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Perspectives on demand side barriers and facilitators to the employment of people with disability: qualitative interviews with hospitality employers

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study sought to identify barriers and facilitators to the employment of people with disabilities in small-to-medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in hospitality.

Methods: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with hospitality employers ($n=35$). Purposive sampling was used to recruit employers with varied experiences of employing people with disability. A conceptual model of five demand-side predictors of disability employment success was used as an analytical lens (employer attitudes, job characteristics, organisation characteristics, workplace concerns, corporate culture).

Results: Data was coded to the five predictors, in addition, "co-workers' attitudes' and "workplace accommodations and adjustments" emerged as additional predictors. All participants raised workplace concerns, with employers with experience adopting a range of strategies to address concerns. Employers with no prior experience were passively rather than actively creating barriers to employment. Smaller organisations were more likely to view employing people with disabilities as high risk. Few organisations reported accessing the services of disability employment providers.

Conclusion: This study extended the model of demand-side predictors in alignment with evidence from the SME hospitality sector adding two additional predictors. Future employment in the sector might be facilitated by more partnerships with disability employment service providers who have the requisite expertise that most SMEs do not have in-house.

➤ IMPLICATIONS FOR REHABILITATION

- Disability employment advisors should promote awareness of their support services, including recruitment, training, and workplace accommodations to small to medium sized hospitality businesses to help mitigate perceptions of risk.
- Disability employment advisors should share real-life examples of successful disability employment to address employers' concerns and highlight the benefits of employing people with disabilities.
- Disability employment advisors should encourage disability awareness training for all staff to improve inclusivity and support for employees with disabilities.
- Disability employment advisors should leverage the networks of industry peak bodies to advocate for disability employment and share resources with member businesses.

Introduction

In Australia, it is estimated that four million people are living with a disability, or approximately 18% of the total population [1]. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Article 27) asserts the right of people with disabilities to "work on an equal basis with others", and that workplaces should be "open, inclusive and accessible" to people with disabilities [2]. Australia, like many other developed nations, has had a shift in policy away from employing people with disabilities in sheltered workshops (called Australian Disability Enterprises, or ADEs), and towards what is referred to in Australia as "open employment" (known as supported or integrated employment on other countries); that is, mainstream employment working with people with and without disabilities [3–5]. This policy shift better aligns with the goal of greater inclusion and diversity in workplaces. Furthermore, open employment has been found to result in a range of positive

outcomes for people with disabilities over and above that provided by sheltered employment, including improved quality of life, better mental and physical health, enhanced self-esteem, personal satisfaction, and social inclusion [6–11].

The National Disability Insurance Scheme was rolled out nationally between 2016 and 2020 [12] with a key aim of improving employment opportunities for people with disabilities as well as enabling the return to the labour market of family carers [13]. Despite policy change and funding being directed to supporting open employment, there has been little progress on improving the proportion of people with disabilities employed in mainstream employment [14, 15]. An evaluation demonstrated that, whilst there had been gains in access to educational opportunity and improvements in educational attainment, there had been limited progress in employment [16]. The latest figures from the NDIS demonstrate that the proportion of people with disabilities in

open employment has dropped since the global pandemic [17]. It is estimated that 53.4% of people with disabilities are in employment, compared to 84.1% of people without disabilities [18], demonstrating that parity of opportunity for labour market engagement is still some way off. The proportion of people with disabilities employed in Australia aligns with the OECD average, and is similar to that of France, Germany and Norway [19].

The hospitality sector in Australia

The hospitality sector (food service and accommodation) is estimated to employ some 946,000 people across Australia [20] and, in the aftermath of the global pandemic has been experiencing severe staff shortages [21]. It is a sector that has numerous, varied roles requiring a range of skills from entry level positions to skilled positions such as chefs and venue management. However, there are a number of barriers to people with disabilities accessing these opportunities including employer, co-worker and customer attitudes, stigma, and discrimination [22–24]. Smaller businesses often lack human resources expertise and are often unclear about what their legal obligations are [25]. In South Australia, 70% of hospitality businesses are small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs), defined as employing between 1 and 199 employees [26].

Demand-side barriers to the employment of people with disabilities in hospitality

In Australia, as in other nations, public funding resources have focused on developing skills and creating job readiness in people with disabilities [24, 27]. Attempts to stimulate employer demand in many jurisdictions – including Australia – has largely been limited to financial incentives such as wage subsidies [28]. However, some counties have instigated employment quotas for the employment of people with disabilities, such as in France, Germany, Austria and Japan [29]. This legislation usually requires workforces to comprise between 2% and 6% employees with disabilities, with obligations sometimes increasing with the size of the business, and smaller businesses often exempt [29]. Such an approach has been demonstrated to significantly reduce the employment rate gap between people with and without disabilities [29]. In a systematic review of disability employment in the hospitality sector, it was identified that meeting legal requirements was a key reason for establishing disability employment program for hospitality organisations [30].

When there is no legal compulsion for businesses to employ people with disabilities, financial incentives are not always enough to overcome the significant barriers employers have towards employing people with disabilities. Several studies and reviews in the hospitality sector have identified that one of the largest barriers to the employment of people with disabilities is concerns over the costs of accommodations [30–32], a concern that is shared by employers in other sectors [33–36]. In a survey of 320 hospitality companies in the US, the cost of accommodations was a significant barrier for most businesses, though reported as a particular concern for smaller business [31]. However, studies reporting the actual costs of accommodations in the hospitality sector observed that many accommodations were free or relatively low-cost (e.g., under US$500) [37, 38].

Other concerns for hospitality employers relate to the productivity levels of people with disabilities [39, 40], and concerns that they represent a greater health and safety risk than other employees [39]. More broadly in two cross-sectors reviews, employers highlighted concerns about their own lack of awareness and knowledge about disability as a significant barrier [34, 35].

A comparison of employer attitudes of services vs goods-producing businesses in the leisure and hospitality sector identified that service sector employers was more willing to employ people with disabilities, but they were more concerned about customer attitudes [41]. Studies have shown that even when people with disabilities were employed in the hospitality sector, many are placed in back-of-house roles, away from direct customer contact, especially if their disability is "visible" [30, 42]. Notably, hospitality employers perceive more barriers to employing people with intellectual disabilities than people living with physical disabilities [43]. Across multiple sectors, physical disabilities are seen as easier to accommodate, and employers report being more positive about the capabilities of people with physical disabilities than people with intellectual and cognitive disabilities [29, 33, 44].

The evidence from the hospitality sector suggests that there are two significant predictors of willingness to employ people with disabilities. Firstly, the size of the organisation, with larger organisations being more willing to hire [30, 32]. Secondly, previous experience of employing people with disabilities, with those with previous experience being more willing to hire [43]. These two predictors of willingness to hire have also been observed in other sectors [33, 36, 45].

Businesses willingness to hire can be enhanced when a senior manager acts as a champion promoting disability employment [30, 46], or organisations otherwise commit to corporate social responsibility in the absence of legal compulsion [47]. Research into employers' perspectives on how demand for employees with disabilities might be stimulated identified the provision of more information about the benefits of hiring people with disabilities (such as the sharing of success stories), and the availability of disability awareness training for employers as likely to positively impacting upon demand [32]. Not surprising, employers prefer incentives to penalties, though the avoidance of penalties has proved to be a motivation for employers. An Austrian study identified that when organisations were penalised with additional tax for failing to meet their employment quota obligations, disability employment rose 12% [48]. However, a systematic review of international employer focused interventions found mixed evidence on the efficacy of wage subsidies [49]. Notably, the authors identified that anti-discrimination legislation alone was ineffective in improving employment opportunities for people with disabilities [49].

In their scoping review, Gewurtz and colleagues [33] identified that placing expectations to hire people with disabilities on employers without appropriate resources and support lead to fear. The authors highlighted the importance of employers developing relationships with disability employment organisations, finding that employers benefitted from having access to such expertise and experience, improving their willingness to hire [33].

Successful employment outcomes for people with disabilities

In seeking to explore the demand-side barriers and facilitators to the employment of people with disabilities in the SME hospitality sector we sought a theoretical model to frame our analysis. In doing so we identified a conceptual model developed by Ikutegbe and colleagues [50] which took an eco-systems approach to looking at factors that predicting successful employment outcomes for people with disability. Such an approach recognises both the demand side and supply side factors, as well as that these factors operate within social, economic and political systems including

the prevailing legislative, government funding and support systems set up to improve the employment opportunities for people with disabilities. Ultimately, understanding all of these components is vital to developing a comprehensive strategy for reducing the employment gap.

Ikutegbe and colleagues' [50] conceptual model adopts a social model of disabilities and was developed from a scoping review of 77 international articles investigating factors that predict successful employment outcomes for people with disability. The five demand-side predictors in the model are: employer attitudes, job characteristics, organisation characteristics, workplace concerns, and corporate culture and climate. These demand-side success factors align with many of those identified in other reviews on the topic [29, 35, 51–55], and key aspects of another eco-systems model that was developed specifically in relation to the employment of people with neurodiversity [56].

Employer attitudes refers to "the covert tendency to respond positively or negatively to a person, event or object" [50, p 211] acknowledging that attitudes towards people with disabilities tend to be negative due to stereotypes and assumptions about the abilities of people with disabilities. The authors highlight that employers with previous experience of employing people with disabilities tend to be more positive about the abilities of people with disabilities.

Job characteristics refer to the match between the person with disabilities and the requirements of the job. When people are mismatched with their role, they experience more limited inclusion in workplace events and opportunities. Ikutegbe et al. [50] report that people with disabilities are more likely to be employed in service industries than in manufacturing, and in lower-level roles which are more likely to be offered on a part-time rather than full-time basis.

Organisational characteristics refer to the sector and size of the organisation, with larger organisations better placed to provide opportunities to people with disabilities than smaller organisations, in part due to the real or perceived additional risk and expense of employing people with disabilities over people without disabilities [50]. Larger organisations are also more likely to have policies and practices that support diversity and inclusion.

While w*orkplace concerns* also includes the real or perceived cost of employing a person with disabilities, this variable also captures risk concerns, including those relating to occupational health and safety [50]. Workplace concerns also relates to concerns about the workplace performance of people with disabilities – specifically, that their performance will be lower than co-workers without disabilities – and the concern that supervisors will not know what performance level to expect nor how to evaluate the performance of a person with disability. Employers may also be concerned about the reaction of co-workers, supervisors and customers when considering employing someone with a disability.

Finally, *corporate culture and climate* relates to the behaviours that are seen as acceptable and unacceptable in the workplace which may be communicated explicitly in policies and procedures or implicitly through the attitudes of supervisors and managers and how people are seen to be formally or informally rewarded [50]. Diversity training can be a strong enabler in relation to this construct as can policies and procedures that support diversity in general and the employment of people with disabilities in particular.

Bauer and Gewurtz [51] have highlighted the need for unique interventions in different employment sectors to maximise opportunities for people with disabilities. In the context of the SME hospitality sector, it is important to test such models for comprehensiveness and to identify the most significant predictors to

develop comprehensive strategies for improving employment opportunities for people with disabilities. We note that the SME sector is less frequently the subject of such analysis with a predominant focus in the literature on the disability employment programs of large corporations [30].

The current study

This study sought to identify the barriers and facilitators to people with disabilities accessing employment in hospitality SMEs through qualitative interviews with hospitality employers as part of a wider program of work aimed at stimulating demand for the employment of people with disabilities in the South Australian hospitality sector.

Much of the extant literature on disability employment focuses on the supply side of the employment equation; that is, building the capacity of people with disabilities to access and sustain employment rather than on demand-side factors [53, 57]. The demand-side predictors of the conceptual model of Ikutegbe and colleagues [50] was used as an analytical lens to examine the experiences and perceptions of the employers. Given size of organisation and previous experience of employing people with disabilities have proven to be significant sectors in employers' willingness to hire, we adopted a purposive sampling approach. The study included hospitality organisations that had current or past experience of employing people with disabilities, as well as organisations that had no experience of disability employment. Given the South Australian hospitality sector is dominated by SMEs, we included organisations that employed up to 199 employers using the definition of SMEs by Australian Bureau of Statistics in their economic activity survey (micro, small, medium) [26]. The aim of the study was to identify practical ways in which demand for employees with disability could be stimulated.

Method

Ethics statement

This research was conducted in accordance with the principles stated in the Declaration of Helsinki.

The study received ethics approval from the Flinders University Human Ethics Committee (reference number: 5520). All participants provided informed written consent to participate in the study.

Participants

Purposive sampling was used to capture a range of perspectives and experiences in relation to the employment of people with disabilities. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique that selects participants based on pre-defined criteria [58, 59]. In this study, we aimed to select participants based on their experience of employing people with disabilities (current experience, past experience, and no experience) and, secondly, on organisational size. Organisational size was defined as micro (1 to 4 employees), small (5 to 19 employees) and medium (20 to 199 employees). As such, the resulting sample is not intended to be representative of the employment of people with disabilities in the hospitality sector but rather to explore diverse experiences and perceptions.

Participants were from South Australia (SA) and recruited through the Australian Hotels Association SA branch, and Clubs SA whose members operate a range of licenced community and

sporting clubs across the state, as well as *via* the professional networks of the authorship team.

Procedure

Participants were supplied with participant information sheets detailing the nature of the research, and what would be required if they decided to participate. All were given the opportunity to talk to a member of the research team if they had any questions. Once they agreed to participate, formal written consent was sought. Interviews were arranged in person or *via* telephone or video conferencing as per the preference of each participant and recorded with participants' permission. A semi-structured interview schedule was developed to guide the interviews. The sections of the interview schedule were participant demographics, organisational demographics, attitudes towards hiring people with disabilities, experiences of being approached by potential employees with disabilities, hiring people with disabilities, accommodations, and available supports, and understanding of legal obligations. All participants were asked if their organisation had any policies or procedures relating to diversity and/or disability employment. Audio recordings were sent to a professional transcription company under a signed confidentiality agreement with Flinders University.

Analysis

Transcripts were imported into NVivo 20 to support the analysis [60]. The analysis adopted abductive logic [61], that is, coding was both inductive and deductive [62]. *A priori* codes were set up to reflect the conceptual model's demand-side predictors of the successful employment of people with disability (employer attitudes, job characteristics, organisational characteristics, workplace concerns and corporate culture and climate) [50]. Inductive coding could then be added when demand-side factors were identified that did not fit with the conceptual model. This approach was deemed suitable as it allowed the researchers to test the comprehensiveness of this model in the context of hospitality SMEs. That is, the presence of the already identified success factors could be tested whilst offering the opportunity to expand or reconfigure the model based on any new factors identified in the analysis but not currently captured in the model.

The first author coded all transcripts to the *a priori* codes and created two new codes not captured in the original model. The authorship team met to discuss and finalise the coding, confirming the two new codes. Following discussion between the team members, it was identified that adding the codes to the existing model did not wholly capture the perspectives of hospitality employees identified in our analysis. We therefore, reconfigured the model as a two level model to better represent our analysis of the data. Attribute codes were added to each file based on participants' experience of employing people with disabilities (current experience, past experience, no experience) and organisational size (micro, small, medium) as these were two factors identified in the model and extant literature as differentiating the experiences of employers in relation to the employment of people with disabilities [31, 50, 63–65].

Results

In total, 35 hospitality employers were interviewed. Of these, 14 had current experience of employing at least one person with disability, 11 had previous experience of employing a person with disability, and 10 had no experience. In terms of organisational size, two hospitality organisations were micro (1 to 4 employees), 10 were small (5 to 19 employees), and 23 were medium-sized (20 to 199 employees) (Table 1).

Our analysis identified evidence for the five demand-side predictors of the original model [50], though we found that the predictor of "workplace concerns" was not as clearly delineated as the other predictors, and that many workplace concerns arose from the other factors in the model. Our analysis also identified two additional predictors to explain the perceptions and experience of SME hospitality employers, these were, "co-worker attitudes" and "workplace accommodations and adjustments," with workplace concerns also arising from the new predictor of co-workers' attitudes. Considering these findings, we propose an updated model of demand-side predictors (Figure 1).

Employer attitudes

Employers with and without experience reported that what was most important was the ability of the person to do the job, regardless of whether or not they had a disability.

> We need a job done. If they can do the job, then all that we require. (Employer 10, Medium Size, no experience)

Employers who reported no experience of employing people with disabilities tended to assume that people with disabilities needed to be allocated simple tasks that were "back of house"

Table 1. Interview participants.

	Frequency (%)
Gender	
Male	22 (62.9)
Female	12 (34.3)
Age	
25-29 years	6 (17.1)
30-34 years	3 (8.6)
35-39 years	3 (8.6)
40-44 years	7 (20.0)
45-49 years	6 (17.1)
50-54 years	4 (11.4)
55-59 years	2 (5.7)
60 years +	3 (8.6)
Years experience in hospitality	
Less than 5 years	6 (17.1)
6 to 10 years	10 (28.6)
11 to 15 years	1 (2.9)
16 to 20 years	5 (14.3)
21 years+	10 (28.6)
Participants role	
Owner/Manager	14 (40.0)
Manager	15 (42.9)
Assistant Manager	1 (2.9)
Human Resources	4 (11.4)
Business Type	
Hotels/Pubs[1]	9 (25.7)
Hotels/Accommodation	6 (17.1)
Restaurants / cafes	12 (34.3)
Community & sporting clubs	6 (17.1)
Event management	2 (5.7)
Number of employees	
Micro (1-4 employees)	2 (5.7)
Small (5-19 employees)	10 (28.6)
Medium (20-199 employees)	23 (65.7)
Experience in disability employment	
No experience	10 (28.6)
Current experience	14 (40.0)
Past experience	11 (31.4)

Note. Some missing data [1]In Australia the term "hotel" is often used to refer to a licenced venue which might be referred to as a pub (public house) or tavern in other countries.
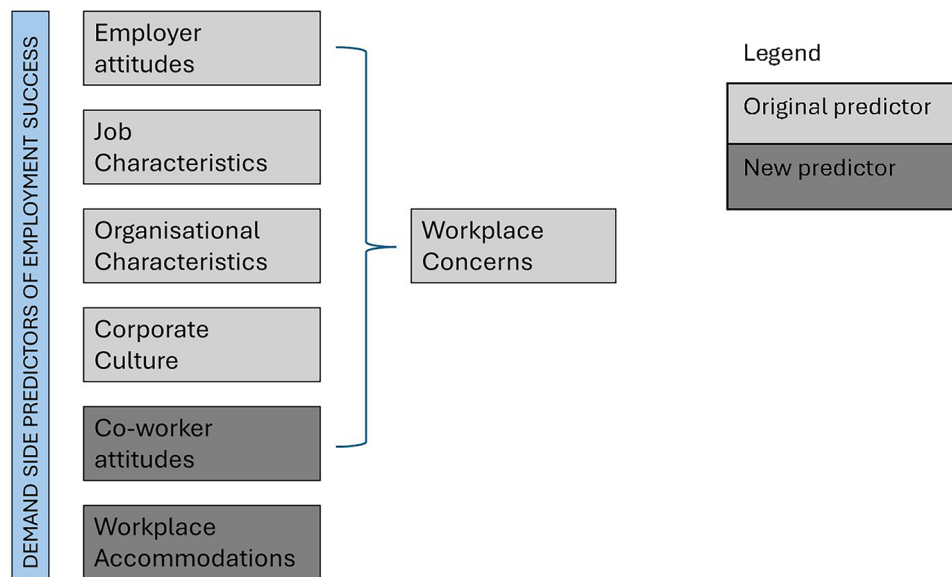
Figure 1. Adjusted model of demand-side predictors of successfully employing people with disabilities.

i.e., not in contact with customers as illustrated by the following quotes:

> …like, not very technical things, but just a routine job. Maybe delivering linen. (Employer 4, Medium size, no experience).

> Interviewer: Would you see them working in the front of the shop?

> Participant: You mean if I hire [someone with disability]? Maybe in the kitchen area, yeah. (Employer 23, Micro size, no experience).

Another employer with no experience assumed that people with disabilities had low confidence and few skills and, therefore, they should be prepared to initially work for free.

> I think if anybody with some sort of intellectual disability …, it's super hard because their confidence is probably low. I think if they wanted to get in… if they just offered their services maybe for free or did work experience to build up to getting the skills. (Employer 14, Medium size, no experience).

In contrast, employers with past or current experience of employing people with disabilities allowed people with disabilities the dignity of risk, that is, they promoted personal autonomy and choice, even if those choices come with consequences for the person with disability.

> At first you really want to help and then you realise that you've got to peg that back and they've got to be in the real world sometimes. (Employer 26, Medium, past experience)

Employers with experience also responded positively to the disclosure of a disability whilst also advising that the person did not have to disclose their disability to others in the organisation unless they chose to.

> I said to her, she can disclose whatever she needs to us. She doesn't need – if she doesn't want to. (Employer 28, medium size, current experience)

Job characteristics

Job characteristics deemed to be barriers to the employment of people with disabilities by employers with no previous experience included the fast paced and physical nature of many roles, as well as the need to interact with customers, some of whom may be intoxicated.

> Friday, Saturday, Sunday night…things can get rough. We do have people that are challenging. We do have people that are under the influence. And to potentially put somebody that may be more vulnerable {person with disability] to deal with a situation like that, it could be quite damaging. (Employer 34, medium size, no experience)

Employers with experience also identified these factors as inherent in many hospitality roles, however, they also identified strategies for supporting people with disability to build up their skills, pace of work and confidence. This is explored more in the new code of "workplace accommodations and adjustments"

Employers also noted the potential health and safety risks, particularly those associated with working in kitchens. One employer with experience acknowledged that these settings were not for everyone and, although he tried to employ a person with disabilities in food preparation, this ultimately did not work out.

> He was really scared working with a knife, so he just quit in a day. (Employer 15, micro, current experience)

Like other employers with experience, he was not put off employing people with disabilities on the basis of one placement not working out or a selected strategy not being immediately effective.

As can be seen by the examples outlined in this section, workplace concerns arose for employers/prospective employers based on the inherent characteristics of work in the hospitality sector.

Organisational characteristics

Smaller business highlighted that they needed people who could perform a range of tasks to offer the best flexibility. The following small employer saw that employing a person with disability could only happen if they were an "extra" person rather than a core member of staff.

> It's quite a small business. For larger businesses it is easier to have different types of staff members on hand. … hospitality is really challenging to make a profit and it is hard to put extra staff on when you need people to be at the top of their game. (Employer 6, Small size, no experience)

A medium-sized employer with experience noted that their larger size meant that they had capacity to move people into "where they skills and interests lie" (Employer 18, medium sized, current experience) which also promoted retention of staff.

Employers with and without experience of employing people with disabilities also emphasised the importance of organisational "fit" of new staff to the business as outlined in the quotes below.

> It's very important for us to ensure that we're not just putting a bum on a seat, that we're getting the right fit for our teams, because we refer to ourselves at [business name] family, because that's what it's like. (Employer 34, Medium size, no experience)

> We don't really screen – the process for us to hire doesn't really include anything to do with them having to be open about that [their disability]. So, it's just based on personality we hire. Personality. Skill set, we believe that we can teach anyone anything. (Employer 16, Medium size, past experience)

Workplace concerns

There was a greater number of data coded to this construct than any other, with employers with and without experience of employing people with disabilities just as likely to raise workplace concerns. However, it was observed that many of those workplace concerns arose from other factors in the model such as job characteristics, employers' attitudes, organisational factors and culture, suggesting poor construct clarity for this predictor.

For example, in the quote below the employer is concerned about a person with disabilities being employed in a kitchen which they perceived as dangerous and a potential health and safety risk, thereby highlighting the job characteristics inherent in kitchen work as a source of workplace concerns.

> …as long as there is no safety concern or elements to their employment. Again, it would all depend, if you have someone that could potentially be in a kitchen that's dealing with sharp knives, do you know what I mean? Things like that, we would have to analyse what the risks could be. (Employer 34, medium size, no experience)

Employers without experience were also concerned about potential customer reactions to having to interact with a person with disability, an employee with disabilities' ability to perform, and their time management skills. Whilst employers with experience also expressed a range of workplace concerns, they also reported strategies that they had adopted to address these potential issues.

Several employers with experience reported that in-house training was key for all staff. Instructing employees with disabilities on how things had to be done was essential for setting expectations and measuring performance. One employer (Employer 20, Medium size, current experience) also noted that training and support was needed to ensure that supervisors were comfortable having conversations that were supportive and not avoid correcting performance issues as required.

Corporate culture and climate

Unsurprisingly, given the informal nature of people management practices amongst SME employers, none of the participants reported that their businesses have any specific policies or guidelines relating to the employment of people with disabilities, though one employer was 'looking at developing a diversity and inclusion policy and strategy' (Employer 2, Medium size, current experience). Several of the community-based clubs reported that it was important for their staff to reflect the community they

served and, indeed, for some of those employers, employees with disabilities were from customers' families or friends of customers.

> The person or persons [employees with disability] are our club members. They were here since they were nippers [young children]. The families are still members, so we know the conditions [they have]. We understand how these young people operate the best. We understand the weaknesses and the strengths, and really try to create a work environment that is friendly, is suitable, where they feel comfortable and valuable, and where they can contribute. (Employer 5, Medium size, current experience)

Participants with past experience reported that their business experienced kudos from customers from their support for the employment of people with disabilities and that it was "good PR" (Employer 1, medium size, past experience).

In the next two sections, evidence is presented for the two additional demand-side predictors of employment success identified in this study: "co-workers attitudes" and "workplace accommodations and adjustments."

Co-workers' attitudes

Participants without experience of employing people with disabilities perceived that co-workers' attitudes would present a barrier to employment of people with disabilities. For example, one employer anticipated communication between employees with and without disability would be a potential problem (Employer 23, Micro size, no experience). In contrast, those who had experience largely reported that co-workers were supportive and "more than helpful" (Employer 26, Medium size, past experience).

> They [co-workers] were really good, really accommodating. I think he [employee with disability] was quite nervous and a little bit overwhelmed when he started, but they were really accommodating. (Employer 19, Medium size, current experience)

However, the respondent also observed that some co-workers are not sure how to interact with an employee with disabilities as they had not come into much contact with people with disabilities previously.

> You get a few kids ….You tend to find you can't put them together because they're not really sure how to interact with them yet [employee with disability]…the problem is I think when they come through school they haven't yet been exposed, because often I think through the school period, people with disabilities get [segregated]. (Employer 19, Medium size, current experience)

Another employer with experience observed that younger co-workers did not always make the best people to pair a new employee with disability with for training purposes.

> That was challenging. I have quite a young workforce, and a couple of them – a couple of them were probably I guess a bit frustrated in the sense that they didn't – they weren't working to be teachers, you know? Or trainers. And I think that's quite an immature way to go about work. You know, knowledge is something that costs you nothing to pass it forward, and it lasts a lifetime. (Employer 12, Medium Size, past experience)

The education and training needs of co-workers also extended to supervisors and managers to ensure that the placement of employees with disability was successful.

> There's a little bit of training and education to support our leaders to be comfortable in having conversations [with employees with disabilities] that are supportive… it's almost like, "Let's avoid the conversation. Let's not touch on it too much because we don't want to be embarrassed to say the wrong thing." Just educating them…to say, "Look,

there's no limitation in terms of what this individual can deliver on. No limitation in their capacity to perform their role." And it's really been just a complete acceptance. (Employer 20, Medium size, current experience)

Employer 33 noted that without other staff being on board and supportive of a new employee with disabilities "it would be too hard to do" (Employer 33, size not known, current experience).

Workplace accommodations and adjustments

One employer reported that being aware of the potential challenges of employing a particular person with disabilities made it easier to develop strategies to support that person's employment (Employer 11, medium size, past experience). Employers with past experience identified a range of strategies to support employees with disabilities either in the short-term whilst training or longer-term. These included initially working during quieter parts of the day, shorter shifts, and starting with a smaller range of tasks.

> We only put him [employee with disability] out there when it's quiet-ish. We don't put him out there in the busy time because he'll get overwhelmed. (Employer 25, Medium size, Current experience)

Another employer emphasised the need for feedback from the employees with disabilities to ensure that the workload is manageable and instructions clear.

> We're trying to take it easy, and I told her that she [employee with disability] needs to be honest with us and if it gets too much, she just needs to let us know. So, we're making sure she doesn't get too many hours, trying to put her in a position that she's comfortable. (Employer 28, medium size, current experience)

Some employers stated the need to schedule staff carefully, so as not to include too many juniors or people with less experience on the same shift, and ensure more experienced staff were rostered on to oversee persons with disabilities and provide support as required.

> It always worked better when you've got more experienced staff. … You do watch who you roster them [employee with disability] with. (Employer 19, Medium size, current experience)

> It always depends on how many juniors or younger kids I might have at the same time to get that balance right. (Employer 26, Medium size, past experience)

For another employer, shift planning wasn't just about making sure staff with more experience and maturity were on the same shift as an employee with disabilities, but also that those they knew were more supportive of employing people with disabilities.

> Some of our staff that had that sort of mind [not supportive] or the rest of it, that was fine. I didn't roster the people [with disability] on with them because they weren't going to get the best out of [the employee with disability] either. So, I really worked with what's on the roster, with who the individual's going to get the best results from [the employee with disability]. (Employer 12, Medium Size, past experience)

Finally, we noted that, though support from disability employment providers is available free for businesses in Australia, only four of the businesses has engaged these services, with three reporting a positive experience.

Discussion

This study aimed to identify the barriers and facilitators to the employment of people with disabilities in the hospitality sector

via an examination of the experiences and perceptions of employers with and without experience of employing people with disabilities. We identified that the model of predictors of successful employment outcomes by Ikutegbe et al. [50] was a potentially useful framework but that it was an incomplete and lacked construct clarity. We identified two additional predictors of employment success that were not captured by the model: "co-worker attitudes" and "workplace accommodations and adjustments."

In addition, we found that the original constructs in the model were not necessarily independent but rather overlapped. For example, workplace concerns included concerns about people with disabilities ability to perform (employer attitudes), including their ability to work at pace, and in areas thought to be more hazardous e.g., kitchens with equipment and knives (job characteristics). As such, we found the "workplace concerns" predictor to be problematic as it was not as clearly defined and delineated as the other predictors. As such, other predictors in the model were better described as sources of workplace concerns. In light of our findings, we propose an adjusted model which better explains the experiences of SMEs in the hospitality sector.

As identified in the extant literature, previous experience of employing people with disabilities was a significant factor in employers' perceptions of the challenges and rewards of employing people with disabilities [31, 50, 63–65]. Notably, employers with prior or current experience were just as likely to raise potential issues (workplace concerns, job characteristics) regarding the employment of people with disability as those that had no prior experience. The difference was that they had tried a number of strategies, whilst acknowledging that not all of these were successful. In other words, they had some tolerance for failure and trying again. For the employers with no prior experience, it was not necessarily that they were explicitly against employing people with disability. Instead, they predominantly adopted a passive approach to the topic, stating that they had never been approached by a person with disabilities looking for a job or that they had never been approached by a disability employment service provider. In relation to the first statement, this seems unlikely given that 18% of Australians have a disability [1]. It is more likely that they have been approached by people without a visible form of disability who choose not to disclose their disability during the recruitment process [22].

In their work investigating the attitudes and behaviours of Danish employers to the recruitment of people with disabilities, Bredgaard and Salado-Rasmussen [66] developed a typology of employers' approach to employing people with disability along two dimensions: attitudes (positive, negative) and behaviours (positive, negative), resulting in four categories. Then, using a survey of some 1901 Danish employers across various sectors, they categorised employers into this typography. They identified that the majority of employers (54%) had positive attitudes but negative behaviours towards employing people with disabilities, that is, they were "passive employers". Employers adopting both negative attitudes and behaviours are categorised as "dismissive employers" (22%) who were more actively against the employment of people with disabilities in their organisation. In our own study, the employers without prior experience were generally passive and asserted that the most important factor in recruitment was applicants' ability to do the job, with several stating that they were open to employing people with disability, as least in theory. Notably in our study, many of the participants had past or current experience of employing people with disabilities, adopting both positive attitudes as well as positive behaviour. In Bredgaard and Salado-Rasmussen's model, such employers accounted for only 20% of the total ("committed employers") with only 4% categories

as "sceptical employers," that is, positive attitudes but negative behaviour.

Organisational size was also found to differentiate the experience of hospitality SME employers and their willingness to employ people with disabilities, as has been identified in other studies [31, 65]. Bredgaard and Salado-Rasmussen [66] also identified that organisational size was predictive of positive attitudes and positive behaviours, with both increasing with each additional employee. They also identified that committed employers were the largest employers and dismissive employers the smallest [66]. Micro- and small-sized employers stated that they did not have as much flexibility in allocated roles and tasks as larger businesses and that they needed their small pool of employees to multi- task. However, micro and small businesses were generally under sampled in the study. In the context of hospitality businesses, 20 to 199 employees was quite a broad category and another categorisation of business sizes may have been more appropriate to differentiate employer experiences. Certainly, the larger of the businesses we spoke to seemed to be less risk averse and were willing to make short term investments in the employment of people with disabilities in anticipation of longer-term gains, whether this was employees who stayed for several years or to enhance the image of their business to customers, staff and potential future employees. As might be expected given the focus on SMEs, no organisation reported any written policies and procedures to support the employment of people with disabilities.

Publicly available data as well as the literature has identified that public companies are more likely to employ people with disabilities than private companies [66, 67]. In our study, we identified that community-based clubs – whether for-profit or not-for-profit – were also more likely to recruit people with disabilities. This diversity was aligned with notions of reflecting their customer base, accommodating requests to provide work experience or employ customers family members with disabilities, and lower time and pace pressures that other commercial businesses. This perspective presents an ethical component to the employment of people with disabilities. This perspective aligns with the notion of Corporate Social Responsibility and has been a guiding principle for some hospitality businesses in developing and implementing disability employment strategies and programs [30, 68]. Many authors have called for the expansion of CSR programs to include the employment of people with disabilities [69–71], though it is larger corporations that typically have formal organisational mission, vision and policy statements rather than SMEs. Though the employment of people with disabilities has been shown to result in many business benefits such as loyalty and better retention [46, 72, 73], better business performance [31, 42], enhanced workplace safety and innovation, and better customer satisfaction [46], these benefits were rarely articulated by interviewees, though retention was mentioned by some of those with current or past experience of hiring people with disabilities.

It was noted that few (n=4) of the participants reported that they used a disability employment provider. In the context of SMEs with often little in-house human resource or diversity management experience, this is potentially a barrier to the employment of people with disabilities. In Australia, the use of such services is free to employers and can cover the costs of recruitment, training, and ongoing support. Disability employment services providers can provide access to equipment to support necessary accommodations and can also support access to wage subsidies for a period of time, assuming minimum hour requirements are met, and that employment is intended to be ongoing [74].

Given the focus of this research, this study only presents the perspectives of employers. Notably, the perspectives of other disability employment stakeholders can differ. For example, in a study of employed people with intellectual disability, Fantinelli and colleagues [75] found participants had a high sense of their own employability and the capacities they brought to the workplace. However, this confidence might not be shared by young people transitioning into the labour market who may not see employment as a realistic goal for them. Expectations can be shaped by parents and peers [76]. Some parents can be overprotective or not see the capacities of their children and dissuade them from seeking employment, whereas others can became too involved in job seeking, potentially causing challenges for employment counsellors and employers [76]. Young people with disability tend to know fewer peers who are working than young people without disabilities potentially impacting their perception about the viability of employment [76], and they are less likely than their peers to have had part-time employment during school [77]. Young people in this age cohort without disabilities are typically drawn to hospitality and retail for their first employment roles during or post-school but young people with disabilities often cannot access such opportunities without support. Employment counsellors perceive people with disabilities are at a disadvantage in the labour market and in need of considerable support [78] though people with disabilities have been shown as having low perceptions of the employment support they receive [79]. Employment counsellors often use a limited range of techniques in training job seekers with disabilities [80], with many recognising that they need additional training to better support their clients [79].

Strategies to enhance employment in the SME hospitality sector can be facilitated through connections with existing disability employment services which are provided free to employers in Australia as in other jurisdictions. DES providers can provide disability awareness training for all staff to support hiring, induction and ongoing support by co-workers and supervisors. The important of disability awareness has been highlighted in the literature as an important step in the employment of people with disabilities in hospitality and other sectors [23, 46]. Furthermore, DES providers can undertake many aspects of pre-employment as well as providing on-the-job training and support. For businesses affiliated with peak bodies (as some of the employers we interviewed were), peak bodies can be instrumental in making businesses aware of these services and their benefits. Sharing success stories can also be important for mitigating fear of employing people with disabilities and highlighting the benefits. Again, peak bodies as well as DES providers can play a role in sharing success stories, which have been identified by employers as a key piece of communication to help them commit to disability employment initiatives [32]. Research in hospitality and other sectors has highlighted that workplace accommodations is a primary concern, especially so for smaller businesses [31]. This was a significant missing factor in the existing model. DES providers can support businesses to identify what accommodations are required (if any), and can support the purchase of equipment *via* the Job Access program *via* the Employment Assistance Fund [81]

Limitations

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. The study was conducted in one state in Australia and can't claim to be generalisable to other states or national contexts. However, that was not the intention or the aim of the study, as the adoption of purposive sampling was to examine a range of perspectives and experiences of the employment of people with disabilities. Given the criteria for sampling, there is an acknowledged positivity bias

towards employers who have past or current experience of employing people with disabilities. It is therefore expected that the true proportion of SME hospitality businesses employing people with disabilities is much lower than the 71% (25/35) in our sample.

Despite this, it is worth noting that even employers with previous or current experience still acknowledge the challenges of employing people with a range of disabilities as well as the rewards from this experience. Though we aimed to sample micro, small and medium-sized businesses, medium-sized businesses were overrepresented in the final sample, largely due to the time poor nature of microbusinesses limiting owners' availability for interview. Given that hospitality businesses employing 20 and up to 199 employees can be very different, it might have been useful to use a different categorisation of organisational size in our analysis. Finally, given our current program of work on the demand-side of the disability employment equation, this study focused only on these predictors rather than all the predictors in the Ikutegbe et al. [50] model, therefore not capturing a broader picture of the employment of people with disabilities in hospitality that included supply-side predictors and environmental predictors.

Conclusion

This study examined the experiences and perspectives of SME hospitality employers with and without experience of employing people with disabilities, identifying that the Ikutegbe et al. [50] model was useful but incomplete. Our study added in two new predictors and reconfigured workplace concerns as arising from five other predictors in the new proposed model, thereby extending and disaggregating the original model. Our study shows that employers who have successfully employed people with disabilities, often for many years, are very cognisant of the challenges associated with their employment. Indeed, workplace concerns were raised as much by those with experience as those without. The difference was that employers with experience had strategies for addressing concerns. Notably, those without experience were largely passive rather than actively creating barriers to the future employment of people with disabilities in their organisations.

In the SME hospitality sector where most organisations have little in-house human resource or diversity management experience, it is expected that positive engagement with disability employment service providers is needed to create more opportunities for people with disabilities. Smaller businesses were more risk averse and concerned about the costs associated with recruiting, training and supporting a potential employee with disabilities. Many of these costs can be covered by existing government support programs, a fact that employers without experience seemed unaware of. Business associations and peak bodies can also play an important role in raising awareness about the employment of people with disabilities. In the current climate of labour shortages and high turnover, the hospitality sector can no longer afford to ignore this potential talent pool.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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