person disclose their impairment without knowing what impact

that disclosure might have on them, an expectation that places a considerable burden on the individual. Supporting employers to understand the need for proactive training, and the importance of disability awareness and responsiveness, regardless of whether a disabled person is present in their workplace, will go some way towards amending the knowledge gap. Further, the absence of culturally focused disability training suggests that Māori and Pacific Disabled People will endure compounding barriers in the workplace, with their identities as Māori, Pacific and/or Māori *and* disabled not being understood.

Figure 6: Perceived Challenges Of Employing Disabled People



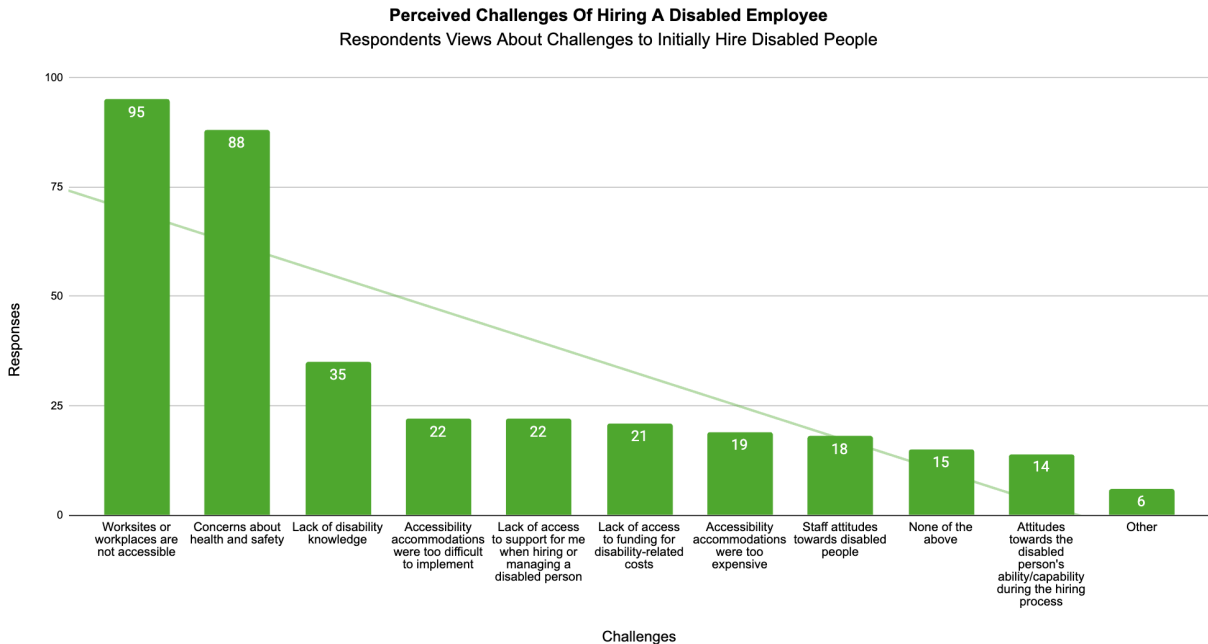
When asked, forty per cent of survey respondents said they currently or had previously employed a disabled person. The percentage of those who had not employed a disabled person was slightly higher at 46 per cent. This provides important context for the wider survey results; almost half of the survey participants were either not aware that they employed disabled workers, or in fact had no direct experience of hiring disabled people.

When asked about what challenges employers have had with disabled employees, concern about health and safety was the most prominent with 42 participants selecting this response. Lack of disability knowledge and physical accessibility were also common choices. **Figure 6.** shows the full response to this question. Again, these insights reinforce that increased understanding of the community is needed. This knowledge is also likely to support employers to understand the realities of disability, and on this

basis, to better determine if physical access and health and safety issues are genuine rather than perceived challenges.

Twenty-six per cent of respondents selected the ‘none of the above’ option, with the comment section providing some insight as to why this might be. Many participants said that they had not thought about the challenges of employing disabled people, or that they are already employing disabled people and feel equipped to navigate this. The fact that some employers had not even considered the challenges reflects an additional knowledge gap - *if you don't know, you don't know* - that needs to be remedied in order to ensure disabled people succeed in the workplace. Without consideration of these challenges, the burden rests solely on disabled employees to mitigate the barriers they experience in the workplace or to self-advocate to have them addressed. Therefore, while it is encouraging that some respondents felt equipped to support a disabled employee, all respondents would benefit from strengthening their disability knowledge and having consistent, systemic support to achieve this.

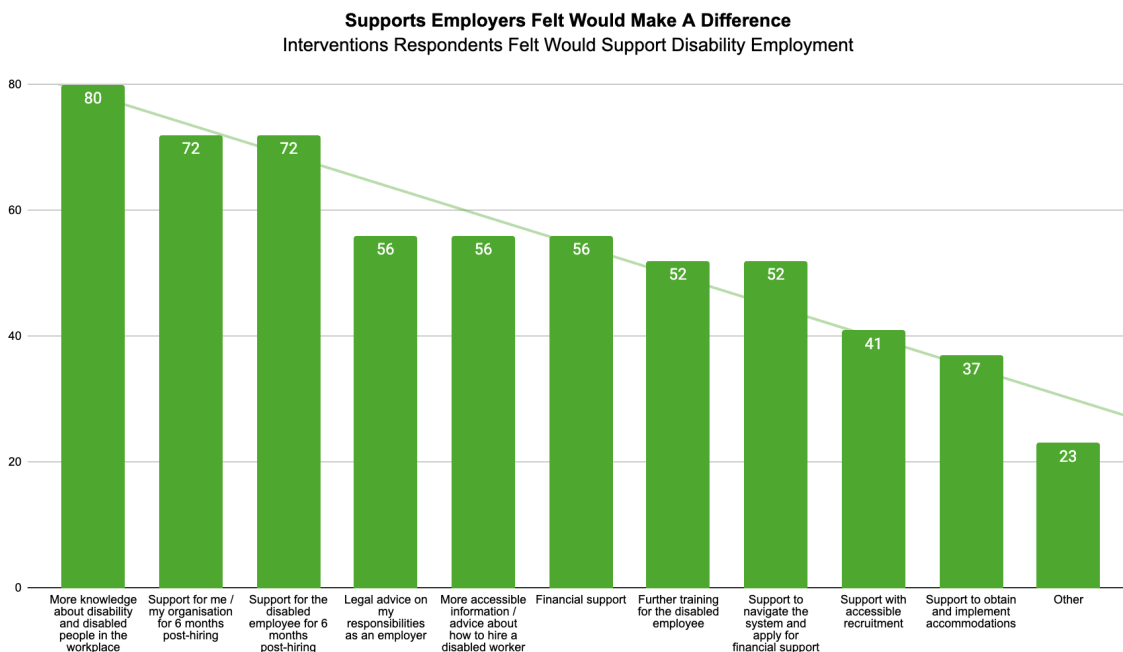
Figure 7: Perceived Challenges Of Hiring A Disabled Employee



When asked what the perceived challenges might be in relation to hiring a disabled person, concerns about health and safety were one of the most commonly identified challenges with 88 respondents selecting this option. Lack of workplace accessibility was the highest identified challenge, with 95

employers selecting this option. **Figure 7.** shows the full range of responses to this question, where participants were able to select more than one option. Answers to this question align with the trends described previously, which indicate a need to address employees' enduring concerns and the gaps in their disability knowledge.

Figure 8: Supports Employers Felt Would Make A Difference



When asked about what would make a positive difference to their experiences of hiring disabled people, 80 employers identified more knowledge about disability. While 72 respondents wanted more support for their organisation and for the disabled employee, 56 respondents also said more knowledge about their legal obligations, more accessible advice about how to hire a disabled worker, and more financial support would help make a positive difference. These results suggest a willingness to learn and engage across the Industries.

It is critical that employers develop internal resources during their disability inclusion journey. Investment in supports that strengthen employers' internal capability will better ensure the long-term viability of disability inclusion programmes and initiatives.

Survey insights discussion

Insights from the survey, combined with the number of survey responses, indicate that employers want to engage with disability as a subject, and that some already felt confident to do this and support their staff with disabilities. A significant finding is that many employers did not have a depth or breadth of awareness about disability, and often relied on stereotypes or deficit thinking to inform their answers. Further, the survey findings suggest that there is a general discomfort with disability, that there is not an immediate assumption of disabled people's capability, and a limited view of what disabled people can do. These kinds of attitudes are not unique to this group of respondents; the ongoing impact of the *medical model* means that these beliefs are normalised and widely held across society.

A significant and urgent opportunity exists to facilitate and support greater disability inclusion in the workforce. This will be achieved by developing employer knowledge and understanding beyond the *medical model* or deficit, and by helping them to understand ableism and its impacts on our collective thinking about 'difference.' The response rate to this survey indicates that employers have a foundational desire to include disabled people within their workforces.

It is positive to see neurodivergence embraced by respondents, however this is not necessarily matched by a willingness to integrate appropriate supports for neurodivergent employees. Only a few employers offered the kinds of support neurodivergent employees often need, like flexibility of work schedule. It is necessary to support employers in understanding what supports are required, and how to implement these.

The data also identified opportunities for the following:

- Support and knowledge building across recruitment processes;
- Helping small businesses recognise the importance of policy and how policies for workforce inclusion can be developed and implemented in scalable and relevant ways and;
- Understanding how health and safety apply to disabled people.

It is clear that employers have significant concerns about health and safety risks with the data indicating that perceived risks are impacting on inclusion across the Industries. While it is positive to see health and safety taken seriously, thought leadership that both mitigates and contextualises risk is required to

ensure that concerns or misperceptions do not negatively impact disabled people's opportunities to work and thrive in the Industries.

The absence of recognition of Tāngata Whaikaha Māori and Pacific Disabled People is a significant gap. In order to ensure disability workforce inclusion is equitable, Tāngata Whaikaha Māori and Pacific Disabled People must be recognised, and their compounding experiences of intergenerational trauma, systemic racism and disablism understood. Actions to support employers to learn about these intersections and to integrate them into their policies and practices are urgently needed.

Finally, employers in the survey called for more organisational support concerning embracing disability and more individual support for disabled employees. Careful consideration should be given as to the appropriate form of such support. Government investment, external resources and experts should all support disability inclusion for employers and organisations. However, if this is the only source of support, then disability employment will not become normalised. Accordingly, supports should focus on supporting organisations to build their own internal capacity or on initiatives that are designed to become self-sustaining.

Employer interview findings and discussion

The level of engagement with employers over the course of this research is a testament to their desire to learn and understand more about the development of inclusive workplaces. Employers' understanding and experience of disability mirrors that of most of Aotearoa New Zealand.¹²⁷ Overall, employers who participated in an interview or focus group had a limited awareness and experience of disability, and often, the awareness they did have was informed by the *medical model of disability* defined earlier in the report. The following section explores the common themes and findings from employer interviews as they relate to awareness and experiences of disability and disability employment. These common themes were:

- A lack of visibility of disability: There are low levels of awareness because disabled people are 'rare' in the Industries. Some employers knew disabled people were part of their industry but did not have the tools or data to support making change. These employers also noted that sexism,

¹²⁷ (Donald Beasley Institute, 2022; Woodley, Metzger & Dylan, 2012).

classism, and racism remained significant issues that also needed to be acknowledged and addressed.

- Supporting the 'idea' or had good intentions: Employers agreed with the employment of disabled people in their industry, in theory.
- Minimising disability: The relevance of disability and the potential impacts disability might have on an employee were neither seen nor understood. Disability status was minimised or treated as unimportant.
- Acts of charity/absence of consistent or strategic support: Employers had good intentions but expressed an embedded deficit or charity view of disabled employees. Furthermore, employers were not systemically supported to employ disabled people.
- Not equals in the workplace: Disabled people were not provided with opportunities to advance and were not treated as equals in the workforce.
- Do you look like me?: Employers tend to hire people with similar characteristics and mindsets.
- Nobody says anything: Non-disclosure of disability limits widespread awareness.

A lack of visibility

Employers told us that one of their biggest challenges was the invisibility of disability, which created a barrier to sector-wide disability awareness. Employers felt that greater visibility was required to effect change. A leader within engineering, for example, commented that known disability was rare across the pipeline of the profession. He said this results in a level of employer discomfort because they don't know how to respond or may never have come across people with a disability before.

“There's a lack of people with disabilities studying engineering, there's a lack of probably, you know, we need more of them to do STEM subjects so they can [study] engineering and that sort of thing. And then in the engineering profession, because there's this lack of visibility and lack of sort of examples. People are nervous or unsure or that sort of thing. And part of that is just because it's very rare. You know, if you're doing interviews and having someone ask if your building is wheelchair accessible or something like that [is rare.]”

Aligned with this, employers felt that more action by disabled people and their communities towards increasing their presence would be helpful. The co-owners of a logistics and infrastructure business

said that they would have no concerns about hiring from the disabled talent pool but had not considered it before. This employer thought that there was a need for disabled people and their communities to be more active – for example, by knocking on employers’ doors and saying, “we can do this job” as a way of increasing the broader community’s awareness of the presence of disabled people. Further, an infrastructure employer, who himself had an acquired disability, shared his perspective on visibility, saying that he very rarely gets job applications from disabled people. He told the research team that over the previous 10 years, only four or five applicants disclosed a disability in their application. He also said that he believed that disabled people limit themselves.

“I don't think there's any conscious or unconscious bias. I think that there's probably a case to be made for people with disabilities ruling themselves out. For lots of different reasons, you know, ‘I don't think I could do that,’ or you know, they're a [infrastructure] company. All they do is drive trucks, and there's no jobs for people in wheelchairs, that kind of thing ... People limit themselves by what they know, I guess to a degree, and so people that are applying for jobs may look at that kind of thing and say, ‘well, the only sort of job I can apply for is a sedentary job that sits at a desk,’ or you know, that kind of thing and [they believe our company] won't have those.”

This employer also acknowledged that his sector had to increase visibility of the range of roles available so disabled people were aware of what they could apply for. While employers had different perspectives on the cause or solutions, the common theme was that disability was not visible in their sector, which meant awareness was neither a necessity nor embedded into practice.

However, an interesting dimension of this finding was that some employers believed that disability was present in their workforce, even if disabled people were not visible. For example, two leaders in manufacturing, a leader in construction and another in engineering, knew that neurodivergence and mental distress were significant features of their workforce, particularly once they understood that these were considered disabilities. However, they were not having conversations about this within their organisation. Employers were also unsure how to navigate a conversation about disability or did not want to ‘label’ anybody. This led to a reliance on disabled people to express their needs, although employers acknowledged that this, within current social settings, required courage.

“[It] requires a high degree of bravery on people being willing to put their hands up and say, hey, you know, I'm autistic, and I'm an engineer, and you know, that I suffer from ADHD and that sort of thing.”

Additionally, while few employers demonstrated an understanding of intersecting inequities, some spoke about how they were grappling with sexism and racism. People were more aware of these issues, but this has yet to translate into visibility in the sector for affected groups. Employers felt that disability was a low priority on a long list of people needing to be better represented within the Industries. Finally, an absence of disability-identity data within the Industries clearly contributes to the invisibility of disabled peoples. Some industry leaders told us they do not have any data that accurately reflects the number of employees working in their sector, let alone the number of disabled employees. While accurate data is needed, support to enable positive disclosure of disability is required to achieve accuracy. The kōrero from employers reflects that much of their workforce is not disclosing or is not aware of their impairment. Accurate data is arguably impossible without people being able to access diagnosis easily, alongside a culture of freedom and safety to disclose disability.

Discussion

The perception that invisibility is a barrier to awareness is a valid one. In an ableist society that caters almost exclusively to the needs of the majority, discussions about solving invisibility places significant responsibility on disabled people. There is a perception that disabled people must put themselves forward for jobs and demonstrate their capability. While the disabled person does, in our view, have a responsibility in the workplace to identify what they need to function in their role, the expectation that disabled individuals must disclose their disability is unfair. Like being a mother or a Para athlete, disability is just one aspect of a person's identity and doesn't obligate them to educate others at work. Moreover, society often pressures disabled people to downplay their disabilities in order to succeed. Therefore, placing the burden on them to address this issue is unproductive and does not contribute to finding solutions fairly.

We believe that greater visibility of disabled people across sectors will help normalise the need for accessible workplaces and make it easier for disabled people to gain employment. However, the burden of increasing visibility is not for the disabled community alone; the discomfort of employers is

the result of the **medical model** and ableism, which underpins the widespread belief that disability is a negative feature that must not be talked about. The existence and collection of data at the intersection of disability and industry would help to increase visibility. However, this is a burden that must be shared. People in positions of power, who have influence and often more job security, have a responsibility to seek out expertise, acknowledge disability and invest in the creation of safe environments for people to come forward and disclose.

Disabled employees can then contribute to increasing visibility—if they choose to—from a place of safety. As to the concern about other marginalised groups and their representation, dismantling ableism across all elements of the workforce pipeline collectively, will support inclusion for everyone. In summary, visibility is key to awareness, but it is a responsibility that must be shared.

Support the 'idea'

Many employers had good intentions and, at an intellectual level, supported the idea of including disabled people in their workforce. However, this intention was dependent on the employers' expectations of 'ability.' A South Island manufacturer's comments embody this:

"We don't actually have a problem [with disability]. It just depends on what position and skill set they could bring to the table. Obviously, we've hired people with disabilities in the past, but they need to be able to carry out that job efficiently with the support that we can give them. Yeah. All right. So I wouldn't just employ anyone you know."

They also talked about hiring a disabled person, explaining that they had done so and then implemented some supports, such as what to do during an evacuation, but at a certain point, the person could no longer work with them.

"Towards the end, obviously, their disability had taken over where they were no longer able to perform their duties."

The majority of employers supported the idea of disability inclusion in their workforce but continually emphasised the need for ability, which infers an absence of belief in disabled people's abilities. The

need to find the 'right role' and be able to do the 'whole job' was also a recurring theme. Even employers with experience of disability emphasised the importance of disabled employees being able to perform in their roles.

The following quote from a non-disabled engineer is illustrative. He demonstrated an understanding of the need for physical accessibility and said that even if their credentials were on par, a 'non-restricted' person would be considered more valuable because they have the ability to do the 'whole job.'

"You know, if you can't do the entire job, you can't do the site visits and the construction monitoring while somebody else has got to pick up that. So yeah, there's an element that an able-bodied...engineer would be more valuable to an employer than somebody who was restricted."

When researchers inquired about disabilities beyond physical impairment, this participant said he didn't know enough to determine "capability" levels of other impairment types. Employers stressed the importance of disabled people being in the right role but were less forthcoming about how they would support them or what structures could be put in place to enable their success.

While employers had good intentions, the common theme was that the assumption of ability or capability was not automatic for disabled employees in the Industries. In this way, good intentions only went so far and were often eroded when more tangible support was required. Recognition of the importance of accommodations to enable disabled people to perform effectively in employment roles rarely featured in interviews or focus groups. The ability of the disabled person had to be demonstrated immediately, without the need for accommodations and supports. This often meant that intentions to include disabled people were not operationalised.

Discussion

Employers' general support of disability employment is the first and necessary step towards inclusion. However, substantive change to the status quo requires that employers challenge their own assumptions about disability, increase their knowledge and skills, and ultimately make tangible changes to their organisations.

Employee capability is critical to organisational success. Disabled people are not advanced when employers begin from a position of 'deficit,' and from the premise that disabled people lack capability. Furthermore, while there may be some jobs, or some parts of jobs, that disabled people cannot do, employers who believe in the capability of disabled people are prepared to have a conversation about what they **can** do – and how their capabilities might add value to their organisation. The critical issue is how capability is identified and measured.

Consider the role of good workplace assistance

A Chief Executive with a disability told us:

“I don't know how well I would be suited to my position if I were looking for employment as a CEO or something like that unless, of course, I've got very, very good assistance, and I have had very good assistance in this workplace.”

A general theme in employer narratives was that capability is determined on the basis of a standard set by non-disabled people, and based on Western ideals. Independent role functioning, individual ability across a role, and performing a role without the need for 'too much' support were emphasised. However, what if consideration were given to capability on the basis of interdependence, collective functioning and providing support as a norm to enable everyone's best performance? A continued emphasis on role fit means that disabled people are required to prove themselves, which is not typically the case for non-disabled people whose foundational capabilities are not generally questioned. An alternative approach to employment could be to ask how a role might be organised differently to fit more candidates or how teams might work collaboratively to utilise skills in a collective way. Based on our findings, fundamental changes in the way capability is understood and measured are required to enable more people to enter the Industries. Education about what support means and looks like is also needed to move beyond support only for disability employment.

Minimising disability

Connected to the emphasis on role fit was the erasure of disability. It was common for employers to say that disability did not really matter as long as the role could be performed to a high standard, and that they were very open to applications from disabled people. One employer with experience of disability made the following comment in relation to hiring disabled people:

“I don't imagine we would be setting any limits. Oh, our previous accountant was very deaf. I mean, directionally, he could hear ... People needed to be aware of that ... when they were talking to him. You know, [you] couldn't just sort of talk away to him behind his back without knowing ... it was just a matter of knowing that, and it [his d/Deafness] didn't make any difference at all.”

It was also common for employers to say that if resumes were equal, there would be no problem with employing disabled people. When employers were asked whether they thought disabled people experienced barriers to achieving a competitive resume, most had not considered this issue. The erasure of disability was common, and participants sometimes seemed uncomfortable or as if they felt disability shouldn't be a focus. Employers did not appear to think that disability was relevant in people's roles at work. Additionally, participants often did not understand certain 'disabilities' as constituting a disability, particularly in relation to neurodivergence. While this belief may be well-intended, recognition of disability status, without assigning negative value to said status, is an important foundational step to enable workplace inclusion.

Employers also identified situations when a person's disability and associated needs or accommodations were not articulated to their manager. For example, one participant inherited a direct report who had disclosed as autistic, but this was never shared in the handover. As a result, this manager struggled to communicate with the autistic person. This is an example of employers having some level of disability awareness, but not communicating about disability openly, and in a way that enables workplace success.

Discussion

The minimisation of disability is common due to ingrained ableism and a *medical model* that frames disability as something negative or unmentionable. While the intention to "see the person, not the impairment" may seem positive, it overlooks a crucial part of their experience. Disabled people, especially those facing multiple marginalisations, often work twice as hard to achieve half as much, as the world is not built for their success. Recognising how disability impacts job opportunities, education, and social skill development is vital. Without considering systemic barriers, expecting a competitive resume and hiring on this basis misses the full picture. This isn't about lowering expectations but

adapting them. Without acknowledging and addressing these barriers, industries will miss out on the valuable contributions of disabled talent.

Act of charity and an absence of consistent strategic support

Employers who took part in this study had engaged positively around disability employment and intended to include disabled people. However, this was often framed in charitable terms or underpinned by a deficit view that the employer was not generally aware of. For example, an employer shared this experience of hiring disabled people and while they intended to be inclusive, their comments reflect a belief that the employment of disabled people is an issue of charity.

“I do have two staff here that do have ADHD and sort of a bit of dyslexia type thing. They're in our design and sales team. And it is hard because, you know, if they make a mistake, it can be quite costly. So yeah, I mean, we've had one with us for just over two years, and we would have liked to have hoped that they were working by themselves by now, but they're not, they're still very much all the work gets checked. One day, they can be great. Like they can smash it out, and there's no mistakes, and then the next day, it's like a switch has been, you know, flipped and so many mistakes and you know, just things that are basics. Yeah, so it's, it's hard, and we've tried to work with them, and you know, what works for you, you know, is there a checklist type system that we can help you use, but the problem is, is they'll go down the list and they'll do one, two, three and then they'll skip to seven, eight.

They just can't even follow a list. Which is, you know, quite difficult. So, you know, we, we are on the cusp of is this actually going to work for us? [It's] probably costing us more money than what you're making us. But we will exhaust all avenues before we, you know, we go down that track of perhaps unemployment. It does, you know, it does get frustrating. And I do have staff that get really frustrated with it. But again, I'm that person that I look at from all different angles, and I want to try and make it work for everyone. And so yeah, like I say, I'll exhaust everything.”

Discussing the impact of disability employment, the employer says:

“I'm doing the work, which takes twice as long as someone capable. And then I've got someone who is capable of checking it. And then if there's mistakes, they have to go back and be fixed. So something that you know, might take a couple of hours for a capable person who's really good at their job, is taking two days.”

While it is admirable that this employer is providing opportunities for disabled people, the way that they frame their experiences here reinforces deficit frameworks and positions disability employment as an act of charity. Employers need support to recognise how to implement systemic and ongoing supports that enable their employees, which will shift the conversation away from perceived individual deficit.

It was commonplace for employers to agree that disability employment was a good thing to do, however, it was less common for employers to acknowledge disabled people's capacity to contribute to their workforce in ways that would be traditionally considered valuable. It's important that we support employers to recognise charitable framing and its impact on how disabled people's workplace role is understood.

Charitable framing was clearly evident in the language used by participants about their experience of employing disabled people. Examples of this can be seen in comments such as “the stars aligned” for a disabled person to be employed or “we needed to give disabled people a shot,” or describing themselves as “very fortunate” to not be disabled. These comments reinforce that disability awareness is framed in charitable terms and underpinned by deficit thinking. Deficit and charity frameworks maintain disability as an ‘outsider’ in the workforce and position it as a rarity instead of a cornerstone.

However, it is important to recognise that charitable framing comes from the desire to do the right thing. Further, deficit and charitable frameworks are so prevalent in contemporary society that employers cannot be expected to recognise it. Employers require support to examine their own assumptions and grow their disability awareness.

The employers who participated in this research all wanted to engage with this topic but had little support to do so, in part because of historic under-investment in growing industry-centred disability

awareness. Such an under-investment has been considered acceptable, because deficit-framing is commonplace in society, limiting the extent to which the community sees value in increasing their disability awareness. Ultimately, disability has been framed through a welfare, charitable and deficit lens. Shifting this is part of shifting industry towards disability inclusion.

Additionally, participants felt that there has been little leadership support for shifting how disability employment is viewed, which has made it harder for them to make progress. A recently retired disabled employer said:

“I have to say, the government's attitude to disability and employment is so poor. And so uncommitted. Just by comparison with [American state], [that has a] fantastic drive to get people out of the sheltered workshops and into paid employment. And that came really from the top. Once that started happening, that changed everything. The families often didn't want it to happen because they felt that their children, although adults, enjoyed going to the sheltered workshop environment and so on. They were being paid nothing...And it was really the parents that had to be convinced, but [the state government] took the attitude of no one was going to be left behind, and everybody was going to have the opportunity to obtain paid work. And it really had to come from the top.”

This employer described his experience engaging with local thought leaders and decision-makers:

“It was terribly polite, and there was a level of enthusiasm. People said, "Yes, that sounds like a great idea” or “how inspiring." But really, there was no commitment at all. And, frankly, from my observation, that has remained ever since. “

Accordingly, a shift away from charitable and deficit frameworks is the foundation for increasing awareness of disability employment, enabling sustainable long-term change. Business leaders, government and the public sector are a critical part of enabling and mobilising this. As one of the disabled employers said, “It is about seeing the potential of disabled people, and we are not doing this routinely in Aotearoa New Zealand.”

Discussion

Participants told us that systemic and consistent support is required to lift awareness and enable the sustainable employment of disabled people. This requires an Aotearoa New Zealand-wide dismantling of ableism. This does not mean that the government should solve this problem; rather, government leadership and investment, as well as corporate leadership and investment, communicate to the rest of society what should be valued and set a standard of behaviour. Consistent investment and support for employers is required to support a shift towards disability confidence and inclusion, and to build internal capacity in their own workplaces.

Not equals

Most employers that participated in our research could not recall working with a disabled person. Furthermore, if they had hired a disabled person, it had not been in a leadership role or in a role comparable to their own. This, combined with the language used to reference disability, suggests that employers do not perceive disabled people as their workplace equals, focusing instead on disabled peoples' lack of capability or potential economic or health and safety risk.

Relatedly, employers referenced the attractiveness of schemes like the [minimum wage exemption](#), where disabled people might perform low-level functions in their workplace. They said that they only employed a disabled person for a couple of days a month to do particular tasks and had no plans or had not thought about strategies to increase this level of employment. Employers also referenced work programmes where disabled people performed jobs 'nobody else' wanted to do.

Discussion

All roles have value. However, increasing disability employment should not solely focus on entry-level or low-paying roles. Disabled people should be represented across the entire pipeline of the workforce. Employers we spoke to believed that achieving this kind of representation would require investment to educate companies with apprentices about appropriate disability supports; investment in education and pathways for learners into Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics (STEM) and other relevant subjects; and transformation of the belief system around how work is valued.

It is important to ask ourselves whether workplaces have an inclusive culture that communicates and reinforces to disabled people the value they contribute, as well as their potential. While they continue to

exist, we must consider whether there is sufficiently robust oversight of subsidy schemes and their appropriate usage. The inclusion of disabled people in the workforce should not just be interpreted as access to a less expensive workforce or an opportunity to fill jobs ‘nobody’ wants to do. Further, it is important to consider the long-term impact of low wages, as many disabled people in the Industries are likely to be in traditionally lower-wage roles, making it difficult for them to get ahead financially.¹²⁸

At present, the system is not set up to support the employment and financial security of disabled people. Instead, the system invests in survival and penalises workforce participation. For example, if you earn over \$250.00 per week, your benefit is docked by 70 cents for every additional dollar earned.¹²⁹ This means if disabled people earn minimum wage (\$23.15 at the time of publication), they can work less than one and a half days a week before their benefit is affected. This approach does not encourage disabled people to increase their workforce participation, instead, it creates a culture where disabled people fear losing what they have. Investing in supporting people to become more financially secure, and encouraging them to work for this reason, is more likely to enable workforce participation. The policies around workforce participation and benefits for disabled people could be reoriented towards encouraging and scaffolding disabled people towards workforce participation. It should be about thriving, not just surviving.

Do you look like me?

Participants from smaller and often family businesses shared that while they were open to employing disabled people, they hadn’t as they tended to hire people they know or people who they consider a personality fit. Other employers also emphasised the importance of personality as their primary consideration when recruiting. An employer told us that:

“Everyone's sort of like, more likely to hire somebody that's most similar to them. Like we have a lot of young females working for us, and I think everybody is like-minded, and that's a beautiful thing in itself, but like that lack of inclusion and diversity probably [is present].”

In some cases, emphasis on personality fit or hiring people ‘like you’ is useful. For example, in a regional context, some employers said that they’d be more likely to employ a disabled person because

¹²⁸ (Cochrane, Fletcher, Pacheco & Plum, n.d.).

¹²⁹ (Work and Income, n.d).

regional communities are more tight-knit and so are more likely to understand one another's capability and invest in one another, particularly given personnel resources are thinner regionally. One employer explained how inclusion is enabled in regional contexts:

“[In regional Aotearoa New Zealand, because the talent pool is smaller] in some respects, if you can get a talented individual, they [employers] will be more accommodating ... So for example, we had someone working for a while on our [team] who was in a wheelchair. And that was because he was someone known to the community. And he was wanting to explore that as a career. And so the council gave him an internship, and everyone was on board with it straight away because [they knew him]. So I think in some respects, in rural and provincial New Zealand, it may be easier ... especially if someone is part of the community.”

However, an emphasis on personality fit can also be harmful, if disabled, especially neurodivergent people, cannot mirror expected workplace behaviours or are not ‘like’ the rest of the team, they can be disregarded as potential employees. One employer spoke about this, saying that her autistic direct report is often misinterpreted or considered ‘difficult’ to communicate with. This can be a marginalising experience for the disabled employee, and mark them as an outsider amongst the rest of their team, who are very similar. Our findings suggest that it is important to support employers, particularly from small businesses, to recognise the need to broaden their ideas about who can be a successful member of their team, and include disabled people.

Discussion

About 97 per cent of businesses in Aotearoa New Zealand are considered small businesses with less than 20 employees.¹³⁰ Participants felt that small businesses are likely to hire from communities they know or from communities they can relate to. It is therefore important to support these employers to increase their knowledge and awareness about disability, so that the disabled community becomes one they engage with and hire from. Further, educating employers and building recognition of how disabled people present or may act in social situations is important so that ‘personality fit’ doesn’t become a mechanism for exclusion. Lastly, participants suggested that inclusion is more likely in regional towns. Given this, there is an opportunity to support regional industry to recognise and build on that inclusion.

¹³⁰ (Ministry of Business, Innovation & Employment, 2024; NZ Business, 2024).

Nobody says anything

For many employers, the absence of disclosure is a significant challenge that prevents the development of more widespread disability awareness. One provider who employs apprentices said that only three of his cohort had disclosed their disability, but he believed that a further 37 learners would benefit from disability support and had not disclosed. It was common for employers to say that they thought someone in their team could benefit from disability support, but they had not broached it because the person had not disclosed it. This absence of disclosure directly impacts the availability of, and access to, supports that could enable a disabled person in the workplace.

The issue of disclosure also arose because some employers seemed to believe they were entitled to knowledge of their employees' disability status but it wasn't always clear if this was because they desired to support disabled people in the workplace. For example, an employer told us that she had circulated a resume of a disabled person without disclosing their impairment, only to be contacted by an industry peer and told she should have let people know the candidate was disabled when she circulated the resume. There was a sense that knowledge of someone's disability status led to an underestimation of that person's capability which shows the impact of deficit framing. At times, employers said they enquired about disability status in interviews or other forums by asking directly if someone had any impairments. This would however not be aligned with legislative requirements.¹³¹

Often the responsibility for achieving visibility was placed upon disabled people by participants. Similarly, employers placed emphasis on the need for disabled people to disclose their disability in order to support it, and many employers hoped they had created a safe environment within which this disclosure could occur. Disclosure is directly linked with visibility; more people coming forward as disabled will support a growth in sector awareness and a broadening of employer experience.

Discussion

Increased disclosure would support employers to build more accessible environments and increase their understanding of their employees' needs. However, accessibility cannot be dependent on individual disclosure. Employers must instead be supported to implement a baseline for accessibility that all candidates can benefit from, whether or not they disclose. Responsibility for implementing this could be shared across industry, decision-makers, the disability community and government rather than being the responsibility of disabled people alone.

¹³¹ (Community Law, 2024; Ministry of Social Development, 2024b).



Section summary

This section detailed employer insights from the survey and interviews as they relate to the research questions. These are:

- Employers are engaged but require support to achieve disability workplace inclusion.
- Emphasis is placed on individual capability, which often disadvantages disabled people. There is an opportunity to consider transforming this focus, and helping workplaces to understand and leverage interdependence.
- Deficit and charitable frameworks of disability impact employer understanding and affect the opportunities afforded to disabled people. Education, awareness and support will likely help to shift this.
- More awareness is needed of how disability impacts the journey into, and the experience of, the workforce. Employers need to be supported to get comfortable with the concept of disability, and with talking about it in the workplace and elsewhere.
- The visibility of disability, and the disclosure of disability status need to be supported in order to increase employer awareness of appropriate workplace supports for disabled people.
- Employer inclusion of disabled people was often irregular, and disabled people were infrequently in leadership positions. Support is needed to scaffold more paths for disabled people into regular roles, and eventually, into leadership.
- Employers, particularly those in small businesses, tend to hire people based on personality fit. In regions, this is useful for disabled people who are more embedded in the community, however, investment is needed to support employers' understanding of the many benefits of employing disabled people.
- Employers recognised that racism and sexism still impact industry representation and the experiences of women and non-Pākehā people in the Industries. It is important to consider that these are not separate to disability, and that a joined up approach is needed to shift workplace cultures towards inclusion.

Disabled community insights

The disabled people who participated in this research came from many corners of Aotearoa New Zealand. Many of them are senior members of their industry, some are entrepreneurs, and some are key players within their local towns and communities. Others are starting out and have an enthusiasm for employment that is unmatched. They are also loyal, with many working for the same company for many years. The insights gathered from participant experiences will play a key role in helping us understand how to better support this community in the workforce.

This section reports on common themes from the interviews or focus groups with disabled people. It highlights the enablers for disabled people in industry, which are not dissimilar to enablers in wider society. These common themes or enablers are:

- Balancing of power: recognising how disabled people are uniquely impacted by power dynamics in the workplace and ensuring appropriate remuneration.
- Being believed: accessing disability identity and a diagnosis, and being part of a responsive environment with someone who believes in you.
- Educational attainment: being supported to obtain a qualification.
- Walkable cities: not having to rely on someone else for transport.
- Belonging and support: includes accessing family support, having a social infrastructure that can help you get a foot in the door, and being part of tight-knit communities.
- Future planning: establishing a strategy and system to protect yourself in employment, including by utilising legal tools.
- Proactive employers: active work to achieve accessibility is done by employers so accessibility doesn't rest on disabled people raising their needs.
- Demonstrating capability: having a positive attitude, going out of your way to do more, or having an experience employers can relate to.
- Allyship: support for disabled people to thrive.
- Supportive policy: funding and supporting policy that helps workplaces to become accessible.
- Progression: support for employees' growth and development.
- Technology: an emerging support in the workplace.

Recognising how disabled people are uniquely impacted by workplace power dynamics

The disabled people we spoke to desired opportunities to lead, be heard, contribute, and have their capabilities recognised, without having to minimise their culture, disability, or support needs. These are the attributes of a workplace where power is shared. While the disabled people we spoke to had experienced these dynamics at times due to the influence of an individual leader or manager, this was not a common experience.

Multiple respondents talked about their employment anxiously and were continually worried about their “boss” - in ways that were at times to their detriment. Some participants, for example, were worried about taking sick leave for fear of being reprimanded. While power dynamics are a feature of all workplaces, disabled participants were less able to recognise unhealthy dynamics and advocate for their agency. One participant in particular said several times that she had learnt to do exactly what the “boss” wants with no back-chat, expressing deep anxiety around workplace dynamics. This suggests that there is a need to support disabled people to understand power dynamics in the workplace, and to ensure employers understand how disabled people can be uniquely impacted by these.

The power imbalance experienced by disabled people also, at times, extended to remuneration. We spoke to several disabled people who were not being paid for their work, one of whom disclosed a history of institutionalisation. Further, one participant who was very concerned about doing the right thing by their “boss” had also had experiences of poor treatment in transitional care and negative interactions with the Courts and Police. These compounded the experience of anxiety around people in perceived positions of power and increased the likelihood of a lack of agency in the workplace.

It was also common for disabled people who had experienced a power imbalance in the workplace to be between jobs or to have struggled in their current role.

Discussion

Some participants' stories evidenced that success at work *is* possible for disabled people in a power-balanced workplace. Such a workplace is a rarity, they told us, with an imbalance much more common. Power imbalances impact disabled people in the workplace or on their journey into industry in a number of ways, for example, increased anxiety, obstructed financial growth, decreased confidence or

an erosion of trust. These imbalances also have an impact beyond the workplace and into every life domain. They also tend to impact the disability community disproportionately because the *medical model* and ableism have pushed the community into a disempowered, deficit position.

Being believed or believed in

The importance of being believed, or believed in, was emphasised by many of the disabled people we spoke to. This came up in discussions about disability status, diagnosis, the impact of getting a foot in the door or having a supportive manager, and the enabling nature of a responsive or inclusive work environment more broadly. Each of these is discussed in more detail below:

Disability status

Some participants with chronic health conditions or neurodivergence expressed anxiety over whether their disability status was 'believed' in the workplace. Lack of belief or understanding was a barrier in the workplace, particularly when disabilities were dynamic or presented differently than expected. One chronically ill manufacturing employee described being upset at the way people responded to her disability in the workplace. Colleagues would become frustrated that she was "away again" and resented carrying her workload for her. This resulted in disablist microaggressions which caused her considerable emotional strain. Another respondent shared how he struggled to build relationships in the workplace because his neurodivergent traits were not widely understood. This persisted, even once he had access to a diagnosis that he could communicate to others, and which helped both him and his family understand the reasons for his behaviour.

Importance of a diagnosis

Those without a diagnosis had a much harder time being believed and/or understanding the origin of their behaviours, which substantially impacted them in their workplace. Many participants had obtained a diagnosis later in life. A senior peak body member who is neurodivergent and lives with experiences of mental distress commented on the impact of receiving an adult diagnosis in this way:

“Once I got diagnosed, then life became a lot easier because it's like, now I understand the why. Now I can explain why ... [I can say] I told you right at the beginning of this that I can't read your facial expression and don't understand the context. “

Two participants had obtained adult diagnoses of neurodivergence. A construction employee with a recent diagnosis of autism had been hesitant to let others know but, after initial discomfort, told us that the diagnosis has had a positive impact on their life:

“My discovery of myself and my disability happened while I was in the workforce, and yeah, it was certainly something I kept to myself because I'd seen other people who were clearly keeping other things to themselves ... In the construction industry, [it was] quite eye-opening, because people are going to bottle that up and not say anything. ... [A diagnosis] just actually gives you more tools, ... and that was magic for me, you know, to kind of be like, oh, I can start to actually look at things differently now.”

The other participant worked in both engineering and construction and was not diagnosed as neurodivergent until quite recently after having worked in the industries for many years. They described their journey in the workplace as trial and error, explaining that their diagnosis supported their self-understanding and contextualised why they worked in certain ways, like having a day off during the week to recharge. Therefore, access to a diagnosis was a critical part of the holistic support that enabled people to function in the workplace; even if they chose not to disclose their impairment, a diagnosis supported self-understanding. This better equipped participants for workforce success and enabled them to ask for help when needed. Timely access to primary health and diagnostic tools is essential as a diagnosis goes some way toward enabling disabled people's integration into, and success in, the workforce.

Being believed in / a foot in the door

A neurodivergent respondent also described their experience of having a supportive staff member at work, and how difficult their workplace had become since that person left. He described his experience of behaviours that amounted to workplace hazing¹³² or bullying, which he found very difficult to deal

¹³² (Stop Hazing, 2020).

with. He explained that he has been misunderstood all “the way through his education,” something he described as a significant barrier. His family believed employer education around neurodivergent traits was needed across his sector, particularly where legacy behaviours, such as male-dominated cultures, were still in place.

It was common for disabled people working in the Industries to describe being included and successful because of one individual who believed in them and understood them. This person supported them to ‘get a foot in the door,’ or was integral to their workforce journey. A wheelchair user describes obtaining work experience following many months of unemployment:

“I turned up at [the workplace]. They arranged for a guy to meet me downstairs. He helped me out of the car. This was the CEO. He was acting CEO. ... And he met me downstairs, got my chair out, helped me up, showed me where I'd be working, and introduced me to some of those teams. And then, I worked with a guy from 10 am till 3 pm for the first month, and then the second month, I got pneumonia. [So I] only ended up working those one, one to one and a half months out of three months [with them]. But he [the CEO] kept ringing me and kept in contact with me to make sure I was feeling okay because I'd worked for those hours, you know, I gave my best and worked hard ... I didn't, you know, you didn't spend too much time having lunch ... And then [later] he rang me up and said, oh, we've got a job going, [in our] structural teams, would you like to come in for an interview? And I said, yeah, that'd be great. But I got in there, and there was no interview. He [the CEO] just said, here's your boss. Took me over, introduced me to my boss. [The CEO] said, that's your desk. This is the key to the basement where you can park your car, and I'll show you where to park it...If it wasn't for [that CEO], I probably wouldn't be [at the firm] today because he was the one that just saw me as a person ... and helped me give it a go.”

The impact of having someone who believes in you and getting a foot in the door cannot be underestimated; it was central to the success of many of the people we spoke to and a true enabler for them. As we were conducting interviews, a regional manufacturer was getting ready to employ a person with a learning disability on work placement with equal pay to others. There is no doubt about the positive impact of actions such as these. Those who did not have someone who believed in them or gave them a chance, and those with fewer community connections, were more likely not to be employed. Whilst individual belief was an enabler, it indicates an absence of both systemic support

and/or belief in the capability of disabled employees. This absence of structural support acts as a barrier for many disabled people.

A more broadly inclusive work environment

Workplaces that had moved away from legacy behaviours such as racism, sexism and ageism better supported disabled people in the workplace. One Pacific disabled person spoke of the impact racism had had on his mental wellbeing in this way:

“I will really rely on my faith, but sometimes, the way they talk to you. It broke my team down, like there's a Fijian boy I used to work with. He said he felt like he was back in the slave days. ... It just got real dark. I know I'm Tongan, but I classify myself as a kiwi, he made me feel like a real Pacific Islander from 'the islands.'”

Both employers and disabled women told us that sexism was still an issue. Some disabled women told us that sexism already pigeon-holed their careers, so they feel disability would have had an even more significant impact. One woman in construction commented:

“It was kind of a little bit like, hey, what do we do with this promising young woman? We put her into a managerial position. Whereas I probably would have loved to have gone down a bit more of a technical route, yeah, but that just, it just really wasn't available in the space I was in. So, I was definitely encouraged to ... go into leadership and ... bring people up with me. I don't really know ... how that would have played out if I was speaking more openly about disability.”

Another neurodivergent woman who had worked in both construction and engineering said that she felt pressure to return to full-time work after her baby was born, which she did to maintain her position, even though she later burnt out. It was common for disabled women to say they wanted to work part-time to manage their impairment and be there for family, but were penalised for doing so. Older disabled people also referenced compounded difficulty obtaining employment and were more often than not in seasonal, irregular or between roles in industry.

For disabled people who also face sexism, racism or ageism, navigating participation in the workforce was that much harder. Disabled people praised workplaces that recognised and challenged sexism, racism and other similar behaviours as being more accessible workplaces.

Consider: the impact of being reflected in your workplace.

After obtaining a late diagnosis of a chronic illness and invisible disability and dealing with impacts from mental distress, a Māori wahine working in logistics shared the connection she forged with other wāhine Māori in her workplace. She explained how they believed her and she didn't have to explain herself when her health condition impacted her ability to work, which made a big difference. At the same time, this wahine, however, yearned for more cultural connection because her disability had impacted her ability to visit her marae. Her story reflects the positive difference made by community in the workplace, and also reflects a need to enhance accessibility to culture.

Disabled people understood that grappling with these forms of prejudice would assist them to work in more fulfilling and sustainable ways because disability is one of many identities a person may carry into their workplace. Disabled people felt enabled by workplaces that recognised other forms of prejudice because enabling all disabled people in the workplace was not separate from enabling other under-represented groups, such as women, wāhine Māori, or young people.

Discussion

Enablers for disabled people centred around being believed by way of:

- acknowledgment of one's disability status
- receiving support from someone who believes in you
- accessing a diagnosis
- demonstrated workplace commitment to an inclusive work environment.

However, not everyone had access to these enablers. We spoke to more women who had struggled to obtain a diagnosis than men, and more non-Pākehā people who did not have the benefit of someone believing in them. It was also more common for women to reference not being believed. These enablers were also uncommon across the workforce and largely depended on individual circumstances.

Enabling industry would therefore involve an investment in equalising access to diagnostic tools, recognising compounding inequities, and committing to dismantling ableism. These measures would

counter disablism, racism, sexism and other specific discriminations that impact particular groups of disabled people.

It is well documented that diagnostic tools tend to be coded male. Arky explains:¹³³

“the model that we have for a classic autism diagnosis has really turned out to be a male model. That’s not to say that girls don’t ever fit it, but girls tend to have a quieter presentation, with not necessarily as much of the repetitive and restricted behaviour, or it shows up in a different way.”

Further, some forms of neurodivergence are made more difficult to diagnose due to the compounded impacts of racism and under-investment. Among them is Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, which is thought to affect up to 3,000 births each year,¹³⁴ and disproportionately impacts Māori.¹³⁵ An expert, Dr Valerie McGinn, told us that it is “very difficult to diagnose” and that it’s “easier to get diagnosed as a child, but then that depends where you live. Most adults only get diagnosed within the criminal justice system.” Dr McGinn explained that even adults with multiple identifying features of FASD remain undiagnosed. This means that many people with FASD and their families learn about their impairment after it has led to relationship breakdowns, limited their employment opportunities and/or access to daily life. Some people will never obtain a diagnosis. Based on what Dr McGinn shared, access to diagnosis is also impacted by the geographical location of the person seeking diagnosis.

In addition to the fact that men are more likely to be diagnosed neurodivergent, many diagnostic tools for disabilities are Westernised, and obtaining a diagnosis often requires assimilation to Western concepts.¹³⁶ It is therefore more likely that Pākehā will obtain a diagnosis. Participants told us that equalising access to diagnostic tools to support early and equitable diagnosis would in turn support disabled people’s access to and retention in the workforce. This means, in part, a critical assessment of diagnostic tools and processes to ensure that they are appropriate for the whole population and aligned to Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

¹³³ (Arky, 2023).

¹³⁴ (Te Whatu Ora Health New Zealand, 2024).

¹³⁵ (Romeo et al., 2023).

¹³⁶ (Tupou, Curtis, Taare-Smith, Glasgow & Waddington, 2021).

While we are ultimately working towards a society where ableism is dismantled and a diagnosis unnecessary for support or accessibility, the disabled people we spoke to told us that the absence of a diagnosis is a significant barrier. A diagnosis is currently critical to workforce enablement or its potential, and it is also essential for people's understanding of the self they bring to work.

The reassessment of workforce practices is also necessary so that women are not penalised for operating outside the established (male) norm and aren't subject to more inquiry than their male counterparts. It is well documented that women are penalised for operating outside 'normalised' work hours or expectations and "are more likely to experience belittling microaggressions, such as having their judgement questioned or being mistaken for someone more junior"¹³⁷ and this is even more likely for non-white women.¹³⁸ In other words, disabled women, and non-Pākehā disabled women in particular, face compounding disadvantages; recognising these and making them more visible is an important step towards greater inclusion.

On the matter of compounding inequities, it is helpful to understand that the dismantling of ableism also contributes to a restored¹³⁹ society, one where the damage created by the ongoing process of colonisation, as well as racism, sexism and ageism, is repaired. This is because ableism is about rebalancing power and shifting away from the idea of 'normalcy.' In other words, being anti-racist, anti-disablist, anti-sexist, anti-ageist and embedding the ethic of restoration are not separate pursuits; they are connected under ableism. Dismantling ableism in the workplace therefore, supports equity for all employees.

Lastly, while an enabler, individual people's belief in and support of disabled people in the workforce is unsustainable. People with greater proximity to normal and greater access to a supporting infrastructure (such as being Pākehā, having family support and education) are more likely to access this enabler. Making access to workforce opportunities more equitable requires a shift to systemic support, a transformation that will involve deliberate investment and focus. Inclusive leadership working towards disability inclusion across the Industries will be critical to enabling real change.

¹³⁷ (Meyer, 2023).

¹³⁸ (McKinsey & Company, 2023).

¹³⁹ (Jackson, 2021).

Educational attainment

Disabled participants who had access to a first chance in the workforce or were working successfully also tended to have some sort of formalised qualification, either a degree, apprenticeship, or certificate. Obtaining the qualification often came with significant challenges, but gaining it meant they had a slightly smoother path toward employment. They also found it easier to get that first opportunity, which then set them up well for sustained labour market participation. The disabled people we interviewed who entered the Industries without qualifications experienced greater difficulty getting their first employment opportunity and struggled to gain consistent work.

Further, while some were working successfully or had completed their qualification, it is important to note how hard it was to acquire these and how poorly they were supported to do this. In one case, an infrastructure employee spoke about the impact of not having a note-taker during his tertiary study and how access to a computer transformed his education.

“When I was at university, I did both a [Bachelor of Science] and a master's degree. When I did my first degree, I had no assistance; basically, I just scraped through, and they told me never to come back. Basically, because I couldn't write in the exams, it took me three times as much time to write clearly. I had to slow down and think about everything I wrote, and so that made it quite difficult.

When I did my master's, I was given, you know, allowed to use a computer and at least the right to do my exam on it. I still didn't have a class note-taker, which I should have had. But you know, [when I had the computer for my exams] I got a first class and never got under an A minus. And before the computer, I was struggling to get, you know, C's. I think that is actually a real issue when it comes to performing in any of these industries because you have to be able to write and, you know, fill in forms and all that sort of stuff. And if you have difficulty in doing that, are they gonna give you support? I would doubt it. “

Other participants told us that university staff had said they wouldn't be able to study after acquiring their disability, and that they were disillusioned by their curriculum's subject matter and its failure to acknowledge accessibility or disabled people despite being highly relevant. These considerable

challenges are barriers to long-term workforce participation. While education is an enabler, the qualifications are in no way easy to obtain.

This impacted disabled apprentices as well, for example, they told us about the difficulties they experienced finding suitable work based placements because of widely held deficit views about disability. Based on what participants told us, we believe more disabled people enter the workforce pipeline, but fewer make it to employment, in part because of curtailed educational opportunities. A disabled participant's experience in construction reinforces this view. He gained his endorsements to drive diggers and rollers through a friend's support but hasn't been in employment since. He told us:

“[I started] driving diggers and rollers and that stuff [because my friend gave me the opportunity]. And [my friend] then he was like, well, okay, let's get you those licences so that you're legally allowed to be on the worksite. ... I'm a hundred per cent certain there is no way I could have applied for a job [in the usual way] because *I've applied for several since and not got a single one and this is after I've had my endorsements.*”

This person may be considered too much of a health and safety risk, and the Accident Compensation Corporation (ACC), one of two main funding bodies for disabled people in Aotearoa New Zealand, denied adaptations to machines that would make him safe on the worksite.

Discussion

The need for anti-ableist, accessible and inclusive education is well traversed in other reports.¹⁴⁰ Insights from this research outline the positive impact that educational attainment has on workforce opportunity and, therefore, emphasises the critical need for accessible education. This is not just about ensuring disabled people have the holistic support they need to succeed in a tertiary education context, it is also about reconsidering how qualifications are delivered, assessed and managed. Accessible education will enable people to acquire the skills they need to succeed and, in turn, ensure that Aotearoa New Zealand benefits from the skills of every person who enters the workforce.

Further, these insights highlight the need for a paradigm shift in workforce pathways; the construction worker's story described above indicates that while traditional pathways into employment are not equal

¹⁴⁰ (Te Pūkenga, 2021; Smith, 2024).

for disabled people, they **can** obtain endorsements or qualifications given the opportunity. Consideration should therefore be given to creating more access points into industry, and to developing policy that enables transitions through these and into the workforce. This kind of change will also reduce welfare costs.

Easily navigatable cities

Disabled employees told us that they benefited from walkable cities and the ability to use public transport to get to and from work. Distance from a workplace which required the ability to drive made employment harder for some participants. Regional participants were more likely to indicate that being near their workplace and able to walk or cycle was an enabler. Some participants told us that, due to the absence of accessible transport or other mechanisms to cover the cost of their work travel, they personally covered the additional costs of transport and support workers to enable their workforce participation.

Discussion

The need for accessible, frequent public transport is well traversed by other reports.¹⁴¹ The research findings on the enabling role of walkable cities and public transport reinforce the need for a holistic view of disability inclusion enablers in the workforce. These stretch across health, transport, and education, and include potential actions within the employment arena too. Investment in accessible public transport enables disabled people's participation and agency in their communities and workforces.

Consider: I would have earned more money on the dole!

A participant told us about the life-long impact his employment had; he didn't tell his employers about his disability and instead paid out of his own pocket for people to support him.

¹⁴¹ (Doran, Crossland, Brown & Stafford, 2022).

“My income [within infrastructure] was less than [the] dole. I basically paid a huge financial cost. So I never charged properly. I always thought, well, one hour of my work is half an hour of somebody else's work because they can do things a lot quicker. So I undercharged for my services. Dreadfully! I overworked and paid other people to do parts I needed help with. So, it was a financial disaster for me. It was really terrible. Yeah. And that was the main consequence of my disability, was [financial], my own rate of work and how much I could do.”

This participant had worked on some of Aotearoa New Zealand's most significant infrastructure projects. The participant was clear that now he is older, he is feeling the impacts of a lifetime of undervaluing his work. Given the opportunity, he is also clear that he'd do things differently. This story illustrates the impacts of ableism and the way it drives people to strive for a specific version of perfection, even at great personal cost. An enabler in this context would be for disabled people to understand the value of their work and their right to the kind of support they need to do it.

Belonging

Believing in and supporting disabled people as an enabler of their workforce inclusion has already been discussed in this report. A significant dimension of this was access to family and/or community support. Participants who belonged to disability sports teams and had the support of parents or friends were more likely to succeed in the workforce. In one case, a participant described how he went back to university to continue studying engineering after acquiring his disability; his mother accompanied him to assist him to get to class. He later earned his degree despite being told by the Dean that he would not be able to do so. In another example, a young neurodivergent participant said his mum's support with writing emails and working through his contract enabled his navigation of a sometimes difficult workplace. For example, “I have a bit of help from my mum, just like trying to work out emails. I'm not as good at talking in person. [Mum helps me] script out an email to write to them. Yeah, I do need it.”

There were also cases where people did not have family support or access to a wide network that could assist them with the demands of work and life. This was more often the case for women, people with learning disabilities, and Māori and Pacific Disabled People, which reinforces the compounding inequities faced by these communities.

Many of those with learning disabilities who had stronger community connection lived in regional areas, and it was common for participants to describe regional communities as more tightly integrated, which supported workforce participation. One recently retired disabled employer said it was easier to galvanise around disability employment in his regional community than in an urban area. He talked about the way that his community's involvement in a disability employment programme across infrastructure, construction, and logistics brought about a transformational sense of belonging.

“What we found was the people who came on to the disability [employment] programme, who might have grown up in the community and might be isolated, they feel disenfranchised. They have never really taken part because they were always treated separately through the education system. But then [the programme] built their confidence to be able to meet with people because they were doing something of benefit to the community. And the community recognised that people are seen as contributing, and people's attitudes started to change. So we'd see people who'd be walking through town, you know, with their head down and lacking in confidence, who would then be acknowledged in the street by other people, and through that simple exchange, and recognition and acknowledgement that they were doing something worthwhile, of mutual benefit. That then started to make things really work.”

It was common for people with learning disabilities to tell us about the experience of stigma and difficulty forming relationships in their community. This distanced them from the enabling power of the community and made their role in industry more difficult.

Sometimes, accessing or establishing social networks within the disabled persons' workforce was difficult. For example, a person working in infrastructure described how he yearned for more friendships at work and struggled to take part in social conversations. Other participants shared this same desire. One physically disabled member of the manufacturing workforce and another in infrastructure said they would like to be more involved in the social dimensions of their industry. Social inclusion is an important workforce dimension that helps add meaning to work.

Some participants with learning disabilities told us they loved work because of the connections it afforded them. For example, an entrepreneur with a learning disability who worked as part of a team of

manufacturers described his workplace as “incredible” and detailed his aspirations for expansion and the opportunities he’s had in his community. Living regionally, he felt like he was better understood at work, and was a bigger part of something.

Ultimately, participants indicated that community integration is an enabling force for their participation in the Industries. These insights reinforce the transformative possibilities of the shift from independence to interdependence, something that Māori and Pacific communities have long known and practised.



Discussion

The insights from these participants highlight the possibilities available to industry when the focus is shifted from individual capability toward community, and from individualism to collectivism. The success enjoyed by those who felt they belonged in their community and felt understood by employers was clear. Our findings suggest that an enabling factor for disabled people's employment in industry is an investment in the disabled person's family, whānau or aiga, and the network, not just the individual. Strong families are key to success.

Strengthening the collective, the family and the infrastructure around the disabled person, rather than just focusing on individual employment interventions, has the potential to improve employment and other social outcomes for disabled people. Such a collective investment would mean that as disabled people move through the different domains of life, they can remain empowered by a consistent supporting infrastructure. A community / collective focus, rather than an individual or siloed focus,¹⁴² will enable consistency that could ultimately strengthen the long-term resilience and sustainability of disability employment in the Industries.

Forethought for their own future

One participant, who identified as d/Deaf and had experience across chronic health as well, shared her journey in the construction industry, one that was impacted by disablism, audism¹⁴³ and sexism. Compounding her marginalisation was the feeling she was “between worlds” because she didn't quite fit into the d/Deaf community and didn't fit into the hearing world either. To protect against these prejudices, she equipped herself with tools to advocate for her rights.

In construction, she encountered overt discrimination from a supervisor who was both sexist and dismissive of her d/Deaf identity. This hostile environment forced her to leave a job she otherwise enjoyed. She explained that in her working life, she has constantly been accused of having “attitude” or being “angry” when she requests workplace support; up until then, when she assimilated to what she called “hearing norms,” she was well received. A recurring pattern for this d/Deaf professional was being restructured out of companies when a supportive individual leaves. She felt this underscored systemic biases against her due to her deafness. She described a consistent lack of understanding of

¹⁴² (English, 2015; Whaikaha Ministry of Disabled People, n.d.).

¹⁴³ Discrimination or prejudice against individuals who are Deaf or hard of hearing.

her needs, both as a d/Deaf person and as someone experiencing other chronic health needs. On one particular occasion, when training, she was pitted against a male, hearing and non-disabled peer, and assessed based on speed and other factors that favoured her competitor. Afterwards, she describes being dismissed from her role because of assumptions made about her and her performance that were based on stereotypes rather than her actual performance.

Protecting herself, this woman leveraged her rights and sought mediation, on multiple occasions. This strong and resilient woman has mobilised and organised to look out for herself, learning about securing optimal interpreter funding and her rights in job interview settings. She stressed that people must be accountable to their policies. By leveraging legal tools and advocating for herself, she has made sure she is protected from the discriminatory practices that have characterised her workplace experience. This example highlights an urgent need to educate employers, industry and workplaces about d/Deaf culture and support access to language and accommodations. The gender and disability dimensions of this story illustrate the combined headwinds faced by disabled and/or d/Deaf women.

The story shared above exemplifies how some disabled people protected themselves within a workforce which did not protect them. In another example, a Pākehā autistic man, who also experienced mental distress, described the steps he had taken to hold onto his position. He negotiated a robust redundancy package, established his own business to fall back on, disclosed his disability so his behaviour could not be misinterpreted, and spent time getting physically fit in order to protect himself in the workplace. This participant was successful in his sector but doubted if he ever transitioned companies that he'd have another supportive leader like the one he does now. He did not believe he would advance beyond his current position because of autistic traits that are perceived as social deficits.

In these examples, we see how disabled people use legal, social, negotiating and communication tools to protect and enable themselves in the workplace, or to help them hold people accountable for their discriminatory behaviours. While insulating yourself like this, knowing your rights and being equipped to exercise them, are workforce enablers, disabled workers should not have to protect themselves in this way. Further, the fact that successful people in industry do not believe they will advance, or that their next leader will be understanding, underscores the complex navigation disabled people at all levels must undertake in order to function in industry workforces.

Discussion

The forethought disabled people have to put into protecting their future is, in part, a necessary response to the pervasive impact of the *medical model*, ableism, disablism and audism in the case of the d/Deaf participant. However, the actions taken by participants to protect their position should also be seen as examples of disabled people's courage, initiative, adaptability and innovation. Through their own resourcefulness, participants have enabled themselves in the workplace or ensured that they were treated fairly. These actions should be considered exemplary, as well as evidence of the kinds of skills and abilities that the Industries need. These themes also crystallise the burdens disabled people have to carry in order to participate in the workforce, burdens which they either should not have to carry at all, or should not carry alone. The fact that such actions are necessary points to failings in government, society, industry practice and policy that are systemic.

It is clear from these findings that disability inclusion requires consistent, monitored and implemented workplace policies that recognise compounded inequities as well as the importance of the supportive network provided by family and community. These could scale to meet sector needs and workforce size. Not everyone has the ability to insulate themselves as some of our participants have done, and nor should they have to. Relying on individuals to enable their own workplace inclusion will mean that only those with access to resources, privilege and capacity will succeed. Systemic actions that equalise opportunity and mobilise the embedding of anti-ableist practice will lift everyone.

Proactive employers

Some participants were reluctant to obtain support until they were in acute need and people were often uncomfortable asking for help or vocalising their needs in the workplace. This suggests that while there is some level of comfort in obtaining support, this has not yet been normalised nor is it free from stigma; often disabled people felt most enabled when the burden for obtaining support did not rely solely on them voicing their own needs.

This is a barrier, one clearly articulated by a young woman working in manufacturing who had a dynamic health condition. She said that while it was admirable that her workplace wanted people to feel comfortable asking for help, this often meant navigating a power imbalance between her and her boss and disclosing private information - which took great courage. The participant noted there was

apprehension among her colleagues about vocalising their needs, but she felt that many would use workplace support if they were made freely available. The participant added:

“I think [our business] operates the people and culture model [based] on creating an environment where people can talk to their manager or senior team because we're a small business. [They believe] that everyone would just feel comfortable talking to people or talking about any concerns or any problems they might be having. But that's not the case. Not even for myself. I would [like] even just to have something that you could read or something that you could look at beforehand. And feel like, okay, you know what you're asking for. I think that would be really helpful for us. “

Based on these insights, proactive provision of support and a baseline¹⁴⁴ for accessibility in workplaces, are enablers for disabled people in the workforce. In order for their own needs to be met, most participants advocated for themselves, not many workplaces had accessibility supports / resources freely available. Further, for those apprehensive about obtaining support, it was common for them to put themselves at risk in order to function in the workplace. An example of this was a wheelchair user lifting themselves up and down stairs. This is both an additional physical burden and a health and safety risk. Implementing a baseline understanding in workplaces of accessibility will both improve health and safety overall, and mean that disabled people can focus on working rather than navigating the additional physical or other burdens associated with an inaccessible environment. Ultimately, proactive implementation is needed until the stigma is removed from accessing support.

Discussion

This section reinforces the importance of sharing the burden of accessibility rather than relying on disabled people to vocalise their needs, particularly given the barrier created by stigma. Moreover, supporting employers to implement a sustainable, proactive baseline for accessibility is an investment in the long-term safety and productivity of the whole workforce. Once this is in place, people can focus on their roles and do not need to put themselves in precarious situations in order to fit into an inaccessible environment.

¹⁴⁴ Consistent minimum standard.

Having an opportunity to demonstrate capability

It is of note that a significant proportion of the disabled people we spoke to had acquired their disabilities later in life. It is notable because it meant that they had navigated part of their education and/or workplace journey *without* their disability and, therefore, without the barriers discussed in this report. Their initial path into education or the workforce was therefore smoother. Participants who acquired their impairment while in industry, told us that there was an infrastructure of support to help them return to the workforce, one that was at times bolstered by ACC support.

While people with acquired impairments deal with significant trauma, it is nonetheless important to note that their educational and/or employment opportunities may not have been blunted across their whole lifetime. This can be beneficial for their individual inclusion journey, and is also an enabler for disability inclusion more broadly. This is because people with acquired impairments have had an opportunity to demonstrate their capability before being affected by disability and the connotations of deficit that go with it. Those who come to the workforce or study with a disability may not have had this same opportunity. The fact that so few of our participants were impaired for their whole lifetime reinforces this difference in experience. The life-long limiting of opportunity and access is, therefore, a significant barrier for some in the disability community.

Another dimension of demonstrating capability can be found in the lengths that some participants went to in order to demonstrate their capacity to their employers. One disabled member of the construction industry described crawling up and down stairs due to the absence of a working lift in his building. He says:

“I crawled up and down the stairs for several weeks because I had to. So I took one of my old chairs to work, and then it was taken upstairs and left upstairs. I would crawl up the stairs, leave a chair downstairs, and have a chair upstairs. Luckily, I'm in a position where I'm able to do that physically. If I wasn't in a physical position to be able to do that, I would have lost my job.”

The fact that participants felt it necessary to demonstrate capacity to this extent in order to keep their job shows how important perceptions of capacity are to enabling disabled people in the workforce.

Discussion

A lot can be learnt about industry enablers by interrogating absences from this research. There were very few participants with congenital impairments, for example, which are those that have impacted someone since birth. Many of the disabled people we spoke to became disabled **after** commencing their study or workforce journey. This means that many participants had had some opportunity to grow before being limited and impinged by society's response to, and the implications of, their disability. That period of growth is an enabler for workforce participation. Acknowledging that this is the case is not to assign value to one experience over another. Instead, it allows us to acknowledge the impact of disability, the **medical model** and ableism across a lifetime, and consider how even disabled children's capability is blunted.¹⁴⁵ This is likely to have an adverse impact on their individual labour force participation, and the success of future workforces in Aotearoa. While systemic changes are ultimately needed to shift this barrier, in the meantime, specific interventions are required to enable all disabled people the same opportunities to grow.

While being perceived as capable was enabling for some disabled participants, it is notable that this was sometimes taken to dangerous extremes. Disabled people having to change into versions of themselves that are more palatable to non-disabled people may facilitate their workforce participation in the short term, but this is an unfair and unsustainable burden for those individuals. Dismantling ableism and sharing this burden is necessary for disabled people to be seen as capable without having to erase or minimise their disability identity.

Consider: impact of unaddressed trauma returning to work following a workplace accident

While participants talked about reintegrating successfully into the workplace after acquiring a disability, this was not everyone's experience. We spoke to one disabled person who was working in one of the Industries when they sustained a significant injury. The accident could have been prevented had the proper processes been followed, meaning their workplace was largely at fault for the accident. Once recovered enough to return to work, the disabled person was told they would be welcomed back. However, the welcome was short-lived because of the discomfort some colleagues felt about the accident, and being reminded of it by the person's presence. Additionally, the workplace's attitude was

¹⁴⁵ (Education Review Office, 2022).

to transition the person's job into a "desk role," which the participant did not want. Ultimately, the disabled person felt it was too difficult to continue working in the engineering industry after everything that had happened and transitioned into a different industry more suited to their needs and ambitions post-accident.

This snapshot illustrates an important enabler for disabled people and communities, particularly those who have acquired their disability at work, the enabler being an investment in healing, well-being, and collective restoration for affected teams. The fact that this person left the sector because of how others made him feel is a loss, not only of potential resources but also of the lived experience the person would have brought to the role after his injury. Supporting conversations to address trauma and/or the impact of the disability within teams is an enabler in the workplace.

Allyship

This report has already explored themes focused on the enabling impact of managers, family or friends. This is also known as allyship, which can be defined as advocating and supporting the rights and inclusion of a community that you don't belong to. However, it is additionally important to note allyship specifically as an enabler of disabled people in the workforce because its impact was demonstrated in the narratives of our participants.

Consider: working together

We spoke to two regionally-based employees who worked as a team on the factory line. One was neurodivergent and had experiences of mental distress. The other was neurotypical and had no experience of disability. Together, the neurotypical and divergent pair work on the factory line. It's important that everyone does their bit and changes roles every 10 minutes or so for health and safety. Everyone has to work together not to interrupt the factory's production flow. However, for the neurodivergent person on the line, changing tasks is a challenge, so his neurotypical colleague knows to look out for him. At the same time, though, the neurotypical person acknowledges the value of his divergent colleague's attention to detail. The pair know each other well and look out for each other; they bring out the best in each other. The neurodivergent person shared his diagnosis with his colleague, but he hasn't told everybody else yet. As a health and safety representative, the neurotypical person is passionate about making the best environment possible and balancing the team's needs. This exemplifies allyship, the neurotypical person working to support and bring the best out of his colleagues.

A person with a disabled child brought up another example of allyship during a focus group. He shared his experience working for a manufacturing plant in Aotearoa New Zealand. After some changes to the plant's procedures weren't widely adopted by long-serving staff, senior leaders at the company discovered that many of their employees were neurodivergent, had a learning disability or could not read. The staff, who had been successful in their roles for a long time, had learnt the rules by 'doing' so. Understanding this, senior leaders transitioned their procedures from written documents to audio-video files played on an iPad. The person who shared this story explained how everybody benefitted from this, which again exemplifies the enabling power of non-disabled people supporting and acting as allies to their disabled staff.

Discussion

The power of non-disabled people's support, community support, understanding managers and having access to people who believed in you are key themes in this research. This is the potential impact of allyship, getting alongside disabled people, supporting them and not trying to diminish their voice or speak 'for' them. The absence of allyship and the lack of support from people in the industry were common barriers for participants. Many told us that they were uncertain if their workplace had a disability policy, while few belonged to education groups or had an internal employee working group for disability. These investments in allyship should be considered while enabling the communication of lived experience.

Supporting policy

Policy settings played an enabling role for disabled people who were working successfully in industry. The accommodations ACC made for employees were particularly enabling, and not a cost to the workplace. However, there was inequity in the support provided by different systems and within those systems. This created barriers because some employees did not have access to funding to support workplace adaptations, and this made them less attractive to employers. The impacts of funding inconsistency were explored in interviews and focus groups. ACC, at times, wouldn't fund adaptations, which meant that people left the workforce. Funding inconsistency within and between systems is, therefore, a barrier. It is even harder in the workplace for those without any funding. Aligning the way that disability funding is managed so that it supports all disabled people to enter and remain in the workforce is critical. This would significantly improve workplace inclusion.

Discussion

While funding inequity embeds difficulties across disabled communities and inhibits smooth pathways into employment, it is notable that those most impacted by funding inequities are those with no funding at all. As part of the recruitment process for this research, the team sought to include someone with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) because it is an impairment that is often rendered invisible and is currently unfunded in Aotearoa New Zealand.¹⁴⁶

Despite our best efforts, we were not able to find participants who lived with FASD for this research. It was difficult for experts we spoke to recall anyone with FASD who is in long-term employment. The absence of funded disability support does nothing to enable those with FASD to succeed in the workplace; without funding, they have no foundational infrastructure. In countries like Canada, where people with FASD have funded support, they're much more likely to succeed in the workplace,¹⁴⁷ particularly in jobs that are manual labour-based. This means that people with FASD might have great potential to support the industries this report focuses on. A significant contributor to greater equity would be the inclusion of FASD as a funded disability in its own right.¹⁴⁸

The absence of funding aside, funding disparities are also a barrier to workplace enablement; transforming system elements to equalise funding for people who want to enter the workforce is worth consideration.

Progression

When asked what their employment dreams were, one person laughed and said “getting paid.” Some disabled people involved in the research were working and not being paid, or not being paid well. Some disabled people who were paid felt they were not advancing in their roles. For example, when asked if he felt his employer supported him in meeting his potential, a neurodivergent apprentice said, “No, no, definitely not.” Reinforcing this, some senior people with disabilities accepted that they were not going to progress beyond their current role because of the impact of their disability. Disabled people told us that support for advancement was an enabler for them, such as professional

¹⁴⁶ (de Jong, 2024; Hunter, 2024b).

¹⁴⁷ (Makela, Kapasi, Pei & McFarlane, 2018).

¹⁴⁸ (Gibbs & Sherwood, 2017).

development or support to 'climb the ladder.' Disabled people who had access to advancement talked about the positive impact that this had on both their work and their sense of self.

Discussion

Progression and access to sector leadership opportunities were not common among participants. Accordingly, to maximise enablement, the focus should be on building pathways and interventions that support advancement, and on recognising that inclusion for disabled people does not mean entering the workforce and remaining at the same level. Further, in contemporary society, where economic payment communicates value, we must pay disabled people in order to communicate that their work is valued. This is critical to disabled people's meaningful employment. Otherwise, we perpetuate belief systems underpinned by deficit views and ableism.

Technology

Of brief note is technology, which did not feature as an enabler at all in our conversations with participants. Neither apps nor artificial intelligence (AI) nor websites were mentioned as tools of enablement in the workplace. However, participants were interested in how technology could support and enable them in the future workforce and saw potential in technology, including AI.

Discussion

This indicates an opportunity to explore how technology can assist the inclusion of disabled people in the Industries. This will align with the emerging discussion about technological solutions for the delivery of disability support.¹⁴⁹ The feedback from participants reflects a need to make sector innovation conversations more inclusive.

¹⁴⁹ (All Health Training, 2023; Fortune et al., 2024; National Health Library and Knowledge Service, 2020).



Conclusion

The increased employment of disabled people and the ability of the Industries to be responsive to disabled employees are essential for the long-term resilience of construction, engineering, logistics, infrastructure and manufacturing. Employers are generally engaged in the idea of disability inclusion for their workforce. However, there are considerable gaps in understanding, support, knowledge and awareness. This prevents sustainable progress and accelerates a culture where disability is neither discussed nor disclosed, leading to the normalisation of inequities. The research suggests that the systems within these industries do not yet support disabled people's employment. When disabled people do succeed, this is often because of support from their families and friends, industry connections, or their personal tenacity and resilience.

Action is needed to address these realities and to embed disability inclusion and equity into industry systems, processes and people. This requires supportive action from systems across government, in education and health, for example, to make diagnoses easier to obtain and decrease the barriers to qualifications. Support from leaders at all levels is also needed to maximise the potential of disability employment - actions must be enacted *with* disabled people and industry. This kōrero must shift from good intention into meaningful action.

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Appendix A: participant information sheet and consent form

Participant Information Sheet

In “Understanding the barriers to and enablers of meaningful employment for New Zealand’s disabled people in manufacturing, engineering, logistics, construction and infrastructure.”

You are invited to take part in a study about disabled employees and employers in the manufacturing, engineering, logistics, construction and infrastructure sectors.

We would like to understand the barriers to, and enablers of employment for disabled people in these sectors including employers' awareness of disability and experiences of employing disabled people. We hope that this understanding will lead to more appropriate support for employees and employers involved in industry.

The research is being carried out by *All is for All* and the *Donald Beasley Institute*, who are researchers based in Aotearoa, New Zealand. Our research team is disabled-led and includes Tāngata Whaikaha Māori and Tāngata Sa'ilimalo (disabled Pacific peoples).

What is this research about?

This research seeks to understand disabled people's experiences in manufacturing, engineering, logistics, construction and infrastructure sectors. and employers' awareness and experiences of disability and employing disabled people.

Disability is defined as any long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairment. This definition is inclusive of d/Deaf, long-term illness or injury, psychosocial disabilities and neurodivergence, as well as acquired disabilities in the course of employment. We understand and respect that many people may not identify as disabled. However, it is important we use this language in our research so we are able to develop the best possible insights.

This research also includes employers to understand their awareness and understanding of employing disabled people. The research will not place blame, find fault or be negative but has the purpose of having an open, honest kōrero to build understanding and support within the industry-related sectors.

This research will use a mixture of surveys, video submissions, interviews, focus groups or wāngaga. People can choose how they take part.

Who is doing this research?

Hanga-Aro-Rau and Waihanga Ara Rau are the workforce development councils for manufacturing, engineering, logistics, construction and infrastructure.

They have asked *All is for All and the Donald Beasley Institute* to carry out this research.

- The researcher you will be engaging with is Grace Stratton.

Who can participate in this research?

- Anyone who employs people to work in manufacturing, engineering, logistics, construction and infrastructure.
- Any person working in construction, infrastructure, manufacturing, engineering and logistics who identifies as disabled.
- Any person working in the construction, infrastructure, manufacturing, engineering and logistics industries who meets the definition of having a 'disability.' We understand that some people may not identify as disabled but may have physical, cognitive, social, or well-being support needs.
- People can speak to us as individuals or collectives.

What will you have to do if you take part?

We will be talking with people in different ways including:

- Survey
- Focus Groups
- Wānanga
- Interviews (one on one)
- Submissions via Videomail.io for d/Deaf participants

In preparation for your participation in this research we have spoken with you about how you can contribute. You have elected to take part in a survey.

The survey will take about 11 minutes and will ask you a mix of closed and open questions. We will ask you some demographic questions about age, gender, cultural identity and any disabilities you have. These questions are optional. It's expected that the survey will take a maximum of 10 minutes to complete.

How will cultural customs be included and respected throughout the research?

All participants will be asked if there are any cultural customs or traditions they would like recognised or implemented throughout the research process and these will be observed in all research interactions.

What will happen with the information I tell you?

What you share with us is private to yourself or if you engage along with a group, to the group of people you engage with. In a group setting (focus group or wānanga) other people in the group will hear what you share and may hear personal information. We will not share your contributions beyond a group or individual setting, unless we hear that your or someone else's safety is at risk and we need to let someone know. What you share will be part of our reports and the outputs we produce in a de-identified, anonymous way.

Who will have access to my information?

The Research Team are the only people who will have access to the details and information you share. We will use a code system to help make sure no one can identify you or your responses.

What will happen to the information and details I share in this research?

Everything you share with us will be kept securely at All is for All. At the end of the project, on June 30 2024, it will be kept at the Donald Beasley Institute for 10 years. After 10 years all the information that was collected for this research will be destroyed.

What happens if I don't want to be part of the research?

Nothing. If you don't want to take part it is OK. No one can tell you that you have to take part in research.

What happens if I decide to take part in the research but then I change my mind?

Nothing. It is ok to decide to take part and then change your mind. You can withdraw consent and decide to stop taking part at any time and nothing will happen to you. If you withdraw, it is your choice whether the researcher uses the information you have told them up until that time. If you took part in a wānanga or focus group it is not possible to withdraw your contributions from the transcript, but the transcript will be deidentified.

If you decide to withdraw from the research all you need to do is to contact the researcher you spoke to or: grace@allisforall.com / 02108415035

What if I get hurt?

It is unlikely that you will be hurt or injured during this study. If you feel any emotional distress during or after talking about your experiences we will talk with you about how and where to access support.

Who do I contact for more information?

For more information you can contact the Research Team on grace@allisforall.com / 02108415035

Who can I contact if I need independent advice about taking part?

If you want to talk to someone who isn't involved with the research, you can contact an independent health and disability advocate on:

Phone: 0800 555 050

Fax: 0800 2 SUPPORT (0800 2787 7678)

Email: advocacy@advocacy.org.nz

Website: <https://www.advocacy.org.nz/>

Who do I contact if I have any concerns about the ethics of this study?

This research has been approved by the Northern B Health and Disability Ethics Committee (the Committee.) This means that a special group of people have made sure that the research is safe and that we will work with people in a respectful way.

Contact details for the ethics Committee are:

Phone: 0800 4 ETHICS

Email: hdecs@moh.govt.nz

Individual Consent To Participate

In "Understanding the barriers to and enablers of meaningful employment for New Zealand's disabled people in manufacturing, engineering, logistics, construction and infrastructure."

If you want to take part in this research please read this form or have someone read it to you.

It tells you what your rights are as a research participant.

If you sign the form you are saying you want to take part in the research.

In giving my informed consent:

- I understand the information I have been given.
- I have had enough time to decide whether to take part in the research.
- I have been able to have a friend, family member, whānau or aiga with me when I learnt about the research.
- I am satisfied with the answers the researchers have given me to my questions.
- I have a copy of the Consent Form and Information Sheet.
- I understand that taking part is my choice. I do not have to take part if I do not want to.
- I understand that I am taking part in an interview.
- I understand that I can stop taking part at any time and I will not be affected in any way.
- I understand that if I withdraw from the study I know I can tell the researchers whether or not I want them to use information I have already given them.
- I understand that it is not possible to withdraw my contributions from wānanga or focus groups.

- I understand that in a wānanga or focus group people may hear about my private information that I choose to share.
- I consent to the Research Team collecting and using the information I share with them.
- I understand that all the processed information will be de-identified so that no one knows that it is me.
- I know I am speaking on my own behalf about my experiences and not on the behalf of others.
- I understand that what I tell you is private and must not be shared with anyone else.
- I know that my participation is confidential and that no information that could identify me personally will be used in any reports of this research.
- The Research Team will not talk to anyone else about what I tell them unless I or someone else is in danger.
- I understand that the Research Team will talk to me first if they are concerned about my health or safety.
- I consent to the interview being recorded (via notetaker or Zoom recording).
- I understand that any video recordings I submit will be viewed and then transcribed.
- I understand that I can stop recording at any time.
- I understand I can request a copy of the final Project Report summary at the end of the research.
- I understand that I can request my own information used in this study any time.
- I know who to contact if I have any questions about the research.
- I understand my responsibilities as a research participant.

I give my consent to take part in this research

Circle Choice: Yes or No

Date:

Participant Name:

Signed:

Researcher's Declaration

I have given an explanation of the research project to the participant and have answered the participant's questions about it.

I believe that the participant understands the study and has given their informed consent to participate.

Researchers Name:

Signed:

Date:

Appendix B: employer survey

Employers Survey

Introduction:

Kia ora, Mālō and Hello!

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey.

All is for All, with support from the [Donald Beasley Institute](#), has been commissioned by Hanga-Aro-Rau (HAR) and Waihangā Ara Rau (WAR) Workforce Development Councils to conduct a research project.

The study aims to understand the barriers, enablers, accessibility, and employment experiences of disabled people, Tāngata Whaikaha Māori, and Tagata S'a'ilimalo (Pacific Disabled People) in the Manufacturing, Engineering, Logistics, Construction, and Infrastructure industries.

For the purposes of this research project and survey – disability is defined as “those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.” (United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities)

Your contributions and insights will help create Disability Action Plans for HAR and WAR, improving accessibility and meaningful work opportunities for disabled people across their respective industries.

The data collected as part of this survey is confidential and will not be used to identify individuals or organisations. We value your time, insights and experiences - the survey should take approximately 10 minutes to complete. The survey link will remain open until **Wednesday, 1 May 2024**. Please share this link with other employers within your network.

If you would like to go in the draw to win a \$100 Prezzy card, please follow the instructions at the end of the survey to submit your contact details.

If you have any questions after completing the survey, please contact grace@allisforall.com / 02108415035.

Section One of Four: Industry Data

In what industry do you mainly operate?

- Manufacturing
- Engineering
- Logistics
- Construction
- Infrastructure
- Other (please specify) [short text answer]

Approximately how many employees are there in the company you work in?

- 1-9
- 10-19
- 20-49
- 50-99
- 100+

Which of the below best aligns with your current role?

- Business Owner/Chief Executive/Director
- Senior Leadership Team
- Diversity and Inclusion
- Human Resources
- Operations Manager
- Project Manager
- Team/People Manager
- Other (Please specify) [short text answer]

Section Two of Four: Disability Awareness in Your Workplace and Industry

Please answer the following questions regarding your work in the Manufacturing, Engineering, Logistics, Construction, or Infrastructure industries. Disability is

Do you know of any disabled people working in your industry?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure
- Comments:

Which barriers do you think impact disabled employees in your industry? (Select all that apply)

- People's attitudes towards disabled people
- Lack of physical accessibility
- Lack of knowledge about disabled people
- Lack of policies to support disabled people's employment
- Lack of an accessible hiring process

- Functional limitations, i.e., jobs not suitable for disabled people
- Comments

How suitable do you think your workplace environment is for disabled workers based on the below types of disabilities on a scale of 1 -5?

- **People who are physically disabled:** includes people who may or may not use a mobility aid like a wheelchair, crutches or prosthetic limbs.
 - 1 - completely unsuitable
 - 2 - somewhat unsuitable
 - 3 - neutral
 - 4 - somewhat suitable
 - 5 - very suitable
- **People who are blind or who experience low vision.**
 - 1 - completely unsuitable
 - 2 - somewhat unsuitable
 - 3 - neutral
 - 4 - somewhat suitable
 - 5 - very suitable
- **Neurodivergent people:** includes people who process information differently to what is expected or considered to be “typical”. Dyslexia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism spectrum disorder (ASD), dyspraxia, and fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) are all common neurodivergent conditions.
 - 1 - completely unsuitable
 - 2 - somewhat unsuitable
 - 3 - neutral
 - 4 - somewhat suitable
 - 5 - very suitable
- **People with an Intellectual / learning disability:** includes people who have a lifelong cognitive impairment that impacts on their ability to learn and process new information and learn new skills, and may require them to need support with daily living.
 - 1 - completely unsuitable
 - 2 - somewhat unsuitable
 - 3 - neutral
 - 4 - somewhat suitable
 - 5 - very suitable

- **Psychosocial disability and / or Mental distress:** includes people who experience ongoing impacts of a mental health condition and / or short term or episodic mental distress.

- 1 - completely unsuitable
- 2 - somewhat unsuitable
- 3 - neutral
- 4 - somewhat suitable
- 5 - very suitable

- **People who are d/Deaf, hard of hearing (HoH) or who experience hearing loss:** includes people who identify as part of the Deaf Community, including its culture and language and those who experience functional hearing loss.

- 1 - completely unsuitable
- 2 - somewhat unsuitable
- 3 - neutral
- 4 - somewhat suitable
- 5 - very suitable

- **People with Acquired or Traumatic Brain Injury:** includes people whose brain injury is due to either a medical condition or illness (acquired brain injury), or an accident or incident that has involved external force to the head (traumatic brain injury).

- 1 - completely unsuitable
- 2 - somewhat unsuitable
- 3 - neutral
- 4 - somewhat suitable
- 5 - very suitable

Have you ever had a workplace discussion about disability, or employing more disabled people?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure
- Comments:

Does your workplace have a network for disabled employees?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure
- Comments:

Do any of your workplace policies mention disabled people/disability?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure
- Comments:

Do you believe your workplace uses and implements its diversity and inclusion policy(ies)?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure
- We don't have these types of policies
- Comments:

Do you believe your colleagues are aware of diversity and inclusion policies and what these mean for them at work?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure
- We don't have these types of policies
- Comments:

Does your workplace use disability-inclusive recruitment practices?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure
- I don't know what this means
- Comments:

Do you/your organisation have any of the following? Select all that apply:

- A diversity, equity and inclusion or similar policy
- Disability awareness training for managers
- The Accessibility Tick
- Employees who have disclosed a disability
- Disabled employees who have requested and been granted accommodations
- Internships for disabled people
- Training opportunities for disabled employees
- An accessibility audit of your premises and online infrastructure
- Disability confident staff
- Disability-inclusive recruitment practices
- Flexible work policy
- Disabled employees working flexibly
- My workplace is currently working towards one or more of these.
- Not sure
- None of the above

***[Skip Question if answer yes for A diversity, equity and inclusion or similar policy]* Is disability specifically included in your workplace Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Policy?**

- Yes
- No
- Unsure
- Comments:

[Skip Question if answer yes for Disability awareness training for managers] **Is education regarding tāngata whaikaha Māori and tagata sa'ilimalo¹⁵⁰ included in the Disability Awareness Training that your workplace facilitates?**

- Yes
- No
- Unsure
- Comments:

Has your workplace ever offered disability confidence training to staff/senior leaders/managers?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure
- Comments:

[Skip Question if answer yes: Has your workplace ever offered disability confidence training to staff/senior leaders/managers?]

Can you please share what you know about the topics covered in this training? [Optional Question]

- Comments:

How much do you know about employment equity and support schemes? (e.g., Workbridge, Be. Lab, CCS disability etc.)

- I have used these schemes myself
- I know where I could find information on them if required
- I know very little about these schemes
- I don't know what these are
- Comments:

Section Three of Four: Your Experiences with Disabled Employees

In this section, we are interested in whether you have worked with disabled people in your industry, and if you have, we'd like to know a little about your experiences.

Have you employed or are you currently employing a disabled person?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure
- Comments:

¹⁵⁰ Pacific Disabled People, we shifted language for the report

[If yes] Which of these challenges did you experience in employing a disabled person? Select all that apply.

- Accessibility accommodations were too expensive
- Accessibility accommodations were too difficult to implement
- Lack of access to funding for disability-related costs
- Lack of access to support for me when hiring or managing a disabled person
- Attitudes towards the disabled person's ability/capability during the hiring process
- Worksites or workplaces are not accessible
- Lack of disability knowledge
- Concerns about health and safety
- Staff attitudes towards disabled people
- None of the above
- Other (please specify)

[If no] Which of these challenges might prevent you from hiring a disabled person?

Select all that apply.

- Accessibility accommodations were too expensive
- Accessibility accommodations were too difficult to implement
- Lack of access to funding for disability-related costs
- Lack of access to support for me when hiring or managing a disabled person
- Attitudes towards the disabled person's ability/capability during the hiring process
- Worksites or workplaces are not accessible
- Lack of disability knowledge
- Concerns about health and safety
- Staff attitudes towards disabled people
- None of the above
- Other (please specify)

What would have made a positive difference to your experience of hiring a disabled person?

- More knowledge about disability and disabled people in the workplace
- Legal advice on my responsibilities as an employer
- Support for me / my organisation for 6 months post-hiring
- Support for the disabled employee for 6 months post-hiring
- More accessible information / advice about how to hire a disabled worker
- Support to navigate the system and apply for financial support
- Financial support
- Support with accessible recruitment
- Support to obtain and implement accommodations
- Further training for the disabled employee
- Other (please specify)
- Comments:

Do you have anything else to share around your experience with disabled employees?

Comments [long answer]

Section Four of Four: Demographic Data

These questions are not mandatory, but we would appreciate your responses. They will help us understand who has contributed to the research and how experiences differ across groups.

What is your age?

- 16-29
- 30-44
- 45-59
- 60+

What is your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Non-Binary
- Prefer Not to Say
- Other

What is your ethnicity? (please select all that apply)

- New Zealand European
- Māori
- Samoan
- Cook Islands Māori
- Tongan
- Niuean
- Fijian
- Chinese
- Indian
- Other (e.g. Dutch, Japanese, etc.) [short text answer]

In which region do you live?

- Te Tai Tokerau - Northland
- Tāmaki Makaurau - Auckland
- Waikato
- Te Moana-a-Toi - Bay of Plenty
- Te Matau-a-Maui Hawke's Bay
- Te Tairāwhiti - Gisborne

- Taranaki
- Manawatu - Wanganui
- Te Whanga-nui-a-Tara Wellington
- Te Tai-o-Aorere Tasman
- Whakatū - Nelson
- Te Taihū-o-te-waka - Marlborough
- Te Tai Poutini - West Coast
- Waitaha - Canterbury
- Ōtāku - Otago
- Murihiku - Southland

Would you like to participate in a focus group or interview about your experiences employing disabled people?

- Yes
- No

[Skip Question if yes to being contacted for an interview] **Please provide your email address below, and one of the researchers will be in touch.**

Email address box

Closing Statement before submission:

Thank you for completing this survey and contributing your ideas to this important research; we appreciate your time.. When you submit your answers, you can register your email to go in the draw to win a \$100 Prezzy card. Please note that your contact details will not be linked to your survey responses which will be confidential. Please share this survey with your networks who could provide valuable insight on this topic.

[Pop up following survey submission] Optional Prize Draw

Thank you for completing the survey. If you would like to go in the draw to win a \$100 Prezzy card, please enter your email address below. All is for All will contact the winner of a random draw following the closure of the survey on Wednesday, 1 May 2024.

Persona: Donald

Amputee working as an Artificial Limb Manufacturer Salesperson

Donald is a 55-year-old salesperson for a manufacturer that produces artificial limbs. Donald was involved in an accident while working construction in his late 20s. He was rising through the ranks and dreaming of running his own business when the accident occurred, resulting in him losing his right arm above the elbow.

Determined to get back to work, Donald soon realised that his biggest barrier would not be the physical elements of his job but the attitudes of colleagues who struggled to come to terms with his accident and its impact on the team. Donald began to feel like an outsider. He started looking for other jobs but struggled to get past the interview stages where he felt that employers were discriminating against him because of their perceptions of his disability. He found some of the questions hurtful; he questioned if he would work in construction again.

During a visit with his Occupational Therapist, Donald asked a number of technical questions about his prosthetic arm. She put him in touch with the company's local sales representative and the pair bonded. The sales representative was impressed with Donald and believed that he had the skills and lived experience to be an asset to the company.

Donald wasn't sure about the job as he had never worked in sales, and despite living with a disability, he didn't feel disabled. Hesitancy aside, Donald was excited about working again, so he agreed. The company made his workspace accessible, and colleagues took on some of the tasks that he couldn't easily do.

Donald is now one of the top salespeople in the country. He has built strong relationships with the disabled community and he is grateful for how this job has helped him accept his disability. Donald has since joined a mixed ability Rugby League team and mentors young people with disabilities. He doesn't think about going back into construction anymore; he is happy where he is, although he would like to explore pathways into artificial limb development.



Persona: Gerald

Disabled Senior Leader working for an earth works company

Gerald is on the senior leadership team at a medium-sized infrastructure company based in Wellington. He acquired his disability in his late teens and uses a wheelchair for mobility. Gerald is now in his 50s and is an avid gym goer who values his independence.

When Gerald was completing vocational education, he received great support. After graduating, he quickly came up against obstacles, including prospective employers making assumptions about his disability. This was frustrating because Gerald knew he could do the job just as well as anyone else if some small adjustments were made; because Gerald had access to the Accident Compensation Corporation scheme (ACC), he believed many of these adjustments would be paid for.

Despite holding a qualification, a licence to drive machinery, and having experience driving diggers before his accident, Gerald was unable to secure a role in his desired field. His interactions to obtain income support were dehumanising. Gerald realised that his income potential was blunted by perceptions of his impairment. He wondered if he should have pursued university-level studies.

A friend of Gerald's who owned an earthworks company offered him a job working in the site office. While it wasn't Gerald's desired role, he agreed on the condition that if he could prove himself with more physical tasks, his friend would give him a chance to work in those roles too.

Gerald has since built a successful career in earthworks. He has a supportive team and the necessary accommodations to feel fully included in the workplace, partly enabled by ACC funding. Gerald thinks that if he can succeed in a physical job, others can, too. He believes that people with disabilities should be more proactive and confident when approaching employment.

Gerald's workplace doesn't have a formal disability inclusion policy, and he doesn't believe it needs one. Instead, Gerald believes that they should focus on employing the right person for the role regardless of ability, and he would be open to hiring a disabled person if they were the right fit and could do the job.



Persona: Chloe

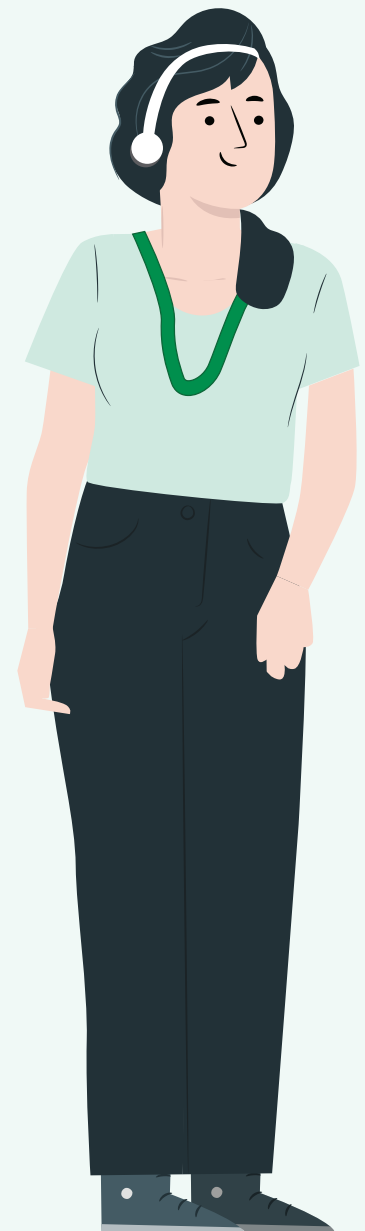
An autistic woman working in HR for a construction company

Chloe is in her late 30s and received an autism diagnosis about 10 years ago. Because of her later-in-life diagnosis, Chloe feels that much of what she knew about being a professional has had to shift. Overall, her diagnosis has positively shaped her thinking about life and employment; she now understands why she didn't fit in for so long.

As a human resources manager for an engineering firm, Chloe thrives on structure and detail. It is easy for her to go on tangents or get stuck inside her head. She used to think this was a frustrating quirk, but she knows now it is because she is neurodivergent. By telling co-workers about her diagnosis, they can better understand her actions. She's grateful for her supportive manager, who can help her shift her perspective and focus when she goes off-task. Chloe's manager has also helped her create a routine with regular breaks to keep her sharp while positively utilising her flare for structure and detail.

Chloe hasn't always had this type of support; previous managers have tried to shame her for being so focused. Chloe says that for most of her working life, she felt the weight of societal stigma around mental health and disability and that her passion for getting things right was being misconstrued as caring too much. Chloe believes that part of this stigma is due to sexism and commented that the comments from co-workers about her habits got worse when she returned from maternity leave. Now, in a much more positive workplace, Chloe is grateful for the safe environment created for her.

She would like to see that support extended to others in the workplace, especially on work sites. Creating a truly inclusive workplace is a goal she champions, and she's interested in meeting with senior leadership to understand how she can contribute. Chloe finds that working in a male-dominated industry can often highlight issues of sexism. Whilst she has never felt discriminated against because of her autism, she has experienced sexism in the workplace.



Persona: Aroha

Disabled train operator who struggles to connect with her culture

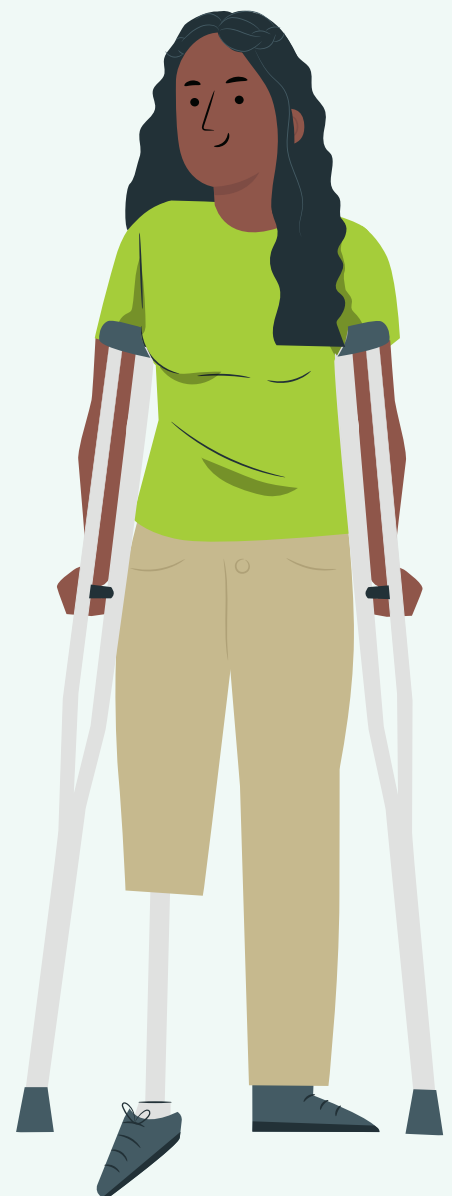
Aroha is a 35-year-old woman who identifies as Tāngata Whaikaha Māori. As a child, she was in an accident and had her leg amputated; she has also struggled for many years with episodic mental distress and anxiety. Aroha chooses to see herself as enabled rather than disabled. This outlook has helped her adapt and build skills so she can get on with life. Currently, Aroha works as a train operator but does not feel fulfilled.

Despite her positive outlook, finding and keeping meaningful employment has been challenging. She is a proud wahine Māori but feels that often counts against her in the workplace. She constantly needs to prove herself and is uncomfortable asking for help if her colleagues bully her. At times, Aroha experiences racism, sexism and disablism. Hers is a male-dominated industry, and when she needs time off due to her impairments, colleagues suggest she can't "keep up with the boys."

Aroha admits it's not her dream job but feels discriminated against when applying for others due to her disability. She hasn't been offered opportunities to advance despite having been at the company for three years. The workplace culture is not inclusive and does not respect or celebrate other cultures. This has left Aroha feeling deeply isolated at work.

Aroha wonders if this isolation makes her more vulnerable to episodic mental distress. Additionally, because Aroha lives regionally, she believes she doesn't have equitable access to resources or support for employment or her disability. She hasn't had an appointment with her General Practitioner for many months and instead uses forums in her community where fellow disabled people provide support and potential solutions.

Aroha wishes that employers would be more open to employing disabled people. She believes that disabled people have a lot to offer a workplace if they are given a chance. Aroha clearly states that racism has to be confronted. It can't just be about disability. She is hopeful that she will find a job in the future that values her skills, culture and lived experience.



Persona: Gary

Disabled Business Owner frustrated with status quo

Gary is a recently retired business owner of a medium-sized business in a rural Waikato town with a large Māori population. He acquired a physical disability later in life, sparking a passion for inclusivity. Under his guidance, the business established disability-focused employment programmes to help the community advance and gain employment opportunities. Gary sees the inclusion of Te Ao Māori as central to his business' success. Therefore, many of his disability employment initiatives integrate Tikanga Māori. He believes that a more inclusive workforce for disabled people is connected to re-indigenising ways of working.

Gary believes in the transformative power of active engagement; he often recounts stories of individuals gaining confidence through work, receiving positive recognition, and ultimately moving on to new employment opportunities. He is unequivocal that the people in his community have contributed meaningfully to maintaining local infrastructure. Gary measures his programmes' success on their ability to empower and build the confidence of those who have taken part in them, believing that this supports them throughout their life.

Despite Gary's successes, he is frustrated by the lack of tangible support disabled people receive for employment, especially from the government. He describes a recurring pattern of empty promises or piecemeal investment in initiatives. Gary desires concrete action. He firmly believes that the lack of commitment from decision-makers discourages other employers from implementing similar programmes.

Gary is also critical of peak bodies in the disability sector because he believes they could be doing more to influence meaningful change by working alongside the industry. He feels 'bogged down' by jargon that prevents inclusive progress; Gary would like greater communication and collaboration across the disability sector.

Gary acknowledges that running a rural business comes with other challenges such as proximity to resources and supporting infrastructure, though he recognises the advantage of being part of a tight-knit community. To enable the employment of disabled people, he stresses the importance of gaining the community's buy-in and pushing through hurdles by being solution-focused, persevering, and communicating openly.



Persona: Claire

Senior Team Member who needs support to make a difference

Claire is a passionate senior member of the marketing team. She recently learned that mental distress and mental health conditions are included within the disability community; this opened her eyes to how relevant disability is in her workplace.

Claire views disability as a source of strength and inspiration, offering unique qualities and lived experiences that can benefit any business. Claire has one direct report who is neurodivergent. She's struggled to build a relationship with this person because her workplace doesn't have any formal resources to guide her. Claire is disheartened by the lack of appropriate support. Her company does what it can but, as a family business, Claire worries it will always be limited, particularly with economic pressures on the rise.

Watching disabled people, including those experiencing mental distress, try to navigate a less-than-inclusive society has frustrated Claire. She has witnessed the impact of bias firsthand. This has ignited her commitment to making her workplace more inclusive. She sees a need for deeper action, policy and data to create holistic change.

Claire thinks that, ultimately, the business owners will be slow to invest in anything without an immediately visible economic return. Her senior leaders continually emphasise that people must "be able to do the job." Within this context, Claire struggles to advocate that disabled people should be given a chance, and she truly believes that if some tweaks were made, disabled people could succeed in her facet of the business.

Claire recognises the importance of diverse spokespeople for the company. She understands that an inclusive customer experience may help signal to potential workers that her workplace is inclusive.

Claire leverages communication, innovation and the power of marketing to create real change within her company. She embodies the potential for a new generation of leaders eager to embrace disability as a source of strength. She needs tangible support and infrastructure to influence her colleagues to invest in disability education and employment. Claire would also benefit from support in learning how to engage her direct report better.



Persona: Brendon

Disabled Entrepreneur with a learning disability

Brendon is a young man from rural Aotearoa, New Zealand, who lives with a learning disability. Since leaving high school without formal qualifications, Brendon has struggled to find sustainable and meaningful employment. He lives with his Aunt Cathy, a staunch advocate for disabled people in the community.

Brendon used to work at the local supermarket, but they had to let him go because of ongoing health issues that meant he couldn't always turn up to his shifts. Brendon was devastated, and it had a profound impact on his mental well-being and self-confidence.

After that, Cathy struggled to help her nephew find a suitable job. Many people didn't want to hire Brendon because of assumptions about his productivity. Cathy and Brendon's support worker, Heath, helped Brendon set up a business making and selling custom gardening boxes.

Planter Boxes By Brendon quickly became a "must-visit" for locals and visitors charmed by Brendon's positive spirit and bespoke products. Brendon opens and closes the store, serves customers, and builds the boxes. Heath is on hand to support Brendon while managing the business side of things.

Travel is a barrier for Brendon as he doesn't drive, so he relies on Cathy or the bus to get to work. Sometimes neither option is available, particularly because the bus route in his rural town is not reliable. Brendon would like his local council and the Prime Minister to understand how critical walkable cities, free public transport, and cycleways are to enable workforce participation.

Heath and Brendon recently decided to hire another disabled person to come and work with them. It has been a struggle for Heath and Cathy to find resources about making job applications accessible or what they might need to consider for employees with other types of disabilities who may want to work for them.

They are working through the process as best they can because offering meaningful and purposeful work for others like Brendon is their mission, but Cathy would like to see much more proactive support from those with funding and resources.



Persona: Darren

HR Manager of a firm who sees the case for change

Darren, a Pākehā man, is the HR Manager of a firm with over 80 employees, some of whom are disabled. He acknowledges the lack of diversity within the engineering sector and is an outspoken advocate for change.

Darren has two pressing concerns: a looming workforce shortage and a recent pause in government projects. He believes disability representation is still an afterthought to many. He has good intentions to overcome this but is unsure how to change the legacy of his sector.

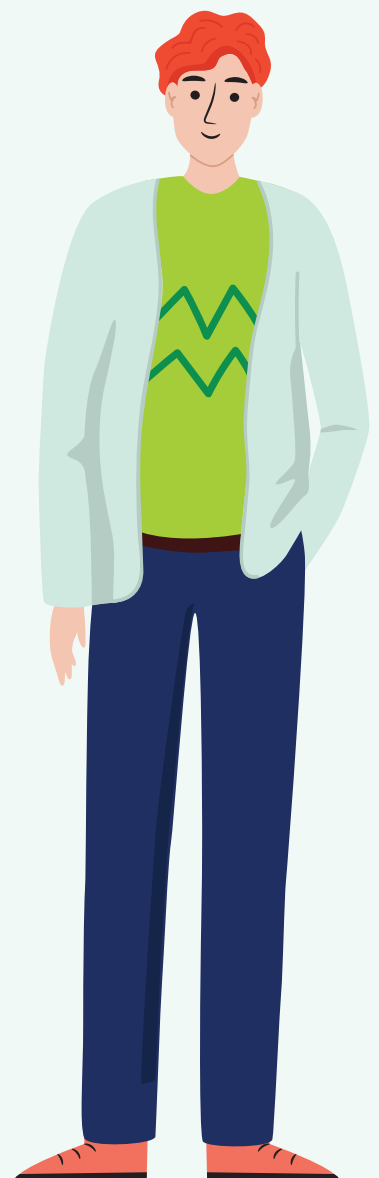
Darren perceives a reluctance to recruit and train disabled apprentices. He sees a real need for more collaboration between employers and apprenticeship programmes to break down these barriers and foster a more welcoming environment for all. He knows that many neurodivergent people are successfully working in the field but is equally aware that many of them haven't formally disclosed their disability, or even recognised it themselves.

Darren acknowledges that there are other challenges for under-represented groups, such as media stereotypes that paint his field as a "white male" profession. At times, he grapples with why his sector is so inequitable when, internationally, the field is much more diverse.

While many express good intentions, Darren sees a lack of systemic change. He supports people from diverse, underserved communities to gain apprenticeships; however, he acknowledges that disability has not been a specific focus for the organisations he's involved in. Darren has observed many apprentices who would benefit from learning support and has noted the need to address the apprenticeship courses' Pākehā nature.

Darren also struggles with the lack of data in his sector. He is frustrated that Aotearoa, New Zealand, doesn't have data that properly reflects the size of his workforce, let alone how many underrepresented groups are participating.

Darren is a passionate advocate for greater inclusion in his sector. He believes there's "a place for just about everyone." He would particularly like to see increased visibility of neurodivergent and disabled people, acknowledging the bravery it takes to self-identify within the current environment.



Persona: Joanne

Senior Business Leader exploring opportunities

Joanne has been working for the same textile manufacturer for nearly 40 years, rising through the ranks to a senior leadership position. The business has experienced recent challenges with cheaper, synthetic alternatives becoming more readily available, forcing Joanne to think about new avenues to ensure the sustainability of the business. She believes employing a more diverse workforce could be one solution, partly because she wonders if disabled people might be more fiscally effective labour.

Joanne is motivated by finding staff with the right skills and experience. She thinks that focusing on personality fit and job competence is a positive approach; however, she also recognises that this could result in her overlooking qualified candidates who present differently due to disability. She has not proactively changed her hiring behaviour, but she would if a candidate requested it.

Joanne fosters a culture of staff disclosure, relying on employees to ask for what they need to succeed in their roles. She recognises that, while well-intentioned, this reactive approach might create barriers.

Joanne believes her business is practical, solution-oriented, and open to implementing basic accommodations like transportation support for those who need it. However, she does have some reservations about hiring disabled people. She worries about inadvertently drawing unwanted attention or singling out individuals by using the wrong terminology.

Joanne is concerned that she has not had any formal training on disability. While she believes some basic adjustments could make their workplace more accessible, she has some reservations about what more substantial adjustments would look like and cost.

Overall, navigating disability is uncharted territory for Joanne. She is committed to embarking on a journey to learn and adapt. Still, she recognises that the complexities of disability inclusion will require shifting from reactive to proactive strategies, and she worries that she might not have the time to do this.

Joanne is a senior leader who would benefit from a better understanding of the disability sector and the funding and programmes available to support her knowledge journey.



Let's level up:

Unlock the power of inclusivity and discover
the potential of the disabled workforce.

Full Report

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