

Missing Out: Why Don't Employers Hire Disabled People?

Key points:

- Disabled people, on average, have half the chance of getting a job.
- Employers systematically underestimate disabled people's capabilities and over-estimate costs and risks.
- Employers don't, and possibly can't, say what their attitudes really are.
- Most people have a very shallow understanding of disability and are unaware of how little they know.
- Employer attitudes vary with factors like business location and size.
- Both disabled people and employers are currently missing out on valuable opportunities.

"In 1973, one of us (J.G.M.) was instructing a class of medical students on the vocational potential of people with disabilities. A gowned patient was wheeled in on a gurney and his condition presented as cerebral palsy, with speech impediment and severe ataxia. After the history and physical examination, the patient was wheeled out and the class was asked to make an appraisal of his capability for learning or employment. The collective opinion was that the most he could do would be to sell pencils on the street. The patient got dressed, returned to the classroom, and this time he was introduced as Thomas Strax, MD, then Assistant Medical Director at Moss Rehabilitation Hospital, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania."¹

This brief explores employers' attitudes to hiring disabled people in New Zealand. It draws on the evidence from New Zealand, where possible, augmented by the extensive literature from comparable jurisdictions overseas. This brief has a full list of references at the end, with key references highlighted throughout as follows:



Indicates a deeper dive into the literature



Indicates practical how-to guides

¹ B. Corbet and J. G. Madorsky, "Physicians with Disabilities," 514. [1]

Disabled people have half the chance of getting a job

Employment rates for disabled individuals in New Zealand remain significantly lower than those of non-disabled people. The 2025 Stats NZ data indicates that only 44.4% of disabled people are employed compared to 82.8% of non-disabled people.²

In the last two decades, a number of welfare states have put policies in place to foster and support the employment of disabled people and legislated against discrimination, like the New Zealand Human Rights Act (1993) and Disability Strategy (2001, updated 2016). Yet these employment numbers have stayed relatively static at this low rate across OECD countries. New Zealand statistics of both the prevalence of disability and rates of employment are comparable to other OECD countries, which indicates that we are likely facing similar dynamics to our international equivalents.

Find out more:



OECD, "Disability, Work and Inclusion." [3]

Employers underestimate disabled people's capabilities and over-estimate the costs

The main barrier reflected in the international literature - across academic, government and advocacy groups - is employers' attitudes³ towards disabled people. The key issue is *not* that potential employers are correctly assessing disabled candidates' performance potential and being unwilling or unable to hire them. Instead, employers largely under-estimate the candidate's, or employee's, capability and over-estimate costs and problems associated with them. Although some employers view hiring or retaining disabled staff as a charitable act, the literature suggests it is more accurate to recognise that disabled staff can be valuable employees.

Rather than thinking of hiring a disabled person as a charitable act – think, "I could have a really quality employee if I make a few reasonable accommodations."

Employers don't, and possibly can't, say what their attitudes really are

In general, employers report more positive attitudes towards hiring disabled people than they act on. Some evidence suggests that if a candidate discloses a disability in their application, they are less likely to get the job. This gap between employers' self-reported attitudes and behaviours illustrates one methodological challenge in finding out employer attitudes: they are unlikely to articulate their real attitudes if they are

² Stats NZ, "Labour market statistics: June 2025 quarter." [2]

³ By which we mean a combination of how employees think about disabled people and their behaviours towards them, for example, their willingness to hire or promote them.

asked directly – at the least, not the real complexity of their implicit attitudes that motivate hiring practices. One manager articulated honestly that despite their best intentions, they felt uncomfortable around disabled candidates. In their words: “I try really, really hard to overcome whatever's happening in my head cause I do [...] sense some discomfort but it is very hard to articulate why I feel that way.”⁴ This discomfort is not widely discussed in the literature, but may be a significant factor, together with other attitudes that employers are willing or able to disclose.

Find out more:



Rola Mahasneh et al., “Increasing employer willingness to hire people with disability.” [5]



Christine R. Antonopoulos et al., “Workplace inclusion.” [4]

A lack of understanding about disability across multiple domains

A recurring theme in the literature is that employers are often ignorant about disability and capability, legal requirements against discrimination, what it might take to support disabled employees (e.g. costs of reasonable accommodations) and how to support disabled employees.

Shallow understanding of disability

When many people think ‘disability’, they think ‘wheelchair’. In fact, in NZ and internationally, ‘disability’ includes a much larger range of impairments that create difficulty for an individual going about their life. They are not always visible, for example, differences in processing information like dyslexia. Disabilities are long-term, but not necessarily permanent, like physical limitations from a pregnancy. They can be acquired later in life, like a traumatic brain injury or stem from a chronic health condition like cancer.

Many employers are ignorant about what a disability might mean for a person, and they are also ignorant of being ignorant. A survey of employer responses in the UK found no relationship between whether an employer *thought* they knew about autism, and whether they *actually* knew about autism.⁵ Most people have a very shallow understanding of disability, and most people don’t know how little they know.

Find out more:



All Is for All, “Let’s level up.” [7]



For a bundle of helpful How-to-Guides, see Australian Disability Network, “Disability Employment Essentials Pack.” [8]

⁴ Christine R. Antonopoulos et al., “Workplace inclusion: Exploring employer perceptions,” 9. [4]

⁵ Marianne Day et al., “Understanding the barriers to hiring autistic people,” 1271. [6]

It is unclear how much of the disabled population is captured in the studies

Unfortunately, a fundamental limitation of the literature is a lack of clarity around how much of the disabled population is captured by studies. Disabilities, and how they impact people's lives, are very diverse, but studies are not typically very granular. Not everyone who lives with impairments that fit the definition of disability self-identifies with being 'disabled'. Additionally, it seems unlikely that the diversity of what counts as disability is captured in employer responses to interviews and surveys. When posed questions about 'disabled employees', how do we know who employers have in mind when they respond? It is likely that a lot of responses cover a small subset of disabled candidates or employees: cases where an employer both knows about the disability and can call it to mind when asked about 'disability'.

Disabled people's capabilities are systematically under-estimated

A repeated theme in the literature is that employers under-estimate the capabilities of disabled people. Indeed, the term disability emphasises lack of ability, but ability to do the role is essential for hiring. Some managers perceive disabled candidates as lacking skills, generally, rather than experiencing specific impairments; and some managers under-estimate employees' abilities – strength, intelligence, mobility - that are related to their impairment. Some employers assume that disabled people don't want challenging work, or to work at all, whereas in fact a similar proportion of the disabled population wants to work compared to the non-disabled population. Many managers simply assume that disabled applicants will be less productive, slow work down, be more absent, later, and less dedicated and reliable. These assumptions are reflected in literature from the perspective of disabled people, who report "feeling discouraged from seeking and maintaining employment because they feel undervalued and disrespected."⁶ The evidence suggests that disabled employees who are appropriately accommodated are as valuable, from an employment perspective, as their non-disabled counterparts.

Many employers state outright that they don't consider disabled people capable of quality work – for example, just 9% of employers in the UK consider there to be a good business case for hiring disabled candidates⁷ – but equally demonstrating global under-assessment of capabilities, many managers claim that their motivation to hire disabled people is to be altruistic, or for their company brand - rather than because a disabled applicant may be the strongest candidate. Of course, there are certain cases where disabled people might benefit from employment more than the employer might benefit from their productivity, similarly to other demographics, like certain cases of youth employment. However, these examples are clearly not representative of all disabled people.

Sometimes, of course, non-disabled staff out-perform disabled staff; sometimes disabled staff out-perform their non-disabled colleagues. These productivity results are what we would expect from different people in the workplace. 'Disabled' is not in itself a predictor of low workplace productivity.

⁶ Rola Mahasneh et al., "Increasing employer willingness to hire people with disability." [5]

⁷ J. Olsen, "Employers: influencing disabled people's employment," 9. [9]

Find out more:



Silvia Bonaccio et al., “The Participation of People with Disabilities in the Workplace Across the Employment Cycle.” [10]



Rola Mahasneh et al., “Increasing employer willingness to hire people with disability.” [5]



Christine R. Antonopoulos et al., “Workplace inclusion.” [4]



Song Ju et al., “Employer attitudes toward workers with disabilities.” [11]



Australian Disability Network, “The business case for disability employment targets.” [12]

Employment challenges are over-estimated

In surveys and interviews, employers often express concerns about the challenges of hiring disabled people, some of which are real considerations, but many of which are over-stated or unrealistic.

Some felt uncertain and worried about how to respect disabled people’s legal rights and still adequately assess whether they could do the job, take disciplinary action or terminate a contract, or simply work together. US literature suggests that they were concerned about legal consequences about ‘saying the wrong thing’ or mishandling a process. This worry stems primarily from employers’ lack of knowledge about their responsibilities as employers. In New Zealand, employers are expected to be clear about performance expectations during recruitment and employment, managing disabled people’s performance similarly to the rest of the workforce.

Find out more:



Silvia Bonaccio et al., “The Participation of People with Disabilities in the Workplace Across the Employment Cycle.” [10]



Australian Disability Network, “Getting Workplace Adjustments out of the ‘too hard basket.’” [13]

Cost of accommodating disabled people’s needs vastly overestimated

As one manager put it, employers often perceive that disabled staff “come with a price tag” – that is, they are concerned with the cost of providing reasonable accommodations.⁸ A finding echoed across a number of

⁸ Silvia Bonaccio et al., “The Participation of People with Disabilities in the Workplace,” 147. [10]

studies is that these costs are vastly over-estimated, with the majority of accommodations costing nothing, for example, giving an employee access to a second parking lot, or a one-time accommodation of less than \$500, for example, dictation software. Some evidence suggests that providing accommodations in a timely way keeps these costs lower. Further, accommodations can signal to the organisation that staff are valued and supported, which can have a number of gains, including boosting morale amongst other staff members.

It is worth noting that non-disabled employees sometimes require reasonable accommodations (e.g. a parent with young children requiring flexibility in their work hours), and that some disabilities are invisible, which can lead to employees not telling employers and not asking for the accommodations that might improve their performance.

Some employers have expressed concerns about the impact of disabled staff on their non-disabled colleagues. For example, that they might be disruptive to team workflow, or that co-workers might resent accommodations or lower work outputs. These concerns reflect the generalised misconceptions that disabled workers will be less productive and that accommodations will be significant, and also the generalised assumption that disability is observable.

Find out more:



Silvia Bonaccio et al., "The Participation of People with Disabilities in the Workplace Across the Employment Cycle." [10]



Australian Disability Network, "10 Tips for Workplace Adjustments." [14]

Higher risk is a myth – but individual crisis safety plans are needed

Another concern widely echoed by managers is that disabled employees have a higher risk of safety problems and accidents. This perceived risk does not seem to be an actual risk; indeed, disability as a demographic marker seems more tied to following health and safety procedures diligently and lower numbers of serious injuries. This trend has been suggested also in New Zealand: employers in the manufacturing, engineering, construction, infrastructure and logistics industries have expressed persistent concerns about health and safety; disabled people in these sectors suggested these were "largely perceived rather than actual risks."⁹ The single area where disabled people experience higher actual risk seems to be in emergency/crisis situations, and it may be necessary to create an individualised safety plan for such an event, like an evacuation plan for a low-sighted employee in the case of a fire.

Find out more:



Silvia Bonaccio et al., "The Participation of People with Disabilities in the Workplace Across the Employment Cycle." [10]

⁹ All Is for All, "Let's level up," (Full Report), 6. [7]



All Is for All, “Let’s level up.” [7]



Australian Disability Network, “The business case for disability employment targets.” [12]

Employer attitudes vary with factors like location and size

So far, our discussion of both employer attitudes and disabled people has been generalised, which reflects much of the primary and secondary research. This high-level view of employer attitudes has been helpful as far as it goes, but a survey of ‘employer attitudes to disabled people’ misses some key differentials: 1) the industry; 2) the size of the organisation; 3) the type of disability and 4) cultural-specific factors.

1. The industry matters

Different industries are more or less open to hiring people with different types of disabilities. A Norwegian study presented employers with fictional job applicants that varied seven variables, including disability, work percentage, work experience, education and age. They found significant patterns related to differences in industry and disability, and types of disability. For example, public administration roles were most likely to hire disabled candidates generally, and accommodation and food service industries showed the highest degree of disability disadvantage. Some types of disabilities had their own patterns: for example, the manufacturing industry was the most likely to hire a candidate with a hearing impairment; professional, technical and scientific activities were the most open industries for an applicant who is chronically ill. For disability generally and disabilities specifically, employer attitudes vary from industry to industry.

Find out more:



Stine Berre, “Industry Differences in Employers’ Hiring Attitudes Towards Disabled Job Seekers.” [15]

2. Large organisations hire more disabled people

In general, larger organisations are more willing to hire disabled employees. Smaller and medium-sized businesses (under 500 employees) report being more concerned with the potential financial costs of accommodations and liability risks. This finding may be particularly relevant to New Zealand, which is dominated by small businesses, with few large firms. Also, larger organisations may be driven by formalised diversity and inclusion policies. A theme absent from the literature surveyed is that smaller organisations often require a greater versatility for individual workers. For example, one source suggested that a swimming pool may not be able to employ somebody with mobility impairments to teach swimming lessons but could employ them at the front desk. This source did not consider that, in many swimming pools, the front-desk staff are also lifeguards. The employment of an individual for a single task or set of tasks, rather than for more versatile roles, should be seen as its own accommodation of greater or lesser significance in different-sized organisations.

Find out more:



Song Ju et al., "Employer attitudes toward workers with disabilities." [11]



Theresa Sepulveda, "Barriers to Hiring and Accommodating People With Disabilities in Small and Medium Sized Businesses." [16]



Rola Mahasneh et al., "Increasing employer willingness to hire people with disability." [5]

3. The type and severity of disability is important

The literature that we have surveyed consistently reports that the type and severity of disability has a significant impact on employer attitudes. For example, employers are apparently least likely to hire people with mental illness, compared with other disabilities. These trends are reflected in studies where disabilities are explicitly discussed with employers, for example, mentioned in the application process. However, a limitation of this finding is that many people with mental illness do not discuss their conditions at work, and managers may be completely unaware of the prevalence of this disability in their workforce. Employers are likely to be more open to hiring employees with mental health or 'invisible' disabilities than they realise; they probably happily employ many of them.

Find out more:



Alex Woodley and Nadine Metzger, "Employer attitudes towards employing disabled people." [17]



Stine Berre, "Industry Differences in Employers' Hiring Attitudes Towards Disabled Job Seekers." [15]

4. Cultural-specific factors at play

We have not seen any literature seeking to address the effect of cultural context on employer attitudes towards disabled people. However, employer attitudes don't exist in a cultural vacuum. In Malaysia, the employment of disabled people is *much* lower than OECD countries - perhaps as low as 5% employment.¹⁰ Cultural attitudes and norms play a role.

New Zealand is a highly multi-cultural society *de facto* and is uniquely bi-cultural *de jure*. Auckland is the largest 'Polynesian' city in the world, and New Zealand is founded on a legal partnership between the settler Government and indigenous Māori people. Māori and Pasifika cultures both have a range of views about the cause and meaning of disability: some people view disability as a medical impairment; some as a divine

¹⁰ Magdalene C.H. Ang et al., "A theory of planned behaviour perspective on hiring Malaysians with disabilities," 188. [18]

punishment or curse; some may see disability, e.g. blindness (kāpo), as a tohu of greatness; some as a result of the infringement of tapu. It is said that Māori and Pasifika people have a more 'collectivist' view towards disability, rather than individual, although it is unclear how this difference might work itself out in employment. Discussions of models of disability often describe the 'social' model (the barriers of social attitudes or environment) or the 'medical impairment' model (there is an 'issue' with an individual), but this discussion seems to miss the real range of models that inform employers' attitudes.

Find out more:



Magdalene C.H. Ang et al., "A theory of planned behaviour perspective on hiring Malaysians with disabilities." [18]



Oranga Tamariki Ministry for Children, "Whai mātauranga in relational and inclusive disability practice." [19]



NZ Human Rights Commission, "Whakamanahia Te Tiriti, Whakahaumarutia te Tangata: Honour the Treaty, Protect the person." [20]

Let's not miss out

In New Zealand, disabled people are half as likely to be employed, but workplace data shows that 'disability' should not be associated with 'lower productivity', 'higher risk' or 'a price tag'. Disabled people need not miss out! The other side, of course, is that clearly *employers are missing out* on employing valuable employees. In New Zealand, we stand to gain significantly from employers having a better understanding of disability, how they can be good employers of disabled staff, and a shift in hiring practices away from stereotyped assessments of capacity and risk and towards more accurate appraisal of disabled candidates. Neither party needs to miss out on valuable employment opportunities.

Find out more:



For actionable employer guidance, see Hanga-Aro-Rau Development Council, "Unlocking the potential of the disabled workforce." [21]



This report was produced by Sophie Silvester for the Workbridge Foundation. The Workbridge Foundation's mission is to enable disabled people to participate in and experience equal opportunities in the labour market. We are committed to reducing the gap between disabled and non-disabled employment rates.

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