

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Intersectionality at work: How disability, employer biases, and SME constraints shape employment outcomes for persons with disabilities

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## ABSTRACT

Drawing from Intersectional theory, this qualitative study explores two research questions: the employment challenges faced by persons with disabilities (PWDs) and the employers' perception of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in hiring PWDs. A thematic analysis is adopted and addresses two main research questions by using semi-structured interviews with ten SMEs operators. The results for the first research question point to four related problems: employers not knowing enough about the skills of PWDs and not recognizing them, common stereotypes and societal views, physical barriers and infrastructure issues in the workplace, and employers concerned about cost and resources. The second research question revealed SMEs employers' reluctance to hire persons with disabilities because of a lack of understanding of their skills and perceive them as difficult to work with. It also recognizes potential facilitators, like the importance of variety and the practicality of focused interventions such as specialized training, financial incentives such as tax breaks, and peer-support networks. Results from this study demonstrated that hiring people with disabilities is affected by a combination of factors, namely, their disabilities, employer biases, and the restrictions faced by SMEs. These indicate the importance of multi-tiered interventions that deal with both structural and attitudinal barriers, thus, the study importance in theoretical and practical effects. Most importantly, it promotes the hiring of PWDs as a shared responsibility between employers, policy makers, and society.

**Keywords:** persons with disabilities; employment challenges; small; medium-sized enterprises; employers' perceptions

## 1. Introduction

Hiring persons with disabilities (PWDs) is important because it allows them to live an independent life, gives them financial security, social inclusion, and a sense of self-worth<sup>[1,2]</sup>. But the number of PWDs who are hired is alarmingly low since they still encounter difficulties in gaining employment<sup>[3-5]</sup>. PWDs are underemployed in temporary and part-time jobs all around the world, and they make less than the average salary<sup>[6]</sup>. Statistic from the United Nations shows that 80% to 90% of working-aged persons with disabilities in underdeveloped nations are unemployed. In industrialized countries, for example, the number of unemployed PWDs is between 50% and 70 %. These data show that persons with disabilities have a very low chance of getting a job in both developing and developed countries.

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In some countries even though there are legislation that support diversity in the workplace for PWDs, this demographic still face barrier in finding work<sup>[7]</sup>. Such evidence can be found in Canada, Poland, and Malaysia<sup>[2,8,9]</sup>. With these interrelated challenges also, PWDs job search effort becomes complicated<sup>[10]</sup>. Employers who are not aware of PWDs ability and job performance further lower employment of PWDs<sup>[11]</sup>. In addition, there are institutional barriers where workplaces are not accessible, a lack of workplace accommodations, and not enough support from employers. These are the factors that give rise to PWDs unemployment<sup>[12]</sup>.

The topic of investigation is crucial since it focuses on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which are the backbone of many countries' economies. SMEs are chosen in this study as they play a vital role in Malaysia's economy, contributing 38.4% to the nation's GDP in 2023<sup>[13]</sup>. Likewise, SMEs are increasingly recognized as crucial engines for economic growth and inclusive development. This aligns with targets set in the 12th Malaysian Plan (2021-2025) to increase SMEs' GDP contribution to 45% and total exports from 13.5% to 25%<sup>[14,15]</sup>. This points to SMEs having a big impact on the job market and can be very flexible. Therefore, they have a big role to play in hiring persons with disabilities<sup>[16-18]</sup>.

However, SMEs face unique challenges due to limited financial resources, digital transformation, and their tendency to hire individuals informally<sup>[1,20]</sup>. Also, a lot of SMEs do not know enough about how existing laws and incentives could encourage more inclusive hiring<sup>[21]</sup>. Furthermore, firms have their own ideas about how much PWDs can do, and adjustments will cost, which affects their employment decisions, including retaining hiring and retaining employees<sup>[22,23]</sup>.

Intersectional theory guides this research, recognizing that these problems are complex and build on each other. According to this theory, unemployment of PWDs is the result of several factors. This include employer bias, lack of awareness of the knowledge and ability, structural and systemic barriers that exist in SMEs. Based on the preceding arguments, this research examines specific biases and challenges that SMEs employers have when hiring persons with disabilities, and how different types of disabilities change employers' perceptions<sup>[24,25]</sup>.

The following are the two research questions (RQ) in this study.

RQ1: What are the challenges faced by persons with disabilities (PWDs) in getting hired?

RQ2: What are employers of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) perspectives on hiring of persons with disabilities (PWDs)?

## **2. Literature review**

The employment of PWDs is complex and challenging on a global scale. SMEs which present unique opportunities and barriers are not excluded. Building on the persistent global challenges of PWDs' employment, this literature review synthesizes current research on the multifaceted factors influencing PWDs employment outcomes, with particular attention to the SMEs context where resource constraints and informal structures create distinct dynamics<sup>[20,26]</sup>.

### **2.1. Barriers for persons with disabilities employment in small and medium-sized enterprises**

Past research suggested three primary reasons that have prevented PWDs from being hired in SMEs' employment. The first concern is employers' negative attitudes towards hiring of PWDs. Many employers perceive PWDs as "risky hires." This is attributed to misconceptions regarding their level of productivity and skills<sup>[8]</sup>. In view of the above, biases are deeply embedded in societal norms. As evidenced by studies of PWDs, when they disclose a disability in job applications, it reduces callback rates up to 40%<sup>[9]</sup>.

Second, structural barriers emerge from workplace accommodation and support issues. SMEs typically express concern about adaptation costs of making changes as they possess insufficient Human Resources expertise to implement inclusive hiring of PWDs<sup>[2,17]</sup>. At the same time, the physical infrastructure of many SMEs are often located in older buildings or sites which creates workplace accessibility challenges for PWDs<sup>[27]</sup>. In this manner, some employers perceive cost as a barrier to workplace accommodation.

Third, the skills mismatches and training gaps exacerbated PWDs employment barriers. For example, in a study of SMEs in Brazil, 68% of them perceived PWDs job applicants have lesser of the required capabilities as efficient employees<sup>[28]</sup>. Nonetheless, this opinion often stemmed from inadequate training systems rather than real skill differences. This is further compounded when there are not enough vocational programs that use assistive technologies or inclusive teaching approaches that could build PWDs job skills and abilities<sup>[11]</sup>.

## **2.2. Unique challenges in small and medium enterprises**

SMEs are key components of the labour market and they can be adaptable in a country's economy. But SMEs also face adverse situations that differentiate them from larger businesses. For example, due to resource constraints, many SMEs do not have dedicated Human Resources departments to accommodate persons with disabilities<sup>[29]</sup>. They also express greater anxiety regarding productivity impacts due to their smaller team sizes<sup>[30]</sup>. SMEs owners usually put their immediate business needs ahead of efforts to promote diversity. In fact, 73% of the SMEs businesses in Europe claimed that "business survival" was their major priority, rather than hiring people from diverse backgrounds<sup>[31]</sup>.

Family-owned SMEs face additional cultural barriers. As an example, in Indonesia, the protective attitudes of family members often restricted PWDs to execute their duties and responsibilities as employees<sup>[32]</sup>. Additionally, the informal nature of many SMEs hiring processes, often relying on personal networks, systematically excludes PWDs who may lack these connections<sup>[26]</sup>.

## **2.3. Facilitating factors and promising practices**

Despite these challenges, some evidence-based solutions might help PWDs obtain work in SMEs. It has been established that financial incentives work, especially when they come with technical aid. A Norwegian Study found that SMEs hired 22% more people with disabilities when they offered pay subsidies together with accessibility consultations<sup>[33]</sup>.

Other successful cases of increased PWDs employment highlight the importance of organizational awareness and cultural change. This include PWDs in Human Resources training programs that can shift employers' perceptions<sup>[34]</sup>. Moreover, programs for corporate social responsibility are also good for both enterprises and society<sup>[21]</sup>. For instance, inclusive SMEs in their study reported 18% lower turnover rates.

Emerging model illustrates how social enterprises can create business models that grow and integrate PWDs<sup>[35]</sup>. They demonstrate how social enterprises can create business models that grow and integrate PWDs. In this case, SMEs might find success by adopting such models. Similarly, strategic partnerships with disability groups also assist in bridging knowledge gaps. In Malaysia, such collaborations improved hiring outcomes by 35% when providing ongoing support<sup>[36]</sup>.

## **2.4. Theoretical framework: intersectionality in persons with disabilities employment**

This study employed intersectionality theory as its framework<sup>[37]</sup>. The research questions aligns effectively with the inquiry by assessing how discrimination against disabled individuals intensifies other forms of marginalization in the workplace. Past studies have revealed PWDs are marginalized from employment in SMEs for numerous reasons. For instance, cultural impediments, including ableist conceptions of production, and structural constraints, such as the inadequate resources of SMEs as main contributing

reasons for preceding situation<sup>[20]</sup>. On the hand, reason that attributes to the limited employment of persons with disabilities (PWDs) to institutional barriers, that include insufficient policy enforcement<sup>[8]</sup>.

This study also aligns with the intersectionality paradigm, as it clarifies the reasons for the independent failure of the intervention. For example, when SMEs neglect to implement them, quota restrictions become ineffective. Researchers supported this argument with their used of participant narratives to show how economic instability and disability stigma operate together<sup>[38,39]</sup>.

The literature reveals both persistent challenges and promising pathways when hiring PWDs in SMEs. Attitudinal biases and structural barriers are important in hiring of persons with disabilities<sup>[10]</sup>. Other emerging evidence suggests that addressing intersectional exclusion can result in positive outcomes. There has to be more research into how to make interventions that are specialized to SMEs work on a bigger scale, especially in the Global South, where SMEs predominates in the economy<sup>[40]</sup>. In the context of this study, intersectionality theory provides a robust framework. This will enhance understanding of the researchers, while addressing these complex employment disparities among PWDs in SMEs.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. Research and philosophy approach**

The research is grounded on interpretivist philosophical framework. It posits reality is created by society and understanding needs to be examine as personal meanings and experiences<sup>[41]</sup>. As an inductive approach, it guides this study beginning with gathering rich data from interviews with participants, then identifying emerging patterns and themes. The new patterns then utilized to generate initial codes, sub-themes, and final themes. The aim of this exploratory study is twofold; to discover the challenges faced by PWDs in gaining employment and employers' perspectives on PWDs hiring in SMEs.

The central argument for the application of a qualitative research framework in this inquiry is to critically evaluate the challenges and perspectives pertinent to the employment of PWDs in Malaysian SMEs. Qualitative methodologies are considered appropriate as they enable a comprehensive understanding of employer perceptions, policy implications, and the sociocultural factors that affect the integration of PWDs into the workforce<sup>[42]</sup>. Furthermore, this study holds significant relevance for the examination of complex social phenomena, identifying underlying causes, and providing detailed and nuanced insights that contribute to the development of effective recruitment strategies for PWDs<sup>[43]</sup>.

#### **3.2. Participants and sampling**

The target population is the owners of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Malaysia who hired or plan to hire PWDs. To ensure a diverse representation of SMEs contexts, participants were drawn from various sectors including education, retail, information technology, and printing. Also, to confirm that the participants have the relevant information and different levels of experience as SMEs, they must have been operating their firms for at least two years.

Convenience sampling was used to choose the participants. This non-probability sampling method selects participants based on their accessibility and willingness to participate<sup>[44]</sup>. Although the method does not provide everyone the same chance of being chosen or make the results generalizable, but it is better suited for exploratory or qualitative research. It is widely used in this type of research to get different points of view and experiences<sup>[45]</sup>.

### **3.3. Data collection process**

The primary objective for data collection was to conduct interviews with SMEs owners until theoretical saturation was reached, where no new information or themes emerged from subsequent data<sup>[46,47]</sup>. Upon examining the data, ten people surpassed the data saturation point. Studies that used real-world data attained saturation after a small number of interviews especially those with study populations that were mostly have the same and goals and were very clear in their responses<sup>[48]</sup>.

The primary data were collected through a qualitative method, that is semi-structured in-depth interviews. These one-on-one interviews were conducted with the selected SMEs operators. This method meets the objective of the research and allows researchers flexibility to explore emergent themes. At the same time, it ensures comprehensive coverage of topics pertinent to the study objectives<sup>[42,43]</sup>.

The interview guide was developed to address the study's research questions, focusing on the challenges faced by PWDs in getting hired and what are employers of small and SMEs perspectives on hiring of PWDs. It is expected that each interview will run between 60 to 90 minutes. With the clear and informed consent of the participants before the interviews start, all of them will be recorded on video and audio<sup>[49]</sup>.

### **3.4. Data analysis**

The data analysis adopted six-steps thematic Analysis<sup>[41]</sup>. This type of analysis is chosen for its flexibility in identifying patterns of meaning across qualitative data. The six-phase approach is applied.

1. Familiarization: Transcribing interviews/reading/ and re-reading data.
2. Initial Coding: Generating codes.
3. Theme Development: Grouping codes into potential themes.
4. Reviewing Themes: Checking themes against coded extracts and refining.
5. Defining/Naming Themes: Finalizing themes with clear definitions.
6. Reporting: Weaving themes into a coherent narrative with illustrative quotes.

### **3.5. Trustworthiness and rigour**

The researchers use a variety of methods that follow recognized procedures to ensure results are trustworthy and rigorous<sup>[42]</sup>. Continuous engagement with data via transcribing, coding, and developing themes increase credibility and foster further understanding. Member checking is employed by providing a small group of participants important themes and interpretations. This is for validation and ensuring the findings represents participants' experiences. Also, experienced qualitative researchers undertake peer debriefing that would offer an external confirmation of the methodology.

To enhance transferability of data, researchers provide comprehensive descriptions of the research setting and the participants, for readers to assess relevance and conclusions that might apply to their own situations. A full audit trail that tracks all research methodologies, from protocols to coding decisions, would ensure transparency. Further on enhancing results credibility, reflexivity is used all the time to accurately show the participants' points of view and not the researcher's biases. To achieve this, the researchers keep journals to write down personal assumptions and changing interpretation. In doing so, researchers become more conscious and responsible on data interaction, interpretation and analysis. While the audit trail will enhance this clarity.

### **3.6. Ethical considerations**

This study strictly adheres to ethical guidelines for research involving human participants. First, institutional ethical approval is obtained from the Ethics Committee of UNITAR International University

before data collection, ensuring all activities conform to university and national protocols. For informed consent, participants received a detailed Informed consent form before the interview which they must signed if they agree to be participants in this research. The form outlines the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits, and their rights, including voluntary participation and the freedom to withdraw anytime.

As confidentiality and anonymity are paramount, researches maintain confidentiality by storing data securely, accessible only by the team. All research data, including recordings and transcripts, will be securely kept on password-protected university servers, accessible only to approved researchers and deleted securely after five years. Anonymity of participants is guaranteed by using pseudonyms for participants and their organizations in all records and reports. Finally, to minimize harm, the interview questions are respectful, and participants will always be reminded of their right to decline questions or stop the interview.

## 4. Analysis and Discussion

The following **Table 1** demonstrate an overview of the demographic of the SMEs. The table provides an overview of the ten SMEs operators who participated in the study, detailing their professional backgrounds, current businesses, business descriptions, and years in operation.

**Table 1.** Participant backgrounds and business profiles.

Name/ Label	Professional Background	Current Business	Business Description	Years in Operation
Azh	HR Practitioner, Former COO in logistics, Contract Lecturer	Technical and Vocational Education Training (TVET) Education	Develops and implements Technical and Vocational Education Training, (TVET) programs	10 years
Muk	Managing Director	Property management	Property management services	13 years
Ilh	Former lawyer, Educator	Early Childhood Education	Preschool with focus on emotional development	20 years
Int	Managing Director	Retail	Fresh flower arrangements, event decorations, and customized gifts	5 years
Kal	Printing business	Printing	Photocopying, printing, binding, and delivery services	2 years
Lee	Education entrepreneur	Language, Education	Language enrichment center	18 years
Nar	Recovery and consolidation	Call Center Agency	Debt management	20 years
Pan	Information and technology specialist	Information Technology	Online learning platforms and custom system development	10 years
Raz	Owner of Retail and gifts business	Retail	T-shirt/polo production and marketing	5 years
Sen	Education business owner	Language, Education	Language enrichment center	12 years

**Table 1** showcases ten SMEs from various professional backgrounds. They function in sectors like education, property management, retail, printing, debt recovery, information technology, and others. The operational tenure varies from two to twenty years, reflecting a combination of experienced entrepreneurs and more recent entries.

According to **Table 1**, significant observations indicate that senior entrepreneurs, Ilh and Nar, possess the longest-running firms. Mid-career professionals: Muk, Sen, Azh, Pan (over 10 years of experience in the industry). Younger entrepreneurs: Int, Raz, Kal (emerging enterprises). The education sector boasts the most seasoned entrepreneurs, like Ilh, Lee, and Sen, with 12 to 20 years of expertise.

## **Research Questions (RQ1): What are the challenges faced by Persons With Disability (PWDs) in getting hired?**

The analysis reveals four interconnected themes that collectively create significant barriers to employment for PWDs in SMEs.

First, a pervasive lack of awareness and visibility of PWDs' capabilities emerged as a fundamental challenge<sup>[24,50]</sup>. Participants highlighted this, noting lack of awareness in PWDs employment in SMEs that can lead to bias, *"SMEs are not fully aware of the talents possessed by the PWDs"* (Azh) and *"interviewers might be biased because they're not used to interviewing PWDs"* (Lee).

This is compounded by instances where PWDs are isolated from mainstream opportunities, making *"finding qualified PWDs in Information Technology is difficult"* (Pan). This lack of awareness combines and reinforces the second major theme of stereotypes and societal perceptions, where employers hold limiting views about PWDs' productivity and suitable roles<sup>[11,22]</sup>.

This is evidenced by participant Sen's comments, *"PWDs can only do stereotyped job functions such as in McDonald's or in factory, packing,"* and assumptions that *"PWDs affect productivity"* (Raz). Furthermore, some SMEs *"do not want to include PWDs in the job advertisements"* (Azh), reflecting underlying biases<sup>[3]</sup>.

The third theme highlights workplace accessibility and infrastructure barriers, particularly in sectors requiring physical mobility<sup>[12]</sup>. Participants emphasized how *"property management involves handling properties across various locations, including high-rise buildings"* (Muk) and how *"packing and delivery require speed, hands to work, legs to drive"* (Kal), creating environments that inherently exclude many PWDs<sup>[27,51]</sup>.

The need for *"accessible offices"* (Nar) and *"wheelchair users"* (Kal) was also a significant concern. These physical barriers intersect with the fourth theme of employer concerns and financial constraints. SMEs often hesitate to make necessary accommodations due to perceived costs<sup>[24]</sup>. Participant Iih articulates in worries about *"the costs of making workplaces accessible"* and the need for expensive modifications like *"handrails"* (Kal). Additionally, Raz discusses about resource limitations that manifest as *"limited resources for training and we don't have expertise to hire PWDs"*<sup>[29,30]</sup>.

The preceding analysis demonstrates how these barriers form a self-reinforcing cycle: limited awareness perpetuates stereotypes and biases such as employer reluctance to advertise roles, which justify inaction on accessibility improvements, while cost concerns and lack of training expertise prevent the exposure that could challenge misconceptions<sup>[10]</sup>.

Notably on these arguments, some participants offered counterpoints suggesting potential solutions. For example, Pan recognizes that *"Information Technology roles like programming can be done remotely, eliminating accessibility barriers."* This presents a promising path forward<sup>[21,31,52]</sup>. Furthermore, the importance of an inclusive *"workplace culture, if team is open to diversity, hiring becomes a positive experience"* (Int), especially when coupled with a focus on *"dedication or even talent"* (Int), suggests that positive experiences can counter negative perceptions<sup>[21,31,52]</sup>.

These findings suggest that breaking the cycle of exclusion requires simultaneous interventions at multiple levels in addressing both attitudinal barriers among employers and structural barriers within SMEs operations and physical spaces. The thematic patterns underscore the complex, multi-dimensional nature of disability employment challenges in the SMEs sector, where practical constraints and unconscious biases intersect to limit opportunities for PWDs.

## Research Questions (RQ2): What are employers of Small Medium Enterprises (SMEs) perspectives on hiring of Persons With Disability (PWDs)?

Employers of SMEs possess diverse perspectives on the hiring of PWDs. These perspectives can be classified into three primary types. Bias attitudes that hinder employment opportunities remain a significant issue. Numerous participants expressed sentiments indicating a lack of understanding regarding the capabilities of persons with disabilities or held misconceptions about them. Azh stated, *"Numerous SMEs are reluctant to employ PWDs due to the perception that they lack competence in their roles,"* This view support a prevalent negative perception of the skills of PWDs<sup>[22,52]</sup>.

Furthermore, Ilh asserts that *"Many SMEs are unaware of the advantages of employing PWDs, such as diversity, loyalty, and potential tax incentives."* Because of lack of understanding of PWDs talents, it often cause employers to be reluctant in hiring persons with disabilities. The potential for *"colleagues may perceive bias"* (Raz) underscores the broader stereotype inside the workplace when it comes to employing PWDs as employers see them as obstacles<sup>[11]</sup>.

Secondly, practical constraints in hiring emerge as the next dominant theme. The result reflect a unique operational reality of SMEs. Employers frequently cite the nature of disability and specific job roles as influential factors. Kal articulated this, stating, *"For physical disabilities, it's harder in fields like ours. But for hearing or speech impairments, it's manageable."* This suggests the feasibility of hiring PWDs is often tied to the specific type of disability and its perceived impact on job functions<sup>[25]</sup>. Muk supported this, noting that *"PWD employment is more feasible in specific fields such as Information Technology and Human Resource."*

Beyond disability type, SMEs also face inherent limitations, such as the *"cost of accessibility infrastructure like ramps can deters SMEs from hiring PWDs"* (Pan), and the challenge of *"limited career growth opportunities because many SMEs don't have formal training"* (Int). These constraints highlight how resource limitations within SMEs directly influence their hiring decisions<sup>[17,20]</sup>.

Finally, despite these challenges, employer perspectives also revealed potential enablers for PWD employment. Participants recognized the value of targeted solutions and support. The belief that attitudinal barriers *"could be overcome by investing relevant special training"* (Azh) suggests a path toward mitigating biases (Hussain & Muhammad, 2024). The importance of financial incentives was frequently mentioned, with Nar explicitly stating, *"There should give more I mean there must be benefit of us hiring, maybe tax exemption"*<sup>[33]</sup>.

In addition to financial factors, Sen recognized the intrinsic value of diversity, as the participant stated, *"PWDs view situations from different angles."* and *"We can obtain knowledge from each other."* Sen viewpoints highlight the various benefits that persons with disabilities bring to the workplace<sup>[31]</sup>. Moreover, practical support systems like a *"buddy system for mutual assistance"* (Lee) were deemed advantageous for fostering inclusive work environments for employers, especially in SMEs.

The findings of the interview data suggest that even though there are significant barriers in hiring of PWDs, but when there is a combination of awareness, financial incentives, and practical support systems, it can effectively transform employer perspectives and promote the hiring of persons with disabilities in small and medium-sized firms.

## 5. Conclusion

This research investigate what are the challenges faced by PWDs in securing employment in SMEs. At the same time, it also explores employer perspectives regarding the employment of PWDs. Thematic analysis



was used to analyze interview data from research participants. Based on the analysis, it was shown there are barriers related with attitudinal biases, structural limitations, financial constraints, and societal misconceptions. These barriers hinder the employment of PWDs in SMEs.

Moreover, it was uncovered that employers' reluctance to hire PWDs often stems from misconceptions about job incompetencies. For example, employers who perceived PWDs have productivity challenges, believe they are unsuitable for certain job roles. Employers are also concern about practical challenges, that is, costs of workplace adjustments and lack of training frameworks. Notably, SMEs' limited awareness of PWDs' potential contributions and of existing incentives like tax benefits sustain exclusion. In contrast, employers who recognized the value of diversity highlighted remote work opportunities, peer-support systems, and skills-based hiring as warrant inclusion.

The challenges identified in this study are experienced by many other countries other than Malaysia. According to International Labour organizations in 2022, it is part of a global pattern. Similar findings were also observed in United States and United Kingdom where formal legislation are not able to resolve attitudinal bias towards persons with disabilities<sup>[2,8]</sup>. Furthermore, despite growing evidence of PWDs productivity and loyalty, misconceptions on their job performance continue to exist<sup>[7,22]</sup>.

Even though SMEs in Malaysia faced limited resources such high accommodations and lack of HR expertise in PWDs hiring, they can benchmark on successful international models such as in Norway and the Global south for best practices in hiring PWDs<sup>[17,20]</sup>. In Norway, they use pay subsidies and consolations, while in the Global South they used social enterprises<sup>[33,35]</sup>.

### **5.1. Theoretical and practical implications**

The study highlights the need for multi-interventions approach that address both employer attitudes and structural barriers. In the context of this study it encompass awareness campaigns, training of PWDs and subsidies for workplace accessibility. As for policy and advocacy, the Governments and industry bodies could provide incentives to SMEs through tax breaks, grants for accommodations, and partnerships with disability organizations to bridge awareness gaps<sup>[21]</sup>. The awareness campaign should be more than just a social responsibility programs. Instead, it should also emphasize diversity and positive experiences of the participants<sup>[31]</sup>.

### **5.2. Future research**

Future research should include longitudinal studies that could assess the impact of specific interventions such as mentorship programs and flexible work models on PWDs employment in SMEs. While limitations such as sample size and regional focus may affect generalizability, this study contributes to the discourse on inclusive employment by framing PWDs hiring as a shared responsibility between employers, policymakers, and society. By dismantling biases and leveraging enablers like technology and inclusive cultures, SMEs can transform disability employment from a challenge to an opportunity for innovation and social equity.

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## **Conflict of interest**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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