

Understanding Drivers and Barriers to Employment for Individuals With Disabilities

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ABSTRACT

Finding and retaining work seems to be a huge challenge for many people with disabilities worldwide, and this is despite the fact that employing them is crucial from both a social and economic perspective. Addressing the gap in the literature, the paper aims to reveal the drivers and barriers to employment for people with disabilities. In doing this, a qualitative study was conducted having semi-structured interviews with people with disabilities. The core findings revealed that individual, organisational and contextual factors might support or hinder people with disabilities from employment. The paper calls for rethinking how society as a whole might contribute to better life and work quality for people with disabilities as well as entire population.

Keywords: People with disabilities, Employment of people with disabilities, Employment drivers, Employment barriers

INTRODUCTION

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities defines people with disabilities (PWD) 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, 2006, p. 5). According to the World Health Organization, the world population includes 1.3 billion people with disability, meaning that 16% of the global population or 1 in 6 of us experience disability (World Health Organization, 2023). In 2022, 27% of the EU population over the age of 16 had some form of disability (the European Council, 2024). Representing a huge part of the global population, PWD still encounter various types of challenges trying to achieve full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others (Khayat-zadeh-Mahani et al., 2020; Maroto et al., 2021; Östlund & Johansson, 2018). This is especially true when it comes to employment. As announced by the International Labour Organization (ILO), about a third of working-age persons with disabilities are in employment (International Labour Organization, 2023). In the meantime, in EU, only a half of persons with disabilities are employed compared to 3 in 4 persons without disabilities (European Commission, n.d.). This situation prevails despite the fact that employing PWD might serve as a source of a competitive advantage for businesses (Alemany & Vermeulen, 2023).

Work is perceived as a highly valued activity in people's life that offers opportunities to engage in meaningful initiatives, connect and socialise with people, and achieve economic self-sufficiency (Sundar et al., 2018). Despite seeing the financial, psychological, social, and health benefits of employment (Chan et al., 2021), the statistical data provided above support the conclusion that PWD are disadvantaged when it comes to finding and retaining a job.

Earlier literature has addressed the issue from different angles. First, the arguments or motives for organisations to hire PWD were revealed, such as moral, legal or economic (Aichner, 2021). From the rational perspective, the business has been invited to utilise PWD as a labour force pool for addressing the labour shortage problems (Bonaccio et al., 2020) or to be recognised as socially responsible company, which again gives an advantage in the war for talents (Alemany & Vermeulen, 2023; Gould et al., 2020). Second, the concerns of organisations regarding employees with disabilities were analysed. For instance, Bonaccio et al. (2020) introduced 11 concerns throughout the entire employment cycle, describing among others such worries as qualification or the impact on co-workers. In line with this stream, Vornholt et al. (2013) revealed that the acceptance of employees with disabilities was influenced by characteristics of three main stakeholders: co-workers, persons with disabilities, and finally the employers. Third, the attitudes and behaviours of PWD were also an aspect of research (Romeo et al., 2020). Finally, the experience of PWD examining the factors that hinder or help them to find and retain a job also constitutes a significant part of the scientific literature (McKinney & Swartz, 2021; Sundar et al., 2018). The current research goes in line with the last research stream having intention to broaden the understanding about challenges and supporting factors for PWD to be a less stigmatised and marginalised group in the world (Chan et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2011). Thus, the aim of the paper is to reveal the drivers and barriers to employment of PWD. More specifically, the paper seeks to answer these research questions: RQ1: Are PWD willing or not to disclose their disability to employers and why? RQ2: What are the main drivers for employment of PWD? RQ3: What are the main barriers to employment of PWD?

For answering these questions, a qualitative research was used in the form of semi-structured interviews.

The paper contributes to the scientific literature by demonstrating the aspects that should be addressed while dealing with workforce diversity, in terms of PWD.

The structure of the paper is the following. After the introduction, the main drivers and barriers to employment of PWD are described in the theoretical background. Next, the methodology is explained. Further, the results and discussions are provided. The paper ends with conclusions.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

As it was mentioned before, PWD constitute a huge part of society worldwide. However, the majority of them are out of the labour force with negative outcomes or missed opportunities for plenty of stakeholders (Vornholt et al., 2013). From the perspective of person with disability, being unemployed

makes it difficult to fulfil a number of basic human needs, including social interaction or consumption needs (Vornholt et al., 2013). The consequences of such situation refers to lower social contacts, income inequality, and poverty, which lead to even poorer physical and mental health, low self-esteem, and lower levels of life satisfaction (Chan et al., 2021). Business could solve some of its problems by hiring PWD as the advantages of hiring them include, inter alia, lower employee turnover, more positive work environment overall, increased productivity, and higher level of innovation (Aichner, 2021). Finally, society and business would not need to cover extra health protection or unemployment costs of PWD as obtaining remuneration for one's work instead of allowance is more beneficial for the economy and society (Zaluska et al., 2020). Hence, concluding it could be underlined that employing PWD is crucial from both a social and economic perspective.

As such, the question how to increase the employment of PWD gains importance. Earlier literature provided several empirical findings (Chan et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2011; Östlund & Johansson, 2018). Turning to the main obstacles, the literature argues that most PWD perceive the nature of their disability as the primary barrier to employment (Sundar et al., 2018). However, there are some other barriers too. For instance, Sundar et al. (2018) distinguished two clusters of barriers, namely, barriers PWD faced during the search for work and barriers PWD faced at work. Among the frequently mentioned barriers in the first cluster were these: not enough education or training; assumption of employers that the person with disability could not do the job because of disability; lack of transportation; getting paid less than others in similar jobs; and lack of job counselling. As regards the second cluster, getting paid less than others in a similar job, negative attitudes on the part of supervisor or co-workers, and needing special features or accommodations on the job were the most influential barriers. Vornholt et al. (2013) devoted much attention to stigmatisation attitudes while concluding that employees often seemed to have a biased perception of the performance of PWD and accordingly were not willing to work with disabled colleagues. The literature also introduces personnel barriers, such as low self-esteem and overprotective families (Lee et al., 2011). Additionally, lack of cooperation among welfare agencies, technical aids, and welfare service make it difficult to remain in the workforce (Östlund & Johansson, 2018).

When it comes to drivers, Henry & Lucca (2004) identified two clusters of factors, namely person and environment. In each cluster, groups and subgroups of factors were distinguished. Turning to person factors, symptoms (such as symptoms being under control or being able to work despite symptoms) and skills, attitudes and experiences (such as work skills, social skills, belief in self, higher work expectations) were revealed as having the potential to facilitate employment of PWD. Regarding environmental factors, the factors related to rehabilitation and mental health services (for instance, client-provider partnership, mutual trust, respect; encouragement), economy, jobs, and non-human resources (such as strong local economy, a "just-right" challenge, clear expectations, supportive employers or adequate finances and transportation); and finally, social supports (recognition and support from family and friends) were emphasised. Summing up, literature reviews show that the path to stable employment for PWD is full of obstacles; however, there are also some facilitators.

METHODOLOGY

Research context. The context of the study is Lithuania, where currently there are more than 147 thousand working-age persons with disabilities of, of whom only 29% work (ELTA, 2023). This number is lower than the EU average (European Commission, n.d.).

Data collection. Having the aim of this paper in mind, qualitative research was used in the form of semi-structured interviews. In the interview guide, three areas of focus were covered, such as disclosure of disability, drivers of employment, and barriers to be employed. Interviews were conducted mainly by telephone in the Lithuanian language only. The number of informants was 72; out of them only 17 were working. The data saturation, which refers to the point at which the data collection process no longer offers any new or relevant data, was achieved.

Ethical considerations were respected during research process. When making contacts with potential participants, information was provided about the aim of the research, the fact that participation was voluntary, and that participants could quit at any time during the research process without any consequences. Later, during interviews, each interviewee was given sufficient time to share their experiences. Finally, the data were presented in such a way that no details that could be connected to a particular individual would be revealed. Thus, confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed. All interviews were audio recorded.

Data analysis. The interviews were transcribed. The data were processed by interpreting, systematising, analysing and categorising the responses. In the current research, the analysis of drivers and barriers was carried out by developing a theory-driven code system based on the relational framework that encompasses three levels: contextual, organisational and individual (Syed & Özbilgin, 2009).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The aim of the research was to reveal the drivers and barriers to employment of people with disabilities. The results and discussion are further provided based on three research questions presented in the introduction.

RQ1: Are the PWD willing or not to disclosure their disability to employers and why?

The aspect of telling the truth regarding the disability is especially relevant in the case of invisible disability (Allen & Carlson, 2003; Charmaz, 2010; McKinney & Swartz, 2021). In the literature, disclosure is described as “the act of revealing evidence that may be perceived as undesirable or with negative connotations” (Allen & Carlson, 2003, p. 19).

From the interviews, it seems that PWD tend to hide disability from employers. The argumentation behind this falls into three groups, namely, the fear of not being employed; the fear of being fired; and the unwillingness to be somehow special.

One of the interviewees clearly stated, that: “*when going to [job] interviews, I never tell that I have a disability. I am scared. After telling, the conversation might turn differently.*” (I59). Such fear can be based not only on the prevailing public opinion that PWD have lower chances to be hired,

but also on previous individual experience, as: “I have [once] told that I had a disability. They were not overjoyed. Now I abstain from telling this and wait a bit” (I71). Nonetheless, some PWD gain the courage after receiving a positive response: “only after I passed and I was told I was selected, I told that I had disability” (I6). Speaking of the fear of dismissal, it was revealed that it has been even reinforced by the COVID-19 situation, when “all the disabled were laid off first, as they were in the risk group” (I4). Finally, several informants associated having disability with being different from others and also with some compassion demonstrated by their co-colleagues or friends. In order to avoid this, they try not to use the disability for getting some exceptional rights: “for instance, I do not even have the sign for my car; I do not use this whenever possible” (I66).

As it was mentioned, disclosure is about revealing something that “he or she believes is not entirely visible or known to another individual” (Charmaz, 2010, p. 10). Usually, before disclosing information about disability people tend to assess the potential consequences, which might vary depending on “a person’s health problem, cultural traditions, social values and norms, hierarchical arrangements, and specific policies in a given workplace” (Charmaz, 2010, p. 8). Turning to interviews, it seems that social values and norms and cultural traditions mainly reinforced the decisions of informants to choose privacy instead of honesty when dealing with dilemmas of disclosure.

Additionally, Gignac et al. (2021) introduced the approach reasons and avoidance reasons for not disclosing disability. Turning to the current findings, it can be underlined that unwillingness to be exclusive reflect approach, while the fears of not being employed and/or fired fall into avoidance reason group. Thus, summing up, the informants preferred non-disclosure decisions leading to several issues for employers, for instance how to ensure the appropriate work conditions and not no break legal rules.

RQ2: What are the main drivers for employment of PWD?

As it was mentioned, drivers and barriers were categorised into three levels: contextual, organisational and individual (Table 1) and are described below.

Table 1. Drivers and barriers of employment of PWD.

Level	Drivers	Barriers
Individual	self-confidence, proactivity in job search, education, and being motivated at work	limited motivation, low self-confidence, victim syndrome, health conditions
Organisational	flexible working conditions, positive attitudes by employers	negative attitude of employer/co-workers, inaccessible buildings and other physical conditions of work, workplace customisation
Contextual	state support, financial support for becoming self-employed, information dissemination	inaccessible transportation, insufficient psychological rehabilitation, stereotypes

Individual Drivers

Self-confidence. Following previous literature, self-confidence seems to be important in the process of job search (Lyons, 2023). Turning to current research, some of informants demonstrated a high level of self-confidence, arguing that “*the creed of my life – a person has to go and do things*” (I39) or “*I do not intend to lay in my bed moaning*” (I54). Furthermore, “*<...> the self-confidence then comes*” (R2) as it is closely associated with active searching for the job, when “*<...> I take part in a project <...> and they teach how to write your CV and cover letter*” (R2). Moreover, following data, there is a link between self-confidence and the pursuit of knowledge when participating in various courses, attending adult evening school or studying individually, for instance mastering IT skills.

Proactivity in job search was mentioned among drivers for employment, as: “*I keep sending my CV and go to interviews*” (I66).

Education. The majority of informants support the idea that education plays a crucial role not only in finding a job, but also later throughout the whole employment cycle, for instance for promotions or remuneration management: “*I used to improve my qualification regularly attending the courses twice per year, so that I would be given more complex tasks and a salary raise*” (I16). It seems that a large share of informants have a very strong desire to learn, they do it on their own, independently, for instance: “*I have been working and studying at the university, devoting all my free time to it*” (I68)” or “*I am studying presently too, for my Master’s degree*” (I17). Moreover, for integrating into the labour market, the relevance of “soft” competences was emphasised, arguing that “*CV writing courses, motivational courses are great opportunities to start searching for the job*” (I3). Such findings correspond to previous literature, arguing that good social skills and a variety of interests (Henry & Lucca, 2004) and job-related skills (Lee et al., 2011) play a crucial role of fitting in on the job.

Being motivated to work. Previous research indicates that the motivational level of employees with disabilities not only matches the average but is significantly higher (Aichner, 2021). This is contributed to by two factors. First, it is considerably more difficult for PWD to get a job; thus, once hired, they appreciate such opportunity and try to perform above what is expected. The second one refers to the lower confidence placed in PWD by others, such as co-workers. In response, employees with disabilities strive to persuade their colleagues to change their mind (Aichner, 2021).

Turning to the findings, being motivated to work was explained by habit, as: “*I am accustomed to always having something to do. Activity drives me, I love it. I cannot imagine myself as a housewife*” (I17) or by prioritising work in comparison to other activities: “*work comes first; it came as a shock when I could not find work <...> I want to work very much*” (I10). Additionally, informants mentioned the possibility to improve that is based on internal motivation as being among the motivators to seek employment and simultaneously to ensure the continuity of employment relations: “*but I wanted to keep improving, so I took it upon myself to complete the courses and then*

the employer promoted me” (R24). Finally, motivation also refers to securing future (including financial) in the long-term perspective: *“I want to secure safe future”* (I2) and *I work in order “to stand on my own feet in life”* (I20).

Organisational Drivers

Flexible working conditions serve as real driver to employment of PWD, for instance: *“the manager set more convenient hours for me”* (I23) or *“I may work from home rather than go to the office”* (I17). Such schedule and place flexibility were also mentioned in previous research (Bonaccio et al., 2020).

Positive attitudes by employers was revealed as encouraging to seek employment arguing that *“the manager makes the effort to organise everything in such a way so that it is comfortable for people with disabilities”* (I58).

Contextual Drivers

State support. According to informants, government support is crucial, but not sufficient at the moment. State might provide more support through employment programmes. As such, the role of Public Employment Service (PES) was stressed emphasising the need for better quality of counselling, more user-friendly webpage of institution, and human-centred approach instead of bureaucratic ones.

Financial support for becoming self-employed is appreciated by PWD; however, consultations by public officials are needed in order to clarify not only the legal conditions, but also to train PWD on the basic business starting rules, as *“to date, rather than providing advice, [people] are instructed to go and “read” the laws”* (I3).

Information dissemination. Timely and sufficient information has the potential to increase awareness of PWD about governmental measures for employment, training and broader integration into society.

RQ3: What are the main barriers to employment of PWD?

Individual Barriers

Limited motivation. Considering the differences between informants regarding their motivation, the findings are rather controversial. As it was mentioned before, some informants expressed high motivation, while other had low expectations in terms of work, as in this case: *“I would like to do a job that does not require qualifications; thus, learning would not be expedient”* (I29) or dependence on entitlements: *“I can survive from the disability benefit; what I get is what I have”* (I57). Thus, passivity in behaviour was observed, as one of the informants told: *“people get disability benefits; they have a place to live and they question then why they should study or work when they need nothing else”* (I58).

Low self-confidence. Following previous literature, job seekers with special needs are considered disadvantaged as they lack self-confidence to engage in job search (Liu et al., 2014). Such insight fits well in the frame of the current research. According to interviews data, low self-confidence is associated

with disappointment and insecurity about the future, which in the long term may imply even greater health challenges. It is important to highlight that the informants' low self-confidence stems not only from lengthy periods of unemployment: *"four months without a job and you start getting doubts about yourself and lose your self-confidence"* (I6), but also from the emotional situation in the family, seeing that: *"<...> when you go to work, you are considered a worthy family member, who earns something"* (I4).

Victim syndrome. Victim syndrome involves the desire to provoke pity in others, as *"nobody needs us"* (R12) and *"I will not work, as I am not able to work"* (R17). It is obvious that such attitude generates passivity, manifesting in *"<...> no sense in studying"* (R29) and no sense in working, especially when there is no necessity to solve the housing problem. Then, the prevailing position is that *"<...> I do not need anything else"* (R58).

Health conditions. Some participants reported that their health affected their ability to work and therefore job was not their immediate priority: *"first, I would like to get my health back"* (I31). Additionally, one informant strongly believed that their health condition might damage his/her reputation and create extra difficulties for employers, as: *"Sometimes, you get up in the morning and you find that you cannot put your weight on your foot because of the problems with spine. Then, the entire day and all plans go down the drain. There is always the risk that [your condition] might exacerbate or something might start hurting. Because of this, it is complicated with employment; plus you do not want to put the employer in a hard position."* (I34).

Organisational Barriers

Negative attitude of employer/co-workers, like in previous studies (Lee et al., 2011), was mentioned during interviews. Usually it refers to workload, as every manager would like PWD to work at the same pace as people without the disability. Following this, a suggestion was provided: *"perhaps the managers of companies should be educated more, something like that, so that they would understand the disabled better"* (R63).

Inaccessible buildings and other physical conditions of work. The ability to enter the building and reach the workplace, as well as the adaptation of sanitary units for the physically disabled were specified as barriers to employment during interviews. Moreover, low temperature was mentioned as well.

Workplace customisation. The majority of PWD emphasised remote work as a prerequisite for effective work. However, it was found that employers were not willing to provide the support to set up a workplace at home, as: *"remote work would be good, but my computer is very old, bad sound. I wouldn't be able to work"* (R10).

Contextual Barriers

The reference to **inaccessible transportation** was primarily related to infrastructure, especially in rural areas. However, there are a number of cases where disability requires special transport or a ride, and the use of public transport is impossible due to the type of disability. As such, this study supports the

previously made conclusion that increasing transportation access is seen as a primary way to improve PWD independence and self-determination (Bascom & Christensen, 2017).

Insufficient psychological rehabilitation. The research findings suggest the need for two phases and types of rehabilitation. After the diagnosis of disability, there psychological recovery and expansion of awareness of one's capabilities are required, as: "*depression was very deep; I found it very hard to realise that I could not work; I cried through the summer because I could not work*" (R11). Later, when PWD accept the disability, the courses for strengthening the motivation are lacking, seeing that one of the respondents confided: "*the enthusiasm and the way of thinking are not as before*" (R36).

Stereotypes. The issue can be illustrated with the following quote: "*in cities, the attitude to the disabled is more liberal and they understand the disabled person better. In the meantime, in smaller towns, they view you as being rather different from others – that is it, you are a leper. In other works, they do not speak with you and address the person standing nearby instead*" (R63). Accordingly, education of society could be strengthened.

CONCLUSION

The findings revealed that PWD were not yet willing to disclose their disability in the employment cycle. Turning to drivers and barriers to employment of PWD, it is obvious that individual, organisational and contextual factors matter leading to conclusion that striving for sustainable societies and economies, all stakeholders and particular PWD, companies, government, the entire labour force, and society should join their forces for actual inclusion of PWD in the labour pool.

The paper has several limitations. The first concern deals with the profile of the informants. The interviews were conducted with PWD without segmenting them by their disability form or current employment status. New studies could try to collect data from particular PWD groups. The second concern refers to the comparative nature of the study. In order to gain a broader picture, a study with two groups, namely PWD and managers, could be conducted.

The paper has several practical implications. First, the paper urges the organisations to employ PWD and use the advantages of such practice. Second, the organisations are encouraged to establish clear procedures for supporting not only PWD, but also co-workers. Finally, the paper argues for a more active role of the state in shaping the country culture and supporting PWD in employment cycle.

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