

# **Disabled People, Work, and Small- Medium-Size Enterprises (SMEs)**

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **Disabled People, Work and Small-Medium-Size Enterprises (SMEs)**

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Finding solutions to address the UK Government aim of getting one million more disabled people into paid employment by 2027 requires a better understanding of the nuanced demand-side barriers currently affecting small and medium size businesses (SMEs). SMEs have been a more robust employer of the unemployed than larger firms meaning they have a unique role in providing employment for disabled people. It is therefore critical to understand how SME employers experience the process of recruiting and retaining disabled people and how disabled people experience working for SMEs. This thesis finds that jobs are still designed with the typical able-bodied worker in mind, and SME practices are often inflexible and therefore exclusionary for people who are deemed not to fit the abled-body worker identity. Yet, despite this, disabled people report feeling welcome in SME workplaces because of the informal nature of the employment relationship. The findings suggest a social relational approach to workplace *flex-ability* is needed to consider ability-diversity as typical to the human condition. As a value-based and inclusive approach, *flex-ability* differs to more traditional understandings of flexibility because it aims to operationalise more enabling employment practice by changing workplace culture and practice. In this atmosphere of trust and acceptance, disabled people feel comfortable talking about impairment effects thus reducing the *disclosure dilemma*. In turn, responding to the needs of disabled workers by changing the workplace instead of changing the individual is therefore the essence of a social relational approach to *flex-ability* in work.

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## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

The Government cannot stand aside when it sees social injustice and unfairness. That is why we have set ourselves the ambition to halve the disability employment gap (DWP and DH, 2016: 12)

At current employment levels, halving the gap would require over one million more disabled people to be in work. Achieving this will require a clear focus on the role that employers and in-work support must play, as well as careful consideration of the necessary role of benefits (Work and Pensions Committee, 2017: 3)

In our manifesto we pledged to see one million more disabled people in work over the next ten years. It will require a comprehensive and wide-ranging programme of action to enable and support that outcome - and it is important that we act now (Ministerial Foreword, DWP and DHSC, 2017: 3)

### **Introduction and background of this study**

Finding solutions to address the Government aim of getting one million more disabled people into paid employment by 2027 (DWP and DHSC, 2017) requires a better understanding of the nuanced demand-side barriers currently affecting SMEs. The Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (DBEIS) define SME employers as businesses with between 1 and 249 employees. Within this most sub-group analysis is based upon employment size (micro businesses having 1 to 9 employees, small businesses having 10 to 49 employees, and medium-sized businesses having between 50 and 249 employees) (DBEIS, 2020). Sixty per cent of all private-sector employment takes place in SMEs (DBEIS, 2020), and they have been identified as the prevailing form of enterprise and the most important driver of employment across Europe and the UK (OECD, 2017). SMEs have also been a more robust employer of the unemployed than larger firms meaning they have a unique role in providing employment pathways for disadvantaged groups such as disabled people (Unwin and Buscha, 2012).

The conjoining of the Government's labour market expectations and the predominance of SME employers means it is critical to understand how disabled people experience working for SMEs and how SME employers experience the process of hiring and retaining disabled people in their workplaces. Therefore, understanding the policy context within which disabled people and SME employers experience the contemporary social relationship of paid work in the formal economy is also important.

### **Disabled People, Welfare Reform, and a Climate of Austerity**

The UK political and social policy agenda since the global financial crash of 2008 has been dominated around ideas of austerity and welfare reform. The introduction of the Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) (as the replacement of Incapacity Benefit) by the New Labour Government alongside increased conditionality and sanctions (Dwyer et al., 2014) has resulted in a hostile environment for disabled people and those in greatest need (Grover and Piggott, 2010). Furthermore, the reassessment for Personal Independence Payments, changes to Motability entitlement and limits on Access to Work funding also contribute to the climate within which people are engaging with paid work.

This policy of austerity has eaten away at resources for improving the welfare state, and consequently disabled people living in the UK have faced unprecedented attacks on their ability to participate fully in society, with poorer standards of living, and in many cases even physical survival (Grover & Soldatic, 2013). In particular, the conjoining of welfare reform with sickness and disability has been noted as perhaps the most important development of UK social policy in the post-war years (Roulstone and Prideaux, 2012) because the integrity of anyone who claims long-term sickness and disability benefits is bought into question (Stewart, 2019). Austerity politics has constructed a narrative that disabled people are not to be trusted because they fake the severity of their impairment or illness. Casting disabled people as willing and capable of engaging in fraudulent behaviour has created a state of fear for disabled people, that whatever they say or do they will not be viewed as legitimately disabled (Soldatic, 2013; Ryan, 2019), or not disabled enough for certain benefits (Deacon and Patrick, 2011).

In the climate of austerity, Ryan argues that those in power have abandoned “even the pretence of duty to disabled citizens and [have] brutally turned against them” (Ryan, 2019: 5). There is also ample evidence to suggest that disabled people are being impoverished by the Work Capability Assessment (WCA) (DPAC, 2015a, 2015b; Grover and Piggott, 2010; Beatty and Fothergill, 2011). Simultaneously, other cost related disability benefits have been introduced with lower levels of financial entitlement and more stringent terms for eligibility. For example, the replacement of Disability Living Allowance (DLA) with Personal Independence Payments (PIP) in 2013 brought in face-to-face assessments and regular reviews of benefits claimants’ abilities. Consequently, disabled people have been divided into those who deserve state support and those who do not, with attempts made to discredit anyone who claims out of work disability benefit as a potential benefit cheat. There are now far fewer disabled people classified as deserving with only those with the ‘severest’ needs to be provided with support. Everyone else must make attempts to become self-sufficient via engaging with paid work (regardless of job quality). This reflects a wider moral dialogue between ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ which has been created and sustained as a result of negative stereotyping of sickness benefits recipients (Garthwaite et al., 2013).

### **Government Strategy to Increase the Number of Disabled People in Paid Work**

In 2017, the UK Government published its strategy in the White Paper, *Improving Lives: The Future of Work, Health and Disability* (DWP and DHSC, 2017). This was to be the start of a ten-year programme of reform that would "evolve in response to trials, research and engagement with disabled people, stakeholders and partners" (DWP and DHSC, 2017: 15). The stated intention was to deliver on the Conservative Party (2017) manifesto promise to increase the number of disabled people in paid work by one million by 2027, thus reducing the 'disability employment gap'. In 2020, an estimated 4.1 million, or 53.6% of working age disabled people were in employment compared to an employment rate for non-disabled people of 81.7%, meaning the disability employment gap stood at 29.1% (UK PARLIAMENT, 2020). However, these figures may disguise the actual number of disabled people in employment who choose to conceal their impairment or health condition as a consequence of negative stereotypes, or fear of discrimination (Foster and Hirst, 2020). It also means that only small advances have been made in the years since the introduction of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) (1995, 2005), because the number of disabled people in paid employment has remained well below that for the whole population.

*Improving Lives* made clear that any programme of transformational change must consider "how to achieve the appropriate balance of incentives and expectations of employers of all sizes to recruit and retain disabled people" (DWP and DHSC, 2017: 14). The Government promised to "improve advice and support both at a national and local level, making sure it works for employers of all sizes, in particular for SMEs, and their employees" (DWP and DHSC, 2017: 26). The paper also says that ensuring the policy measures introduced effectively needs to be considered alongside "wider work on employer obligations and incentives" (DWP and DHSC, 2017: 33). Still, it also recognised the limitations that SMEs have in terms of human resource expertise, training, time, and resources (DWP and DHSC, 2017: 26). During the consultation stage, SMEs, in particular, made it clear that they want information and support to help them effectively deliver on their legal duty to make reasonable adjustments (Equality Act, 2010). This request is not surprising given previous research and evidence that suggests smaller employers are less likely to make a reasonable adjustment either because they do not know what they mean in practice (Taylor et al., 2017) or because they fear additional costs (Fordyce et al., 2013).

Furthermore, *Improving Lives* raises some important questions about the Government's interpretation of the meaning and definition of disability and its stated commitment to the social model of disability (Oliver, 1983) (discussed in chapter two). If this is true, such a commitment would be welcomed by disabled people and their organisations because it locates disabled people's disadvantaged position in the labour market squarely on the disabling barriers and disabling organisation of work. However, immediately following this statement, the document says: "We want to avoid creating excessive burdens on employers that could discourage recruitment [of disabled people]" (DWP and DHSC, 2017: 33).

It seems ironic that a policy document that claims to find solutions to reduce the disability employment gap equates the recruitment of more disabled people with creating "excessive burdens" on employers. Such policy discourse has reinforced prejudice and stereotypes that frame employer discrimination, arising from a widespread unhelpful belief that disabled people are less productive (EHRC, 2017). These stereotypes have a long history. Many post-World War Two policies underpinned by orthodox economic theory were based upon the idea that disabled people were less productive than non-disabled people (Bolderson, 1980). In 2017 comments made by the Chancellor, Phillip Hammond, again reaffirm such beliefs, when he said Britain's sluggish productivity could be partly blamed on the higher number of disabled people in the workforce:

It is almost certainly the case that by increasing participation in the workforce, including far higher levels of participation by marginal groups and very high levels of engagement in the workforce, for example of disabled people - something we should be incredibly proud of - may have had an impact on overall productivity measurements. (cited in The Guardian, 2017)

Of more help, the *Improving Lives* (DWP and DHSC, 2017) paper does recognise the significant role that flexible working can play in enabling changes to the nature of work and linked these changes to new technology developments that can improve outcomes for disabled people. Also, there was a sense that supporting employers of all sizes is needed and achieved through improving advice that is easy to use. Furthermore, the development of occupational health services primarily geared towards helping smaller employers "because they are less likely to provide this service to their employees", was seen as important (DWP and DHSC, 2017: 33). Besides, there was a promise to improve Access to Work (AtW). This scheme offers grants to both disabled employees and to self-employed disabled people to provide practical and financial support to help disabled people find or stay in work (discussed further in chapter 3).

In addition, the Government committed to consider recommendations made in the *Thriving at Work*, review of mental health (Stevenson and Farmer, 2017) in making financial incentives for SMEs as well as offering a Small Business Challenge Fund aimed at developing "small-scale innovative models to support SMEs with sickness absence" (DWP and DHSC, 2017: 65). As part of this broader work, the Government is engaged in significant discussion with the insurance industry to consider developing a product like Group Income Protection (GIP) which would appeal to SMEs, allowing them to continue paying sick pay past the statutory period of obligation. This may require further incentives aimed at SMEs to enable them to bear the extra cost involved (DWP and DHSC, 2017: 68). In the same year, the Taylor Review of "Good Work" recommended to Government that the focus should be on "making a difference", and this requires a sector-specific approach, noting how "sectors dominated by a small number of large

employers or conversely in one dominated by SMEs require different strategies" (Taylor et al., 2017: 108).

The position of SMEs in the context of competitive capitalist labour markets means that external uncertainty and economic shocks can impact small and large firms differently (Smallbone et al., 2012). Given the distinctive factors that characterise SMEs, they are *a priori* less resilient because of their relative resource poverty, weak external environment control and limited options of financing (Smallbone et al., 2012). On a day-to-day basis, SMEs are just trying to survive. Understanding organisational culture in SMEs is also crucial to determine if the nature of informal relationships that tend to occur in SMEs (Ram et al., 2001) result in less discrimination for disabled workers (discussed further in chapter four). Creating the evidence base also requires a more nuanced and contextual-specific account of SMEs, given that it is already well established that the character of employment relations vary markedly across industrial sectors (Taylor et al., 2017).

Policy that is focused on supply-side expectation to improve one's education, training, skills and maintain our health to 'overcome' barriers to work and present ourselves as employable –has so far failed to reduce the disability employment gap (NAO, 2019). The demand-side policy initiative, Disability Confident may be well-intended in its effort to try and encourage employers to recruit and retain disabled people, but again, it has failed to reduce the disability employment gap. By offering advice and guidance to employers, it aims to alert them to the business case of widening the pool of talent from which they recruit:

The business case is simple: employing disabled people can lead to better business performance through accessing untapped reserves of talent, new sources of ideas, creativity and problem-solving, and new business from disabled customers, their families and friends from opening up new markets and enhanced reputation and loyalty. Although there is some evidence to back up the business case, many employers are not aware of these benefits. It is helpful to tailor the business cases to different types of employers. (Sayce, 2011: 56)

Furthermore, policy such as the Equality Act (2010) is critical to compel employers to change their behaviours, but on its own policy is not enough to facilitate a change in employer attitudes. In chapter eight I suggest there is a need for an educational agenda to support policy to challenge the engrained nature of ableist attitudes, and this must start at a young age. Education must run side by side with employment policy implementation because without that SMEs are out of their depth and left to unintentionally flounder with some of the requirements to respond to disabled people's needs for flexibility in work.

In general, people do not think about disablism or ableism. Both terminologies are largely unknown outside of disability studies and even then, I only came to read about ableism in academic literature during my postgraduate level studies. Expecting employers to reflect upon their taken for granted understanding of disability will require much deeper and complex conversations and finding a way to operationalise this is admittedly very difficult. Therefore, these lessons need to be learnt in childhood, and not left until the point of transition into adulthood and the world of work. The argument posed is that making disabled people more visible in the workplace, makes them more accepted by employers as a result. Gradually the prejudice against disabled people fades away because employers are given cause to rethink their attitudes (Moore, 2017). Building closer interpersonal relations should then become a Government priority, to rethink its approach to increasing segregated 'special' education at a young age. For example, between 2012 and 2019 the number of disabled children attending mainstream primary and secondary school in England has decreased by 24% (ALFFIE, 2020). The concern is that if disabled children are not visible to other children, what chance is there for a future without disablism? When children grow up into adults and enter the workplace without the experience of learning alongside children with impairments, they will become the next group of adults who are blinkered by ableist normative 'wisdom' that the 'ideal worker' (Foster and Wass, 2012) looks and acts a certain way.

### **Personal motivation**

My childhood best friend Andrew (a boy born with Cerebral Palsy and severe epilepsy) was sent away to a residential school in Scotland at nine by his parents. They were moving to Hong Kong for work (his Dad was a banker). I never saw Andrew again. I remember the moments we shared playing games, dressing up, and generally being silly together. We even had our wedding ceremony! The fact that he did not speak, walked with a wobble, was forever falling off his bike made no difference to our relationship and friendship. Other children tried less hard to become his friend, not taking the time to communicate with him, never realising how wonderful he was. The only times I worried about Andrew was during his epileptic attacks. They were scary to watch. The day my Mum told me the news that Andrew would be leaving Luton, I begged her to adopt him, and I remember the sadness and bitterness I felt. It seemed unfair that there was not a suitable school where I could stay close to him.

Now, I am step-mum and carer to Justine. I have known her since she was thirteen, and she is now thirty-seven. Like Andrew, Justine has cerebral palsy, epilepsy and does not 'speak' words in the normative sense. But she has mastered the skill of communication in other ways. It does take time to understand the 'noise' and the gentle nods or flicker of an eye to interpret what she is saying, but it is possible. As a family, we officially 'care' for Justine, but equally, she 'cares' for us. We are just as dependent on her as she is on us, and we are acutely aware of how fragile our 'ableness' is. We do not dwell on fading capacity as we age because we know that there is life to be lived no matter our functional ability. The only time it becomes problematic is when others take a different view. Relationships with Andrew and Justine have shaped the

values I hold and how I feel about the language used in everyday interactions, in policies and practice that reinforce the dominant cultural view of disability as a personal tragedy and something to be pitied (Oliver, 1990).

I became interested in exploring small business responses to disability because of observations I made during time spent working in the financial services sector as an Administration Manager. The business owner was pleased to accommodate his high-net-worth clients with physical impairments by providing them with ground floor meeting rooms and accessible parking spaces but was far less inclined to adjust the organisation of work for his staff. On one occasion, he point-blank refused to interview a job applicant who had all the skills, qualifications, and previous work experience that we needed because she had ticked the 'disabled' box on the application form. Such a response demonstrates a discriminatory attitude informed by cultural notions of an 'ideal worker' (Foster and Wass, 2012) based on non-disabled abilities and characteristics. As a form of discrimination based on perceived or actual ability (Campbell 2009: 5), such attitudes are ableist. In particular, ableism reveals the beliefs that devalue those people perceived as lacking essential human qualities. Specific abilities or personal attributes are then seen as typical (or favoured), and they become viewed as critical ability expectations (Wolbring, 2012).

It was not until I entered higher education that I could 'name' and 'theorise' what I had observed in the workplace. In 2013, I left work and enrolled as a full-time mature student on a BA Disability Studies (Inclusive Practice) programme. In a final year module, "From Policy to Practice", I selected employment as the topic of focus for an extended essay. During the literature review, I first discovered a lack of research on employment experiences for both disabled people and SME employers. Uncovering that gap led me to this doctoral research. The close relationships I have had with disabled people have helped inform and shape the research design and methodology.

### **Theoretical underpinnings**

The use of definitions of impairment and disability informed by the 'social model of disability' are said to be essential when undertaking disability research, because they are more likely to reflect the experience of disabled people within society (Oliver, 1990; Barnes, 1991). Impairment can be defined as a "physical, mental or sensory functional limitation within the individual", whereas disability is referred to as the "loss or limitation of opportunities to take part in the normal life of the community on an equal level with others due to physical and social barriers" (Barnes, 1991: 2). Furthermore, the social model of disability takes as the unit of analysis, the social barriers and material relations of power that need to be changed (Oliver, 1990). In the spirit of the social model, this study is framed upon prioritising the needs and voices of disabled people, in order to remove disabling material and social arrangements, which proceed to exist in the current labour market.

However, in an effort to advance knowledge, the thesis will draw upon the theoretical work of Carol Thomas (1999, 2004a, 2004b, 2007) and her extended version of the social model, for

reasons explained in more detail in Chapter Two. In summary, her work has been hugely important to disability studies in Britain and Nordic countries because it offers a social-relational interpretation of disability by including an advanced set of concepts to explore social barriers that exist both externally and internally. Her extended version acknowledges how social interactions between disabled and non-disabled people at both the public and private level cause disablism. Whilst she accepts that significant and pervasive external (structural and attitudinal) barriers exist, it is her focus on the psycho-emotional disablism (internal) barriers and the subjective experiences of impairment effects that provide for a more holistic understanding of disablism. She argues that *how* disabled people feel about themselves, in part, is a consequence of coming up against the negative reactions and behaviours of non-disabled people that make disabled people want to ‘conceal’ their impairment, and overtime, the reinforcement of such negativity can make disabled people feel ‘worthless’ (Thomas, 2004).

The focus of this thesis though is not to deal in any depth with the effects of impairment in terms of pain or restriction. Neither does the thesis deny impairment effects exist. Rather, I use the concept of *impairment effects* and place it in relation to the concept of employer *ability expectations* (Wolbring, 2012). By placing the two concepts side by side the thesis argues that employers ‘miss’ disabled people’s ability because their gaze is fixed on impairment and difference. Employer beliefs about disability are misinformed by ableist normativity that go unchallenged. Employers expect certain ‘ideal worker’ characteristics to be clearly on display during the recruitment and retention processes, and the SME employer often seeks to recruit people who will ‘fit’ – in other words, they look for the ‘same’ rather than for ‘difference’. Recruitment is often decided on an informal basis, which can be problematic for people who appear to be ‘different’. In addition, employer understandings of disability are reinforced by equality legislation that uses a medical model focus on what disabled people’s bodies and minds cannot do.

Findings from this study show that disabled workers often rely on building positive interpersonal relationships with key decision makers and other work colleagues to operationalise change in the workplace. When the workplace culture is one that fosters open, trusting, and reciprocal relations people are more inclined to listen and respond in non-ableist ways. The data presented in chapters 6 and 7 attests to the importance of employer willingness to work in ways that respond positively and to shift their gaze from impairment as difference, to an eye on ability-diversity. In chapter eight I extend the theoretical work on psycho-emotional disablism of Thomas (and later Reeve) and advance it with two new concepts: *disability dilemma* and *flexibility in work*. Together, these concepts respond to earlier work in disability studies that established how it is through creating a culture of “unconditional acceptance of workplace diversity and flexibility” (Roulstone et al., 2003: 37) that enabling employment experiences for disabled people can be operationalised.

### **Three concerns**

The thesis addresses three fundamental concerns:

- 1) The first concern is SME employer attitudes around impairment (and the effects thereof), expectations of ability (closely tied to assumptions of productivity and performance), and their experience of providing disabled people with non-ableist forms of flexible working.
- 2) The second concern explores disabled people's experience of psycho-emotional disablism during the recruitment and employment process (Thomas, 1999, 2007, Reeve, 2008, 2014).
- 3) The third concern is to consider the policy context within which disabled people experience *barriers*, and SME employers experience *burdens*, which consequently impact on the social relations of paid work in the formal economy.

### **Contribution to knowledge**

A significant amount of research evaluates the effectiveness of disability employment policy, legislation, support services and work-focused programmes (Roulstone, 1998, 2005, 2016; Roulstone and Williams, 2014; Roulstone et al., 2003; Roulstone and Warren, 2006; Yates and Roulstone, 2013). However, this is the first UK empirical study that has focused exclusively on the experience of SME employers and disabled people from a disability studies perspective. The research is also the first empirical study investigating disabled people's experiences of psycho-emotional disablism in the SME workplace in a UK context.

In addition to filling an empirical gap, this thesis also makes a theoretical contribution through extending the work of Thomas (1999, 2007) and her concepts of impairment effects and psycho-emotional disablism and I place these into the SME workplace context. I use the concepts to explore how deciding when to 'come out' as 'different' in the recruitment process causes disabled people to experience a *disclosure dilemma*. Second, I have developed a new conceptual idea of *flex-ability* in work. It refers to a social relational approach to working relationships that value ability-diversity. As a value-based and inclusive approach, *flex-ability* differs to more traditional understandings of flexibility because it aims to operationalise more enabling employment practice by changing workplace culture. I contend that it takes a collective conscious effort to oppose ableism and the underlying ideologies that sustain it through Government policies and discourse. In this way, both new concepts: *disclosure dilemma* and *flex-ability* in work attend to the affective cultural dimensions of the SME workplace.

That is not to suggest that changing workplace cultures can happen without support from the rational policy dimension. Disabled people and SME employers need policy, and the relationship between affective and rational dimensions of the employment relationship are central to this thesis. At a more practical level, this relies upon complementing the need to change policy with the need for creating opportunities for people with varying abilities to work together to build interpersonal relationships across the binary of disabled/non-disabled, impaired/non-impaired. Afterall, disablism and ableist logics are likely to fade away only when

the common sense understanding of the 'norm' is replaced with an understanding of our shared interdependency and vulnerability.

Essentially, *flex-ability* is a way of thinking and reflecting about ability-diversity. It is an approach to change hearts and minds, to trigger those conscious thoughts about stereotypes and prejudice and unchallenged ableist beliefs. Therefore, reducing prejudice against disabled people relies upon deeper questioning of cultural and economic preferences for certain bodies and minds, certain abilities, and certain ways of functioning.

As a form of inclusive practice, a social relational *flex-ability in work* approach raises consciousness among employers and co-workers making them consider other people's individuals' needs holistically, thus developing a workplace culture that supports and values interpersonal relationships for everyone. In this way, *flex-ability* is pre-empting a diversity of ability among the workforce. Employers who value human diversity will then become *flex-able* to the needs of all individual workers.

A *flex-able* work culture makes it easier for all employees to be themselves, putting their vulnerabilities on display, letting people see and hear the whole person. In this way, creating an atmosphere of ability-diversity acceptance lets workers know it is ok to say what they need to do their job without fear of prejudice or discrimination. Workers who 'trust' in the workplace culture, expect to receive a response that is appropriate and kind. In this atmosphere of trust and acceptance, disabled people will feel far more willing to talk about ('disclose') impairment effects (Thomas, 1999) (see comments made in chapter seven), thus reducing what I have coined, the *disclosure dilemma*. In turn, it reduces the impact of psycho-emotional disablism, especially the psycho-emotional insecurity felt during the process of asking for workplace adaptations or changes to the organisation of work. Responding to the needs of disabled workers by changing the workplace culture instead of changing the individual is therefore the essence of a social relational approach to *flex-ability* in work (discussed in chapter eight).

### **Research questions and method**

The thesis seeks to answer the following questions:

- What are the attitudes and experiences of SME employer's to hiring and retaining disabled people?
- How do disabled people experience employment in SME organisations and how do relationships shape the experience of disablism?

I chose to use a maximum variation sampling strategy (one type of purposive sampling) (Patton, 2015) to reach participants with diverse backgrounds and experiences, but within a small sample size. By selecting heterogenous characteristics I was able to understand experiences from people with different employment backgrounds, in different locations, and different occupational sectors. The sample includes twelve disabled people who spoke about the experience of working in an SME, and fifteen SME owner/managers who spoke about their

experience of employing (or not) disabled people. Amongst the SME sample, four business owners self-identify as a disabled person.

For this study, I used individual qualitative semi-structured interviews as the data collection technique (Bradford & Cullen, 2012), largely because the method is independent from any particular theoretical framework or epistemological position (Evans, 2018) and it offers the researcher a degree of flexibility when asking questions (Cartwright, 2020). This data collection approach fits the aims of the research, that addresses three concerns (noted above). Each interview account was unique, however, I also sought to identify common themes across interviews to identify collective experiences as well as the nuance and differences (Broadhurst and Mason, 2019). Data collection and analysis adhered to recognised standards for robust qualitative research in the consideration of ethics, transparency in methods of sampling and description of the sample, the use of appropriate and rigorous methods of data collection and analysis and attention to all elements of study reporting (Cohen and Crabtree, 2008).

Data analysis was informed by an emphasis on close qualitative engagement with experience (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Through an inductive back-and-forth engagement with the interview data, the analysis aimed for conceptual generalisations based on the integration of existing knowledge and new, qualitatively derived conceptual insights, grounded in disabled people's and SME employer lived experience. For example, the study started with the intention of exploring the experiences of employment and disablism through the lens of 'social barriers' (Oliver, 1990). However, during semi-structured interviews with disabled people and SME employers, and during the thematic analysis stage, the significance of psycho-emotional dimensions of disablism were uncovered (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

### **Thesis outline**

In chapter two key concepts are introduced that are used later in the thesis for the purpose of interpreting and explaining data collected during semi-structured interviews with disabled people and SME employers. Specifically, the chapter includes the concepts of disablism, psycho-emotional disablism, impairment effects, ableism, and ability expectations. The chapter starts by going back to the foundational works of two key disabled activist researchers: Paul Hunt (1966a, 1966b) and Vic Finkelstein (1980). These accounts set the scene for a further exploration of materialist inspired works, including Mike Oliver (1983, 1990) and some critiques of his 'social model of disability'. Next, the chapter turns to the more sophisticated work of Thomas (1999, 2007), including the concepts of impairment effects and psycho-emotional disablism, allowing for more experiential and private elements to be factored into disability theorising (Thomas, 1999, 2004a, 2004b, 2007). From ability studies, and studies of ableism (Campbell, 2009), an exploration of underlying, deep-rooted beliefs that set the standard of 'norm' and the concept of 'ability expectation' (Wolbring, 2012) are also used to understand employer attitudes towards certain cherished abilities in the workplace and discussed further in chapter eight.

Chapter three reviews literature to explore supply-side policy approaches and disabled people's contemporary employment experiences since the introduction of the Disability Discrimination Act (1995). The chapter starts by outlining the policy approach to show how it has focussed far too heavily on the supply-side of the labour market, expecting disabled people to 'overcome' their impairment. This policy approach has promoted the 'employability' (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005) of disabled people through gaining qualifications and training but fails to sufficiently address the demand-side (employer) contribution to ensure more disabled people can access paid employment. Following a discussion of policy, the chapter turns to more empirical studies that have captured the 'voice' of disabled people to understand their personal experiences of employment in the UK context. From the existing studies, it was possible to find key themes highlighted as critical barriers that sustain disabled people's employment disadvantage. These themes include the attitude of employers and specifically the role of line managers, the need for flexibility at work to accommodate impairment effects (Thomas, 1999, 2007), the relevance of supportive workplace cultures to reduce psycho-emotional disablism (Reeve, 2008, 2012, 2014), and the benefits of working for disabled people's organisations. The main argument presented is that it is within social relations that disability becomes embedded in ableist policy, employment practices, and employer attitudes that act to preserve or challenge what constitutes an 'ideal worker' and an ableist 'one best way' of working (Jammaers et al., 2016; Jammaers et al., 2020; Foster and Wass, 2012). The review confirmed that there is no existing research or specific literature from within the field of disability studies looking specifically at the experience of working for SME employers. It is this empirical gap that will be filled to some degree by this thesis.

Chapter four starts by briefly describing the critical role that SMEs play in the UK labour market as a source of job creation. It further assesses how labour market flexibility is understood as a necessary condition for driving competition in free market contexts. Then it reviews the experiential literature to understand employer attitudes to impairment and ability expectations, their experiences of offering reasonable adjustments and flexible working, how they perceive the 'business case' for hiring for diversity, their recruitment process and practice, and the barriers SMEs face that requires policy intervention if they are to employ more disabled people and reduce the disability employment gap. This chapter draws upon literature from a range of academic fields including, leadership and management, human resource management (HRM), vocational rehabilitation and industrial relations to explore demand-side research on the hiring and retention of disabled people. Also included are DWP commissioned research reports, Chartered Institute for Personnel Development (CIPD), Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS), Federation of Small Business (FSB), Disability Rights Commission (DRC) and Employers Forum on Disability (EFD) research findings. By the end of the chapter it is evident that we do not currently have a sufficient enough knowledge base from which to understand SMEs experiences of hiring, retaining, and progressing the employment of disabled people.

Chapter five outlines the methods and provides participant summaries. It describes the ethical considerations in designing the qualitative research of the thesis and outlines the sampling approach and challenges in recruiting participants, highlighting how I overcome the problems and the strategies adopted. It describes the data collection methods and explains the thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006) and use of NVivo as a computer aided analysis tool.

Chapter six presents the data generated from interviews with fifteen SME employers, including twelve owners and three managers, from eleven private enterprises, including one social enterprise and four small charities. This chapter explores their experiences of recruiting disabled people, their knowledge of, and attitudes towards, equality legislation, implementing reasonable adjustments and taking positive action. The chapter also explores employer knowledge and experience using Government schemes designed to support them in recruiting disabled workers.

Chapter seven presents the data collected during interviews with twelve disabled people to examine their experiences and perceptions of time spent working for SME employers. This chapter's key theme is the psycho-emotional dimensions of disability (Thomas, 1999, 2007; Reeve, 2008, 2014), but also includes structural and attitudinal disablism experienced during the process of finding and keeping employment in SME contexts. The importance of relationships in gaining workplace flexibility is also explored.

Chapter eight examines the empirical data presented in chapters six and seven using the concepts discussed in chapter two to develop a social-relational approach to *flex-able working*. This is the unique contribution of this thesis. As an approach, this develops non-disabling and anti-ableist employment relations. It does this by raising awareness of pervasive ableist logics, that inform ability expectations, which sustain the privilege of 'ideal' workers and the false idea of one-best-way to organise work (Foster and Wass, 2012) based on non-disabled abilities and characteristics. This chapter demonstrates that the issues are not simple. Extra thought about difference and diversity, accepting we are not the same is critical. Linking this to broader interpretations of inclusion from simply being present, making disabled people feel welcome and included is a value decision enacted through social relationships. Turning to a discussion of disablism, psycho-emotional disablism, ableism and ability expectation; and drawing on equality legislation and the language of reasonable in the reasonable adjustment provision, this chapter demonstrates that insensitive and unreasonable adjustments (Bunbury, 2009) can do more harm than good. I demonstrate that if employers act sensitively and remove externally imposed issues of accessibility, disabled people can benefit internally because destructive and limiting messages, that tell a person they are "out of place" can be replaced with messages of validation and acceptance. In this way, disabled people sense and feel they belong, in workspaces and workplaces that are open and welcoming to all. It is argued that the social relational *flex-able* approach to working has the potential to change attitudes and build strong interpersonal relationships in the workplace and reduce psycho-emotional dimensions of

disablism (Thomas, 2007; Reeve, 2008,2012,2014). This is because as employees are made to feel welcome, they are then encouraged to speak openly about impairment effects with non-judgement and this reduces the *disclosure dilemma*. Viewing working relations in this way is underpinned by a set of values that privileges ability-difference over ability-sameness and disrupts discrimination based on perceived or actual ability (Wolbring, 2012).

In the concluding chapter, the key findings of the thesis are summarised. It reflects on the insights offered in this thesis that might improve practice and the policy needed to support employers in taking a *flex-ability* approach and how this has the potential to reduce *disclosure dilemma*. Following a brief discussion of some policy recommendations the chapter discusses the limitations of the study. Because this thesis was written in the context of the global Covid-19 pandemic I offer a brief reflection upon the impact Covid-19 has had on both SME employers and disabled people, and in particular the shift to remote and socially distanced working. Whilst the data collected for this study was collected prior to the event, meaning I cannot make direct connections, I feel it cannot be ignored in the current climate.

## **CHAPTER 2: UNDERSTANDING DISABILITY**

### **Introduction**

The focus for this conceptual chapter is to consider how disability in the UK came to be understood as a social relational issue as opposed to an individual deficit of body/mind based upon medical or charity definitions of disability. It starts by going back to the foundational works of two key disabled activist researchers: Paul Hunt (1966a, 1966b) and Vic Finkelstein (1980). These accounts set the scene for a further exploration of materialist inspired works, including Mike Oliver (1983, 1990) and some critiques of his social model of disability. Next, I turn to the work of Carol Thomas (1999, 2004, 2007) because she extends the social model further by embedding a feminist lens to include concepts of impairment effects and psycho-emotional disablism (Thomas, 1999, 2004, 2007). Then the chapter explores the contemporary operation of cultural moral judgements based upon notions of normalcy and visions of the ideal subject informed by a set of ableist beliefs. From ability studies an exploration of underlying, deep-rooted beliefs that set ability expectations and ability favouritism in motion (Wolbring, 2010, 2012) are explored.

### **Developing a social relational understanding of disability**

In 1966, an edited collection of essays entitled *Stigma: The Experience of Disability* was put together by Paul Hunt (1966a), a twenty-nine-year-old man who had attended school until becoming physically impaired at the age of thirteen, after which he spent four and a half years in hospital. At the time of publishing the edited series of essays he had been living at the Cheshire Foundation Home in Hampshire for all of his adult life. Given his personal experiences of segregation, he was especially interested in the social and psychological aspects of 'disablement' (or oppression), and in the study of institutional life.

In the Foreword, he warns the reader "this is an uncomfortable book" for two reasons, and both refer to the social relations of work (Hunt, 1966a: 1). The first of his reasons relates to the inadequacy of services available to disabled people. This inadequacy, he says, is widespread and includes pensions, information about housing and gadgets. Furthermore, the Disabled Persons (Employment) Act (1944), he says, had proved of small value to those other than the "less seriously disabled" (Hunt, 1966a: 1). The second reason he gives reflects the "value-system of society itself" (ibid). He lists the following individual attributes as being "admired to an extreme", namely "productivity, vigour, health and youth" (ibid). Conversely, "incapacity, unproductiveness, slowness and old age are implicitly if not explicitly deplored" (ibid). Critically, he follows this by suggesting that such a system of values creates an "elaborate social hierarchy", within which he accepts disabled people are the "inevitable victims", whereas the "young professional and managerial groups are its inevitable beneficiary" (Hunt, 1966a: 2).

In Chapter Twelve of the collection, Hunt writes an essay titled *A Critical Condition* in which he details his intention to "look at this special situation largely in terms of our relations with others, our place in society" (Hunt, 1966b: 2). Noting commonalties of experience between people with

different impairments, his essay was unreservedly a call to action for other disabled people to feel confident in speaking out about their experiences of living a segregated life:

We are challenging society to take account of us, to listen to what we have to say, to acknowledge us as an integral part of society itself. We do not want ourselves, or anyone else, treated as second-class citizens and put away out of sight and mind (Hunt, 1966b: 16)

This quote demonstrates Hunt's effort to resist paternalistic attitudes that judged the residents to be 'too disabled' to live in the mainstream (Roulstone and Prideaux, 2012). In this way, Hunt shows how the most significant problem facing physically disabled people lies in the area of relationships with "normal" people (Hunt, 1966b: 3). For Hunt, this specific form of social relation (exclusion by segregation) was grounded upon perceptions of bodily deficiency or abnormality. He argued that people with impairments are viewed as "unfortunate, useless, different, oppressed and sick [because they] challenge in their relations with normal society" (Hunt, 1966b: 3). Further, he argues that disabled people who are prevented from experiencing marriage, parenthood, employment, and other socially valued roles are assumed to be "only half human" (Hunt, 1966: 4). He also touches upon the emotional and psychological impact of such attitudes when he shares the following information:

Sometimes it seems to us that we just can't win. Whatever we do, whether good or bad, people put it down to our being disabled. Meeting this kind of attitude constantly can be depressing and infinitely wearing (Hunt, 1966b:10)

In respect of aspiring to a notation of normality, Hunt deals with this as dogma:

If being 'normal' is based on being like the majority, he asks, is it a good enough ideal on which to base our lives, when it is causing so much emotional damage, causing disabled people to hide away? (Hunt, 1966b: 8)

At this stage in the development of a social relational understanding of disability, the terminology for such experience did not exist. Indeed, it was three decades until Thomas (1999) frames this as evidence of psycho-emotional experiences of disability oppression (and later renamed to psycho-emotional dimensions of disablism) (Thomas, 2007).

Primarily, Hunt's (1966b) call to action should be viewed as an affirmative challenge to the idea that somehow all physically impaired people are unfortunate beings, living unfortunate lives that would be improved if the impairment were removed. Consequently, in his essay he asks disabled people to use their agency, in a thought-provoking exercise, to communicate to the

outside world the value of their lives. Therefore, the edited collection of essays included positive stories which reported *feeling* fully-human, providing a much-needed counter argument to more common-sense assumptions of ruined lives. In this way, the edited collection demonstrates the imperative of resisting prejudice, injustice, and oppression by confronting and disrupting commonly held ideological beliefs of what it means to be fully human and worthy of dignity.

By the 1970s, Hunt's call to action had the desired effect, and a small (but mighty) group of physically disabled people, including Vic Finkelstein, a disabled man expelled from South Africa for his involvement in anti-apartheid activity, established the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS). As a group they wished to find ways to politicise their experiences of oppression and the group's core arguments can be found in the UPIAS (1976) document, *Fundamental Principles of Disability*. This document provides the redefinition of disability as social oppression caused by arrangements that place restrictions of activity, and which are 'on top of' impairment.

Splitting the biological from the social, UPIAS (1976) were able to define impairment as either lacking a bodily part or having a body part that is considered defective. It then follows that disability is not caused by the impairment. Instead, a social creationist view of the disability 'problem' lays blames on the institutional discrimination by material arrangements that place restrictions on disabled people's activity (Oliver, 1990; Oliver and Barnes, 2012). In contrast, hostile social attitudes are a social constructionist view of disability caused by prejudice against disabled people and are therefore a problem rooted at the ideological level (Oliver, 1990; Oliver and Barnes, 2012).

In 1980, Vic Finkelstein travelled to New York to present his monograph entitled *Attitudes and Disabled People: Issues for Discussion* organised by the World Rehabilitation Fund. His opening remarks outline very clearly that he views disability as an "oppressive social relationship" (Finkelstein, 1980: np). In particular, he argued that attitudes towards disabled people only become apparent through research. He suggests it is the role of the researcher to adopt a more critical attitude by considering the historical social relationship and context in which such attitudes become uncovered. The monograph outlines three distinct historical phases that emphasise the continuity of attitudes to disability, however his phases are limited by a lack of specific detail over times, dates, and locations. Nevertheless, his argument is still important in understanding how disability came to be understood as a social relational issue from the very earliest days of the disability movement and the development of disability studies.

In the first phase, located at the beginning of the 'modern era' (by which he means pre-industrial), he argues that 'cripples' (defined as people with physical impairments) were not segregated from the rest of society. Alongside beggars, people considered to be mentally ill, and those out of work, 'cripples' were part of an "oppressed layer of society" (Finkelstein, 1980: 6). They were integrated to a degree, being able to be socially active by taking part in the profession of 'begging'. In this way, they were still active members of their community, asserting their right to live amongst non-disabled people. He asserts, at that point in time the typical

attitude would be to blame individuals for their own situation, attributed to individual failings. Thus, the social relationship of physically impaired people during phase one could be described as one in which disabled people held some autonomy, claimed their rights to live freely, and held responsibility for their own actions and fate.

In phase two, industrialisation brought into being new forms of productive technology in large scale industrial workplaces whose rhythms and routines favoured able-bodied workers (Finkelstein, 1980). At the same time, new hospitals facilitated the rise in number of medical professionals in roles employed to service patient's needs, and large-scale asylums were created to house the lunatics and the infirm. For Finkelstein, the rise of these two institutions reflects the paternalistic attitude that Hunt had previously highlighted. Disabled people were deemed to need care and protection and seen as passive, suffering and in essence, people who had experienced a "personal tragedy" (Finkelstein, 1980: 7).

The third and final phase was associated with the time in which Finkelstein wrote the monograph. In 1980 new technological advancements were changing the world of work and Finkelstein considered this as key to unlocking disabled people's potential to 'fit' into the contemporary workplace. Consequently, he believed this to be a significant moment for the potential to change paternalistic attitudes and a defining moment for realising new forms of independence and social relations that would end disabled people's oppression. His optimism is apparent in the following passage:

Phase three marks the beginning of a struggle to reintegrate people with physical impairments. From this perspective, in industrialised societies, phase two can be seen as the period in which cripples disappeared and disability was created. Phase three heralds the elimination of disability. (Finkelstein, 1980: 8)

The above demonstrates how the founders of UPIAS favoured Marxian theories, with ideas grounded within historical materialism related directly to how work is organised and understood (Grover and Piggott, 2015). They used this perspective to demonstrate how the combination of structural, attitudinal and the political-economic organisation of production in capitalist society placed restrictions on their ability to undertake productive work (Hunt, 1966a, 1966b, UPIAS, 1976), thus creating disabled people's dependency on the welfare state (Oliver, 1990), and care from professionals. As Oliver notes, the idea of disabled people's dependency became central to UK social policy from the 1990s onwards to "socially reconstruct the "problem of disability" (Oliver, 1990: 82).

Oliver (1983) had been influenced by the disabled people's civil rights movement and the ideas of UPIAS in particular using this knowledge to write about the 'social model of disability' in an academic book focused on social work education and practice (Oliver, 1983). For Oliver (1983), the social model was not intended to be used as a theory of disability. It was only ever intended

to be used as a practical teaching tool to help social work students explore 'societal barriers', and to shift the way they understood disability away from the framing of disability as an individual 'deficit' found in the vast majority of academic literature available at that time (ibid).

Oliver (1990) did however begin to theorise later about the social relations of work, by arguing that within capitalist society, disabled people serve a particular role both economically and ideologically within the labour market. That is, economically they contribute to the "reserve army of labour" meaning they are there to be selected from if and when supply becomes tight from the non-disabled workforce (ibid). Oliver contends that, in similar ways that women joining the labour market boosts the supply of labour from which employers can select their employees, disabled people also afford a degree of flexibility to employers in managing the fluctuations in demand for labour (ibid). Moreover, he suggests that keeping disabled people in an inferior economic position, can serve as a warning to others "unable or unwilling to work" (Oliver, 1990: 70). For Oliver, this illustrates the structural reason for disabled peoples continued inequitable position in Western capitalist society. From this materialist worldview, Oliver contends it is an unsurprising consequence (indeed it is no accident), that the material forces of capitalism and the closely tied ideology of competitive individualism sustains disabled people's oppression (Oliver, 1990).

By 2012, Oliver and Barnes (2012) reflected upon the progress made over the past two decades in terms of both the academic discipline of disability studies and the disabled people's movement. In summary, despite some reasons to be positive in light of gaining protections in law from discriminatory practice, they were less optimistic about disabled people's futures. In charting the changes over time, they argued that unfettered capitalism had prompted Governments to withdraw services and benefits, forcing disabled people further toward the margins of society. Oliver and Barnes (2012) also acknowledge how a decline of trade unionism, in Britain since the 1980s Thatcher era had placed severe limits on disabled people's ability to resist disabling capitalism. Furthermore, they acknowledged a simultaneous decline in the disabled people's movement and activism more generally, again limiting the power of a unified voice to fight political, economic, societal, and cultural disablism (ibid).

These accounts have shown that Hunt, Finkelstein, and Oliver were primarily interested in the systematic social disadvantaging of disabled people caused by a combination of social attitudes that value productive capability over passivity, alongside social arrangements in the labour market that cause institutional discrimination. In this way, they each recognised the importance of socially created barriers but also accept that the position of disabled people in society is caused through social relations, shaped by the attitudes held by non-disabled people. However, their accounts are often criticised for focussing exclusively on structural barriers, and the political-economic features of the changing nature of capitalist society at the expense of critiquing the gendered character of disablism (understood as discrimination and oppression).

For feminist writers like Morris (1991, 1993, 1996) and Crow (1996), the silencing of impairment by men within disability studies reflected the patriarchal separation of the personal from the

public. Feminists within disability studies, therefore, wanted to bring to life their impairment experiences noting how the 'personal is political' (Crow, 1996; French, 1993, Morris, 1991, 1993, 1996, Thomas, 1999, 2007). In response, Oliver (1996) justified this by claiming three reasons why he (and UPIAS) put impairment aside. First, it could dilute the impact of the external forces that oppress disabled people, and in that sense, impairment could divert attention back to the individual medical view of disability. Second, strategically, it would not be good to focus on impairments because a strong political campaign needed a collective voice. This meant that disabled people (regardless of impairment type) needed to find common cause on issues of disablism. Third, impairment was deemed to belong to the personal and private domain. However, it was down to the focus on structure that the disability movement were successful in gaining anti-discrimination rights in the form of the Disability Discrimination Act (1995). Failing to talk in depth about impairment did not mean the 'men' in disability studies thought impairment had no significance on "quality of life" (Thomas, 2007: 122).

### **Impairment effects**

The work of Carol Thomas (1999, 2007) has been hugely important in the UK and some Scandinavian and Nordic disability studies because it offers a more sophisticated social relational interpretation of oppression. It deepens the materialist theorisations of disability, to include questions of culture, difference, and impairment (Thomas, 2002) and looks for barriers that operate both on the inside and outside. In *Female Forms: Experiencing and Understanding Disability*, Thomas (1999) introduced the concept of 'impairment effects', providing a means by which to acknowledge the "direct and immediate impact that being impaired can and does have in the daily lives of disabled people" (Thomas, 2007: 135). Critically, it allows researchers to bring impairment and its effects into analysis without undermining the centrality of disablism (Thomas, 2007), and without medicalising the body. Therefore, from this lens, it is possible to understand 'the impaired body' as "simultaneously biological, material and social – in short, as bio-social in character" (Thomas, 2007: 136). The premiss is that a missing limb (or any other visible impairment) interacts with subtle and complex processes, that become socially contingent determined by social factors and circumstances. Consequently:

Impairment effects then become the foci for social responses that exclude the bearers of impairment from full social participation and citizenship. That is, these bio-social phenomena become the substratum or medium for disablism (Thomas, 2007:137)

For people with hidden impairments, it can be hard for others to see and to recognise that a person has additional challenges in negotiating everyday work and life (Finesilver et al., 2020). Similarly, impairment effects can fluctuate (in pain, health, and energy). They are not always static and constant, some days are better than others (Ferrie and Watson, 2015). For the person experiencing these fluctuations it can feel frustrating, and for those witnessing it can be understandably confusing:

...even where difference from the abled norm is acknowledged, it is often assumed by others to be constant. If a person has limitations, it is assumed that these limitations will broadly be the same all the time. This is somewhat understandable as our brains like predictable patterns of simple dichotomies: right and wrong, true, and false, disabled, and non-disabled. (Finesilver et al., 2020: 147)

Also highlighted by Thomas are the constructionist aspects of impairment, noting how certain bodily differences only became labelled as impairment according to socio-cultural times and place. Similar arguments were found in Hunt's collection of essays, and Finkelstein's 'three phases' approach. Thomas (2007) contends that in Western capitalist society a missing limb at birth becomes constructed as a biological 'abnormality' equating to having an 'impairment'. Critically, in such cultural contexts, medical professional judgements hold remarkable weight, informing wider public attitudes that form the basis of disablism. Conversely, in non-Western cultures or at different times, a missing limb, can be responded to through a wholly different set of ideas based on religion or spirituality. In other words, one is not disabled, one is made disabled.

Therefore, Thomas (2007: 137) argues that a theory of disability must engage with theorisations of the impaired body. She concludes by suggesting that impairment, their effects and disablism are intermeshed:

...the social conditions that bring them into being and them meaning. The materiality of the body is in a dynamic interrelationship with the social and cultural context in which it is lived. Moreover, the impaired body is changing and dynamic...the body is constantly aging (Thomas, 2007: 137)

In summary, impairment and its effects are relevant to this thesis because it enables a nuanced exploration of cultural prejudice to understand how culture shapes employer responses to disabled people based upon perceived vulnerability, weakness, or lack of expected ability (Wolbring, 2012). Impairment also raises other critical questions for the thesis. For example, why is it that some impairments appear to be easier to accommodate in the workplace, and why does this vary between workplaces? What does it mean for workplace accessibility arrangements and employer responses to requests for reasonable adjustments if they are only needed part of the time? Are employers more inclined to invest in adjustments for employees if they are to be used regularly compared to occasional use? Therefore, does the nature of impairment in terms of its predictability and stability make a difference to employer's decision making around hiring and retaining disabled people? These questions are explored further in

the thesis, when I draw again on Thomas' concept of 'impairment effects' in chapter eight to consider ability in the employment context.

### **Psycho-emotional dimensions of disablism**

Thomas' feminist-materialist interest in 'the personal' and the experiential aspects of disablism led to a more sophisticated definition of disability:

A form of social oppression involving the social imposition of restrictions of activity on people with impairments and the socially engendered undermining of their psycho-emotional wellbeing (Thomas, 1999: 3)

In 1999 she names these dimensions of oppression that operate on the inside as *psycho-emotional dimensions of disability*. In her later book she renamed the concept as *psycho-emotional disablism* (Thomas, 2007) in a strategic move to align disablism with other forms of oppression (racism, sexism, and ageism). It was the labelling of these personal and private experiences that moved debates forward, enabling researchers to uncover and expose the complex and harmful oppression operating on the inside - at the psycho-emotional level (Thomas, 1999). For Thomas, 'being' disabled does involve restrictions imposed on 'doing' things due to external barriers, but it also involves "the intended or unintended 'hurtful' words and social actions of non-disabled people...during inter-personal engagements with people with impairments (Thomas, 2007: 72). The list of non-disabled people who are capable of responding in such negative ways is wide-ranging and can include parents, other family members, professionals, and all others (ibid). Thomas further argued:

[In] relegating psycho-emotional consequences of living in a disabling world to the realms of 'private life' or 'the personal restrictions of impairment' (Oliver 1996: 48), key dimensions of disability are ignored. The manifestations of disability are thus mistaken for the psychological angst of 'personal troubles' (Thomas, 2001: 41)

... it is about being made to feel of lesser value, worthless, unattractive, or disgusting, as well as about 'outside' matters such as being turned down for a job because one is 'disabled' (Thomas, 2004b: 38).

And in terms of identity construction, Garland-Thomson notes:

People with disabilities themselves routinely announce that they don't consider themselves as disabled...Nonetheless, by disavowing disability identity, many of us learned to save ourselves from devaluation by

complicity that perpetuates oppressive notions about ostensibly "real" disabled people. (Garland-Thomson, 2013: 347)

However, not all disability writers would agree with this idea of identity construction. From a critical realist perspective, Watson (2002) contends the presence of an impairment does not affect a sense of self, and the physicality of the body can easily be pushed aside when forming self-identity. He argues that this happens despite daily oppression experiences, noting that many disabled people describe themselves as 'normal' (p. 515). In this way, disabled people do not deny their impairment exists, but they can self-identify attached to the things they can do rather than how they do it. Therefore, Watson (2002) argues that identity construction is based upon a self 'away' from the body capable of challenging 'othering' through acts of self-determination, autonomy, and choice. For Watson disabled people can define their own identity – they get to decide what is symbolically important, by presenting a picture of the self as an “active, resistant agent” (Watson, 2002: 516). Identity then becomes less about what others see about us. Instead, identity is the product of relationships with others and the social roles we all perform within these relationships and identity formation for people with and without impairments is rarely based upon impairment as the primary marker. The other relationships and the role we play in them become our dominant and preferred identity (ibid). Similarly, Thomas (2007) states that disabled people rarely identify their impairment above other identities. Nevertheless, the impact of psycho-emotional disablism on the ontological security or confidence of disabled people (Thomas 1999) leads to a psychic reaction to such hostility. Consequently, the effect can be understood as a form of 'internalised oppression', and the re-injuring of self through internalising discriminatory values, lowering self-worth and lessening a sense of intrinsic value (Thomas, 2007).

#### Direct Psycho-Emotional Disablism

Donna Reeve has skilfully advanced Thomas' work by breaking down psycho-emotional disablism into two types – direct and indirect (Reeve, 2014). She contends the most basic form is *direct psycho-emotional disablism (the type described above by Thomas)*, which emerges from the interpersonal engagements that disabled people have with non-disabled people. Basing this again on the specific acts of non-disabled people Reeve (2014) observes how invalidation can take many forms. Examples include jokes made about impairments or thoughtless comments or active avoidance from non-disabled because of prejudice. She noted three identifiable problems with other people's reactions that project negativity. The first is that disabled people do not feel this way about themselves and their own lives – the same was said by Watson (2002). The second is that, despite feeling positive about themselves and their impairment, prolonged exposure to such undermining reactions can significantly impact wellbeing. Third, the expectation of others' adverse reactions leads to existential insecurity (Thomas, 2004a) – the uncertainty of how others will react.

Morgan (2017) raised a significant point about people with hidden or fluctuating impairments. For them, gaining a formal medical diagnosis can be critical to improving psycho-emotional wellbeing. This is because through diagnosis comes validation. Until that point, many people who genuinely need support are invalidated by the judgement of others who question whether they are faking an impairment (Morgan, 2017). Knowing that, and feeling the mistrust, can unsurprisingly lead to psycho-emotional damage. That said, having a visible impairment does not guarantee appropriate or adequate access because of discourses of faux disability and the consequent questions of authenticity (Roulstone and Morgan, 2014).

Reeve, suggests that psycho-emotional disablism is absorbed by disabled people from outside, learned over time by the loss of opportunities, and reinforced by the adverse reactions of others (the stares, questions, and avoidances), all of which are triggered by stigma and latent oppression (Reeve, 2012). Since avoidance responses are often predicated upon earlier experiences (or, rather, a lack of earlier experience of being near people with impairments), primitive feelings of anxiety in uncertain situations can arise. Anxiety caused by the unknown's fear can often be exhibited as hostile and irrational, and 'responding by avoiding' becomes a quick-fix defence mechanism. Consequently, *internalised oppression* (a relationship with oneself) arises from this form of direct psycho-emotional disablism, bought about by the "internalising of negative messages about disability that are found in the cultural lexicon, [that] can lead someone to feel they are a burden, useless and a second-class citizen" (Reeve, 2014: 103). Reeve (2012) also notes the impact on psycho-emotional wellbeing created by internalising and then performing psycho-emotional labour. In this situation, disabled people present themselves in ways that match up to the commonly accepted identity standards expected by broader society (ibid).

Reeve further argues that people fear contagion, thinking disability is catching or the reverse of contagion when people ask invasive questions about your impairment or condition, like, "what is wrong with you?" to establish if you pose a risk to health and safety (Reeve, 2014). She blames this on culture, and specifically, the tragedy myths of disability in our society. Other disability studies writers agree. Comments such as these can be seen as a form of psychological "disavowal of disability", whereby people project their fear of mortality, dying and physicality onto disabled people (Shakespeare, 1994: 298). Hughes (2007) also exposes the non-disabled emotions of fear, pity and disgust as avoidance responses that serve to invalidate disabled bodies. For Hughes, affect is deeply embedded in cultural norms and "disability is a life lived before a looking glass that is cracked and distorted by the vandalism of normality" (Hughes, 2012: 68). He argues that people whose bodies are opposite to the normative perfect mythology are subjected to the "body fascism of ableist culture" – that which creates the 'other' and from which an "alterity that is evil, sinister, threatening, contemptible, repulsive and pitiable" is created (Hughes, 2012: 76). This renders disabled people as objects of ambivalent feelings from wider non-disabled society such as resentment and hatred. It follows that disabled people risk being ontologically invalidated by the disabling worlds that they inhabit (Hughes, 2012).

In similar arguments made by Hunt (1966a, 1966b) over fifty years ago, it is suggested that these affects cause non-disabled people to estrange themselves from disabled people because the presence of impairment reminds them of the precariousness and vulnerability of being human, and the universal human tendency for people to break down and die (Soldatic and Meekosha, 2012; Shakespeare 1994). People who identify themselves to sit in the 'normal' category project their deep-rooted fear of illness, frailty, incapacity, and mortality onto people with visible impairments (Shakespeare, 1994). Similarly, exploring disablism through a psychosocial lens enabled Marks (1999) to explore how non-disabled professionals can erect professional 'defences' expressed in negative emotions of anger or hostility whilst simultaneously wishing to be altruistic through offers of care and help. The consequence of such reactions is to either respond by resisting or internalise the oppression as one particular form of psycho-emotional disablism.

Of course, in the same way that disabled people experience material barriers differently, not all disabled people experience psycho-emotional disablism. When they do, it may not always be to the same degree. Each person has their life history, and resilience levels will differ according to other intersectional identities and subjectivities. Factors such as age, class, gender, work experience, and personality can shape a person's response to experiencing disablism of any type. Some people may be well prepared to resist the "normative gaze" (Garland Thomson, 2009: 87), managing such encounters in pragmatic and productive ways (Reeve, 2014). One strategy often deployed is to "educate" people about impairment – its cause and its effects. In this way, some disabled people retain control by returning the objectifying gaze (Reeve, 2014). However, the ability to resist may depend upon individual confidence, energy, and feelings of self-worth – which can be closely associated with broader aspects of a person's life – including participation in paid employment (ibid.). Therefore, it is possible to agree with each point and add to this by suggesting that people with newly acquired impairments are less well equipped to resist as they deal with coming to terms with a changed identity and the impairment effects (Oliver, 2004). It is also the case that for people who straddle the boundaries of chronic illness, terminal illness and impairment, the experience of psycho-emotional disablism may be secondary to the lived experience of the "psycho-emotional impact of impairment effects. In this sense, impairment itself can have a similar psychic effect" (Ferrie and Watson, 2015: 44).

#### *Indirect Psycho-Emotional Disablism*

The second element proposed by Reeve is *indirect psycho-emotional disablism* – "arising from the relationship a disabled person has with the material world" (Reeve, 2014: 103). In this way, Reeve says the emotional consequence arises from interactions with the environment instead of other people's reaction. Disability studies and the sub-discipline of geographies of disability (Imrie and Edwards, 2007) have also heightened the interest in relationships between identity and space, or the biographies of place (Warren and Garthwaite, 2014), and the influence that place has in influencing how disabled people "feel" (Imrie and Edwards, 2007: 626), about themselves (Reeve, 2014). How disabled people experience being "out of place" within spaces

that are "landscapes of exclusion" because they are "different" (Kitchin, 1998: 351) are also highlighted within this literature. Reeve (2014) rightly argues, the "day to day experiences of being reminded you are "out of place" can have a detrimental impact on emotional wellbeing and sense of self" and it must be acknowledged outside and beyond disability studies "if disablism at both the public and private level is to be identified and removed" (Reeve, 2014: 104).

It is in this space and place approach to disability studies that a lens exists through which to examine the experiences of disablism, including the implicit [yet unspoken] "ideological messages inscribed in spaces", that make disabled people feel uncomfortable and unwelcome because the message implies - "you are different" (Kitchin, 1998: 351). For example, a lack of accessible provision or alternative forms of provision that are stigmatising or second class in their nature, such as using a service entrance to enter the building (Reeve 2014).

The concept of reasonable adjustments embedded in the Equality Act 2010 (explored further in chapter 3) helps Reeve to expose issues of accessibility. Reeve shows in her empirical research how "poorly designed and implemented reasonable adjustments can contribute to indirect forms of psycho-emotional disablism" (Reeve, 2014: 99), and which can be felt as distressing (Imrie and Edwards, 2007: 626). While she considers the provision of accessible toilets explicitly, I argue the same emotional and psychological consequence can occur when employers refuse to implement (or only partially implement) adjustments that fully address the need of disabled workers because they can claim unreasonableness (Bunbury, 2009).

She argues that "access to the built environment for many disabled people is partial, a possibility rather than a certainty" (Reeve, 2014: 111). What becomes clear is the indirect nature of psycho-emotional disablism is a consequence of the assumptions made by other people, and by using the concept of reasonable adjustments, Reeve (2014) showed the more insidious forms of indirect psycho-emotional disablism. For example, employers who remove structural barriers to the workplace and implement reasonable adjustments as a means of 'including' a disabled worker assume that disabled people will feel 'included'. What Reeve's conceptualisation allows us to do is show (using practical examples) how these partial reasonable adjustments can be just as disabling as the original structural barriers, "continuing to remind the user that they are "out of place" (Reeve, 2014: 104). Reeve argues that the response of employers (and others) to implementing accessibility points to cultural prejudice:

In the UK at least, employers, businesses, town planners and builders (who also need to take account of Part M of the Building Regulations) are left to envisage what is meant by "reasonable adjustments"; these decisions will be informed at least in part by prejudice and notions of "who" disabled people are, as well as financial constraints (Reeve, 2014: 111)

Titchkosky argues there is a “normalcy of inaccessibility” that permeates society (Titchkosky, 2011: 67). Reeve suggests, the solution lies in ensuring the responsibility for treating reasonable adjustments as “ongoing” and “evolving” (rather than a one-off tick-box exercise) “that does disability access”, requires employers (and other service providers) to have “the right mindset, attitudes and intentions towards genuine, respectful inclusion” (Reeve, 2014: 113).

Furthermore, legislation and policy “re/map, re/frame and re/shape divergent spatial relations and realities for disabled people” (Roulstone et al., 2014: 2). For example, in a UK study of disabled women’s gendered experience of disablism in rural locations, Morgan (2017: 97) found evidence of “increasingly hostile narratives about disability and welfare were permeating the rural spaces the women occupied and the emotions this provoked for them and their families”. Likewise, in their detailed evaluation of legislation, Roulstone and Prideaux (2009) argue, there are no rule books about how to make space, goods, and services accessible to people with a wide range of impairments and the inclusion of provisos “reasonable”, “practical” and “impractical” in legislation “serves to dilute the true extent of the requirements laid down by the DDA” (Roulstone and Prideaux, 2009. 365).

Reeve suggests disabled people “find themselves in paradoxical landscapes; [where] it appears that the built environment is being made accessible” (Reeve, 2014: 100). However, as Titchkosky (2011) and Soldatic, Morgan and Roulstone (2014) argue, disabled people do not experience these public spaces as somewhere they belong. Instead, it demonstrates how social relations and others’ reactions have the power to place limits on disabled people at the psycho-emotional level, something that non-disabled people do not experience.

Consequently, if a reasonable adjustment is too distressing to use, then the disabled person stays at home - the service provider (or employer) has simply replaced a structural barrier with a psycho-emotional barrier to inclusion (Reeve, 2014: 99-100)

Broadly access to public places has improved since legislation was enacted, yet it is often wrongly assumed that *all* space and *all* services are now accessible to *all* disabled people (Morgan, 2017; Titchkosky 2011). On the face of it, spaces have become more inclusive of diverse bodies and minds, but in reality, the experience of traversing these spaces has become more (not less) disabling, hostile and problematic (Reeve, 2014; Roulstone and Morgan, 2014), and “design apartheid” exists where buildings are designed with able-bodied values in mind (Imrie, 1998). On a similar theme, Reeve (2014: 106) argues that reasonable adjustments can be used to sanction a form of “spatial apartheid”.

In summary, direct psycho-emotional disablism happens when disabled people feel and then internalise the hurtful messages during interpersonal engagements with non-disabled people, placing restrictions on who people with impairments ‘can be’ (Thomas, 2007). In addition, social barriers ‘out there’ exist as inaccessible environments and place restrictions on what people

'can do' (Thomas, 2007). But it is the partial adjustments made by others which trigger indirect forms of psycho-emotional disablism activating feelings that tell disabled people they are in the wrong place (Reeve, 2014).

### **Ableism**

The above has demonstrated how theorisations on disability have moved forward from a strong materialist focus on structural dimensions of disablism towards the inclusion of a cultural analysis (Thomas, 2007). In this way, they have broadened and deepened the analysis by shifting the object of research away from disabled people, and their impairment, onto the contemporary operation of cultural moral value judgements. The core argument presented in this final section of the chapter is that while the social model of disability (Oliver, 1990) provided us with the foundational ontological understanding of disability as oppression, studies of ableism and its counterpart disablism allows an epistemological framework to examine the privileging of normative ways of living (White Rose, 2017, undated). In this way, studies of ableism are a broad approach to disability studies to analyse the ways in which disability is produced by society, culture, and economics, that endorse and overemphasise an ableist normativity (Goodley, 2017). Taking this idea forward, the concept of ableism has provided the lens through which disability studies researchers can say *why* society holds beliefs and values that promote the able-ideal human subject (the white productive male), and why processes and structures are designed to fit his normative shape, size, and abilities. Barriers exist in some workplaces because those who hold the power to implement changes to workplace contexts tend to adhere to normative ableist constructions of an 'ideal worker' based on notions of ideal qualities and behaviours (Jammaers et al., 2016; Jammaers et al., 2020; Foster and Wass, 2012). Perceptions of the 'ideal' employee and the qualities they possess may vary over time and according to the tasks being performed, but the 'ideal' often reflects the dominant values and prejudices of a society in that time and place in history. Foster and Wass (2012) have argued that the importance of this 'ideal' is the way in which it shapes and has shaped accepted norms around job design:

Historically, both employers and the State have been interested in defining, scientifically and empirically, a generic 'ideal worker' and a 'one best way' of working" (Foster and Wass 2012: 705)

For Campbell (2001), ableism can be understood as:

A network of beliefs, processes and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical, and therefore essential and fully human. Disability then is cast as a diminished state of being human (Campbell, 2001: 44)

For the purpose of this thesis, ableism provides the theoretical lens through which we gain answers to the question: Is the social relation of employment based on ableist normativity? If it is, what will need to be done to change that?

Today, these judgements are often premised upon a notion of 'normalcy' as part of the normal/abnormal dualism and include ideas of essential human abilities and ways of being and behaving (Davis, 2002). However, this was not always the case prior to the concept of normalcy, the dominant paradigm revolved around the word 'ideal' in feudal society (ibid.). Davis argues there is a critical difference between the two concepts because when we judge against an 'ideal' standard then nobody is viewed as perfect, we are all flawed in some way or other. In other words, the 'ideal' is an unrealisable standard which individuals can strive for but never actually achieve. Instead, all humans are seen as having "degrees of imperfection" (Davis, 2002: 105) and in such cultures, no one individual has an 'ideal' body or mind, and therefore, society does not *expect* that of any one of its members. In the same way that Finkelstein's (1980) three phases spoke about the 'cripple' working as a 'beggar' within the community, Davis (2002) observes that in pre-industrial society, individuals with varying degrees of body/mind 'difference' (or variation) lived out their lives together. Davis asserts, the shift from the concept of the 'ideal' to the normal/abnormal dualism occurred because of developments in statistics in the nineteenth century. Overtime, it became possible and indeed an intellectual duty to combat disease. Thus, measuring bodies for medical practice led to the concept of a 'bell curve' which set in motion the 'averaging' of bodies/minds (Davis, 2002). For those individuals, whose bodies/minds fell at the extreme's – they became seen as 'abnormal' (ibid.). They became the symbols of 'freakery' (Garland Thomson, 1996), with 'extraordinary bodies' (Garland Thomson, 1997), as a consequence of the homogenised able-bodied standards and norms upon which society began to organise itself on the normative able-bodied standard (as measured by science).

Hughes (2015) viewed ableism as being embodied throughout different ages. In various different forms, he argues that ableism has been mobilised through a "politics of resentment" that construct disability as a "scapegoat" (Hughes, 2015: 996). In this way, invalidating processes target people whose ontological validity is questioned in times of social crisis, and for Hughes, a perfect historical example is that of the hunt for witches. Turning to Quarmby (2011), he argues that the witch was disabled, gendered, and witch-hunting was a weapon against Satan. It set the moral code, clearly distinguishing right from wrong based on 'aesthetics' and good from evil behaviours in the process of social control and the exercise of power by constituting women and disabled people as morally inferior. Understandings of disability as a neoliberal scapegoat or folk devil relate to a contemporary 'politics of resentment', which Hughes argues is reproducing ableism through the modern discourse linked to state welfare systems that implicate disabled people in benefit fraud (Hughes, 2015: 1000). However, within the context of anti-welfare populism (Tyler, 2013), these portrayals are not based upon valid evidence. They are extrapolated from one or two individual cases (either real or imaginary) and used to

scapegoat everyone in the socially labelled 'disabled' group as "counterfeit citizens" (Hughes, 2015: 1001).

More recently, Hughes (2019) extends his analysis to include the cultural relations of the "moral economy", taking a historical, sociological perspective to map out the dimensions of human evaluations that invalidate disabled people in any given social or historical context. Central to this, he contends, is the concept of "moral economy" as a site for lay normativity (Sayer, 2007). For example, he contends that when disabled people are represented as "abject and monstrous... [disability is] good to mistreat" and when disabled people are interpreted as "vulnerable and needy... [disability is] good to be good to" (Hughes, 2019: 830). Thus, moral economy cultural relations manifest as "the space in which disability is disrespectfully constructed and represented by ableist narratives of purity and invulnerability" (Hughes, 2019: 831). In summary, he is making the argument that at certain times and in certain places, some disabled people are evaluated as impure, dishonest, and less vulnerable, and this feeds into societal attitudes, including the attitudes of employers.

Campbell believes that ableism is a violent ideology that seeks to marginalise and erase disabled people from the norms of society by "the ways that stories about wholeness, health, enhancement and perfection are told" (Campbell, 2009: 197). Societies which are committed to privileging ableness are fond of 'sameness' as opposed to valuing difference. Often linked to white supremacy and other forms of privilege, for example, the necessity of non-ideal bodies (black, disabled, female) for the success of that culture and the upholding of these ideals. As Campbell notes:

A call to sameness appears to be easier as these requests galvanise and rearticulate the normative even if such a norm is somewhat vacuous and elusive (Campbell, 2012: 214)

In writing about the workplace, Campbell says it can be characterised as a "wild zone...an arena for the playing out of tensions between normative compulsions and the showing of disabled difference" (Campbell, 2013: 27). It is these tensions that are explored further in chapter eight because during interviews with SME employers, it became apparent that employers hire people based on 'sameness' rather than 'difference'. What this means in terms of the type of 'abilities' expected by employers becomes critical to disabled people's employment opportunities.

Taking a critical geographical analysis to ableism, Vera Chouinard (1997) defines ableism as "ideas, practices, institutions and social relations that presume able-bodiedness, and by so doing, construct persons with disabilities as marginalised, oppressed and largely invisible "others" (Chouinard, 1997: 380). The consequence is that disabled people are devalued by ableism because it takes for granted and idealises mobility, speech, hearing, sight, and cognition premised upon an able-bodied norm. Chouinard (1997) situates her research about "disabling differences" as a challenge to unsettle ableist geographies and the ways in which

able-bodied people react to disabled people taking up 'space' – space that is marked as inherently a place for able-bodied subjects and not for those 'others'. Taking a radical critical geographic approach, she uses the research to highlight the complicity in "the perpetuation of knowledge, practices and relations which contribute to the oppression of people marked as 'different' and 'inferior' on the basis of physical and/or mental disabilities" (Chouinard, 1997: 380). In summary, critical geographies of disability aim to unsettle the ableist and other relations of power that help to mark disabled bodies as negatively different. Like the argument put forward by Wolbring, she picks up on the privileged position of abled-bodied people. She states ableism is an ideology and a form of oppression that privileges able-bodied people in society by organizing structures and behaviours to reject people with impairments (Chouinard, 1997).

### **Ability expectations**

Turning to the extensive work of Gregor Wolbring (2010, 2012a-b, 2014, 2017) this section explores societal perceptions of privileged abilities that influence ability expectations. Wolbring argues everything and every domain of life has implicit and explicit 'ability expectation' components, and as researchers, we can use it to reveal not just what is wrong but where the trade-offs are happening (ibid). His is a stage theory of ableism:

Ability expectations and ableism are two stages of the same cultural dynamic. Ability expectation simply signifies that one desires or expects specific abilities. Ableism extends these desires and expectations to a different level where one's actions and judgments are shaped according to the perception that specific abilities are essential. (Wolbring, 2012a: 151)

Shifting how disability studies have tended to focus on the negative aspects of identifying and mapping disablism, Wolbring moves towards a foresight-orientated approach to ability studies research. In this approach, Wolbring (2012b) asserts that researchers can then make predictions of what will work, something he suggests has been lacking from current theorisations of disability. Therefore, his ability expectation concept is useful for making change at the practice level too, and in chapter eight I draw upon this idea to predict that employer *flex-ability* is what will improve disabled people's experience of work. Wolbring (2017) argues it gives researchers a new angle to evaluate the usefulness of policy, practice, and attitudes. As disability studies scholars, Wolbring asserts that we are already ability-cultural researchers interested in revealing the culturally specific ability preferences in each setting and their impact on society. From this perspective, he is keen for disability scholars to expand the concept of ableism to be used in other academic fields to focus on ability favouritism (Wolbring, 2010). He argues that many societal goals are shaped by a vision of which abilities are desirable, and which are to be avoided. Wolbring (2010) calls this moral judgment of abilities ableism. He uses

it to show how even when non-disabled people have the best of intentions, they can help to create and sustain an inequitable world.

Finding out why employers privilege some abilities over others can help bring about positive employment practices that may lead to improved employment experiences. Fundamentally, the abilities that society cherishes impacts perceptions and responses to (and action taken), and ability expectations influence ageism and youthism. For example, Wolbring (2017) contends that transhumanism (a process of human enhancement through new technologies) can alter the social perceptions of productive, competitive, and efficient-enough abilities in a process that he says is changing ability expectations. He argues that ability expectations shape every aspect of society and are the root cause of many social problems. According to Wolbring (2012b), there is a significant risk that medical knowledge and capability is now using technology in such a way that it goes beyond simple fixes of lost faculty in an ameliorative or restorative (rehabilitation) approach. He alerts us to the dangerous trend in using technology to transcend the species-typical driven by a desire to increase competitiveness through productive capability. For Wolbring (2012b) an acceptance of human diversity and different abilities is the only answer, and we should not be engaging in human enhancement just because we can unless, of course, it is to help reduce pain or suffering. In a piece written for *The Conversation*, he explains his concerns extend beyond the reach of disabled people:

Ability expectations have been and still are used to disable or disempower many people, not only people seen as impaired. They've been used to disable or marginalise women (men arguing that rationality is an important ability and women don't have it) (Wolbring, 2017).

While ability expectations can be damaging, for individuals who cannot demonstrate the valued abilities, there is an advantage to be gained for some people. Wolbring calls this an 'ability privilege' over others who lack such ability. For the people left behind and disadvantaged, Wolbring (2017) asserts it is a form of ability expectation oppression. Critical to this research is understanding what 'abilities' employers' value when making hiring decisions, and this relates closely to how employers perceive employability (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005) focused on individual characteristics and abilities and feeds into ability expectations (Wolbring, 2012a).

Furthermore, the concepts of ableism and ability expectations provide a sound basis for disabled people to disrupt the normative standards and normative practices taken for granted in most workplaces. One strategy used by disabled people to disrupt and destabilise the cultural reproduction of ableism is to take an affirmative disabled identity, found for example, in disability arts (Cameron, 2009). In chapter eight, I discuss how participants of this study illustrated other strategies of resistance. One popular example is that disabled people purposely avoid organisations who adhere to ableist normative employment logics and do so by becoming self-employed.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has shown *how* social relational conceptions of disability help disability studies researchers to identify structural barriers, impairment effects, and psycho-emotional disablism. Whilst this is important in and of itself, the concepts of ableism and ability expectations, help researchers explain *why* disabled people experience oppression and the beliefs, processes, and practices through which this occurs. I take the ideas and concepts presented above and develop them in chapter eight.

In the chapter that follows, I review the existing literature that captures disabled people's employment experience in mainstream workplaces to consider the effectiveness of supply-side policy, the value placed on receiving flexibility in work (either formally or through reasonable adjustments) and the nature of supportive workplace cultures in creating enabling employment experiences.

## **CHAPTER 3: DISABLED PEOPLE AND WORK**

### **Introduction**

This chapter identifies the key themes coming from previous empirical studies to understand why gaining and retaining employment for disabled people is still problematic despite the existence of equality and anti-discrimination legislation (Equality Act, 2010). The chapter starts by describing the social policy focus on the supply-side of the labour market and outlines the current employment position for disabled people living in the UK. It then looks at the attitudinal barriers from employers that can damage employment relationships when disabled people ask their employer for flexibility in how, when, and where they do their work. Following this, the chapter considers how the negativity from employers impacts on disabled people's decision whether to disclose their impairment and the impact that has on psycho-emotional wellbeing. Finally, the chapter reviews the policy's used by Government to support disabled people and reflects upon the benefits that some people report in working for disabled people's organisations.

### **Disabled people, supply-side social policy, and employment outcomes**

As noted in Chapter One, the political focus has been on the 'supply-side' of the labour market, with efforts primarily targeted at activating disabled people to become more employable. Yet, the expectation to improve one's education, training, skills and maintain our health to 'overcome' barriers to work and present as employable has so far failed to reduce the disability employment gap (NAO, 2019). In early 1998, the New Labour Government commissioned a review of the relevant 'employability' literature to develop a definition and framework to help inform future policy developments (Hillage and Pollard, 1998). The definition established was:

For the individual, employability depends on the knowledge, skills, and attitudes they possess, the way they use those assets and present them to employers and the context (e.g., personal circumstances and labour market environment) within which they seek work.  
(Hillage and Pollard, 1998: 2)

It has been argued that this policy agenda set out clear individual expectations and responsibilities to constantly enhance disabled people's social capital through acquiring hard skills to improve their employability in an effort to reduce dependency on social security benefits (Grover and Piggott, 2015). These hard skills can be obtained through education, training, or skills development, and rely upon individual motivation (Yates and Roulstone, 2013). In other words, what disabled people must do to overcome their barriers to work (NAO, 2019).

However, the Government recognised that many disabled people continue to face low expectations from employers, limited access to services, and a welfare system that does not provide enough personalised and tailored support to help disabled people 'into' work or to 'stay' in work (DWP and DH, 2016). Yet policy continues to pursue a failing supply-side focus. With

the focus so significantly one-sided the labour market institutions that should be facilitating disabled people's employment are left largely alone whilst "the focus [is] upon the ability of the individual to labour" (Grover and Piggott, 2007: 739). Worryingly, the strong supply-side employability focus on functional capability for paid work is also being used to "threaten the impoverishment of disabled people" (Grover and Piggott, 2015: 8) within social security conditionality clauses.

Furthermore, policy responses which have focussed mainly on the supply-side, or support programmes such as the Work and Health Programme (DWP and DHSC, 2017) can be understood as the general continuity of a policy direction in the wider context of the extension of market principles aligned with self-interest, competition, efficiency, and profit-making, to all areas of life (Roulstone and Prideaux, 2012). Consequently, contemporary employment and training policies are premised on an emphasis in which individuals bear responsibility for their own employment position (positive or negative). When not in employment, disabled people have been publicly blamed and shamed, with examples of politicians making suggestions that their disadvantaged position in the labour market is caused by a morally skewed attitude to work, preferring to be lazy and work shy (Ryan, 2019).

In 2019 the National Audit Office (NAO) (2019) study into the effectiveness of support to help disabled people overcome barriers to work examined the Government's strategy to consider what is currently being achieved. This review concluded that the Government still does not understand enough about 'what works' and neither can it tell how much of the improvement in terms of the numbers of disabled people finding paid work can be attributed as a function of changes in how people already in work report disability or whether that is due to actions to support more disabled people to work.

Given the Department has had programmes in place to support disabled people for over half a century, it is disappointing that it is not further ahead in knowing what works and that it lacks a target that it is willing to be held to account for. While the commitment to gathering evidence is welcome, until it has a clear understanding of what works, and a plan to use that evidence, it is not possible to say the Department is achieving value for money. (NAO, 2019)

The irony is not lost on disabled people's organisations who have provided evidence of 'what works' for over thirty years. Disability Rights UK (2020) have called on Government (again) to invest in more 'impairment specific' and targeted programmes of support based on individual need, noting the barriers for each individual person to enter and stay in mainstream employment.

Justin Tomlinson, the Minister for Disabled People has stressed the importance of the Disability Employment Adviser (DEA) role, suggesting to MPs that they would play a key part in achieving the Government's target of seeing one million more disabled people in work between 2017 and 2027. DEAs are part of JobCentre Plus and are trained to specifically help disabled people to find suitable jobs, and work alongside work coaches to provide additional professional expertise. Yet, in a Freedom of Information Request made by Disability News Service (2021), figures show that at the start of 2021 there were just 447 DEAs, compared with 661 in 2020. Meanwhile the number of 'regular' non-disability aware work coaches rose by nearly 6,500 in the same period, showing that trained disability advisers fell by 32 per cent compared to the number of work coaches rising by 51 per cent (Disability News Service, 2021).

Perhaps the most important and successful supply-side policy, Access to Work (AtW) is arguably one of the services provided by Government to disabled people that is closest aligned to a social model of disability. This is because it focuses on barriers that must be overcome in order to allow a disabled person to start or keep a job, rather than locating the problem within the individual. It is also the only programme proven to be effective according to disabled people (Lord Low et al., 2015). Essentially, the scheme takes care of the extra costs most disabled people would otherwise need to pay for themselves, including, paying for assistive technology, transport to work, personal assistance and adaptations to the workplace. However, the Sayce Review (2011) described AtW as the Government's 'best kept secret' because both disabled people and employers are unaware of its existence. This is particularly true for SMEs (FSB, 2019). As a model of employment support, it is also cost effective. In 2004 it was found that for every £1 spent the Treasury received a net return of £1.48 (Disability Employment Coalition, 2004). More recently, a cost benefit analysis reconfirmed that on the basis of the available evidence the overall benefit to society outweighs its costs by a considerable amount (Melville et al., 2015).

In response to a Freedom of Information Request I made in 2020 to DWP (Appendix R), the evidence showed that disabled workers in large firms (with more than 250 employees) on average get higher amounts of AtW funding compared to those people working in SMEs. This is a significant finding because it points to a policy that is failing to provide adequate funding to firms who need it the most. Given that AtW does not cover changes that the employer must make under the Equality Act 2010 (reasonable adjustments) it would seem most funding should be directed to the smaller employer with less resources. It indicates a problem too because SMEs are not expected to pay towards AtW whereas larger firms are expected to pay a percentage contribution to the overall award amount. Therefore, these figures show that if a disabled person with high-cost support needs finds employment in an SME (where the Government should cover the full amount), the worker is at a disadvantage because they are less likely to receive a high value award from an AtW decision maker.

Importantly, there was also a significant difference in the amounts awarded by sector, with people working in the charity sector receiving higher awards compared to those working in

private national and private local organisations. Disabled workers in large charity organisations get significantly higher amounts in comparison to private sector workers overall. The reason for this is not clear. However, it could be that disabled people, managers and other staff at all levels are more likely to know about AtW funding in the charity sector especially if the organisation works on disability related issues. These organisations may be better informed of what is available, better at navigating the system and maybe because of the nature of the firm's involvement with disability issues, they are more willing to push for the support actually needed. Or it may be that AtW decision makers are more inclined to provide higher rates of funding to charitable organisations compared to their willingness to award higher funding towards private enterprise employers. It may also be an indicator that those with highest support needs find employment in charity organisations. What these figures do show though is a failure to reach the private sector SMEs and the disabled people who work within them. The smallest amounts on average per head are in private sector national firms indicating where a firm has multiple worksites across the country, workers receive the least amount of AtW funded support. Again, the reasons behind this are not clear, but I suggest, it may be related to the lack of proximity between employees and employers in businesses that have multiple working locations. This lack of proximity between the employee/employer can limit the building of strong interpersonal relationships because opportunities to have open conversations are made more difficult at a distance. This would support the idea coming out from interviews with disabled people in this study (see chapter seven), that in smaller organisations, access between the disabled worker and the key decision maker help to get adjustments to working arrangements quickly, without fuss, and usually informally.

Social policy responses that ignore broader structural inequality facing disabled people reveal the failed attempts to address wider employment 'barriers' (Yates and Roulstone, 2013). Also, Roulstone and Barnes (2005) highlighted how policy fails to comprehend impairment diversity and the specific barriers that disabled people face in trying to gain employment and when barrier reduction is a focus, it tends only to consider the physical access issues. But for people with mental health issues or learning or social difficulties wider barriers that include "inclusive work cultures and flexible performativity's are essential" (Yates and Roulstone, 2013: 464). Therefore, the heterogenous nature of impairments and the unpredictable and complex nature of disablism are not adequately addressed by a simple individualised focus that "shifts attention away from considerations of broader structural inequalities and disablement" (ibid.)

Furthermore, moving into secure types of employment is not experienced equally and is associated with the abilities and resources people have to understand the demands of the labour market, and to make themselves 'flexible' and 'adaptable' in response to the prevailing labour market conditions. For example, Yates et al. (2011) found that social background is a powerful mediating influencer in young people's employment outcomes. Even when young people from poorer backgrounds aspire to work in professional jobs the lack of resources available to them make it far less likely they will end up working in a professional, managerial,

or technical job in adulthood (ibid). This is reflected in wider outcomes as disabled people in general are significantly less likely to be employed as managers, directors, or senior officials, or to be employed in professional occupations and are significantly more likely to hold elementary occupations, significantly more likely to be employed in caring, leisure or other service occupations or sales or customer service occupations compared to non-disabled people (ONS, 2021).

As well as difficulties in entering certain occupations, there are differences in the quality of employment between disabled and non-disabled people. For example, over one-third of disabled people work part-time compared with under one-quarter of non-disabled people. While part-time employment can provide the flexibility needed to accommodate work-limiting impairment effects (Thomas, 1999, 2007) part-time jobs are on average paid at lower hourly rates (Longhi, 2017), despite the requirement for equal pay for equal jobs. In 2020, the TUC conducted analysis on UK disability pay gaps, and found that a disabled worker working thirty-five hours per week would, on average, earn £3,822 per year less than a non-disabled worker (TUC, 2020). The figures on self-employment are similar between disabled and non-disabled people overall (15.0% for disabled people, 14.0% for non-disabled people), however, disabled men are significantly more likely to be self-employed (20.2%) than non-disabled men (17.3%) (ONS, 2021).

### **Getting reasonable adjustments**

Anti-discrimination policy should have outlawed the inferior treatment of disabled people but given the statistics presented in this thesis outlining the employment and pay gap (TUC, 2020), it has clearly not made a significant difference to disabled people's employment outcomes. Employers lack knowledge and understanding of the legislation and specifically, reasonable adjustment requirements, often assuming wrongly that additional costs are needed to fulfil the duty to comply with legislation (Fordyce et al., 2013). In addition, the inclusion of caveats such as 'reasonable', 'practical' and 'impractical' within the legislation dilutes the true extent of requirements laid down (Prideaux, 2006; Roulstone and Warren, 2006).

A significant weakness of reasonable adjustments raised by disabled people is the minimum requirements which expect only piecemeal changes to spaces, goods, and services, and there has been a history of "ambivalence exhibited towards planned solutions to equality issues" (Roulstone and Prideaux, 2009: 366). As noted in chapter two, this type of legislation puts in place the bare minimum standards, and what is thought to be 'reasonable' for a disabled person often fails to make spaces and services fully accessible or inclusive (Roulstone and Prideaux, 2009). Also noted in chapter two, when reasonable adjustments are only partial because either equipment is broken or it is not clear how to use the equipment provided, inclusion is not guaranteed (Reeve, 2014). Consequently, the failure to make reasonable adjustments in the workplace can prevent disabled people taking up, or staying in employment (Newton et al., 2007). Also, the concept of reasonable adjustments is framed upon a very narrow conceptualisation of access needs-based primarily on physical impairments (assuming

wheelchair use as the familiar symbol of disability) and sometimes sensory impairment. In this way, the access needs of people described as neurodiverse, people with mental health conditions or learning difficulties and people with chronic/energy limiting conditions (Hale and Gunn, 2020) are often neglected.

Adams and Oldfield's (2011) study reported disabled people's awareness of rights to request reasonable adjustments was far from universal. Whilst some disabled people were aware that their rights were enshrined in law, others believed that it was purely a matter of employer discretion to decide the degree of effort to accommodate their needs. For those who did know about their legal rights, they often felt it would not be 'reasonable' to ask their employer to make the adjustments if they felt the employer would not be able to afford them. Some felt that their need for smaller items, would not be covered by the law, and for many, just because the law exists would not dispel their fear of a personal risk in asking. They fear a negative response from management who would perceive them as 'causing problems' or being 'unable to cope' with the demands of their job, as well as the potential negative response from work colleagues who would accuse them of receiving unfair 'special treatment'. Consequently, disabled workers worry that once a 'disclosure' of need is made, it is irreversible and they would prefer to 'struggle on' by 'hiding' aspects of their impairment or health condition, developing coping mechanisms to continue to work (even if this made their working lives harder and reduced their full productive potential). Again, this points to evidence of psycho-emotional disablism happening at work but going unrecognised as such (Reeve, 2014).

Also, disabled people would like their employer to instigate a frank and honest discussion of needs from the start of their employment, but instead of asking about specific impairment effects the process should focus on specific individual needs (Adams and Oldfield, 2011). The problem this creates in relation to asking for reasonable adjustments is that workers must prove they are 'disabled' under the definition of disability provided in the Equality Act (2010). Otherwise, employers are not expected by law to respond. Indeed, it is only at the point of employers 'knowing' that a person is defined as 'disabled' that the expectation begins. Unlike in education, employers are not obliged by law to 'anticipate' the needs of disabled workers.

In Roulstone et al (2003) study, a small number of participants used the DDA to 'inform' their employer of their legal rights, using it in a strategic way to affect a positive employer response. They saw this approach as less risky than resorting to threatening the employer with legal action. However, the exact relationship between the equality legislations requirements on employers and the operation of the AtW scheme remains unclear. Employers are not expected to anticipate the 'needs' of disabled workers but are expected to make 'reasonable' adjustment. AtW can cover the part of a request that is not 'reasonable' but critically, the only way to find out what is 'reasonable' is to go through a Judge at Tribunal. In other words, both employers and employees are understandably unsure of their rights. Furthermore, the ambiguous interpretation of what is reasonable, plus the expectation of individual (rather than collective)

claims to rights, limits the ability to support disabled people fully (DPAC and Inclusion London, 2017: 8).

Whilst the Equality Act (2010) makes employers legally responsible for making reasonable adjustments, at present they are not being held to account for non-compliance (Dwyer et al, 2014). In their report *We Belong*, Disability Rights UK (2020) called on the Government to extend and enforce the Equality Act (2010) they suggest it should be extended to cover:

... the inclusive design of manufactured goods including technology products. It should enable direct enforcement of provisions by the Equality and Human Rights Commission and public bodies. It should not be left to individual disabled people to uphold the provisions of the Act. Where disabled people do uphold rights under the Act relating to employment and services, we should be financially supported, and processes should be simple to administer. (Disability Rights UK, 2020, np)

Despite legal protections, contemporary case law provides the evidence that discriminatory workplace practice persists and whilst placing a duty on employers to make reasonable adjustments can help disabled people in theory, in practice it does not provide a framework to change societal values and attitudes (Disability Rights UK, 2020).

### **Disabled people and flexibility in work**

A main theme for disabled people in many of the existing empirical studies is the need for greater flexibility (Adams and Oldfield, 2011; Barnes et al., 1998; Foster and Hirst, 2020; Roulstone et al., 2003). This is mentioned consistently in some form or other and to some extent underpins all other requests or suggested solutions for accessing and maintaining paid work in mainstream work contexts. Whilst some disabled people may need specific aids, adaptations, or equipment in order to facilitate their ability to work, the vast majority have needs that only require changes in the way in which work is organised, such as flexible working hours and being able to take rests when required.

In the UK, all employees have a statutory right to request flexible working (ACAS, 2014; CMI, 2019; Gov.UK, 2021) after twenty-six weeks continuous employment, whereas the obligation on employers to make reasonable adjustments for disabled people (within the duties of the Equality Act 2010) starts even before employment begins, throughout the recruitment process. Yet, the statutory right to request flexible working can still be beneficial for disabled workers who either do not identify themselves to be 'disabled' or because they would prefer to keep their disabled identity concealed from the employer and co-workers (Adams and Oldfield, 2011). However, in 2019, findings from the Chartered Management Institute (CMI, 2019) suggest that only 25% of managers know about the employee's right to request flexible working.

Forms of flexibility that disabled people may find helpful can include part-time working, job sharing, working from home, flexible hours, and annualised hours (Roulstone et al., 2003). According to ACAS (2013) under annualised hours arrangements an employee works a certain number of hours over the whole year, but with a certain degree of flexibility about when those hours are worked. It is normal for the employee to have a core set of regular hours or shifts, with the remaining time left unallocated and used on an 'as needed' basis (ACAS, 2013). In the same way that it offers working parents the opportunity to balance family life with work, flexible working can offer disabled people a way to accommodate requirements arising from their impairment (Barnes et al., 1998). Although, some caution must be taken in regard to part-time working, because there is conflicting evidence on whether this is taken through choice of if it is due to a lack of alternative full-time flexible job roles (Barnes et al, 1998). There is also a gendered aspect to part-time flexibility, as evidenced by the figures showing that in the UK in 2020, women are three times more likely than men to be working part-time (38% compared to 13%) (Devine et al., 2020). However, the numbers have changed since the 1990s, with reducing levels for women and increasing levels for men entering part time jobs (down from 45% of women and up from 7% of men) (ibid).

Adams and Oldfield's (2011) qualitative research for the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) was designed to understand how the world of work could be opened up to enable more disabled people to participate fully and more employers to realise the potential of their disabled employees. It sought to look beyond the barriers and to identify how workplaces could become more inclusive. They used a series of group discussions and depth interviews with disabled people between October and December 2010. In addition to flexibility in the hours or days worked, some disabled workers need flexibility to accommodate time off at short notice because of a need not to work on 'bad days' and at other times to accommodate medical appointments, whose timing can be outside their control (Adams and Oldfield, 2011). For people with progressive illnesses who may take long periods of absence from work, they need flexibility to return to work gradually to help with adjusting back to work routines (ibid).

More specifically, research participants in Adams and Oldfield (2011) study stated that they aspired to work in an organisation who would be willing to offer the following strategies to accommodate their impairment effects: relaxed start and finish times, the flexibility to distribute working hours across the week, including weekends (even if these are not usually working days); employers who understand the need for time off at short notice; employers who allow the option of phased returns to work after long periods of absence, employers who make working from home an option if wanted, but this should not be seen always as the solution for 'accommodating' disabled workers; and employers willing to be flexible to the idea of adapting job roles if people become disabled during their working lives.

Interestingly, Adams and Oldfield (2011) found that public sector employees seemed more comfortable asking for flexible arrangements, and several had been successful. However, the vast majority of people in their study had not asked for these types of flexibility for fear of the

stigma attached to being 'singled out' for receiving special treatment. They suggest, the solution to encourage more people to ask is for employers to offer this as a 'whole workforce' approach where all employees are consulted on their flexibility needs irrespective of whether or not they are disabled. They acknowledge that this approach is already offered by some employers, but to only some of their staff, and the challenge for employers is to adopt a consistent (and fair) way to deliver this across the workforce in ways that do not discriminate.

In a discussion about the benefits of working from home, Adams, and Oldfield (2011) found that disabled people mention it as important for making work more accessible for disabled people, allowing them to avoid the difficulties of travelling to work on days where they did not feel able to cope with them. However, some of their participants accepted it simply would not be a realistic option within their current job because they were required to be at certain locations or with certain equipment. For others, they believed a request to work from home would be refused by their employer because of a lack of trust, thinking that home workers work less diligently. Yet, flexible forms of working can benefit employers to, and this will be addressed in chapter four (Adams and Oldfield, 2011). However, there is some ambivalence about whether flexible working is always beneficial or whether it contributes to disabled people's disadvantage in the labour market. Also, not all disabled people want to work from home so if this were ever enforced it could create a problem rather than a solution. For some disabled people, working at home is seen as a 'lazy' solution (Adams and Oldfield, 2011), and has negative consequences because it can increase feelings of being segregated and cut off from the normal social interactions that happen in the workplace. The issue of home working has become a 'hot topic' during the Covid-19 pandemic (2020-21) and is returned to in chapter nine of this thesis to reflect on the impact for both disabled workers and SME employers.

More recently, Leonard Cheshire's (2019b) research found that there has been some progress in disabled people's ability to get flexible working practices agreed, including, breaks in the working day. Yet just twenty per cent of disabled adults in the UK who have applied for a job in the past five years said employers had explained the workplace adjustments that could be made to support their impairment, which could include flexible working hours or assistive technology (ibid). In that study, one participant, Phil, commented on the importance of a workplace culture that actively supports flexible working options:

It varied as to whether I felt I could ask for adjustments. Some employers actively encouraged flexible working and had a culture of encouraging people to mention any problems. Others made it clear they wouldn't allow any flexible working adjustments and so I didn't pursue it... Flexible working should be available from day one in a job, rather than once you've worked for an employer for a certain time. That's bonkers, you have the problem from day one, it doesn't just suddenly start

three to six months down the line! (Phil, cited in Leonard Cheshire, 2019b: 27)

Flexibility in the way that job roles are defined and adapted is seen as important too for people who acquire an impairment during their working career (Adams and Oldfield, 2011). But there is evidence that some employers do not think flexibly about redistributing certain tasks as a form of reasonable adjustment, meaning that too often the employee is forced to leave their job (ibid.).

Flexible hours and flexibility about working locations has been found to be important specifically for people with fluctuating and unpredictable impairments and chronic health conditions (Holland and Clayton, 2020, Chronic Illness Inclusion Project, 2020a, 2020b). But because of the unpredictable nature of some chronic conditions (they tend to be more fluid and less noticeable) access to workplace adaptations and employer and colleague flexibility varies significantly (ibid). Taking annual leave strategically or having the chance to take unpaid leave to cover longer periods to manage 'flare ups' were seen as good employer practices to embed flexibility (ibid.).

The examples of flexibility presented here have all been drawn from the voice of disabled people and can be considered informal arrangements agreed in negotiation with their employer. In the next section of this chapter the legal rights and entitlements to reasonable adjustments are explored further to assess disabled people's experience of getting them and to consider why, according to many, they are still denied to them.

### **Supportive workplace culture**

It is suggested that disabled people's organisations (DPOs) offer a more enabling and supportive workplace environment (Goodley, 2006), "setting a benchmark of good employer practice that could be imported into general employment policy and practice" (Roulstone et al., 2003: 38). The ways in which DPOs offer more supportive working environments can be demonstrated by a focus on individual self-empowerment, promoting and valuing diversity, and by operationalising the social model principles in practice (Goodley, 2006) ensuring that it is the employer who adapts rather than expecting the employee to adapt themselves. Roulstone et al. (2003) note the "unconditional acceptance of workplace diversity and flexibility is at the heart of more enabling workplace regimes. [And] The need for organisations in which disabled workers are not viewed as 'different' or outside of the 'norm'" (Roulstone et al., 2003: 37).

The same research found that one of the most widely used strategies adopted by disabled people is to be assertive, clear, and direct about their specific impairment effects to get flexibility from their line manager. Whenever possible, better outcomes result from addressing this issue at the earliest possible stage as it helps to resolve any access issues and being accepted as a valued co-worker (Roulstone et al., 2003). However, not all disabled people have the confidence to assert their rights, and the confidence to have open conversations grows over time spent and building up trusting relations.

Evidence supports the view that a lack of familiarity with disabled people as work colleagues affects the attitudes of non-disabled people (Barnes et al., 1998, Scope, 2017, 2018). Disabled people feel that increasing the number of people with impairments in the workforce is the most effective way to create an organisational culture where disclosure of needs would be more likely to take place (Adams and Oldfield, 2011). They recognise the importance of proximity in building interpersonal relations and familiarity with people as individuals that can help eradicate feelings of suspicion and resentment (Adams and Oldfield, 2011). In chapter four, this theme is discussed further in relation to creating workplace cultures which can facilitate disclosure in ways that can avoid psycho-emotional insecurity (Thomas, 2007). For example, evidence suggests that employers who are aware of their legal responsibilities and who actively promote the legal rights of their employees are more likely to instil confidence among disabled people to disclose their needs (Adams and Oldfield, 2011).

### **Attitudinal barriers and the importance of line manager's**

The role that employer attitudes play in disabled people's experience of work became the focus of a study by Roulstone (1998) who very firmly locates his work within a social model understanding of disability and his main argument is that all disabling barriers whether they be environmental or technological in nature can be traced back to attitudinal barriers. He defined attitudinal barriers as the negative assumptions made by line managers and work colleagues about disabled people's *abilities* and *limitations*. Drawing upon data collected in interviews with disabled people, he noted that disabled people felt that it was the negative attitudes of others in the workplace that created the principal barrier, leading him to summarise:

The findings of this study...suggest the primacy of attitude barriers as the source of most other barriers, as the majority of remaining barriers can be linked at some point to attitudes more generally. (Roulstone, 1998: 126)

In later research, Roulstone et al., (2003) interviewed disabled workers and once again, the report emphasised the primacy of disabling attitudes at work. This led the researchers to conclude that the key to the future employment success of disabled people was for organisations to ensure that 'disabled workers are not viewed as different or 'outside the norm'' (Roulstone et al., 2003: 37). I return to this critical point in chapter six of the thesis because seeing disabled people as 'different' rather than the 'same as us' appeared to be important to employer decision making on who to recruit, basing this on deliberations of who will 'fit' into the existing workplace culture.

To combat ableism in the employment relationship some research points to the need for supportive attitudes from line manager's (Adams and Oldfield, 2011; Holland and Clayton, 2020; Roulstone et al., 2003). In Adams and Oldfield's' (2011) study, disabled people felt that the ideal manager should be aware of the specific individual needs for each member of their team. They should also be willing to use their powers to offer flexibility in how the working day is arranged

to suit the needs of their employees. In this study, disabled people commented how they want their line managers to think more creatively about specific job roles so they can be adapted to fit their skills and previous experience. They also want line managers to speak informally about any performance concerns before allowing issues to progress to formal disciplinary stage which they felt were intimidating:

Some participants had experienced managers who had not discussed any concerns with them until the point where their ongoing employment was in question. They felt that earlier open discussion could have led to a climate of greater trust where individuals might have been willing to discuss the challenges that the workplace was presenting them with and possible adjustments that would enable them to perform better (Adams and Oldfield, 2011: vi)

Research commissioned by Leonard Cheshire (2019a, 2019b) found that, of line managers who are less likely to employ a disabled person, almost three in four (73%) would be concerned they would struggle to do the job. Yvonne, from London, who took part in Leonard Cheshire's ACE (Able, Capable, Employable) programme, had previously been forced to give up work after not receiving any support for her disability. Yvonne's account below demonstrates psycho-emotional disablism (Reeve, 2014):

My line manager didn't help me at all, and I became isolated due to my disability. I felt frozen out and took early retirement because I was so low. On my last day nobody said goodbye or sent me a card. I was made to feel worthless (Yvonne, cited in Leonard Cheshire, 2019a)

The degree to which workers are more or less able to manage their own time and work schedules is often dependent upon job status and the attitudes of line managers (Adams and Oldfield, 2011; Holland and Clayton, 2020; Roulstone, 1998):

I got support from my employer and it was not helpful. The direct line manager is supportive because they see you every day, so they want to help the person. But it's the systems in place that are inadequate. The line managers need to have the power to make reasonable assessments just during the day. It should be down to the individual manager rather than having to go through a system and up the chain. (Vinny, cited in Leonard Cheshire, 2019b: 27)

These concerns are important for the thesis and feed into the discussion in chapter eight because participants in this study made similar comments about the benefits of informal approaches taking place in SME work relationships.

The other significant theme emerging from the existing literature points to the critical role that disabled workers place on gaining flexibility in SME workplaces through building good relationships with their line manager. In general, SMEs have been found to be more supportive and offer training on an individual level to disabled workers (Barnes et al., 1998). Given the smallness of the firm, it is possible to predict that building closer working relationships is perhaps inevitable simply as a consequence of fewer people in the firm. This is important because prolonged contact with disabled people as colleagues may have a positive effect on the attitudes of non-disabled colleagues, thus, reducing prejudicial stereotypes (Scope, 2017, 2018).

### **Career mobility and psycho-emotional disablism**

Disabled people's experience of working in professional occupations is largely absent in academic research, suggesting that disabled people are still not *expected* to be in higher status occupations. The participants in this study (see Appendix P) work in a diverse range of roles and most have higher level qualifications and experience of working in professional positions making it important to understand why it is that common portrayals of disabled people who are working tend to ignore those with successful careers. Again, it can be explained by a reading of broader social security and employment policy which demonstrates how disabled people are only *expected* to 'enter' into, not 'climb' the labour market.

Sadly, the language of career progression or career development of disabled people does not make its way into policy discourse. Inevitably, this lack of aspirational language restricts disabled people from climbing the career ladder because employers can assume that disabled people either cannot or do not want to progress. Evidence confirms that disabled people consistently come up against the 'glass ceiling' in reaching positions of power and influence as they strive for career success (Foster and Hirst, 2020, Roulstone and Williams, 2014; Spooner, 2013). Notably, 'glass partitions' describe the fears that disabled workers have about negative consequences if they moved job or if their job changed "and the possible surfacing of negativity from non-disabled colleagues as impairment becomes the primary focus of attention" (Roulstone and Williams, 2014: 22).

In an attempt to fill some of this gap, Foster, and Hirst's (2020) *Legally Disabled?* project conducted with disabled people working in the UK legal profession is an important recent addition to research. They found examples of disabled people who want a career in law but who feared that an impairment would have a negative impact on their career progression and job security. This was especially true for people with hidden impairments, and for those who acquired an impairment later on in their career. They found disabled workers who would be entitled by law to reasonable adjustments were often not receiving them, because they feared the consequences of making a request. Furthermore, among those that did ask for adjustments

to be made, “a significant number experienced ill-treatment, ignorance or discrimination from senior personnel, ill-equipped to respond to them” (Foster and Hirst, 2020: 6). Some of their participants had opted to conceal their impairment until it was impossible not to and they were in danger of being outed. For others there was no option to conceal because of the visible nature of their condition, or because the condition necessitated medical treatment.

Another problem identified is the experience of misplaced paternalism described as the well-meaning manager who assumes that the disabled person would not want to do certain job tasks or have certain responsibilities (Foster and Hirst, 2020). Interestingly, in chapter seven of this thesis, examples of this type of unwanted paternalism were provided by several of the participants. The problem of this type of management behaviour (although well intended) is that it denies disabled workers the full opportunities to demonstrate their skills and talents on a par with other workers. It, therefore, limits their CV and potential to demonstrate all of the essential criteria expected on future job applications or criteria for promotion:

...the fact that the decision to decline a role is taken away from the disabled person is not just patronising, but can have real consequences for career advancement”  
(Foster and Hirst, 2020: 62)

This quote confirms how other people’s attitudes towards disability whether positive or negative have powerful psycho-emotional effects on disabled people’s confidence and career aspirations (Foster and Hirst, 2020). From speaking to disabled people working in the legal profession they found significant harm being caused by bullying associated with their disability:

We found the psycho-emotional effects of bullying had led people to seek psychiatric support and counselling and seriously affected mental well-being. Some left promising careers as a consequence, others continued with determination but often at great personal cost, while the associated stress caused relapses in existing illnesses, precipitated new ones, or in some cases ended the ability to work completely. (Foster and Hirst, 2020: 16)

Similarly, these ‘inner’ psycho-emotional barriers are revealed in a study of disability in the online recruitment process, Scholz (2017) found that disabled people’s past experiences with employers and co-workers can have a direct impact on the way they engage with recruitment processes and practices. The majority of disabled people that took part in Scholz’s (2017) study referred to their impairments as an ‘individual’ barrier to work. Some also adopted ableist norms in order to ease the experiences of direct psycho-emotional disablism (Reeve, 2014). Furthermore, past experiences of discrimination in the job search process influenced an individual’s decision to either declare themselves ‘disabled’ on a job application, or they

engaged in a strategy to conceal for fear of discrimination. Disabled jobseekers in Scholz's (2017) study felt that declaring they are 'disabled' at the application stage was an obligation rather than choice. The only reason they would declare was in order that they might receive reasonable adjustments during interviews, or any tests expected as part of the application process. Similarly, findings emerge from the Foster and Hirst (2020) study with people working in the legal profession. They found evidence that most people anticipate that declaring that they were a disabled person prior to interview would disadvantage them. They conclude that this finding indicates that the legal profession is not currently persuading people that they will not be discriminated against if they exercise their right to request an adjustment.

Specifically, section 60 of the Equality Act (2010) was intended to challenge unconscious bias during the selection process, however, Scholz's (2017) findings demonstrate how employers can use this to their own advantage by asking whether a job applicant requires a reasonable adjustment, they have an indirect method of establishing if an applicant is 'disabled'. As such, section 60 affords employers the discretion to ask for disclosure, placing a dilemma on disabled applicants because they already anticipate that discrimination will take place:

Consequently, this legal tool that is formed around an equal treatment approach to recruitment has not been able to challenge disability discrimination and more proactive measures and differential treatment approaches to recruitment are required (Scholz, 2017: 194)

Similarly, the work of Schur et al. (2009, 2014, 2016) writing about corporate culture and the employment of disabled people in the USA, identified a number of strategies adopted by disabled workers that highlight emotional 'discomfort' caused by anxiety and heightened ambivalence about how to best portray one's impairment effects (Thomas, 1999, 2007). Strategies include a mix of emotion and impression management to deal with the consequence of barriers to employment and prejudicial attitudes towards impairment, including concealing impairment, emotion management, requesting help, emphasising sameness, and becoming a 'super worker' to present themselves as the exceptional employee (Schur et al., 2009, 2014, 2016).

In a study of disabled academics experience working in Higher Education Institutions, Olsen et al. (2020) describe the barriers that 'shadow' disabled people's daily lived experiences. These are often invisible to non-disabled people meaning that employers are often unaware of or do not recognise these barriers, despite them greatly impacting disabled people's abilities to meet established policies and social norms (Olsen et al., 2020). The concept of 'shadow' barriers provides an important insight into understanding the practices and societal attitudes disabled people have previously experienced in trying to access employment, and how these historical experiences can affect them in the present. These types of 'shadow' barriers must then be considered as a result of being denied access and participation over extensive lengths of time. In this way, 'shadow' barriers complement and extend the social model of disability (Oliver,

1983, 1990) and recognise that both 'visible' (conscious) or 'shadow' (unconscious), barriers encountered by disabled people are not caused by individual failings of disabled people. Neither should the expected strategy for removing such barriers be the sole responsibility of the disabled individual. Instead, both visible and shadow barriers "remain part of ingrained structures that produce our social world, and favour the ideas, strategies and activities of those who influence the organisation" (Olsen et al., 2020: 266). This deeper understanding of 'shadow' barriers enables a meaning to be made from understanding the impact of history on the here and now. Shadow barriers therefore follow disabled people from one space into another, accumulating lived experiences of disablism and ableist attitudes that over time overlay and turn inwards causing psycho-emotional restrictions.

### **Conclusion**

The research presented in this chapter confirms that when studies have reported on the psycho-emotional elements of disablism, they have not recognised it as evidence of something far more worrying that needs to be addressed by policy. Also, the review of literature has confirmed what I suspected, that is, there is no existing research or specific literature from within the field of disability studies looking specifically at the experience of working for SME employers across different sectors – a gap that will be filled to some degree by this thesis. We do not yet have an adequate evidence base to know how disabled people experience working for SMEs and therefore we cannot assume that the experience of somebody working for a larger employer is going to be the same for somebody working in an SME. The fact that employment outcomes for disabled people are consistently poor compared to non-disabled people adds weight to the need for further research, and this study aims to dig deeper into the 'demand-side' because it is clear that policy needs to know more about the attitudinal barriers embedded within SME cultures and employer practice if it is to ever reduce the employment and pay gaps. In the following chapter literature around demand-side issues are explored further.

## **CHAPTER 4: UNDERSTANDING SMEs**

SMEs form the backbone of the UK economy. More numerous and more varied than you would imagine, these millions of companies face all of the challenges their larger counterparts and competitors do, without the benefits of scale. (The Telegraph, 2019a)

### **Introduction**

The previous chapter noted the importance placed on gaining “unconditional acceptance of workplace diversity and flexibility” (Roulstone et al., 2003: 37) by disabled people in facilitating a good (enabling) employment experience. It raised questions about the extent to which employers are willing or able to adopt a workplace culture that strives to accommodate disabled people. With this in mind, the chapter reviews the literature from within a UK context (primarily) of SME organisational culture, work processes and structures and the demand-side policies that purport to support employers to recruit and retain disabled people.

### **SMEs, the economy, trends, locations, and industries**

The SME sector has been notoriously difficult to research due to its complex character. There are a wide range of dynamics that serve to influence the operation of private sector SMEs, for example, location, size, sector, strategic goals, access to funding, links to more extensive business networks of support, management cultures, social and corporate values, and employee relations. Nearly a quarter of SMEs who have employees are home-based (most notably in city spaces), meaning they may have very different and specific needs compared to those operating from business premises (Reuschke, 2018). In fact, the category of SME is so broad that it is impossible to identify a typical company and its everyday needs. Thus, a more nuanced view of these businesses will help disabled people and policymakers alike better understand individual employee needs and employer attitudes.

Interestingly, in one recent study, more than 20% of SMEs list non-financial objectives as their primary motivation for being in business (Oxford Economics, 2017). It is difficult to comprehend this finding when business operates within a capitalist system premised on competition and profit-making. However, viewed as a positive, it could point to a future direction where employees are valued equally regardless of their “disabled” label and where solutions to barrier removal are focussed squarely on the discriminatory (deliberate or not) behaviour of employers’ rather than individual capability for waged work set against vague notions of the ‘ideal worker’ (Foster and Wass, 2012). Determining best practices amongst medium-size employers may not suit micro or small-size employers (and vice versa), varying according to the nature of the business and the context in which they operate. There are significant differences between companies not just in size but from one industry sector to the next, and above all in attitudes to growth. This suggests that it is unhelpful to discuss and make policy for SMEs as a single category, and perhaps partly explains why successive government policy has failed to do so.

Any SME research must, therefore, take account of the degree of nuance, as well as the commonalities between distinct characteristics.

There were 5.7 million SMEs in the UK in 2018, (over 99% of all businesses). The vast majority of those are micro enterprises (96%), accounting for 33% of employment and 21% of turnover (Rhodes, 2018). The Department for Business, Energy, and Industrial Strategy (DBEIS, 2018) figures indicate that SMEs employ 16.3 million people in total. This means that around 60% of private sector employment in the UK is now accounted for by SMEs, (this has remained the same since 2014). In terms of turnover, SMEs account for around 52% of the UK private sector, amounting to £2.0 trillion. SMEs account for at least 99.5% of the businesses in every main industry sector with nearly 20% of all SMEs operating in construction. There are also a considerable number of SMEs operating in the Professional, Scientific and Technical Activities (816,000 or 14%), and Wholesale and Retail Trade and Repair sectors (555,000 or 10%). Although construction is the largest industrial sector in terms of SME numbers, wholesale and retail trade had the highest share of both SME employment and turnover. Although Government uses business growth to refer to increases in employment and turnover, it is useful to recognise that SME owner-managers are much more likely to conceptualise growth in terms of turnover or profit than employment (Allinson et al., 2013).

The longitudinal SME survey for 2017 (DBEIS, 2018) reports the most commonly cited obstacle to business success was competition in the market, which was mentioned by about half of SME employers. As in the previous year, the three other most cited obstacles were regulations and red tape, taxation, and staff recruitment and skills (*ibid.*). Ten per cent of SME employers were social enterprises, 16% socially orientated SMEs, 5% were traditional non-profit organisations, and 69% of SME employers were defined as family-owned businesses, majority owned by members of the same family (*ibid.*), typically with a very different culture to larger organisations (Ram and Holliday, 1993). Thus, the importance of improving the broader conditions within which SMEs operate is emphasised by Department for Business Innovation and Skills (DBIS, 2013a) analysis which suggests that SMEs are more likely to report the wider business environment as the main obstacle to their success.

The growth of small business is an essential part of driving economic progress and rebalancing the UK economy. Research shows that almost half of all start-ups do not make it to their third year (Enterprise Research Centre, 2018). The UK Local Growth Dashboard 2018 findings show that there are very few firms in the UK which can be categorised as high-growth or scaling up, or indeed contributing to productivity growth. Unsurprisingly, there are regional variations, with London and the South East having the most substantial rate of start-ups, with the rate reducing towards the North and West. Only a handful of fast-growing SMEs has had a disproportionate impact on job creation. They are crucial to the growth of the UK economy and re-balancing jobs away from London and the South East but have had little impact on the 'productivity gap'.

### **Flexibility in work and the role of technology**

Debates have existed for decades as to whether size matters, and if it does, in what way does size shape the employment relationship? Indeed, there is no homogenous SME sector, and each individual firm has unique characteristics depending upon occupational specialism, location, length of operation and many more variables, meaning that size alone may be insufficient to understand SME experiences of hiring or retaining disabled people. A nuanced analysis is therefore required to capture the inadequacies of overly managerialist and bureaucratic responses to complex, interpersonal employment relations between disabled workers and SME employers. For example, as Wilkinson pointed out:

If what constitutes 'smallness' is contextual and possibly subjective and interpretational then we need to examine what factors come together to explain patterns of employment relations rather than assume one particular type, be it either 'small is beautiful' or 'bleak house'. We need to move beyond simple stereotypical pictures of employment relations in SMEs (Wilkinson, 1999: 214)

One perspective suggests that workers in SMEs will experience worse working conditions, will likely be managed in more authoritarian ways and the model of flexibility within small firms is more closely aligned to instability caused by informality of policy and procedures (Cully et al., 1999). An opposing view suggests SMEs may be complex, informal, and contradictory rather than simply offering either harmonious or autocratic workplace relations (Ram, 1991).

A positive movement for change on the demand-side is what the disabled people's movement has long called for. However, the willingness of SME employers to recruit, retrain and retain disabled people will no doubt depend largely on the financial incentives to 'compensate' for the perceived lack of productive value (EHRC, 2012). For Grover and Piggott (2015), disabled people are inherently disadvantaged in a "labour process of capitalist forms of accumulation" because of "competitive individualism" (Grover and Piggott, 2015: 277). This argument was also made by Oliver (1990) and it rests on the perceptions held by some employers that compared to non-disabled people, people who have an impairment are less able to labour and keep up with the demands within existing workplace arrangements and are therefore less profitable for the employer. It is for this reason that disabled people need to find employers who accept the argument that having an impairment does not inherently make a disabled worker less productive. Their lower productivity (if this is true) is only caused by a workplace whose "temporal and rhythmic demands of wage work and/or its intensity" (Grover and Piggott, 2015: 277) is not flexible enough to be altered to suit the needs of individual workers. This is foundational 'social model' thinking, that once understood by employers enables them to realise that the ability of their workers to labour productively and profitability is only ever facilitated by the changing organisation of work, not by changing the individual worker (Oliver, 1990).

Although somewhat outdated, Atkinson's (1984) *Flexible Firm* thesis is still a useful conceptualisation of flexibility because it includes two dimensions in which the concept can be applied in research. The first is flexibility in the nature of the labour market, and the ways in which organisations construct the size and the make-up of their workforce to be more flexible. In this way, he suggests employers are looking for employees who can be redeployed smoothly and quickly between activities and tasks – what he terms functional flexibility, and these adaptable employees change in concert with the changing modes of productivity. The second type of flexibility sought by employers is termed numerical flexibility meaning the number of employees at any one time can easily and quickly be increased or decreased in reaction to ebbs and flows of the level of demand for labour. The aim would be to ensure that the numbers employed match the numbers needed so that labour costs are not wasteful. Critically, this will include making use of part-time, zero-hours and casual worker contracts of employment and essentially it prioritises the needs of the business in line with market conditions. As such, it reflects shifts towards deregulation, reducing employment protection legislation and labour market 'flexibilization' (Grint and Nixon, 2015), and highlights primarily the freedom of market principles over and above the protection of its citizens. Also, it gives employers greater power, control, and organisational flexibility (Hill et al., 2008) over working patterns with more potential to maximise productivity and efficiency (Atkinson, 1984). The third type of flexibility sought by employers is termed financial flexibility and unsurprisingly this asserts the need to keep labour costs low. It reflects a shift to new forms of employee relations based on performance related reviews rather than a rate for the job system.

The second dimension of Atkinson's (1984) model is flexibility in work. This focuses upon the flexibility inside the organisation itself in terms of working structures and processes, which can include how work tasks are organised, the composition of the team, the expectations placed on where, when, and how work gets done (the rhythms of work) and negotiations between employer/employee in making adaption to these rhythms to accommodate life outside of work. Evidence suggests that SMEs, in particular, look for flexible employees during moments of economic recession (Davidson, 2011). It appears that many employers recruit people with a flexible attitude to work, and who would be willing to perform many different roles in the company as and when needed, described by Atkinson (1984) as functional flexibility.

A more comprehensive definition of workplace flexibility in work that considers where choice and control sit in the employment relationship is offered by Hill et al., (2008). However, their work was not focused on considering impairment and disability, but rather focused on the nature of balancing personal/family circumstances around work: The definition offered is:

Workplace Flexibility: the ability of workers to make choices influencing when, where, and for how long they engage in work-related tasks (Hill et al., 2008: 152)

Given the importance that disabled people place on receiving unconditional acceptance of flexibility as a type of support from their employer (Roulstone et al., 2003), it is the flexibility in work dimension that is of relevance to this study. This chapter reviews the literature to assess whether the Government demand-side policies make flexibility in work a realistic possibility for changing the ableist workplace culture. I return to this again in chapter eight when I introduce the new social relational approach to flex-ability in work.

For many disabled people, flexibility in terms of working location and hours, including the opportunity to work from home is critical (Williams et al., 2008). While flexible working can benefit disabled workers (Adams and Oldfield, 2011), and employers, the independent Taylor (2017) review of modern working practices identified the problem of one-sided flexibility at work, particularly for low-paid workers. The review argued that the government must take steps to ensure that flexibility does not benefit the employer at the unreasonable expense of the worker, and that flexibility is genuinely a mutually beneficial arrangement. Critics of these “flexible” policies have noted how the design tends to suit the employer and not the employee. Gray (1998) and Dean (2008) have termed this *flexploitation*, based upon a lack of employee bargaining power. Likewise, this coincides with a reduction in workplace unionism during the past twenty years. Further research conducted by the Low Pay Commission (LPC, 2018) highlighted, “...the misuse by some employers of flexible working arrangements creates unpredictability, insecurity of income and a reluctance among some workers to assert basic employment rights” (LPC, 2018: 3).

It was acknowledged in the Taylor Review of ‘Good Work’, that there is a need for flexibility in work for most under-represented groups (Taylor et al., 2017). In the ‘under-represented group’ there will inevitably be disabled people whether they self-identify as disabled or not. The review notes the benefits of making workplace adjustments for “working patterns”, but only in reference to “accommodate other commitments outside work” (Taylor et al., 2017: 94). This focus is on helping working people with parenting or caring duties, but perhaps somewhat surprisingly it does not relate flexibility in work in terms of supporting the needs of disabled people through negotiating changes to specific working times, working locations, or work tasks. Furthermore, the major weakness in the Government’s pragmatic approach is that it simply tries to encourage rather than impose cultural change in the workplace. The leading representative body of SMEs in the UK, the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) says that in order for the ‘Good Work’ agenda to be realised in SME workplaces, policy makers must focus on supporting smaller businesses to deliver on the ‘3Rs’, recruit, retrain and retain (FSB, 2019: 7). Yet, despite acknowledging a lack of support through policy, the FSB make bold claims about the significant use of flexibility in work in SME work contexts. They state that SME employers provide flexible working to all staff (69%), or to some or all staff (89%) and for those SMEs employing disabled people already, these rates are even higher (FSB, 2019). However, their research found that flexible working arrangements are contingent upon the nature of the business, with variable application between different sectors. For example, flexible working is offered to all staff by 88

per cent of SMEs in the Information & Services sector, compared to 69 per cent across all other sectors, and drops to only 56 per cent for those operating in the Wholesale/Retail sector (FSB, 2019). However, research by the Chartered Institute of Professional Development (CIPD) found evidence that flexibility in work is still under-utilised and is seen by some employers as suitable to only certain jobs (CIPD, 2019).

The CIPD (2019) study also highlights the importance of technology as vital to increasing flexible working. However, the adoption of digital technologies is still relatively low amongst SMEs for a number of reasons including not knowing what is available or how to use it, and the FSB heard that some SMEs see technological advancements as a threat (although the report does not explain what is meant by 'threat') (FSB, 2019).

The UK Government believes Assistive Technology (AT) will be the catalyst to boost productivity and address the disability employment gap:

Tapping the potential of disability employment, and assistive technology in particular, are the epitome of the Government's industrial strategy of creating a modern, dynamic economy. (House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee, 2018: 3)

As mentioned in chapter two, developments in new computerised technology during the 1970's and 1980's were optimistically viewed by first-wave disability writer Finkelstein (1980). He suggested that after segregation, disabled people would eventually be liberated with the emergence of new white-collar workplaces, based on computer technologies. These new technologies would, in principle, offer greater scope for disabled people's integration into mainstream employment (Roulstone, 1998). Alan Roulstone's (1998) first study presented in a book titled *Enabling Technology* aimed to help challenge 'hostile' workplaces by focusing on the impact that new information or communication technologies could have on changing employer attitudes and barriers within the workplace environments. Roulstone (1998) simultaneously argued that work-based technology functionality would allow non-disabled people to see what disabled people are able to do, which in turn, leads to psycho-social benefits for disabled people. Roulstone's (2016) later empirical study, concluded that although technology in the post-industrial information age was not always designed with disabled people in mind, it had serendipitous potential for both enabling and disabling, meaning that only some disabled people will benefit, and only sometimes. He also acknowledged rightly, that technology is often designed and procured by non-disabled people (Roulstone, 1998; 2016).

Similarly, Roulstone (1998, 2016) was quite cautious about the potential to move towards more inclusive and accessible work environments, asserting that a shift away from physically demanding jobs to desk-top working does have the potential to create different challenges for disabled workers. Technology has the potential to shift workplace practice towards more

standardised (inflexible and ableist) ways of working and employers can then place added pressure on employees to increase output.

### **The informal culture of SMEs**

The nature of informality is not inevitable. As Ram et al (2001) assert:

...it is structured by external influences relating to the product market and the characteristic of the available and existing labour force. It is also shaped by the demands and constraints imposed by existing modes of work organisation and technology. There is real scope for management choice but within certain limits and its circumstances change the nature and extent of informality adapts. (Ram et al., 2001)

Many SMEs are family run, with a very different culture to larger organisations (Ram and Holliday, 1993). It can mean that employer-employee relationships might be less formal and more negotiated than in larger and more 'rational' organisations (Ram et al., 2007; Ram and Edwards, 2003). This informal management style has been noted previously for generating greater reciprocity between employers and employees and it helps to create a sense of interdependence through intimate everyday working and indeed 'family-ness' (Ram and Edwards, 2003; Ram et al., 2001, 2007). Whilst beneficial to disabled workers, informality can also benefit employers with reduced administrative burdens (FSB, 2019). For those firms who employ disabled people, the FSB say it has helped to resolve skills shortages, provides fresh perspectives and creative ideas (FSB, 2019). Another benefit is in terms of building closer working relationships between the worker and their employer that rely on high degrees of trust (FSB, 2019).

Although Ram et al (2001) conclude that the nature of informality in small firms should not be taken at face value they found that close interpersonal relationships do occur and that helps to promote individualised decision making. In the employment relations literature, informality is defined as "dynamic rather than fixed and highly context specific" (Ram et al, 2001: 846), meaning it should be understood as a matter of degree and not kind as it evolves over time, largely in response to changing regulation. For example, Ram et al. (2001) argue that 'regulatory shock' caused by the introduction of new statutory frameworks such as working time regulations and guaranteed minimum wage can influence the degree to which SMEs operate informally (ibid). The same is true for the development of anti-discrimination legislation and health and safety at work legislation (Connolly et al., 2016), both of which are likely to generate 'regulatory shocks' as well as 'regulatory burdens' (Kitching et. al., 2015) on SMEs.

Most SMEs do not have a formal Human Resource (HR) function, tending instead to operate informal recruitment practice. This means they rely on 'interpersonal' factors rather than referring to CVs or formal evaluations of ability (DWP, 2014; FSB, 2019). Informal and

'interpersonal factors' often found within SMEs can also benefit people with more complex needs because smaller businesses are easily able to explore alternative forms of recruitment and interview processes (FSB, 2019). The ability to adopt alternative recruitment practises, it is argued, also helps SME recruiters to see the strengths in all applicants, with recent research by the FSB stating that thirty per cent of SME employers have recruited a disabled person in the last three years (FSB, 2019). They also suggest that the retail, manufacturing, and professional scientific sectors are particularly good at adopting alternative recruitment practices (ibid). Previous research by IPPR (2014) also note that greater informality of recruitment in SMEs (in contrast to the more uniform and structured processes found in larger organisations) is the reason why a greater share of workers in SMEs come from groups that face labour market disadvantage, including disabled people.

The practice of selection and recruitment is understandably a major worry for SMEs because each employee constitutes a more significant per cent of the workforce compared with large organisations. Making poor hiring decisions can be costly but also potentially critical to the continued operation of the business. Much of the research into the recruitment process suggests that those firms with a personnel or Human Resource (HR) function are less likely to discriminate against disadvantaged applicants (Nunn et al., 2010). Whilst HR practices have been found in some SMEs (Bacon et al., 1996; Dex and Scheibl, 2001), they can be interpreted in quite different ways to larger employers because HR standards also depend on who in the company is responsible for the policies and procedures and their backgrounds and training (Davidson, 2011). Bacon et al. (1996) found that managers in smaller businesses could distrust psychometric tests or see them as too time-consuming and less accurate than 'first impressions' (ibid).

Therefore, employment decisions in SMEs without a formal HR function are more likely to be made intuitively (Lodato, 2008). This has the potential to be problematic because recruitment processes that rely on intuition are often exclusionary, especially for people with learning difficulties (Davidson, 2011; Fraser et al., 2011). In a similar vein, other research into SMEs suggests that the 'fit' of potential workers with the culture of the firm is important to SME employers and perceptions of not 'fitting in' can militate against the employment of certain groups (see, for example, Pittaway and Thedham, 2005). Interviewers can also make 'early impressions' about candidates in an interview which will have little grounding in the candidate's ability to do the job in question.

### **Attitudes about employing disabled people**

There are some studies with a focus on disability that found evidence of direct discrimination. For example, when presented with a choice between identically qualified candidates, one disabled and the other not, employers can display a reluctance to hire a person with a visible or declared impairment (Ameri et al., 2015; Baert, 2014; Ravaud et al., 1992).

Employer attitudes often revert to assumed problems related to health and safety, and for manual work, health and safety concerns are most often expressed about people with

Musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs), mobility and dexterity impairments, sight impairment and neurological conditions (EHRC, 2012). For all types of work, but especially for those in managerial, professional, and administrative positions, health and safety concerns were most often expressed about people with mental illness or a learning disability (EHRC, 2012: 34). This is despite there being no evidence that disabled people are more at risk of illness or injury in the workplace than non-disabled people (Alkire et al, 2009). Even so, the Health and Safety Executive expresses concern that employers sometimes use health and safety as an excuse for the non-recruitment or dismissal of disabled people (Hurstfield et al., 2003), with some believing their insurance policies would not allow them to employ anyone with a mental health condition (Russell, 2006).

Over the years, many disabled people's organisations have advocated for and tried to influence employer attitudes to increase their willingness to take on disabled people (Goodley, 2006). It is claimed that the best approach to do this is through personal contact because evidence shows employers are more likely to be willing to "take the risk" if they have previous experience of employing a disabled person (Sayce, 2011: 56). But research finds that despite equality legislation and policy that should in practice prevent discrimination, employer's individual stereotypes reduce disability to bodily impairment and inability (Edwards and Imrie, 2003, Hall, 1999). The influence of such unconscious bias, leads to negative evaluations of disabled people's capability to perform, or at least, expectations to perform on a par with non-disabled people and impacts on hiring decisions (CIPD, 2018):

...hiring intentions were still lower for those with disabilities, and this effect was more pronounced for those with mental disabilities than physical ones. This suggests that unconscious (or indeed conscious) bias is powerful (CIPD, 2018: 17)

Of the few studies that explore SME recruitment behaviour, attitudes, and experiences of employing disabled people, the qualitative study by Davidson (2011) on behalf of the DWP is probably the most comprehensive. The overall aim of the study was to explore the factors that influence the decision-making processes and relate these to the recruitment of disabled workers. The qualitative methods used in the research study consisted of a literature review, 60 in-depth interviews with 30 employers, focus groups with employers and follow-up telephone interviews. There were several main concerns, including the financial implications for addressing the unsuitability and inaccessibility of the building in which they operate, risk to productivity, risk to the disabled employee and to other staff and potentially risks to customers. Employers worried that other staff would need to compensate for work not done by the disabled person which may cause resentment between work colleagues.

SMEs lack information on specific impairments or health conditions and consequently they find it difficult to anticipate disabled people's potential to be good employees (Davidson, 2011; DWP and DHSC, 217). Generally, small employers have very narrow perceptions of disabled workers

as wheelchair-users and people with physical impairments (DRC, 2004). They make hiring decisions based upon people who they believe have a flexible attitude to work, who would ultimately perform a number of different roles in the company as and when needed: “staff were expected to ‘muck in’ and carry out tasks over and above those associated with the actual job recruited for” (Davidson, 2011: 26). Furthermore, whilst SMEs agree that disabled people should have the opportunity to work, on the whole, they felt this should be provided for by larger organisations who operate with economies of scale (Davidson, 2011).

An Italian study of thirty SMEs explored the attitudes towards hiring people with a learning disability (Zappella, 2015). In contrast to the UK, Italy still operates a quota system, whereby, all firms with over fifteen employees must hire a certain percentage of disabled people. This study found that previous positive experience of employing people within the company meant they were more prepared to hire again. Interestingly, the employers felt more comfortable hiring again from the same "category" of impairment type. For example, if they had previous experience of employing a person with Down Syndrome, they would instead recruit within that impairment grouping compared to trying to accommodate someone with a different label. Although, another study describes how managers' view people with intellectual disabilities positively, generally regarding them as easy to supervise, and as productive as their non-disabled co-workers (Hartnett et al., 2011).

In another DWP (2014) commissioned research into the recruitment practices of SME employers which aimed to provide insight into *who* and *what* are the influences on SME employers when recruiting unskilled and semi-skilled employees, the study found evidence suggesting that benefit recipients are often viewed as problematic by employers because they face restrictions on the number of hours they can work. In other words, this reflects the internal *numerical flexibility* in employment thesis of the Atkinson model (1984) that places the power in the hands of the employer to decide when and how many hours their employee's work. Similarly, people with caring responsibilities or children of school age were also seen as unsuitable employees for the perceived time they would need to spend caring for others when they face ill health (DWP, 2014). Some small employers also perceive that disabled employees would claim discrimination if a job offer did not work out (DRC, 2004; Reed in Partnership, 2016). Similarly, employers look for compliant candidates perceived as employees who will not challenge managers on efforts to reduce sickness absence (Foster and Wass, 2012; Montgomery, 1996; Purcell, 1999). The 'fit' (Foster and Wass, 2012) of potential workers with the culture of the business is important to SME employers, and perceptions of not fitting in can militate against the employment of particular groups (Pittaway and Thedham, 2005). Employers also assume that disabled staff will be less productive (EHRC, 2012).

Employers state they have no experience of receiving applications from disabled people suggesting that some employers believe that disabled people do not apply for jobs (Stevens, 2002). Similarly, in a survey with employers on behalf of Disability Rights UK (Reed in Partnership, 2016) employers say one of the biggest challenges to employing disabled people

is that applicants are not always willing to talk about their impairment. Employers therefore feel it would help if job applicants were more willing to be open about their health condition or impairment (ibid). In contrast, the industrial relations literature accepts “high rates of job seeking among people with disabilities” (Schur et al., 2016: 1471) which suggests that disabled people are being open at an early stage in the process. Evidently, there are two competing scenarios at play. Either disabled people are not willing to disclose at the point of job application for reasons outlined in chapters two and three, namely, to avoid discrimination and psycho-emotional disability; or else, employers are not attracting disabled people to apply for jobs with their firm, perhaps due to their jobs and workplaces being designed with the typical or ideal worker in mind (Foster and Wass, 2012).

Disabled people know from experience (see chapter three) that employer attitudes vary according to impairment type and some research moves away from looking at attitudes to disabled people and instead looks at attitudes towards different impairments. For example, physical impairments are considered more of a barrier by employers in transport companies than they were by employers in IT-based businesses (Stevens, 2002). On the whole, employers perceive more significant difficulties in employing people with fluctuating health conditions (DWP and DHSC, 2017) because they are difficult to predict and plan for.

Liz Sayce (former CEO of Disability Rights UK) has repeatedly suggested that Government should share the risk with small businesses who employ people with fluctuating conditions and who may require long periods away from the workplace. She rightly says that people should work when they can rather than not at all. She proposes that the Government could share this risk by paying the sick pay of someone with a fluctuating condition or funding temporary cover for their absences (Sayce, 2011, 2018, 2019). Similarly, the Federation of Small Business (FSB) recognise that the UK Government must use policy interventions to support SMEs if they are serious about reducing the disability employment gap (FSB, 2019). They are lobbying Government to offer an incentive for SMEs in the form of a one-year Employers’ National Insurance Contribution ‘holiday’ if they recruit people from groups described by the Conservative Party (2017) manifesto as the most labour market disadvantaged people in our communities – this includes older workers and disabled people. Other barriers that could be overcome with interventions include access to funds for workplace and non-workplace learning and the ability for SMEs to reclaim Statutory Sick Pay.

The Sayce (2011) review also highlighted that AtW was under-used by disabled people working in small businesses (who probably need it most), by those with mental health problems and learning difficulties. More recently, it was found that only 9 per cent of small organisations use AtW funding and that private sector employers are especially concerned about the bureaucracy surrounding the scheme (38 per cent agreed this was a problem) (Centre for Social Justice, 2021: 11). The FSB found the same problem with SME employers lacking knowledge about the financial support available to help with employing disabled people saying that SMEs may struggle to introduce larger and more expensive reasonable adjustments within the workplace

(FSB, 2019). But many businesses are not aware that micro (less than 10 employees) and small businesses (less than 50 employees) are exempt from employer contributions for AtW (FSB, 2019). Comments made by one FSB member who operates in the Social Care Sector said:

We struggle to know what types of Government support we can access and when. Sometimes we've accidentally found out about something afterwards, so a simpler system to show everything that is available to an SME in one place, with all the different levels of support and with all the potential funding support that is available, would be great. It would also be great if it also contained useful case studies (cited in FSB, 2019)

As noted in chapter three, the UK Government has largely concentrated on supply-side interventions in the labour market to encourage individual disabled people's attainment of qualifications and work experience ('hard' skills) in a knowledge driven economy (Brown and Hesketh, 2004). In contrast, employers take a broader view of skills (or abilities) needed for their workforce. Employers are more concerned with the whole person that includes both 'hard' and 'soft' skills (Brown and Hesketh, 2004). For Hurrell, soft skills can be defined as "involving interpersonal and intrapersonal abilities to facilitate mastered performance in particular contexts" (Hurrell, 2009: 397). Specifically, in relation to interactive service work (retail for example), employers are less concerned with qualifications, instead they look for other qualities based on appearance and performance:

In short, employers seek employees who 'look good' and 'sound right' and can best either embody the brand or appeal to the senses of customers (Nickson et al, 2011: 66)

Furthermore, employees must be "friendly, helpful, tactful, and courteous" to customers (Mills, 1956: 183). It is important therefore to understand how employability is understood by different employers and specifically what SME employers across different sectors are seeking in prospective employees if disabled people's experience of employment is to be better understood. Therefore, it is the broader conceptualisation of employability used by employers that is of most relevance for this study because it helps to illustrate attitudes and cultural perceptions of disability in relation to ability expectations and ability privilege (Wolbring, 2012). It also helps to understand how employers view certain impairments and their effects (Thomas, 1999) as problematic or undesirable and in the attitudes that equate disability with inability to perform normative "soft" skills that leads to institutional discriminatory practice.

### **Recruiting disabled people through government schemes**

In terms of recruitment facilitated and supported by engaging with the Government funded *Work and Health Programme* (DWP and DHSC, 2017), employers can use the provider as a source

of information about potential disabled applicants while widening the pool of job seekers from which to recruit. However, viewed critically, it could also assist employers in filtering-out in the selection process; those people deemed to not to be job ready (Ingold and Valizade, 2017). Ingold and Valizade (2017) explored the effect of these programmes on employer's recruitment practices and found that larger firms are more likely to employ people from disadvantaged groups. Yet, in general employers do not engage with schemes and programmes designed specifically to move disabled people into paid work (Roulstone et al., 2014). It is also noted by previous research, that (in general) this type of recruitment approach does not usually end so positively, or when it does, it is for those people already closest to the labour market – deemed as work ready (Warren et al. 2015; Woodin, 2015). Another option available to employers is to use 'work trials' (Secker and Grove, 2005) as an alternative to the more formal recruitment methods used in larger organisations. The work trial provides employers with an opportunity to test-drive the disabled applicant before making an offer of employment and gives the disabled person a more realistic on the job experience (ibid). Several of the SME employers in this study used work trials with varying degrees of success (see chapter six). Employer awareness of the available support is often lacking in respect of the availability of bursaries to support disabled apprentices and Commission/YouGov polling shows 59 per cent of private sector employers are unaware of supported internships (Centre for Social Justice, 2021).

#### **Disability Confident and the “Business Case”**

Given how flexibility in work could benefit many disabled people move into work, or to retain employment (Olsen, 2020), there has been no concerted effort by recent Government's to apply incentives for employers to adopt this more inclusive practice (Cameron, 2011). Instead, the Government pursues an approach that simply asserts the 'business case' for missing 'disabled talent' (Sayce, 2011). This is evident when the Government replaced the hugely discredited Two Ticks<sup>1</sup> disability employment programme with an equally controversial 'Disability Confident' scheme aimed at encouraging employers to recruit disabled people (Pring, 2016). Two Ticks was run by JobCentre Plus and it enabled employers to display a positive about disability symbol on their websites and other marketing material to show disabled people they had committed to guaranteeing suitably qualified disabled people an interview. However, Hoque and Bacon (2014) called the scheme 'an empty shell' often used as a public relations tool by employers after they discovered that less than 15% of organisations that displayed the Two Ticks symbol kept to all of its commitments.

As a demand-side policy, the Government says that Disability Confident is aimed at providing employers with the knowledge, skills, and confidence they need to attract, recruit, and develop disabled people in the workplace. In April 2021, the Government website claims over 20,000 organisations have signed-up. Interestingly, it claims the role of Disability Confident is also to:

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<sup>1</sup> The Two Ticks symbol was awarded to 8,387 organisations since its launch in 1990, and was used by nearly half of the top 200 FTSE companies (Pring, 2014)

...change attitudes for the better...[by] changing behaviour and cultures in their own businesses, networks, and communities, and reaping the benefits of inclusive recruitment practices (HM Government, 2021)

This list of objectives says everything that is needed but little about how they intend to support businesses to do it. Also, missing is how the Government intends to support employers to change their behaviours, and what specific behaviours it is suggesting need to be changed? This type of Government claim is left undefined, yet if viewed from a materialist social model perspective (Oliver, 1990), policy would require a radical shift in thinking around capitalism and the commodification of disabled people's labour (Grover and Piggott, 2015). Also, what evidence is there to substantiate the claim that Disability Confident enables employers to understand what inclusive recruitment practice is, and then how to implement it? As a demand-side policy, the message given to employers is that they will 'reap the rewards' of widening their 'talent' pool from which to recruit, but it does not offer any substantive support to help employers to become more 'inclusive' in practice. Recent polling shows that 59 per cent of private sector employers have not heard of it and in addition, there are concerns over whether employment outcomes for disabled people are any better in Disability Confident than in non-Disability Confident organisations (Centre for Social Justice, 2021).

As it stands, Disability Confident simply asks employers to begin a journey of change at Level 1 (Committed status) working through to Level 2 (Employer status) and then Level 3 (Leader status). Once achieved, accreditation for each level lasts for three years. However, to attain level one, employers just complete a form online stating five *actions* and one *activity* that will make a positive difference to disabled people. To achieve level two, the employer must do a self-assessment activity to review their existing policies and procedures and once they have completed this exercise, they simply confirm they have done so on Gov.uk (there are no external checks made to assess this). At its inception, 2,000 member organisations of the older Two Ticks scheme were automatically transferred to Level Two without any check on their suitability (Pring, 2016). Finally, at Level Three the employer must put their self-assessment up for independent validation and be able to demonstrate leadership in encouraging and supporting other employers to become Disability Confident. On this basis it appears that growing the number of firms signed-up to the scheme is a priority for Government, as opposed to helping employers to grow the numbers of disabled people employed.

In chapter six of this thesis, criticisms made by some of the disabled SME participants who knew about Disability Confident suggest the scheme is "meaningless", "patronising", "ridiculous", "a tick box exercise" and merely a "public relations exercise". In a freedom of information request (FOI) for this thesis, the DWP confirmed that there is no complaints procedure available for non-compliance with the stated commitments and there are no plans to develop a procedure for doing so (see Appendix M). This means that any firm can display a sign to say they are becoming more 'confident' but in practice do nothing substantive to reduce

ableism or measure and remove restrictive structural or psycho-emotional disablism (Thomas, 2007; Reeve, 2014) in the process of work.

There is currently no evidence that level two and three Disability Confident members are any more likely to hire and retain disabled people than other employers, which means the scheme rewards employers for public declarations of intention rather than for delivering outcomes. In light of this, the FSB (2019) have called upon Government to introduce a fourth level where accreditation depends on actual job outcomes, this would enable those SMEs who are hiring, retaining, and progressing disabled people to claim the highest level. As it stands, the FSB (2019) argue that SMEs are at a disadvantage because it relies upon measuring processes and procedures rather than the actual employing of disabled people.

Take up of the scheme in general has been slow and limited, but worse still has been the woeful numbers of private sector employers. Disability@Work (2019) analysis shows that in November 2019 almost half (7,464) of all Disability Confident employers (15,123) who had showed their commitment were located in the voluntary or public sectors. Yet, there are 1.39 million private sector businesses in the UK (not sole traders), meaning that the numbers signed up represent just 0.47 per cent (6,480) of the private sector businesses population who employ people. Not only is the policy failing to reach the private sector, but it also means the potential for disabled people to experience 'inclusive recruitment' (if that is really an outcome) is extremely unlikely.

The Government based the 'business case' on suggesting benefits would be derived by recruiting from a wider pool of 'talent' and improving company reputation. The contention builds on the idea that by improving workplace 'diversity' employers help to facilitate equal opportunities for disabled people to gain paid work. In recent years, one of the most significant discussions in business management and leadership, and human resource management (HRM) literature is the "business case" for creating equal opportunities at an individual level (Riley et al., 2008), diverse workforces and inclusive workplaces (#valuable500, 2019; Casey, 2019; Danieli, 2006, Riley et al., 2008; Ross and Schneider, 1992; Urwin et al., 2011). According to Sayce, the "business case" is simple to explain and promote to employers but in order for the business case arguments to gain traction from employers they must be convinced of the financial benefits to be gained from employing disabled people:

...disabled people can lead to better business performance through accessing untapped reserves of talent, new sources of ideas, creativity and problem-solving, and new business from disabled customers, their families and friends from opening up new markets and enhanced reputation and loyalty (Sayce, 2011: 56)

She also notes the lack of awareness amongst employers of these benefits. However, there are very few workplace studies that attempt to quantify the impacts of diversity on business outcomes when considering disability, due in part to often low response rates and self-reporting

issues. Much of the evidence on workplace diversity (based on other protected characteristics such as gender and race) and business performance is qualitative and of a case-study nature (Monks, 2007; Richard et al., 2003; Shen et al., 2009). Several studies have found evidence to suggest that workplaces that are sensitive to and emphasise social justice and disability equality practices, positively affect and improve outcomes for disabled employees (Forth and Rincon-Anzar, 2008; Hoque et al., 2018; Jones and Latreille, 2010; Schur et al., 2009, 2013, 2014). Evidence also points out the need for inclusive recruitment and retention policies that flow from larger public sector contractors to smaller ones in a duty to promote equality (Connolly et al., 2016). Consequently, there has also been a growth in critical diversity research, but according to Zanoni et al. (2010), the theoretical and conceptual basis is still underdeveloped and needs improvement. Similarly, the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC, 2012) argue that the business case can present a moral or social argument for diversity, but it is a rational economic business case approach to operating in a very competitive market that will convince employers to take positive action to recruit and retain disabled people (EHRC, 2012).

For the first time, a panel discussion took place with global industry leaders at the World Economic Forum in Davos (Casey, 2019). Corporations such as Unilever, Virgin, Microsoft, Fujitsu, Barclays, and Accenture (amongst others) have publicly pledged to put disability business inclusion on their leadership agenda, taking proactive steps towards realising the social and economic value of 1.3 billion disabled people worldwide. In substantial positions of power and influence, these organisations confessed that large businesses have not done enough, have not invested enough and need to do much more. They accept the 'business case' evidence that inclusion of disabled people in the workplace results in higher revenue, net income, and profit margins. Collectively they have also agreed to involve SMEs in this 'inclusion movement' via their supply-chain influence and there are now calls to set a new global standard for workplace equality that recognises the value and worth of disabled people. Working with their SME supply-chains they intend on setting the example and then passing this message down to the smaller employers.

#### **Increasing diversity through taking positive action**

The Workplace Employment Relations Study (WERS, 2011) involved managers, employees, and employee representatives. The findings offer an important opportunity to understand the operation of workplaces during a specifically difficult time of substantial economic and social uncertainty, following the 2008 global financial crash and the recession that followed. This series of surveys began in 1980 and ran intermittently until 2011, mapping UK employment relations extensively for over four decades. The 2011 survey revealed the extent to which Britain's workforce is increasingly diverse. One important finding was that while workplace policies have changed to reflect this situation, practice on the ground has changed little. One third of total workplaces in 2011 had a formal strategic plan covering employee diversity which sets out objectives to be achieved, yet only 17% of workplaces belonging to private SMEs had them. Additionally, less than a fifth of workplaces had a written policy that mentions specific

grounds for discrimination, suggesting that the majority of workplaces have policies in place that may have limited practical value. Very few workplaces had special procedures for potentially disadvantaged groups. In each case, workplaces were less likely to have them in 2011 than in 2004, except in the case of procedures to attract disabled people.

The Aldermore SME Future Attitudes survey (2017) data with over 1,000 small business leaders, states that 37 % of UK SMEs are much more likely to do business with a supplier, partner or provider that is well known for its inclusive employment strategies. Interestingly, 75% said they had intentions of becoming more diverse over the next year, with only 22% saying that increasing diversity was a low priority for them (Aldermore, 2017). Whether this new level of awareness and commitment leads to real change for disabled people is yet to be seen, but there are now very public messages alluding to business being ready to take their share of responsibility.

In this sense, there are some employers who would recognise the issue of providing flexibility in work as a moral case of workplace diversity and inclusion in creating an inclusive workplace culture, because “people matter” (CIPD, 2018: 2). Although, they are not focused per se on the benefits of flexibility, these organisations view diversity as an ethical and responsible way to consider issues of equity for disadvantaged groups and often get presented as equal opportunities (CIPD, 2018; Hocking, 2017; Vornholt et al, 2018).

People matter, and we all should have equal opportunity to develop, progress, and be rewarded and recognised at work. Organisations must ensure that their people management practices champion this fundamental principle (CIPD, 2018: 2)

This raises other important concerns linked to the concept of equal treatment (treating all employees the same) which employers believe to be the law (this is discussed again in chapters six and eight). Yet, the Equality Act 2010 specifically includes an unequal treatment-inspired rule for disabled people because it recognises that equality of opportunity and equitable outcomes often requires different treatment (Lawson, 2008). However, as noted by the Trades Union Congress (TUC, 2016) many employers do not understand that they can, and should, treat disabled people differently when making reasonable adjustments. In other words, it is not unreasonable to expect different treatment as a disabled person, but the problem can arise when the different treatment is felt to be delivered in a manner that is partial, begrudgingly given, or disrespectful in its delivery (Reeve, 2014).

Another unequal treatment inspired element within the Equality Act (2010) is the positive action provision which makes it lawful for employers to provide training, advice, and guidance to enable disabled people to gain employment (where these are not offered to other non-disabled people). Employers can use this to improve their workplace diversity when recruiting and promoting candidates. It means employers can take into consideration impairments when deciding who to

recruit were disabled people are disadvantaged or are under-represented, yet it is only permitted when the person recruited is “as qualified” as other candidates. Given that disabled people often have lower-level qualifications as a starting point, the limitation of such a provision are obvious. The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC, 2019) found limited use of the positive action provision in practice, and when used, they found companies using it to balance out gender inequalities, with far fewer actions taken relating to race and disability. This is not surprising given that during interviews with SMEs for this study, the concept of taking positive action was not something the private enterprise employers had considered and indeed many had never heard of it. Once it was explained to them, they still questioned if it was legal, believing it to be unfair on other non-disabled people as a form of positive discrimination (see chapter six).

### **What support do SMEs need from Government?**

In an effort to address the demand-side barriers, one policy paper has shown some signs of progression in terms of considering the role of employers in reducing barriers in SMEs work contexts: *Improving Lives* (DWP and DHSC, 2017). It recognised the limitations that SMEs have in terms of Human Resource expertise, training, time, and resources. During the consultation stage, SMEs, in particular, made it clear that they want information and support to help them effectively deliver reasonable adjustments. This request is not unsurprising given previous research and evidence that suggests that only 45% of employers understand clearly what it means to make reasonable adjustments in the workplace (Centre for Social Justice, 2017). Notably, during 2018, the FSB (2019) helpline received almost 800 calls from SME employers asking for advice in relation to disability discrimination, meaning that they do not understand their legal duties set out in the Equality Act (2010). The same report shows that only 7% of FSB small business members had made a reasonable adjustment to working arrangements for their staff in the last twelve months, but rather confusingly, they say this increased to eighteen per cent for SMEs who know they employ a disabled person (FSB, 2019). Furthermore, the general legal guidance tells SME employers that:

What is 'reasonable' depends on the individual circumstances of the case and the size and resources of the employer. In other words, an adjustment would have to be practicable, effective and within the scope of the employer's financial and human resources (Markel Law, 2019)

Viewed critically the subjectivity of what constitutes reasonableness lends itself to favour employers (or business per se) over individual employees (Bunbury, 2009). From a disability studies perspective, what is needed is a narrowing of the interpretation of what is reasonable “to reflect the intuitive sense that exclusive environments are increasingly unacceptable” (Roulstone and Prideaux, 2009: 375). However, another service that offers advice to employers, the Advice, Conciliation and Advocacy Service (ACAS, 2021) suggests three things to help

employers make the best decision on what is reasonable. They say, employers should seek professional advice, get quotes on making adaptations and research different options. What is missing from this advice is any sense of asking the disabled employee or job applicant what they need from the employer so they can do their job unrestricted. ACAS (2021) interpret the reason for making a reasonable adjustment as a change “to remove or reduce the effect of an employee’s or job applicant’s disability”. In this understanding, the disadvantage is caused by the impairment not by a work organisation that takes little or no account of ‘difference’. A rewriting of this sentence using a social model understanding of disability (Oliver, 1990) would say a “*reasonable adjustment is a change to the workplace or work pattern to remove or reduce the effect of an employers’ barriers*”. Given the likelihood that business owners/managers would turn to ACAS for advice it is disappointing that they still hold such ableist and individual model understandings of disability.

Evidence shows us that rather than employers making reasonable adjustments, instead, disabled people or those with long-term health conditions are routinely managed out of the workplace on grounds of poor performance or a risk to health and safety (Connolly et al., 2016: 7). Estimates show this is happening to between 35,000 and 48,000 workers a year (ibid). Evidently, becoming disabled or having a long-term illness means losing your job. FSB (2019) argue that the cost of any adjustments can be problematic especially for SMEs and almost 50% of employers surveyed by Reed in Partnership (2016) stated that additional funding for making adaptations would help them to retain disabled people.

### **Conclusion**

The studies included in this literature review confirm that relatively few (and largely DWP commissioned studies) or those from business-orientated professional organisations have researched the recruitment and selection practice of SME employers and even less research exists on their attitudes towards employing disabled people. Those DWP studies that have explored SME attitudes are valuable but in rather generalised aspects and limited by a lack of criticality. Social policy research on the impact of national employment policies on disabled people is also starting to integrate with research into the management of disability in the workplace but these studies rarely examine the impact of workplace policies and practices (for example, equality and diversity policies) on SME employers. Thus, substantial gaps appear in existing research concerning how SME employers experience the process of employing disabled people and whether different Government support programmes or business focussed schemes produce better outcomes for both disabled employees and SME employers. Consequently, despite the prevalence of SMEs in the UK economy, relatively little is known about the process of decision-making within them regarding recruitment procedures or their attitudes towards employing disabled people. Currently, the evidence does not exist to assess whether SME employers are better and in what ways at providing disabled people with the flexibility in work they need. This lack of qualitative insight means we do not understand why some SMEs are better at responding to the needs of disabled people. Neither does it help us

understand how some organisations place a high value on supporting interpersonal relationships and responding to requests for workplace adjustments (either formally or informally) in ways which promote inclusion, mutual trust, openness, and which empower workers. These issues are explored further during interviews with SME employers and presented in chapter six.

## **CHAPTER 5: METHODOLOGY**

### **Introduction**

This chapter begins with a very brief overview of the development of a disability studies research agenda in the UK and what has influenced this development and then moves on to outline the methods used in this empirical study and the ethical considerations that underpin the research approach. It includes discussion on the challenge with recruiting disabled people and SMEs and how I overcame these problems. Then I describe the potential benefits of using computer aided software (NVivo) to store and analyse data from data collected in semi-structured telephone interviews, and the approach taken to conduct a thematic data analysis. In the final section of this chapter, I present participant summaries, giving a brief pen-portrait for each person who took part in the study.

### **Researching disability**

During the 1960s and 1970s (before the establishment of UK disability studies scholarship), the favoured social science (positivist) approach to disability research was to analyse through the lens of social deviance and sickness (Parsons, 1951). For example, Miller and Gwynne's (1972) now infamous study on institutional care of the 'physically handicapped' - *A Life Apart*, aimed to be progressively grounded, but actually reflected deeply held professional views of disability as tragic. As the 'experts', Miller and Gwynne (two researchers from the Tavistock, London) were invited by Paul Hunt and other disabled residents at the Le Court Home to produce research findings that they thought could improve choice and control over aspects of daily living. They expected sympathy from the researchers about their restricted choice and control and lack of input into the management of the home. Instead, they produced a report that rejected residents' complaints. The researchers had kept 'balanced', 'objective' and 'detached' pursuing the positivistic approach expected of social scientists, justifying this approach as scientifically valid and open to challenge on the grounds of academic rigour. They concluded that living in the home was akin to "institutional death" (Miller and Gwynne, 1972: 13) but instead of challenging this situation, they went on to recommend the role of the care home should be to prepare its residents for dying. Hunt and others were furious. Rightly so, they had been betrayed by researchers who they had trusted to report on the experience as told by disabled residents. Yet, fundamentally they avoided any explicit examination of the cause of the residents' "social death sentence" (Hunt, 1981: 40), and they "distorted the experience of disability" (Barton, 1992: 99). They were drawing from an underlying functionalist medical model understanding of

disability that views it as individual dysfunction (Topliss, 1982). As Oliver later argued, it represents the personal tragedy theory of disability research which is so often funded by Government and research bodies, which then feeds into policy designed to do things to and on behalf of disabled people (Oliver, 1992). Abberley (1987) similarly argued that such research treated disabled people as passive research subjects leading to their disempowerment and the reinforcing of existing feelings of exclusion amongst research participants. Consequently, Hunt and Finkelstein responded to the research when they went on to develop the UPIAS (1976) *Fundamental Principles* document in which they begin to set the criteria for any future social scientific analysis of disability:

Any scientist, seeking to deal effectively with a problem, knows that the cause must first be identified. Therefore, if disability is a social condition, then an analysis of the ways in which society actually disables physically impaired people is obviously required before the condition can be eliminated. To persist in concentrating on the effects, on the other hand, is to divert attention from the real problems; and in fact, it entrenches disability even further by seeking its remedy in the opposite direction from the social cause by concentrating on the assessment of the individual (UPIAS, 1976: 13)

Illich once famously stated 'If you want to change a society, then you have to tell an alternative story' (cited in Springer, 2016: 2). In formulating an alternative to traditional deficit approaches to disability research, disability studies research provides a framework for new ways of thinking in ways which create "truly relevant research [that] can only be grounded in the daily concerns or aggregate national needs articulated by disabled people" (Roulstone, 2013: 4). Therefore, the disability studies research paradigm is a rebuttal of positivist and interpretative claims to objectivity, and it requires the researcher to be transparent about their own political position (Priestley, 1997: 88). Disability studies researchers carefully consider the social relations of research production and the "placing of control in the hands of the researched, not the researcher" (Oliver, 1997: 17).

These ideas laid the foundations for the Emancipatory Research Paradigm coined by Oliver (1992), but used by others (see Barnes, 2003 and Stone and Priestley, 1996) to challenge the methods employed in academic research on disability. There was no single approach to researching disability before the social model (Oliver, 1983), but Oliver (1992) argued that approaches to disability research that pre-date a social barriers model were wholly inadequate because it failed to improve disabled people's material circumstances and quality of life. He further argues that this failure stems from the expectation that disabled people would participate in research as passive subjects (ibid). On this basis, it is not surprising that many disability

studies researchers and disabled people came to see traditional social research as “part of the problem rather than part of the solution” (Oliver, 1992: 105).

Oliver (1992) challenged the work of Miller and Gwynne (and others) for failing to deal with the social oppression of disabled people and the failure to develop social policy that would bring about material improvements in disabled people’s lives:

The emancipatory paradigm, as the name implies, is about the facilitating of a politics of the possible by confronting social oppression at whatever level it occurs (Oliver, 1992: 110)

As an epistemological approach to disability research (rather than a methodology per se) as Oliver defines it, emancipatory research adheres to the social model of disability (Oliver, 1983), prioritising accountability to disabled people and their organisations (Morgan and Harris, 2005). It also aims to produce research that empowers disabled people – both in the social relations of the research process and in its outputs (Barnes, 2003). Empowerment in this context stresses the commitment to political change through raising awareness of the social structures and processes that cause disability as defined by the social model (Mercer, 2002). However, operationalising emancipatory research has been found to be difficult to realise with people with learning difficulties (Walmsley, 2010). Instead, participatory research methodology is preferred which includes people as more than just subjects or objects of research (Walmsley, 2004). Although, critics argue that participatory research can still reinforce the divide between the researcher and the researched, whilst also failing to change oppressive structure and practices (Watson, 2012).

Rules setting out what constitutes acceptable practice for emancipatory research were laid down, for example, by Stone and Priestley (1996: 706) who identified six core principles:

- 1) The adoption of the social model of disability as the ontological and epistemological basis for research production
- 2) The surrender to falsely premised claims to objectivity through overt political commitment to the struggles of disabled people for self-emancipation.
- 3) The willingness only to undertake research where it will be of some benefit to the self-empowerment of disabled people and/or the removal of disabling barriers.
- 4) The devolution of control over research production to ensure full accountability to disabled people and their organisations.
- 5) The ability to give voice to the personal whilst endeavouring to collectivise the commonality of disabling experiences and barriers; and
- 6) The willingness to adopt a plurality of methods for data collection and analysis in response to the changing needs of disabled people.

Or a shorter, but similar set of rules are provided by Barnes (2003) and it is these four that underpin the approach I set out to follow from the very start of this study:

- 1) Be accountable to disabled people and their organisations.
- 2) Place the social model at the heart of the research agenda.
- 3) Be politically committed to the emancipation of disabled people.
- 4) Be relevant and produce research that has a meaningful practical outcome for disabled people.

Being held accountable to disabled people is difficult when the reality is, this project was designed to receive funding from the ESCR long before I spoke to a DPO. My original application to the funding council was in February 2015 meaning it was over two years later that I began to contact potential research participants and their organisations as gatekeepers. Yes, I place the principles of the social model (Oliver, 1983; 2013) but an extended social relational version of Thomas (1999, 2007) at the heart of the research. Yes, I am politically committed to help disabled people to live free from segregation against their wishes (although I am aware, I can always do more politically engaged activity). Finally, I hope this research will lead to practical outcomes for disabled people if employers can be engaged with to change their attitudes by raising their consciousness about ableism and the inherent problems that creates for disabled people. I also hope that policy makers will consider the current ineffectiveness of demand-side policy because it is critically missing the support needs of SME employers. Disabled participants specifically asked me to focus the research on finding practical solutions to the disabling employment barriers and social inequalities they experience. This endeavour is certainly worth pursuing and critically important for producing a robust and substantive evidence base upon which policy makers can frame their agenda's. However, in practice, translating the sheer scope of such huge problems into a time-limited, and low-funded PhD research study is perhaps a bit unrealistic. As Watson (2012), Barnes (1995) and Zarb (1997) rightly acknowledge, disability research that tries to respond to the demands made by the social model and supported by the demands of the disability movement, namely, the barriers disabled people face are difficult to translate into empirical studies. It is reasonably easy to measure the features of inaccessible environments, but far more difficult to measure the extent of psycho-emotional disablism (Thomas, 1999, 2007). Also, by claiming that disability studies must strictly follow the 'rules' of emancipatory research, those from outside of sociology can be denied the right to engage in debates (Watson, 2012). Therefore, I would suggest my research is informed by and sensitive of the underlying principles rather than strictly following the four rules set out by Barnes (2003).

Before I started this PhD, I was very firmly attached to a strong historical materialist theoretical position rooted to the 'social model' of disability. However, as I progressed through reading more disability studies literature and finding the work of Carol Thomas and Donna Reeve in particular, I came to realise that disability research requires a more nuanced social relational

approach to capture the emotional barriers that exist caused by the response of, and interactions with others. I have come to view the experience of disablism as differentiated, dynamic and contingent upon context, time, space and place and I recognise the importance of the relationship between disabling barriers and impairment effects (Thomas, 2007). From this social-relational theoretical lens, disability is not ontologically separable from the body and barriers and impairment effects therefore needs to be taken into consideration on the overall experience of oppression. It makes good sense then to follow a methodological approach that draws upon the social relational definition of disability which understands disability as a gendered phenomenon (Thomas, 1999: 60). By using this methodological approach, I show that first-person accounts from disabled people and SMEs can identify testimonies that are illustrative of both the material socio-structural external barriers, and the social cultural processes including ableist discourse that generate negative attitudes that can serve to undermine the psycho-emotional wellbeing of disabled people.

### **Ethical considerations**

An important stage in any research project is gaining ethical consent for the work (Mason, 2018). The study received ethical approval from the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS) and Lancaster University Management School (LUMS) Research Ethics Committee (REC) on 1<sup>st</sup> December 2017 (Approval number: FL17057) [Appendix L]. The ethics application included sample Participation Information Sheets [Appendices F, G and H], Consent Forms [Appendices I(a) and I(b)], Interview Guides [J and K] and SurveyMonkey sample questionnaires to be used with SMEs and Disability Confident Leader organisations [Q and R] (although the lack of completion made these ineffective). As an ESRC funded researcher, I also observed the framework for research ethics and the policy and guidelines for good research conduct. The ESRC six core principles are:

- research should aim to maximise benefit for individuals and society and minimise risk and harm.
- the rights and dignity of individuals and groups should be respected.
- wherever possible, participation should be voluntary and appropriately informed.
- research should be conducted with integrity and transparency.
- lines of responsibility and accountability should be clearly defined.
- independence of research should be maintained and where conflicts of interest cannot be avoided, they should be made explicit.

ESRC guidance also stipulates the importance of considering ethics issues throughout the lifecycle of a research project:

The lifecycle of research includes the planning and research design stage, the period of funding for the project, and all activities that relate to the project up to - and including - the time when funding has ended.

This includes knowledge exchange and impact activities, the dissemination process - including reporting and publication - and the archiving, future use, sharing and linking of data (ESRC: undated)

### **Avoiding Harm**

Avoiding harm and distress to participants was the paramount methodological consideration. In this regard, no interviews were conducted without informed consent; and extracts from interviews were anonymised to hide the identities of respondents and employing organisations. At no point during interviews was distress obvious, although it is difficult to assess when conducting telephone interviews and I am not clinically trained to make such judgements. I was not aware of any times when participants needed to pause or terminate the interview due to the line of questioning. I asked if the interview was what they had expected, and the vast majority said they had enjoyed the experience and gained something positive from it. Afterwards, I sent an email to each participant, thanking them for their time and invited them to stay in contact and to let me know if they decided they would like a copy of the final thesis once it is submitted to ESRC.

Anticipating sources of discomfort is difficult, but I did not anticipate the topics discussed would lead to participants feeling any harm during the course of the interview or afterwards. However, should a participant have requested support, I was ready to signpost them to the most suitable service, for example, support services for mental health issues or advisory service. All participants were given a two-week period following the interview to withdraw their data, although none did.

### **Confidentiality and Anonymity**

From the outset, the intention of the research was to ensure confidentiality of all respondents. It was decided that all respondents would have their names and any identifying features removed from the completed thesis. Pseudonyms were used in place of real names; these were randomly selected and only I know which adopted name represents each respondent. During transcription, all identifiable information was removed from the transcripts. Therefore, the sources of any quotes used in this research would not be identifiable.

### **Storing Data Safely**

All interviews were digitally recorded, uploaded to a personal password protected laptop, and transcribed verbatim to prepare them for thematic analysis. ESRC-funded students are strongly encouraged to offer copies of data created or repurposed during their PhD for deposit at the UK Data Service as it is considered good research practice. As per the information sheet and consent forms, on the advice of the ethics panel, only interview data from employers will be deposited. Interview data from disabled people was deemed to be more problematic because they are categorised as a 'vulnerable' group for ethical research purposes (although this is not

something I necessarily agree with). Any identifiable data (including recordings of participants' voices) have been deleted from the recorder after being transferred to a password protected and encrypted laptop. I will keep audio data and signed consent forms stored until my thesis has been examined and will delete it immediately thereafter.

### **Gaining Consent**

Upon an offer to take part in an interview, I sent a reply email with a copy of the information sheet [Appendix F, G and H] and consent form [Appendix I(a) and I(b)], along with a link to the research website ([www.disabledpeopleworksmes.wordpress.com](http://www.disabledpeopleworksmes.wordpress.com)). The consent form I designed ensured that participants had received the information sheet, and that they explicitly consented to taking part in the research. All interview participants were given an opportunity to ask questions about the study. I asked for the consent form to be signed and returned before the interview to ensure that informed consent was achieved (Bryman, 2012). At the beginning of each interview, I reiterated the importance of freely given informed consent, to ensure that participants were still in agreement and aware of the process for opting out and retracting their data within an agreed time-limit. Although, I also recognise it is never as straightforward to ensure all possible implications are presented in advance, I did try hard not to violate the terms of our agreement by ensuring the research process clearly followed the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC, undated) core principles.

### **Sampling strategy**

There are several options when using a purposive sampling strategy (Patton, 2002) and the approach chosen was *maximum variation sampling*. The aim was to maximise diversity across the sample, to reach participants with diverse backgrounds and experiences, but within a small sample size. The SME characteristics [Appendix O] show a range of private enterprises, for-profit and not-for-profit enterprises, charities, user-led disabled people's organisations, different occupational sectors, owners, and managers, disabled and non-disabled business owner's, male and female, and a range of micro, small and medium size businesses. Importantly, the SME sample also included those with and without prior experience of employing disabled people. The disabled participant characteristics [Appendix P] demonstrate a range of age groups, visible and hidden impairments, different impairment types, male/female, acquired/congenital impairments, a range of schooling experiences including some with both mainstream and 'special' school, as well as a range of qualification level (although more with Higher Education).

### **Engaging with disabled people's organisations**

Initially, the intention was to locate and identify disabled people with experience of working in SMEs through national and regional DPOs (see Appendix A-E). Naively, I assumed that linking with a DPO would open the doors to recruiting a relatively large number of people, with a wide range of work experience, across different sectors. I also imagined this would include people with a wide range of impairments. I expected that my openness around studying Disability Studies (Inclusive Practice) as my first degree, my role of a carer for my disabled stepdaughter,

and my explicit advocacy of disability rights and allegiance to the disabled people's movement would be enough to get access, despite being a non-disabled researcher (Tregakis and Goodley, 2005).

Early in the research process (prior to receiving ethical approval) I reached out to two disabled people's organisations (DPOs), one in the South (Inclusion London) and one in the North of England (Breakthrough UK). Both are very respected and well known in the disability research community. I asked if they could assist with finding participants who had some experience of working in SMEs. I received a reply from Inclusion London declining due to resource constraints and being inundated with requests from other researchers. Breakthrough UK replied to say they would be happy to be interviewed as an SME employer of disabled people, but also willing to talk to disabled people who may have found work in SMEs with help through their own service. I asked them to look at the information sheet and consent form designed to be used with disabled people and the feedback received from Breakthrough UK suggested creating Easy Read versions (see Appendix G) to make the research more inclusive for people with learning difficulties. I did this and after receiving ethical approval these documents were shared with Breakthrough UK and other DPOs to help with recruitment.

I decided to visit Breakthrough UK to speak to their Policy Adviser, with the aim of gathering insights into both local and national perspectives on employment barriers. During the interview it became clear that the DPO had experienced severe funding cuts (Carey, 2019) in recent years which had impacted on their ability to engage with SME employers. Indeed, they had not found any disabled people paid work with an SME and therefore were unable to help with recruitment through their own connections with local disabled people. After speaking to the Policy Adviser, she reassured me this was not surprising given that most of the people who use their services are unlikely to have much paid work experience, as they are working towards that as an ongoing goal – but moving into paid-work is still a distant dream for many. The meeting with the Breakthrough UK Policy Adviser confirmed that my research should engage with understanding the policy context as something that has got worse in the last ten years. The knock-on effect this has had on their ability to support disabled people to find suitable employment has been significant. Following this meeting, my research questions focused on understanding societal attitudes, as well as exploring the structural barriers and experiences of discrimination to finding and retaining employment.

### **Recruiting disabled people**

It became clear after several rounds of emails and attempts of recruiting disabled people via other DPOs (across England), that I would need to find alternative recruitment strategies. So, in an effort to find a maximum variation of participants I shifted tactic and created a simple but informative WordPress website [see [www.disabledpeopleworksmes.wordpress.com](http://www.disabledpeopleworksmes.wordpress.com) and Appendix B] to recruit disabled people. I shared the link via Twitter and in emails to organisations of and for disabled people, mostly DPOs and other large well-known charities. I had approximately three hundred 'followers' on Twitter, many of whom are academics working

in the disability studies field. They were happy to share and promote my search for self-identifying disabled adults with experience of working in SME workplaces. This approach to recruitment produced replies and offers to disseminate the information sheet [see Appendix F and G]. For example, Shaping Our Lives, Disabled People Against Cuts (DPAC), Merton CIL, Disability Equality, British Association of Supported Employment (BASE), Disability NW, WOW Campaign and Breakthrough UK advertised the research on their own websites and in their member Magazines. I also gained support and Tweets from several high-profile charity “gatekeepers” (Bryman, 2012) who were happy to email their members/supporters and share the information sheet, consent form and link to my website.

The approach to selection was based upon people who self-identify as a disabled person, who expressed an interest and met the inclusion criteria (over the age of 18, based in England, with some past or present experience of paid work in a SME). From this approach I rejected three people who offered to take part, but who lacked paid-work experience in a SME. I experienced a dilemma when one potential participant (Dean) was based in Northern Ireland (NI) and, at first, I was inclined to reject his offer to be interviewed. However, after much deliberation I decided to be more flexible with the sampling criteria (Bryman, 2012), and I accepted him into the study because of his vast work experience in SMEs across different occupations (law, education, hospitality, and disability advocacy). His lived experience would again add an element of diversity to the sample at an individual level but also it would add to the collective experience of disabled people more generally. I also felt his experience from NI could add a level of comparison to the participant experience of paid work in England. After conducting the interview with Dean, I felt validated in taking this flexible approach to sampling because of the depth of insight gained from our discussion and, indeed, it provided an opportunity for at least one voice of a disabled person living and working in NI to be included. Without prior knowledge of this geographical exclusion, I found it enormously satisfying that he appreciated the opportunity, that he said is so often denied to NI residents. Also, because of his work in disability employment related advocacy he was able to point me towards some very useful examples of good practice. It was also interesting to hear about the policy approach and provision to AtW funding, which from his account, appears to operate significantly better across the Irish Sea (see chapter 7).

### **Recruiting SMEs**

I had wrongly thought that finding SME employers to participate would be relatively easy considering their huge presence in the labour market. The approach I used to recruit them began by contacting national business networks by email with a copy of the information sheet [Appendix H] and consent forms [Appendix I], including, the FSB, Chambers of Commerce (CC), Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), Institute of Directors (IoD) and Business Disability Forum (BDF). They can all be understood as “gatekeepers” (Bryman, 2012) to a much wider network of SME organisations who I wanted to target with an initial email to advertise for interview participants. I was also keen to interview each of these organisations to

understand the role they themselves play in influencing and supporting SMEs in relation to good practice in hiring and retaining disabled workers or workers with a long-term health condition. At first the FSB Public Relations Manager showed some interest and invited me to their London head office for 'an informal chat'. However, after some follow up emails to plan, it became clear that the meeting was not going to come to fruition. I heard nothing back from the CC and the IoD. Business Disability Forum replied to my email to let me know their membership only consists of larger employers, and the CIPD responded to say they would be interested, but after several follow-up emails, again it became clear they were unable to participate.

According to Bryman (2012: 151), some firms can be concerned with how they will be represented and the whole process can turn into a political "research bargain". I will never know their reasons for their non-participation, but as national representative bodies it was a shame, they chose not to engage in the research. Whether it was a deliberate strategy to enable themselves time to gather some evidence and publish a report before the thesis findings get published could just be a coincidence. It does perhaps reflect a wider concern over the utility of my research findings, or even a suspicion and reticence about my motives. Maybe they could not see the "business case" for researching workplace barriers, and SMEs experiences of supporting disabled workers? Whatever the reasons, it became evident that an alternative strategy would be needed to increase participant numbers.

Next, I asked the DWP to provide me with names and contact email addresses for all Disability Confident organisations. However, they were unable to provide that level of information, instead they pointed me to the public website to download an Excel spreadsheet of all listed organisations who had signed up to each level of Disability Confident. From that list I was able to then filter just the Disability Confident Leader organisations (but not by size) and then visit their website to find a contact email address. I assumed that reaching out to the organisations who had reached the highest level of commitment would mean they would be more likely to want to engage in research. It would have been impossible to contact all of the organisations listed in Level 1 and Level 2 categories (over 5,000). At that time, there were around fifty Leader organisations therefore it was a manageable task to visit each website and find an email address. However, some were only generic info@ or enquiries@ email addresses making it difficult to know if they were reaching the relevant person in the organisation who would engage with hiring and retention decisions. I designed a SurveyMonkey questionnaire [Appendix Q] which included information about the study and a statement saying that "by completing the questionnaire you provide consent". The SurveyMonkey settings did not collect respondent data (email address, IP address) to ensure anonymity. The questionnaire did include an option to provide contact name and email address if respondents wished to take part in a follow up interview. However, only four organisations responded to the survey and three of those were large employers, so I discounted those, but one SME employer agreed to be interviewed (Fiona). Her response to the survey informed the discussion points during the subsequent interview. In the end, after hitting brick walls, I contacted Lancaster University's Management

School, and they agreed to promote my study via their own contacts and links to the wider SME population. This turned out to be a successful way of accessing SMEs, but the geographical location of Lancaster University led to a concentration of respondents (over fifty per cent of the final sample) being based in the North West of England. Other SMEs were recruited via introductions from my PhD Supervisors.

For the SMEs I specifically wanted to recruit SME participants who had decision making responsibility for hiring or retaining staff. It was less important whether they had previous experience of hiring or retaining disabled people or people with long term health conditions, because I wanted to ensure a wide range of experiences and perspectives could be included in the study, including those employers with no previous experience. Understanding why they had not employed disabled people was important. The companies involved had a variable number of employees (from 3 to 630) and were from different sectors. For example, it included ten private sector employers, four from the manufacturing sector, three from the Information, Communication and Technology (ICT) sector, and three from across the service sectors (education and training, cleaning, and recruitment), two social enterprises and three charities, including one DPO. The private sector employers tended to be larger, including the two businesses with more than 250 employees. The sample also included four interviewees who self-define as a disabled person.

#### **Using a Semi-Structured Interview Method**

One of the most common approaches to data gathering in qualitative research is participant interviews (Bryman, 2012). Interviews can range from structured - that is to say that the researcher has a list of questions that the researcher asks research participants (D'Cruz & Jones, 2004) – to unstructured, where the researcher allows exploration of topics as they arise naturally during a conversation. For this study, I used individual qualitative semi-structured interviews as the data collection technique, which as the names suggests, sits somewhere between structured and unstructured approaches. Semi-structured interviews are one of the most dominant and widely used methods within the social sciences (Bradford & Cullen, 2012), largely because the method is independent from any particular theoretical framework or epistemological position (Evans, 2018) and it offers the researcher a degree of flexibility when asking questions (Cartwright, 2020). This data collection approach fits the overarching aims of my research, that addresses three concerns:

- The first concern is SME employer attitudes around impairment, expectations of ability, and their experience of providing disabled people with non-ableist forms of flexible working.
- The second concern explores disabled people's experience of psycho-emotional disablism during the recruitment and employment process (Thomas, 1999, 2004, 2007; Reeve, 2004, 2008, 2012, 2014).

- The third concern is to consider the policy context within which disabled people and SME employers experience barriers which impact on the social relations of paid work in the formal economy.

An interview schedule is an effective tool to get a grip on how people make sense of their experiences because it explores a defined topic or line of enquiry created by the researcher, whilst allowing the interviewee to discuss topics pertinent to them and which may not have been anticipated in advance by the researcher (Choak, 2012). In this way, a qualitative semi-structured interview resembles a “flowing conversation” (ibid). I started with a list of topics [see appendix A and B] that I wanted to discuss during each interview and anticipated in advance that each individual conversation could potentially divert into any number of different directions that reflect the personal experiences for each participant. Some were clearly defined closed questions, but most were open-ended, designed intentionally to gain access to participants views, interpretations of events, understandings, experiences, and opinions (Burke and Byrne, 2021).

#### **Telephone facilitated qualitative interviews**

The vast majority of interviews were conducted on the telephone as opposed to face-to-face meetings (only three in total). This was a consequence of participant choice. Each interviewee was offered the choice between telephone, face to face or via Skype (a video-conference software). Whilst quantitative survey-based research makes extensive use of the telephone interview, relatively few qualitative studies employ this approach to collect data (Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004). Overall, there is a lack of methodological discussion of the telephone facilitated qualitative interview (TFQI) in the qualitative research literature (see Burke and Millar, 2001; Carr and Worth, 2001; Sturges and Hanrahan, 2004; Sweet, 2002 cited in Novick, 2008), and when they are discussed, it is normally from a negative perspective (Novick, 2008).

Novick (2008) conducted a thorough search of the textbooks and literature selected for their detailed discussion on qualitative research methodology but found even much-cited authors lacked a critical debate on the TFQI mode of qualitative data collection method. For example, “in a chapter on interviewing in Denzin and Lincoln’s 1,126-page anthology *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Fontana and Frey (2005) referred only in passing to telephone use for surveys” (Novick, 2008: 4). For this reason, I found little to guide me as I embarked on conducting TFQI with disabled people and SMEs and relied largely upon the quantitative research methods literature as the only source available to me. As Chapple (1999, cited in Novick, 2008: 3) noted “while entire books have been written about the advantages and disadvantages of telephone interview for the purposes of social survey work...much less has been written about telephone interviewing as a means of gathering qualitative data”.

Specifically, for disability research, I see the main advantage of using TFQI in relation to the potential to adopt inclusive practice, meaning that disabled people can be included despite geographical location, at decreased cost and without the need to travel. This is not necessarily specific to disabled people but reflects the spirit of more general or universal inclusion for all.

This approach also offers both the researcher and the interviewee enhanced safety because the interview can be conducted in a safe space, using either landline or mobile connectivity. Conversely, the main concern about TFQI within disability research centre around the exclusion of Deaf people because of the absence of visual cues and the opportunity for British Sign Language. As I am not skilled in BSL, and there were no funds available to pay for such communication strategies, regrettably, I was unable to open the study to people who require such accommodation. The lack of visual cues has been raised as a more general concern. So, for example, it is thought to result in a loss of contextual and non-verbal data and to compromise rapport (Smith, 2005), probing, and interpretation of responses (Novick, 2008), as well as, deterring the disclosure of sensitive information and communication of emotions (Groves, 1990). On reflection, these interviews took place prior to the experience of Covid-19 when undoubtedly, they would have taken place via Skype or Teams. This use of technology does offer opportunities for verbal cues and other forms of interaction although does raise other issues about identification for research ethics. And yet, conversely, interviews conducted at a distance, and without visual identifiers, may offer participants a less intense, more relaxed context in which they feel comfortable to share their experiences, feelings, and emotions. There is no evidence to suggest that telephone facilitated qualitative interviews impact on data quality and, yet there does appear to be an unfounded apparent bias against using telephone interviews (Novick, 2008). Still, the rich data generated from interviews during this study seems to suggest telephone interviews are a useful tool for qualitative inquiry and should not be discounted when it is the preferred option of the participant.

#### **How many interviews are needed?**

The question of how many qualitative interviews is 'enough' is a common one (Baker and Edwards, 2012). In the end I stopped once I felt I had gathered a range of experiences in detail, rather than believing that I had reached a point of data saturation – something that seems, to me, impossible to claim. This is a common way of thinking about when enough interviews have been done. I believe I did get an excellent range of high-quality interviews that provided a rich account of complex experiences from disabled people and SME employers.

#### **Interviews with Disabled People**

These interviews addressed questions about the processes, contexts and circumstances that influence the experience of paid work. The interviews took place between January and September 2018. Respondents were not required to articulate the precise nature of their impairment. During the introductory part of the interviews, respondents were invited to highlight any self-defined, relevant, and interesting aspects of their lives for me to become aware of their background. Also, such details gave an indication of their perspectives on their situations. The majority of participants [see Appendix O and P] opted to take part in an interview via the telephone for their convenience and at a time that suited them. I arranged one interview face to

face at the person's place of work, and one other was conducted at Lancaster University in a pre-booked accessible room. Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 2 hours.

The approach was emancipatory inspired because I consciously tried not to take the role of 'expert' researcher. For example, with disabled people I consciously allowed them to wonder off topic so that I heard the lived experience and stories of their employment experiences. I was careful not to interrupt and was sensitive to keeping the flow of conversation on their terms. I repeated back (in summary form) the answer to ensure I had heard correctly and to gain clarification if I was unsure of the point being made. In this way, I checked my understanding with the participant before proceeding to the next question and created a Memo (summary notes or themes emerging) as I went along.

I sketched a brief pen portrait for each participant capturing the demographic and biographical descriptions disclosed during the interview. I did not ask questions about impairment type, cause of impairment, age, gender, race, marital status, level of education, schooling, or any other personal characteristics, preferring instead to allow participants a safe space where they could choose what personal data, they felt comfortable to share. I felt this approach was the most respectful and least likely to cause any discomfort or harm in the research process. Although, ultimately, the way in which I created their summaries are my own definitions and decisions.

#### **Interviews with SMEs**

In contrast, with employers, I had a much tighter list of questions that I wanted to ask and get their responses to. The interviews were much shorter in duration, tending to last around half an hour. Most participants stipulated a time they felt comfortable giving to the interview in much more pragmatic sense. I kept the interview on track to finish by the allocated timeframe. If they strayed off topic, I tended to bring them back on track, although for the disabled employers if they spoke from personal experience of prior employment or discrimination, I let them continue. If I felt they were avoiding answering more difficult questions, I pursued it further even when I picked up on hesitation. Respondents from the SME group were asked to provide an outline of their type of business, number of employees, experience of hiring disabled employees and invited to share any other relevant background information they believed to be relevant to this study during the introductory phase of the interview.

I repeated back (in summary form) the answer to ensure I had heard correctly and to gain clarification if I was unsure of the point being made. In this way, I checked my understanding with the participant before proceeding to the next question and created a Memo (summary notes or themes emerging) as I went along. By the end of each interview, I had created a Memo in NVivo to summarise what I took to be the significant comments and overall feeling about employing disabled people in their workplace. Recognising this selection of comments reflects my own interpretation is important, because it is based on my own knowledge and expertise. The significant comments were based upon pertinent, unusual, contradictory, or surprising

stand out comments, but I also made a note of things left unsaid – the avoidances that I found to be illuminating because it suggests a lack of understanding on issues, I feel are important.

### **Rigour and quality standards**

Data collection and analysis adhered to recognised standards for robust qualitative research (Hannes, 2011). These include consideration of ethics, transparency in methods of sampling and description of the sample, the use of appropriate and rigorous methods of data collection and analysis and attention to all elements of study reporting (Cohen and Crabtree, 2008). After each interview I allowed time to reflect on the quality of the data I was gathering and the depth of the responses I received to the questions I was asking. This process of reflection helped to make sure that my style of interviewing enabled the participant time and space to provide data that were rich in contextual detail and would enable me to answer the research questions (Cartwright, 2020).

### **Approach to thematic analysis and making use of NVivo**

Having made the decision to collect qualitative data by using semi-structured interviews, I needed to select an appropriate method for data analysis. As this was a small-scale study, I identified thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), as an approach that supported the research aims, and that was a good fit when working with data collected from semi-structured interviews. This approach was used for its strengths in helping to identify, analyse, and report patterns (or themes) in the collected data. For Braun and Clarke (2006) a theme should capture something interesting, insightful, important, or significant in the data that will help the researcher to answer the specific research questions, as well as, illustrating a pattern within in the data set. Frequency of a theme within a data set does not necessarily mean the theme is important. Instead, Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest what matters is that a theme sits in relation to the research questions and speaks to the researcher's theoretical position. One use of thematic analysis is to provide:

...a more detailed and nuanced account of one particular theme, or group of themes, within the data. This might relate to a specific question or area of interest within the data (a semantic approach), or to a particular "latent" theme across the whole or majority of the data set (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 11).

Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach have six distinct interrelated phases. In the first phase, I developed a working familiarity with the interview data by reading the transcripts and memo's (my initial summary notes after each interview stored in NVivo) to get a sense and feel for the data. The second phase in the coding process consisted of identifying specific words and phrases that highlight phenomena of interest. The process involved reading over the transcript line by line and attaching a "node" (or code) to the text in NVivo. From this initial detailed analysis, I created a spreadsheet to show the frequency by interviewee for the number of times the words or phrases appeared in the interview. I could then gauge how often this appeared to

be meaningful or significant for each individual and across participants transcripts. I could also identify commonalities or differences in experiences between the participants. I then began to narrow down the themes to create overarching categories that better represented overall segments of conversations that would help to answer the research questions posed and fit with the theoretical framework being used in the thesis. In the fourth phase, these codes were ultimately structured into the higher order codes to refine and restructure the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Next came the phase of defining and naming the themes as categories. In this way, each theme is given a definition of its clarity of scope. The final stage is to present and discuss the data.

The Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis (CAQDAS) software program NVivo10 (Woolf and Silver, 2018) was used to help with the organisation and initial analysis of the qualitative interviews and existing literature. All of the transcripts were uploaded into NVivo meaning I could add 'nodes' (themes) to specific text. NVivo is a powerful tool when harnessed to its full potential. However, in reality I only touched the surface of its capabilities. I found simply learning how to operate the software quite difficult (even after receiving some training), and in the end, I reverted back to printing out the transcripts and coding by hand and using a highlighter. I did manage to code within the software and run queries which enabled me to export a table of coded data into an Excel spreadsheet (a database I am more familiar with using) and I also used NVivo for storing and coding written memos. This helped me to quickly compare the frequency of the initial 260 codes by participant, and it also allowed excerpts of significant coded quotes to be easily extracted. From the list of codes, I began to mark those codes that appeared to be meaningful, and I could also see where codes overlap or related to another. I found NVivo to be particularly useful at this point because it allows codes to be redefined at any time meaning it can be reshaped and resized to extend its range of meaning to include additional context, or even linked to a specific interview question so that responses from participants can be easily captured and compared. Codes can then be renamed as well as linked to other codes to show relationships between them. NVivo has an auto-code facility which can save time on manually sifting through the data to find repeated words or phrases. However, auto-coding is not a substitute for manual coding and should not be relied on too heavily because simple spelling mistakes can make searching and queries unreliable (Woolf and Silver, 2018).

In practice, I could only gather the significance of participants data through moving from the semantic to the latent level of thematic analysis. At the semantic (explicit/descriptive) level of analysis, themes are identified in the surface/explicit meaning of the data, for example in what disabled workers said about their paid-work experiences and the wider structural barriers that can restrict access and generally make life more difficult. When I moved to the latent (or interpretative) level of analysis, I began to interrogate the data at a much deeper, theoretical level. At this point, it became clear that layering each of the disabled people's experiential accounts were instances of inner complexities that illustrate psycho-emotional dimensions of disablism (Thomas, 1999) and internalised oppression (Reeve, 2014). In this way, the stage of

uncovering latent themes, shifted the analysis from descriptive data [presented in the empirical chapters 6 and 7] to interpretative, theoretical analysis [presented in the discussion chapter 8]. This move from merely describing the data to interpreting it through consideration of the broader discourses and cultural representations of disability, and normative assumptions or ideas that are at play in ableist society, inform the explicit content of the semantic themes (for example, what SMEs say about disabled workers and what disabled workers say about disablism). In other words, latent themes represent an interpretation of the data that deals with the “so what?” of the semantic descriptive themes to enable the research to finally make sense of what the data actually means, during the process of theorising with the data, “and of getting a message across about what the data actually means” (Evans, 2018: 5). Latent thematic analysis is thus capable of identifying the underlying ideas, assumptions, conceptualisations, and ideologies that inform the semantic data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). For example, as I moved from the semantic to the latent level of analysis the data revealed how paid-work has particular meanings, not only because it is a space in which people can interact with others and build relationships, but because it is also intimately bound with the formation and consolidation of a worker-identity that resists the passive “benefit cheat” portrayal so often used in Government rhetoric, media and on TV in regard to disabled people (Johanssen and Garrisi, 2020; Pring, 2020).

#### **Summary of SME employers interviewed**

I interviewed fifteen people who self-identified as SME business owners or managers. Amongst this group, four self-identified as disabled and eleven non-disabled. For each of the employers I include details of the type of business sector they operate in, number of employees, role in the organisation (owner or manager) and whether they have human resource (HR) expertise in their organisation because this will help to distinguish between those who have formal or more informal relationships between employer/employee (as noted in chapter four).

Frank owns a small private enterprise operating in the disability sector providing education and training on equality issues based in the South of England. He employs approximately 30 freelance workers. He self-identifies as a disabled man with a congenital mobility impairment and makes use of a wheelchair. There is no HR expertise in-house.

Andy owns a small private enterprise operating in the manufacturing sector based in the North of England. He employs 14 full-time and 1 part-time permanent contracted workers. He self-identifies as a disabled man with an acquired hearing impairment. There is no HR expertise in-house and he has no experience of hiring other disabled people.

Peter owns a medium-size private enterprise operating in the manufacturing sector based in the South of England. The organisation employs 132 people with the majority having full-time, permanent contracts but no experience of employing other disabled people. He self-identifies as a disabled man with an acquired mobility impairment. His organisation has in-house HR expertise.

Hannah is an owner/partner in a micro-sized social enterprise operating as a disabled people's organisation (DPO), based in the North of England. The organisation offers disability equality training and advocacy to disabled people and access audits for businesses. They employ 8 people with permanent contracts. As a user-led organisation the majority of employees are disabled. Hannah self-identifies as a disabled woman with a chronic and fluctuating health condition and sometimes limited mobility requiring the use of a wheelchair. There is no in-house HR expertise.

Bev manages a micro-sized registered charity which provides recreational services for disabled people and other disadvantaged adults and children in the North of England. The charity employs Bev full time and 10 freelance seasonal workers many who are disabled people. There are no in-house HR expertise and Bev makes all recruitment and retention decisions.

Rachel is the policy manager for a small DPO, set up as a charity and based in the North of England. The DPO provides advocacy and training underpinned by social model principles (Oliver, 1990) to disabled people. The organisation employs 12 people, with the majority self-identifying as disabled people. There is no HR in-house expertise. Rachel self-identifies as a disabled person with a hidden impairment.

Zoe is the manager of a small, affiliated member of a large national charitable organisation based in the North of England. They offer advice and guidance across social security, housing, debt, and employment to the general public. Zoe is the only full-time employee, with 7 others working part-time. Because her organisation is part of an affiliated national charitable organisation, she has access to the full range of HR expertise. The organisation has experience of employing disabled people.

Diane is the Managing Director of a small Community Interest Company (CIC), operating as a social enterprise in the health and social care sector in the South of England and the organisation has achieved Disability Confident "committed" level. There are 20 paid members of staff in addition to unpaid volunteers and there is no in-house HR expertise. The organisation has experience of employing disabled people.

Janita owns a small private enterprise operating in the manufacturing sector based in the North of England. She employs 33 people full-time and has some experience offering unpaid work experience to disabled people via the Work and Health Programme (DWP and DHSC, 2017). HR expertise is drawn upon when making important disciplinary or firing decisions, using an outside agency but all recruitment decisions are made by Janita alone.

Linda owns a micro-sized private enterprise operating in the IT sector based in the North of England. She employs 3 people full-time on permanent contracts and has no access to HR expertise and no experience of employing disabled people.

Chris owns the largest private enterprise in the study, with a mix of full-time and part-time employees, totalling 630. The organisation operates within the specialist cleaning and security

sector across England. There are three sub-branches, and the head office is based in the North West with its own in-house HR department. Chris came forward as a self-defined SME, despite the number of employees going beyond official definitions. Based on his self-defining, plus the depth of insight obtained from the data collected during the interview, I decided not to exclude him from the research. His organisation has some experience of employing disabled people.

Bruce owns a micro-sized web-design private enterprise operating in the IT sector based in the North of England. There are 5 full-time and 1 part-time employees and no in-house HR expertise. He has experience of employing a disabled person after offering a work-trial to a young man with Autism.

Karen owns a micro-sized private enterprise operating in the IT sector based in the North of England. There are 6 full-time employees who all work remotely, and no in-house HR expertise. She has no experience of employing disabled people.

Daniel is a manager at a small private enterprise operating in the manufacturing sector. There are 18 full-time members of staff on permanent contracts based in the South of England and no in-house HR expertise. He is not aware of the organisation employing any disabled people, although he does think they have employed a person with a “mental health issue”.

Fiona is a HR manager at a medium-sized private enterprise operating in the recruitment sector based in the South of England. As the second largest employer in the study, Fiona manages the HR function for the organisation, and was instrumental in achieving Disability Confident Leader status. The organisation employs just over 250 people, with a mix between full and part-time contracts, including a small number of disabled people.

### **Summary of disabled people interviewed**

I interviewed twelve self-identified disabled people who came forward to discuss their experience of working in small and medium size organisations. Pseudonyms have been given to the participants and will be referred to again in chapters 7 and 8. When exploring the lived experience of disablism caused by structural, attitudinal, and psycho-emotional barriers, it is not possible to ignore the impact of impairment effects (Thomas, 1999, 2007), therefore, in each summary of disabled participants I include details of their main functional impairment.

Tom lives and works in the South of England and is in his early thirties. He has a congenital impairment that affects mobility. He is a wheelchair user and receives funding from Motability for a wheelchair accessible vehicle. During childhood he experienced both special and mainstream education before going to university. His highest level of qualification is a PhD. He has worked for a range of small and large organisations in various roles that tend to promote disabled people's inclusion in sport and his current employer is an SME.

Simon is twenty-three and lives and works in the North West of England. He has a mobility impairment, uses a wheelchair, and recently set up his own small business offering advice and guidance to Personal Assistants working for disabled people. He has some previous

volunteering experience working unpaid for the local council as a young disabled ambassador, and he has some paid work experience with a small charitable organisation. He attended special schools in childhood and later attended Further Education College.

Kevin acquired a head injury in adulthood, resulting in a speech impairment and memory loss. He lives in the South of England and gained a university degree. He has been unemployed for eight years, but has extensive experience working as an accountant for a range of large and small private enterprises.

Colin lives and works in the South of England. He has a congenital mobility impairment but does not use a wheelchair. He graduated from university with an undergraduate degree and works in advertising, PR, and communications. He is in his fifties and describes his impairment effects (Thomas, 1999, 2007) as “walking a bit funny and having funny hands” and “a very minor speech impediment”.

Kelly is forty-two and she lives and works in the South of England. She has dyspraxia, self-diagnosed Autism, depression, anxiety and previously an eating disorder. She is currently employed as a part-time study skills tutor in a start-up private sector SME who specialise in arranging Disabled Students Allowance (DSA) support for Higher Education (HE) students. She is also a self-employed piano teacher working in the evenings and she considers this to be her profession.

Dean currently lives and works in Northern Ireland for a charity that advocates for independent living for disabled people. He has a congenital mobility impairment and uses a wheelchair. After graduating with a law degree, Dean went on to obtain a postgraduate teaching qualification. His work history includes times employed by large and small employers across sectors including in a small law practice and disability charities.

Tina lives and works in the South of England. She has a congenital mobility impairment and uses a wheelchair. She has a postgraduate qualification, and her employment history includes time spent working for TV and for some large disability charities on policy issues. She is now a self-employed consultant. She has close contact with policymakers and has previous work experience in SME private sector organisations working in media and communications. She has campaigned for equality and change all her life, and most recently, she has developed training programmes for young disabled people to campaign on the issues that affect them.

Dominic lives and works in the North West of England. He has a congenital mobility impairment and uses a wheelchair. His previous work history includes various roles within the disability sector working for several small disability charities in roles focused on campaigning. At the time of interview, he was unemployed, looking for work but was going through a dispute with a previous employer for their failure to make reasonable adjustments. This employer is a disability charity.

Paul lives in the North of England. He has a congenital mobility impairment and sometimes uses mobility aides or a wheelchair. He graduated with a PhD and at the time of interview he had been employed for eight months for a small hotel chain writing social media content. This is his first full-time job in a private enterprise after leaving academia and his ambition is to become self-employed.

Holly lives in the North East of England. She works full-time for a medium size charity. She is waiting for a formal diagnosis and is on a waiting list for an assessment of ADHD and Autism. She has a formal diagnosis of chronic mental and physical health issues.

Paresh lives in the South of England and has recently began working for a small start-up recruitment agency as a consultant. He attended special and mainstream school in childhood. After attending further education college and completing A levels he decided against going to university, preferring instead to move straight into paid employment. He has a mobility impairment and uses a wheelchair.

Bradley lives in the South of England and now works at the same start-up recruitment agency as Paresh. He previously competed at a high level in sports and has worked for a large utilities company. He has a mobility impairment but says on most occasions it is not obvious and he tries not to use a wheelchair.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has described the methods selected for producing the data which supports this thesis. Sensitive of emancipatory research principles but accepting the inherent difficulties in pursuing such a process in practice, I have utilised a combination of semi-structured individual interviews with disabled people. The inclusion of SME employers into the study adds a critical new dimension to disability studies research and is one of the unique contributions to knowledge. I have described how participants were recruited, and then interviewed, and have outlined the ethical issues which I reflected upon during my fieldwork. In the spirit of self-reflexivity, I have also discussed what problems I encountered and how I managed to overcome these. The methods outlined above provided a wealth of rich and interesting data which is presented in the following chapters. The next chapter presents the experiences of the fifteen SME employers that were interviewed.

## **CHAPTER 6: SME EXPERIENCES AND EXPECTATIONS**

### **Introduction**

Sociological accounts of labour market disadvantage experienced by disabled people attribute it partly to employers' unwillingness to accommodate individual needs and widespread ignorance of the capabilities of disabled people (Berthoud, 2008). Therefore, explaining the demand-side barriers and burdens facing SME employers requires an in-depth analysis of employer experiences, which can only be robustly achieved by obtaining first-hand accounts. Therefore, this chapter presents the missing 'voice' of SME employers. Given the lack of academic engagement with UK based SME employers experiences of recruiting and retaining disabled people, the following experiences add new knowledge to disability studies research. In particular, this chapter explores employer attitudes and their experience of using Government schemes such as Disability Confident and AtW designed to support employers in their recruitment and retention of disabled workers.

### **Disability Confident**

I begin by examining the role that Government funded demand-side schemes play in supporting employers in their ability to recruit and retain disabled workers. Although these schemes provide financial and non-financial support previous research confirms that many SME owners and managers are not aware of them or how to access them (Fordyce et al., 2013).

Less than half of the employers in this study knew of the scheme (Frank, Andy, Diane, Zoe, Hannah, Rachel, and Fiona), and only two had signed-up (Diane and Fiona). Of the employers who knew about the scheme but who had chosen not to participate, Zoe (manager, charity) said they would not sign up to a "tick box" type scheme, and Andy (private employer) raised a concern over the potential for it to be used by employers as a "public relations exercise". Frank (owner, private employer) is a disabled man with a history of working closely with policymakers on a range of issues related to disabled people's inclusion. He sees the benefit of such a scheme "if it makes employers more confident". But he counters this optimism with a concern of the scheme's validity because monitoring employer processes is not built-in, rendering the scheme "meaningless". Instead, he proposes that employers should develop a personal message of support for disabled people's acceptance in their workplace (by adding a public statement to their company website):

I would like the organisation to come up with their own statement or their own example. I think that is more powerful and more attractive, rather than just saying we are part of Disability Confident. (Frank)

For Hannah (social enterprise), as a disabled woman with a strong allegiance to the social model of disability, the usefulness of such as scheme was questioned. She observes how it does nothing to challenge structural barriers and prejudicial employer attitudes:

I think its possibly the most patronising, ridiculous scheme I have seen in a long while...It is not worth the paper it is written on. It is not a stringent standard, is not written by disabled people, not assessed by disabled people. I think we are way past this, we have legal rights now. We are fighting for equality of outcome and I think saying "oh be nice to disabled people" without having to prove how many disabled people you employ and what their satisfaction level is, and where they're at in the organisation is just fluff. (Hannah)

Similarly, the lack of impact the scheme has on changing employer practice was noted by Rachel:

We do not think the Disability Confident campaign is anywhere near rigorous enough because it is too many hearts and flowers and not enough stick. (Rachel)

Diane (charity) signed-up to the scheme at the entry "Committed" level. She explained the motivation for doing so was to encourage disabled people to apply for jobs. This was prompted because her charity already employed a number of disabled people and she wanted to promote this welcoming culture to other potential applicants:

We just wanted to make sure that people felt that they could apply to us for a job, and it would not be a barrier. We do not want to put barriers up to anyone to apply for jobs. We are always looking for people with good skills and it doesn't matter to us what issues they have as long as they have the skills that we need. (Diane)

Likewise, Fiona (HR manager, private enterprise) also spoke very proudly about a company culture that wants to attract more disabled people into the workforce. She represents one of the largest employers in the study (with just over 250 employees) and they have reached the highest level of Disability Confident accreditation, with "Leader" status. I asked Fiona whether the organisation consulted with disabled people's organisations (DPO) or user-led organisations (ULO) during the process, in what is called the "outside challenge". Although it is not compulsory, it is an option open to employers going through each stage of the process to becoming a Disability Confident "Leader" and one which would signal real acknowledgement of a social model approach to enabling disabled people's employment. Instead, Fiona described a close working relationship with the Government and two large charities *for* (not *of*) disabled people, as being fundamental to the achievement of their "Leader" status:

We worked directly with the DWP (Department for Work and Pensions). They held an event at the House of Commons

that we attended. We also work with a number of organisations, [charity A] and [charity B]. So yeah, that gives you an idea of the type of people we work with already, and who we consulted with whilst we were going through that process. (Fiona)

Based upon the perceived close working relationship with DWP, it seems reasonable to predict that Fiona would also have advanced knowledge of wider disability related employment policies and services available to employers. Yet, somewhat surprisingly, Fiona was unaware of the most important AtW scheme, and the associated help it offers to disabled workers and their employers. On hearing about the benefits of AtW to employees and employers, she was noticeably embarrassed. It left her wondering why her company did not know about AtW, especially in light of working with DWP in promoting the Disability Confident scheme to other employers. She also reflected upon her own role when working with clients (often smaller employers in their supply chain), and the comments from them about cost implications for making workplace adjustments for disabled people:

Why aren't they shouting about it? You would often hear our clients say, "oh well I can't make those adjustments, or I don't want to interview that disabled person, or we can't afford to get a different keyboard in or a different piece of kit". But actually, what would have been helpful was for the business to already know that this type of stuff existed because actually its then not financially detrimental to them at all. That to me quite frankly is not good enough, not nearly good enough to not take on anybody who has a disability, but it takes the pressure off. (Fiona)

### **Access to Work (AtW)**

One fundamental barrier is a lack of SME employer knowledge and information about reasonable adjustments such as annualised hours, inclusive practice and inclusive design, and support for employers through AtW (Hale, 2017). However, Rachel in her role working for a DPO who regularly liaise with disabled people and their employers raised some important concerns about the inadequacy of the current system for disabled people to obtain AtW:

Access to Work has been limited for the last few years. I mean I've been working for XXX for the last 14 years, and I've seen a huge change with AtW. It used to be, paperwork has always been difficult but it's very bad at the moment and if you want a support worker. So, people who have had support workers in the past have had their funding withdrawn. Or they might have moved from one job

where they had it and then reapplied for it and been turned down. What they have really put out there now over the last few years is which they didn't say as much about before is that it's the employer's responsibility to make reasonable adjustments and then AtW is anything above that what the employer can't do. So, when you put in an AtW request, they generally want to go back and check what has already been put into place and argue the toss about who's responsibility it is. [Rachel]

Seven employers had knowledge of the AtW grant scheme (Frank, Hannah, Rachel, Zoe, Peter, Andy, and Bev). Of these employers four identify as disabled people running private enterprises (Frank, Andy, Peter, and Hannah) and all apart from Andy had used the AtW schemes for themselves. Both Hannah and Frank also used the scheme to support other employees. Both Andy and Frank said they would expect a job applicant with an impairment to know about AtW and consider it beneficial if the applicant was willing to discuss what funding they have secured from AtW at an early stage in the recruitment process. Frank noted several benefits of the AtW scheme:

For the employer - a saving on money, it could be expert advice you know it should help the employer get the maximum out of the individual. For the employee - the word I would use, it makes them more competitive. You are presenting an issue because you have a disability, and you might need an adjustment. You are also providing a solution by saying [to the employer] "look here's some funding, here's some support, here's some expert advice. So, the employee can say to the manager, "look this is what I need, here's how we can go about getting it".  
(Frank)

All of the employers with personal experience of using ATW for themselves emphasised the critical role it plays in supporting them in work. They each said they would be in a worse position without this essential funding. But they also raised serious concerns over recent changes to eligibility and funding caps, alongside the changing nature of the application process which has shifted from a localised offer to a remote impersonal call-centre operation. As a wheelchair user, Peter (private enterprise) had used the ATW scheme for himself in the past, but when he tried to request a new power-assist piece of equipment more recently, he faced problems:

The first time was for a standing chair. It wasn't a good experience, but I got it in the end. But they did not like the fact I was a Director of the company. They really did not like that. They want to help employees,

which is what I am. The second time was only very recently for a power-assist. I have been in this chair 26 years and my shoulders are not great; I get a lot of pain now so it would have helped. As soon as I rang up for it, they questioned "why do I need it?". What do they know? So, then I thought, do I need it? So, you start doubting yourself, perhaps I can get along without it. So, I gave up and thought stuff it. So, I do still get on without it, but when I go for business meetings in the City, it would have been extremely helpful.  
(Peter)

Chris (the largest private enterprise employer in the study) was notably shocked to hear about the AtW and Disability Confident schemes. He expressed disappointment in his HR specialist employee, "*she never bought anything like that to me or made me aware of them*", and he placed fault with the Government and "*possibly charities*" in not ensuring SME leaders are kept informed:

Do SME businesses know and understand where the support is out there? I can tell you they don't. I've been in business for twenty-two years and I've never heard of them. (Chris)

These feelings were echoed by Hannah when she commented on the important role that should be played by business organisations such as the Chambers of Commerce (CC) and Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) in raising awareness of both schemes to their SME members:

Afterall, it is these two organisations who engage with policymakers on behalf of SMEs. (Hannah)

This is a point well made because both organisations (CC and FSB) hold some level of power to influence future policy, but ultimately, they aim to promote productivity and innovation of SMEs as opposed to engaging with notions of promoting organisational diversity.<sup>2</sup>

### **Attitudes, diversity and ability expectations**

Issues of workplace equality, diversity and inclusion have become more prominent in recent years, mainly from a large firm perspective, but evidence suggests, the issue is also permeating SME thinking (Wilkinson et al., 1999). Yet, in this study, when I asked about the approach to

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<sup>2</sup> FSB offer their members a range of business services including advice, financial expertise, support, and act as a voice heard in government. Their mission is to help smaller businesses achieve their ambitions. The Chambers of Commerce exists to support and connect companies, bringing together firms to build new relationships, share best practice, foster new opportunities, and provide practical support to help member businesses trade locally, nationally, and globally.

recruiting with diversity in mind nearly all said they did not have a formal policy and neither did they intend to write one, even though it has been noted that “To be effective, equality and diversity need to be embedded in the business strategy, not treated as an ad-hoc addition” (DBIS, 2013b: vi). Instead, several of the employers raised the point that their own company culture and values would ensure that disabled people (and other marginalised groups) would automatically be treated “*equally*” by which, they meant “the same” because they believed that disabled people want to be treated the “the same” and not be singled out as “*different*” to other workers. Indeed, they felt that to treat disabled people “*differently*” would be insulting and maybe even seen as “*discriminatory*”. Another concern cited by several of the SMEs was that giving preferential treatment to a disabled worker would be an act of unlawful positive discrimination and unfair on non-disabled workers.

I asked the employers whether they would consider actively recruiting with diversity in mind. All three of the largest private employers in the study (Chris, Peter, and Fiona), have a formal in-house HR function, but only Fiona reported taking a concerted, proactive approach to diversity issues. As a Disability Confident Leader organisation, it would be unusual if her organisation did not think about these issues. But she also reported a difficulty, “*despite trying really, really hard*”, in finding disabled people to recruit. In contrast, Peter says he thinks “*diversity at board level is important, like getting more women at the top*”, but admitted that it is not something that he would actively pursue in relation to disabled people (even though he has an impairment himself). His usual method of recruiting staff is via recruitment agencies. Chris said he left all recruitment decisions to his “HR lady” but was not aware that she ever considered diversity. Again, like Janita and Daniel as an employer of staff who must perform very manual type jobs that require a level of physicality, his priority was very pragmatic:

It doesn't matter who they are, men, women, sexual preference, religion or what else...we aren't all that bothered who you are, as long as you can work and do the job, we need you to do. (Chris)

In this sense, the ability to do the job straight away, rather than at a point in the future after some training, reflects a lack of thought about potential ability development, and there was no discussion around changing the ways of operating to encourage more flexibility around accommodating ability-difference.

Linda owns a micro digital company, employing three non-disabled employees. She has no previous experience of hiring disabled people, but confirms she would be willing to, although again, she has never taken active steps to do so and did not comment on any potential benefits to the business:

It's not something I would actively look to do. But certainly, if somebody came along for an interview that

had some form of disability that would not be an issue at all. (Linda)

Karen shared similar positive sentiments but again did not comment on any potential business benefits to be gained from widening diversity amongst her team. She also made it clear that even if she wanted to take proactive steps to 'find' and recruit disabled people she would not know where to look:

I totally would, but I would not know how to go about it. (Karen)

In contrast, Diane recognised the benefits in creating diverse workplaces linking this to the sharing of different perspectives within the team, although she did not mention the potential economic benefits that could also be gained:

The experience of being disabled, I think maybe you have a different perspective on things. So, I think bringing that into the workplace can be really useful. It can be a real benefit for others to understand what its actually like to be in a particular position. So, yes, I think there is a lot to be gained by having a very diverse workforce because you have all of those different perspectives. (Diane)

Rather than focus on creating diverse teams, some employers spoke about the need for their employees to have the "*right attitude to work*" and a personality that would "*fit in*" with existing staff. A strong work ethic was valued by all of the employers, although there were differences by sector in how they interpreted this. For example, in the manufacturing firms, the employers expected compliance to strict processes and procedures with clearly defined job roles. In contrast, in the service sector that tend to work with digital technology (Roulstone, 2016), employers were looking for a work ethic that included an element of creativity, proactivity, and entrepreneurial spirit, a willingness to drive the business forward, with employees seen to contribute to the dynamics of the team.

This sentiment was expressed by Karen who runs a private enterprise in the IT & Communications sector. She employs six people who all work remotely. Her preference is to employ people who will add to the existing culture, people who will "fit" in with the existing team that is considered as 'family' (Ram and Edwards, 2001):

I would look for someone who is proactive, full of ideas and creative. You are looking for the right person to fit in with your team and within that you ...if they're not the full package that doesn't really matter, they are becoming part of a family if you like. (Karen)

In this context I explored with Karen whether, for her, soft skills (Hurrell, 2009, Nickson et al., 2011) and personality in particular was more important than hard skills (Grover and Piggott, 2015; Yates and Roulstone, 2013). The specific abilities that she expects are closely related to personal motivation and willingness to go above and beyond what is expected:

...because you can always train people on skills and things like that, you can train on the way you work. What you can't train people to be is enthusiastic and passionate and all that kind of thing, and proactive. So, if you give somebody a task to do, that they come back, and they've exceeded your expectations that's the kind of thing that we look for all the time because that makes our job easier if you've got someone who is going that extra mile all the time. (Karen)

Similarly, Linda said she is looking for person who will add to the existing culture of the organisation as opposed to focusing on 'hard skills':

When I'm recruiting, I'm not recruiting on skills and qualifications or what university they went to, I'm recruiting primarily on a cultural fit. Other things also come into play. So that disabled person has to add and contribute to the culture then that's got to be a great thing. (Linda)

Andy also favoured the soft skills when he stated:

I don't think it's necessarily all about the qualifications. It's actually about whether or not you can see this person slotting into the business with the various people that you've got in the business already. (Andy)

Reliance on informal recruitment practice based on making a judgement of cultural fit does little to safeguard against discrimination, but this was not recognised by the employers. In fact, most seem very proud of their recruitment processes, claiming they are the best judge of character. Some employers even reacted quite sensitively to questions of "fitting" people into the culture, and some displayed apprehension at the idea that their current recruitment process could be seen as a barrier to disabled people or in need of improvement. Only Chris the largest private employer in the study had recently started to collect and monitor employee data but this was focused specifically on absence due to ill-health. He did not know how many disabled staff he employed and was not inclined to start collecting it because as he sees it – it's not important. Instead, the focus was on the ability to "*do the job I'm paying them to do*":

There is no point - unless they're ill and going to be off sick, I'm not bothered if they have this, that, or the other impairment. We all have something wrong with us don't we but if they are doing the job, I'm paying them to do, the way I want them to do it - and its done on time, I really, really don't care. I'm lucky that not many of my staff take time off sick - but if they are [sick] they would be helped. I even gave full pay for a year to one bloke with cancer because he's a good bloke and a great team member. It's sad though as it's got a lot worse, and I don't think he'll make it back to work.

(Chris)

When asked if their business should be proactive and do more to employ disabled people, most respondents were ambivalent. Some said they had never contemplated the idea and queried why should they deliberately be proactive, questioning whether again that would constitute an illegal form of positive discrimination. Underpinning this was a general anxiety about being seen to then discriminate against non-disabled people and they did not agree that people with impairments should be treated as a 'special' case believing that disabled people want to be treated the 'same' as non-disabled workers. This is an important point because the interviews with disabled people (presented in the next chapter) show that whilst they do not want to be seen as 'different' in a negative sense, they may still need 'different' treatment to accommodate their impairment effects. It is this need for change to current forms of working patterns or locations that causes a tension and anxiety, that creates the psycho-emotional barriers. This affective dimension of disablism was not acknowledged during interviews with SME employers.

### **Recruitment practice**

Similar to previous research into SME recruitment practice into how employers approach the recruitment and hiring process for unskilled and semi-skilled workers (DWP, 2014), the majority of participants did not feel the need to investigate what they perceived as more formal options via recruitment agencies or the JobCentre when recruiting unskilled and semi-skilled staff. In contrast, and in common with employers in general, when recruiting for skilled staff, several of the private employers were more likely to rely upon formal mechanisms by outsourcing the search activity to professional recruitment agents (Andy, Chris, Janita, Peter, Bruce, Karen, Bev, and Linda). They also reported using LinkedIn and other digital platforms as a starting point in their recruitment search, as well as drawing upon personal contacts and business networks, including University alumni employment channels (Linda, Chris, and Karen).

Four participants (Andy, Peter, Linda, and Karen) stated that they had no previous experience of employing a disabled person (that they were aware of), although there is the possibility that employees have not declared a hidden (or less visible) impairment to these employers. Two of these employers (Peter and Andy) identify themselves as having acquired an impairment in

adulthood (spinal injury and hearing loss respectively). Both own and operate a private enterprise, both say they would employ disabled people, but neither have taken proactive steps to do so or engaged with any type of employment support programmes. In itself, that finding was not surprising given that in most instances, employers do not engage with schemes and programmes designed specifically to move disabled people into paid work (see Roulstone et al., 2014), and only a fraction of SMEs had previously recruited from the UK Work Programme (Ingold and Stuart, 2015). However, there were three participants (Janita, Bruce and Hannah) who each reported using such schemes. The following extracts provide evidence of their experiences.

Janita is the owner of a manufacturing firm which specialises in producing bespoke furniture based in the North of England. She describes her business premises as “*historic - with no access*” and she employs over thirty full-time staff. The majority of skilled workers are located on the ground-level – “*on the shop floor*” and administration staff work in upstairs offices, “*but there is no lift*”. She reflects on her recent experience offering work trials (arranged via the JobCentre) (Secker and Grove, 2005) to three adults with learning difficulties noting in all cases, the short-term nature of each placement. Interestingly, the motivation to offer these trials was not discussed during the interview, but they were explained as entered into voluntarily with good intentions.

This lady got in touch and said we have got these people is there anything you can do to help? So, they came in, we took them into different areas that were suitable and safe, it is about safety. Initially it was on the basis that it would be a work trial. But do you know what, if they coped and if they could do what we needed we would have kept them. Without a doubt. Some lasted a few months, days for others because it just would not, could not work - you know? They seem ok and with all due respect, they come in and it's not until they start that you understand exactly where they are with their learning disability that you then know it is difficult, very difficult. (Janita)

By her own admission, these workers were expected to undertake under-valued tasks in the workplace:

We tended to keep them in what we call warehousing and logistics area where, sounds awful, manual labour, packing, wrapping lifting, carrying that kind of thing. (Janita)

She casts people with a learning difficulty as problematic in her company's work environment, requiring high levels of attention to ensure safety for themselves and other work colleagues:

The machinery, things moving around, trucks coming in, fork-lift trucks moving about. They could not quite grasp sometimes the danger or the signs for danger, very difficult to explain to them. Lovely people but it is difficult as an employer. You feel as though you are taking risks and when you have got 30 other people to consider besides them, the potential for them putting other people at risk - it's hard. (Janita)

Asked whether the experience could be improved with a dedicated, fully funded support worker for employees with learning difficulties, Janita was concerned how in the longer term this would work in practice. She was particularly worried about the extra responsibility imposed upon other workers, viewing this as an extra burden and unfair practice:

Once they have gone [the support worker], that responsibility becomes ours. And it sounds dreadful to say but we are so busy and the people we have got are bright and they know what they are doing. So therefore, to have to make them a buddy we are then a person down. But it is also the responsibility that we would be putting on somebody here which potentially I would not think is fair. (Janita)

Based on her willingness to participate in employment support programmes, I followed-up by asking Janita whether she would employ people with visual impairment, hearing impairment, mental health conditions, Autism, or people with physical impairments. She responded with ambivalence, citing health and safety again as the major cause of concern:

We could not for health and safety reasons ever consider anybody that could not hear, could not see. The way the factory here is designed, certainly you could not have a wheelchair user on the shop floor... I think from my point of view it's a logistical point because we haven't got the facilities for example to get somebody upstairs. That is just the way the building is made, its historical. Do you know what I mean? So, whilst I would really love to and I have tried, it just does not appear to work in my circumstances. (Janita)

Although, Janita mentioned the inaccessible nature of her older building, she did not consider making other adaptations to the workplace to accommodate a disabled person would involve

additional costs. Indeed, none of the employers explicitly stated a concern or fear that disabled people would necessitate additional expenditures which contradicts previous findings by Fordyce et al. (2013). Later in the discussion, Janita suggested that retaining a member of staff who acquires an impairment whilst employed could potentially be made possible, although she says it would depend on the situation and what the resulting impairment was. None of the placements in Janita's organisation pathed a way into offers of paid work or employment contracts for people with learning difficulties, and the fabric of the building, which renders it inaccessible was the real barrier for Janita:

Access again, from our point of view in our business if it weren't an issue then I don't think I'd say no, say for example if it were a physical impairment if they could do the job a physical impairment wouldn't bother me. (Janita)

Daniel is the manager in a small manufacturing firm and at first said he has no experience of employing disabled people but later remembered one member of his team "*with a mental health issue*". He stated that the nature of the work involved heavy lifting and machine work which would probably make it too difficult to recruit people with sensory or physical impairments. When asked if he would consider offering a work trial, he said he would "*give anybody a chance in principle if they had the required ability to perform physical tasks*". In one pertinent comment he compares disabled people to a "*petite lady*" highlighting the gendered and embodied nature of organisational cultures, processes, and values (Acker, 1990, 1998, 2006; Billing, 1994):

You know if you had somebody that was disabled, wheelchair-bound, something like that, there would be no reason why they couldn't join us. But from a factory point of view, from a health and safety point of view, it would be very difficult to take somebody on with a more severe physical or mental disability. But you know so we would give anybody a chance but there are some things that, a lot of things that we do, for a petite lady you just cannot physically do. You know you can't get lugging great lumps of timber on your shoulder all day long or standing on the machine three ton of timber through every day. That's just physically not practical. So, you know that would be the same with a disabled person. There are physical practicalities would come into play on some things. (Daniel)

Daniel is another employer from the manufacturing sector and like Janita he was clear his priority is to consider ability to assess that a person is capable to perform the role according to existing workplace norms and practices and adhering to health and safety. When I posed a

question around the possibility for changing the workplace to fit the needs of people with impairments, he was not able to comprehend alternative inclusive approaches. He dismissed such ideas as completely unacceptable or do-able in the context of the dangerous environment in which work takes place. He reflected upon a recent experience of recruiting two young Apprentices which demonstrates a very task specific and pragmatic approach to decision making. In a manual occupation such as this, where heavy lifting and strength is key, what became important is simply that the worker has the necessary “*ability to do what we need*”:

What I would do is - I would take them on about a month's work experience to start with to see how they fared within our trade. I would do the same for that, you know because within a month we know whether or not that person's going to be suitable for the position available and whether that disability's going to be... I mean obviously that's not about disability, that's about ability. Some people haven't got the ability to do what we need whether they be disabled or able-bodied. So, if we were asked to take someone new on you know after the initial interview with them to give a month's trial and then by that time, we would know whether or not they were what we needed for doing what we needed them to do.  
(Daniel)

Daniel differentiates between physical and mental impairment in carrying out tasks within his manufacturing setting.

We do have a chap that's got some mild mental disability. If you class that as a disability at all. Again, nothing that would stop him from being able to carry out all his day-to-day stuff. (Daniel)

Two other employers had provided work experience or work trial (Secker and Grove, 2005) placements via formal employment programme routes to people with an Autism diagnosis (Hannah and Bruce). In both cases there was a positive outcome in terms of the placement leading to pay and conditions commensurate with the job role (although Bruce offered a more precarious job - paid by the hour).

Bruce runs a web design business based in the North of England with six full-time employees. He provided a work placement for a young man with Autism, organised via a friend (Bev – also interviewed for this study), who was approached by a large national charity. He describes his willingness to employ this person as “*accidental*”, saying “*I didn't have any deliberate attempt to go out and recruit a disabled person into my business*”. In this way, the motivation was an act of charity. And similar to Janita, it took someone else to approach him about this opportunity

to recruit via a work trial. Without that approach, he would not have actively 'looked' for a disabled person to join his team. However, from the start he was unsure that it would benefit the bottom-line of the business:

You know it may prove to be an investment, but you know we've done that as primarily an act of charity really. You know it's only a few hundred pounds a month, so I've said if we can break-even on it, and provide him with a job, and a stepping-stone to enable him for his future, then I'd be quite happy with that. (Bruce)

His comments make it clear that he had low expectations from the start, comparing the work trial as different compared to his non-disabled staff:

So, in that particular case, profit is not the prime motivation. But that is different from the way in which I consider employing my other employees. (Bruce)

His experience was tainted by problems with receiving payment from the employment support provider (the large national charity). Bruce said it left him feeling "*disappointed and quite angry*" at the poor communication and payment structure which in the end would leave him economically at a loss:

This slow administration has made the exercise economically unattractive. So, we are actually in a state where we are making a loss on him... The payment from [large charity] was for the initial training while he was on the scheme. We were able to invoice for time spent on supervision and training. That stops at the point that his placements end with us - at that point we decide about whether we employ him or not. If we decide not to employ him then that would have been just that one off payment. We took the decision to employ him so after that point its entirely up to us - the payment is up to us. He is on benefits; he's working less than 16 hours per week for us so as not to affect his benefits. So, we are employing him for two days a week and pay him on an hourly basis. (Bruce)

Bruce then went on to say he would try this type of recruitment approach again, "*but with a different prime provider next time*". Critically, the work placement transitioned into an offer of paid employment and Bruce reported no concerns or issues with continuing this in the longer-term suggesting that recruiting in this way can indeed lead to successful outcomes. However, it is noted by previous research, that (in general) this type of recruitment approach does not

usually end so positively, or when it does, it is for those people already closest to the labour market – deemed as work ready (Warren et al. 2015, Woodin, 2015).

Hannah's business operates within the disability sector in the North of England. She describes the organisation as a "*user-led social enterprise*" meaning that 6 out of 8 employees have some type of impairment (including MS, blindness, Autism, and physical impairments). She described the experience of recruiting Tim (a young man with Autism - anonymised), via a work trial which has traditionally been the main route to employment for people with learning difficulties (Goodley and Norouzi, 2005). Hannah self-identifies as a disabled woman and from personal experience of facing employment-related barriers and requiring flexibility, she was willing to listen, to be compassionate and responsive by offering Tim an approach that led to a positive outcome.

It was about what he could do and wanted to do - and it was about us being flexible and creative around that.  
(Hannah)

Hannah acknowledges here that the responsibility to be flexible rests with the employer, not with the employee. This reflects her own experience as a disabled woman who understands what it is like to be denied flexibility from an employer but also her values that have been developed through disability activism and knowledge of the social model principles. As an employer with the power to adjust the way work is organised, she is more than willing to do this for Tim. This approach and understanding of flexibility in work, is referred to again in chapter eight as representative of a social relational approach to *flex-ability in work*. In this sense, Hannah's recruitment practice and willingness to change things to fit her employee rather than expecting the employee to fit the existing culture should be viewed as an example of 'good' employment because it is fully responsive to the needs of the employee.

Diane also described a variety of adjustments made for her employees (not just disability related but more widely in terms of flexible practice). She explained how her own perceptions towards disability changed after meeting and then marrying a disabled man in her early twenties. Her husband is a wheelchair user and much of the discussion focussed upon the day-to-day inconvenience of coming up against inaccessible services or environments. She also highlighted occasions when people talk to her and ignore her husband and the word she used repeatedly was "*frustration*". She could not comprehend why UK society fails to take full account of the needs of people who may need to use mobility aids at the point of designing access features and why non-disabled people are so ignorant to the daily challenges that physically impaired people face:

You know, for us, sometimes doing the simplest of tasks becomes a big upheaval, like going shopping or on holiday. And people just don't get it - it's so

frustrating. And then they wonder why you get pissed off - honestly - it's so annoying at times". (Diane)

After sharing her personal experiences, she went on to explain how she consciously and actively "*thinks about*" accessibility in the workplace. She said it was necessary because she has an employee who is a wheelchair user, but also because many of the "*visitors [to the organisation] have a disability*". Diane was extremely proactive in providing adjustments and felt it important to ensure all her employees "*holistic*" needs were being met. The following example also demonstrates a concern for supporting independence and inclusion for a member of staff:

I purchased a glide-about trolley so a work colleague could walk short distances, but also so she would be able to make people a cup of tea, because we always make each other drinks or carry things from office to office. It makes her feel independent really rather than rely on us to be carrying things around for her. You know she can feel like she is contributing. (Diane)

In terms of changing working practices for her employees, Diane said:

We have flexible working, so one person working with us had issues with pain, so we allowed them to work the hours that best suited them - within reason. Obviously, the job still had to be done. We've changed people's working hours over the years, and it doesn't usually matter to us which days they work, as long as the work gets done between Monday to Friday. They can work from home; you know if they have fatigue or if pain was a problem. We've had people with Asperger's, anxiety, depression etc. and obviously there was additional support - and just keeping a close eye on them to make sure they don't get stressed. (Diane)

Overall, the response to supporting disabled workers was mixed, with manufacturing sector employers or employers who provide more manual type services showing signs of ambivalence compared to service sector employers. They appeared to be much more perceptive to the needs of each individual member of their team but only a few recognised the investment of time and energy paying-back into the business in terms of staff wellbeing or economic gain for the business. What was not so forthcoming by most was an appreciation that even slight restructuring or flexibility in the way jobs get done, could reap huge benefits for disabled workers and the business in ways that reduce psycho-emotional disablism (Thomas, 2007; Reeve, 2014) and increase profits. Therefore, as it stands it would appear the 'business case' (Casey,

2019; Sayce, 2011) message currently used in demand-side policies such as Disability Confident, which advocates recruiting for 'diverse talent' is not influencing SME employer hiring and retention practice.

### **Conclusion**

By capturing insights from SME employers into their experiences and attitudes towards recruiting, retaining, and progressing disabled people, this chapter presents new insights from a 'missing' sector of employers about issues most have never contemplated before. Employers' responses help to identify the attitudinal, systematic, and institutional discrimination that policy makers have so far failed to address. What remains is to explore disabled people's experiences of working for SME employers and this will be presented in the chapter that follows.

## **CHAPTER 7: DISABLED PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCES AND EXPECTATIONS**

### **Introduction**

This chapter presents the data collected during interviews with twelve disabled people to explore their personal experiences of time spent working for SME employers. As employment is such an expansive theme it would be impossible to cover the full range of issues arising from the collected data. For example, I have omitted all comments in relation to wider welfare reform concerns over benefit reassessments, conditionality and sanctioning and eligibility for retaining a Motability vehicle or Personal Independence Payments (PIP) (Patrick, 2017; Ryan, 2019) because, although important, other themes were more insightful for capturing the specific experience of employment in SME workplaces. Therefore, the chapter encapsulates the core themes identified across all participant interview data, outlining specifically the experiences whilst in-work rather than the experience of finding work or moving from worklessness into employment.

Three key interrelated themes arose. The first section looks at the experiences, benefits and challenges of obtaining informal flexibility in work or formal reasonable adjustments. The second section presents the experiences of using Access to Work. The final section presents disabled people's views on the process and concerns of disclosing an impairment as well as the strategies used to time disclosure to their own advantage in an attempt to avoid anticipated discrimination.

### **Flexibility, relationships and values**

Often, but not always, the participants cited reasonable adjustments as key to their successful employment experience. Most often though, it was the notion of informal forms of flexibility that seemed to trigger a positive outcome and on the whole smaller employers seem to be well placed to offer a range of informal psycho-emotional supports for each individual worker due to the strong interpersonal relationships that develop between employee and line manager or business owner. The employer data presented in chapter six confirmed most do operate informally, without a policy for reasonable adjustments or equality and diversity but the employers did not acknowledge this necessarily as a positive arrangement for disabled people. As noted later (see page 165-166) in this thesis, informal processes are one feature of the flexibility concept specific to the characteristic of SMEs. In this way, informal flex-ability expects employers to go beyond the formal practical expectations of equality law and the need for formal reasonable adjustments. Informal flex-ability attends to the wider workplace culture and the psycho-emotional aspects of building supportive interpersonal relationships in SME work contexts.

Whilst the employer data raised an issue over attitudes that favour 'sameness' in the recruitment process, the data coming from interviews with disabled people suggests that once inside a small

organisation, the informal approach can lessen internalised oppression because employers are more willing to see 'ability'. Also, with less employees it also means a workplace atmosphere is based upon higher levels of trust and reciprocity making each employee feel they have been selected on merit rather than a tokenistic gesture to create 'diverse' workplaces.

On the whole, participants were highly complementary about the benefits of working for smaller organisations, noting how the flatter structure in SMEs (Lai et al., 2015) has the greater potential to build better relationships, making it easier for workers to access key decision makers.

You are much closer to the decision maker so you can influence the organisational culture if you can get access to the people at the top and they are willing to listen. (Colin)

These finding echoes previous research by Barnes et al. (1998) which showed smaller employers tend to offer more support tailored to each individual worker despite having less resources.

Dean has a varied experience working in SMEs, including in the retail and hospitality sectors (during his student years) and later in a law firm after graduating. He now works for a small charity providing advocacy for disabled people. He considers in most cases SME employers have more supportive values because of the potential for regular interaction with the line manager and his comments highlight what previous research by Scope (2017) has shown that close proximity to disabled people improves employer perceptions of ability rather than relying solely on misinformation in "benefit cheat" narratives of the media and politicians (Johanssen and Garrisi, 2020; Pring, 2020):

In my experience it is the small, more family type organisations that will have more time and do the right thing..You are not just a number. And if the manager, or the person in charge is walking round that smaller building regularly and seeing the individual, they get to see the clearer picture, they get to see the person. (Dean)

Dean also experienced less competition between colleagues and a more collegiate approach in smaller organisations. He expressed this by referring to his work with larger organisations in tackling discrimination at work in his current role as a Disability Advocate. His own observations led him to assert that discrimination "*is much worse in performance driven environments*" - implying that SMEs are not performance driven:

In my experience, the chance to get in the door in a bigger firm is incredibly slim. They want their pound of flesh. They will have performance plans, day in day out.

You know they will say, we will do a slight reasonable adjustment. The HR departments manage people out of jobs. Not all the time, not entirely but they will have very strict policies and processes and disabled people do not feature largely in these policies. (Dean)

Colin's career history includes working for large disability charities for a number of years, followed by employment as a communications specialist in a very small Public Relations (PR) agency for several years. Today, he can be considered a "portfolio worker" meaning he sells a variety of skills either to employers or to companies on a self-employed basis (Handy, 1994). This was not unusual amongst the group of interviewees there was a commonality of occupational choices in terms of sectors in which they work which tended to be linked to disability services in one way or another, but also examples of disabled people becoming self-employed.

These findings may suggest becoming self-employed was chosen because of a need for flexibility, in terms of accommodating personal impairment effects (Thomas, 1999, 2007). UK evidence (Boylan and Burchardt, 2002) found that self-employment rates were disproportionately high for individuals with musculoskeletal problems, and more specifically for women with mental health problems. In contrast, men with sensory impairments are disproportionately unlikely to be in self-employment. Self-employment has been found to enable greater flexibility in choosing working hours, and other task-related functions such as setting the pace of work, the order of physical tasks, and the ability to work at home. It is then argued that these aspects of self-employment allow a better matching between impairment and work (Pagan, 2009; Jones and Latreille, 2011).

For some of the participants in this study moving into self-employment was seen as an advantage for the freedom it offers in how, when and where they perform their work which correlates with previous research (Pagan, 2009; Jones and Latreille, 2011). For Paresh, it was viewed as positive because it reflects his "*ability to be entrepreneurial and independent*" (both highly valued attributes in market-based liberal economies). But more often, it was a consequence of necessity because of difficulties in securing flexible employment in any size organisation. In the end, faced with systemic and attitudinal barriers, the data from these interviews concur with previous evidence showing that disabled people are more likely to take on the precarious risk of becoming self-employed compared to non-disabled people (Jones and Latreille, 2011; Pagan, 2009), and it is felt by some as their only employment pathway to achieve self-sufficiency and maintain their self-respect. Viewed critically, this is further evidence to support Finkelstein's (1980) claims that attitudes towards disabled people (and their perceived deficits) continue to undermine and devalue disabled people leading to their experiences of psycho-emotional disablism. It also reflects inadequate attempts by some employers to follow the spirit of the UNCRPD (2006) or adhere to the law (Equality Act, 2010).

At present Colin works as a communications consultant to improve organisations' profiles and reputations (mainly in the disability arena) and also works part-time offering equality training on the social model of disability (Oliver, 1983, 1990) to commercial and non-profit enterprises. He also sits as a lay member on disability benefit tribunals. Thinking back to when he worked at the PR agency he says:

They (the SME employer) were really responsive. They were a small family run business and they liked to sell themselves as being different to other London PR firms "like, we are nice people". And so, there was a set of values you know. I think there is some flexibility around culture in a small business. So, if you get a willing ear, and some open-mindedness what you can do is turn it into a benefit. (Colin)

Colin makes an interesting point about "*values*" being important in the employment relationship and how that can make an employer more likely to "*treat their employees well*" and more willing to be flexible in their response – "*So I knew it was ok to go to them about my impairment and say, I need extra help*".

All the adjustments they made for me were really about processes rather than about specific bits of equipment. For example, I could come in late and go home late because that meant I miss the traffic and travelling is made less difficult. (Colin)

Similarly, Paul pointed to the close relationships that can develop in smaller organisations and how this can influence attitudes towards providing support. He now works as a copywriter for an SME in the hospitality sector in what he describes as his first "*real job since leaving academia*". Although he had only been in this position for eight months and it was not a permanent contract of employment (he hoped it soon would be offered on that basis), he reports "*a good experience so far*", noting that working for a small employer is a benefit because "*being close to the key decision makers makes it easier to get things done*". The opportunity for conversations to happen more naturally without the hindrance of following written formal policies and procedures:

I think that there is scope (in SMEs) to have conversations, an open and frank conversation with somebody who can implement any changes that you think are necessary. If you are working in a big corporation, any changes you request would probably be linked to a policy that would be implemented for everyone. There is a little bit more tailored to the individual in SMEs, so

you do feel you are part of the organisation rather than just a cog in a machine. (Paul)

Despite claiming “*things get done*”, nine months on Paul was still waiting for his employer to provide him with an office on the ground floor meaning he must climb stairs which can be problematic. He only uses a wheelchair “*when really necessary*” and on most “*good days*” he can “*manage the stairs*”, but that still requires him using a rollator. When I asked Paul if he would consider challenging his employer over this slow response, he felt confident it would be resolved eventually “*if they decide to give me a permanent contract*”. This is interesting because it points to a reluctance from employers to make adjustments during probationary periods or for those working on temporary contracts of employment.

Dominic also commented on the importance of relationships. At the time of interview, he was unemployed, but had previously worked for several small disability charities, one of which was a user-led organisation. He spoke about the benefits of working in a smaller organisation:

Working in smaller organisations there is a more intimate kind of relationship, less corporate. Small organisations I have worked for have been fine because its intimate and although the knowledge might not be there, policies might not be there, the relationships are better. There is a willingness to understand. Whereas in the bigger organisations, you get a lot of bureaucracy, especially in the private sector. I can tell you that I have had experience in big organisations that have a lot more resources and they can still be bad employers. (Dominic)

Tom’s experience of work includes both large and small charitable organisations operating in the disability sector. He also described a short spell working as self-employed and he currently works for a small private sector organisation who specialise in developing sporting events for disabled people. In relation to responding to the needs of workers, Tom comments on the flexible response from SMEs:

Small employers are more agile in terms of their ability to respond in more flexible ways, although they will usually have less money floating around. (Tom)

Kevin describes his impairment as an acquired brain injury following a road traffic accident which left him with “*poor memory, bad speech and a difficult personality*”. Early in the interview, he said that for many years since the accident, he has worked tirelessly as a “*disability campaigner*” attempting to change policy, working alongside Labour politicians and other campaigners to oppose Government imposed austerity measures that impact upon disability benefit recipients (Ryan, 2019). Prior to his injury, his working history includes roles in senior

management positions in both large and small organisations. Kevin stated that working in a large organisational culture's see "*difference as a weakness*" and "*big companies think about will this person conform*". In contrast, his experience working in SMEs was positive:

The person who owns the business and decides to give you a chance is more willing to recognise your ability...they understand your abilities and your limitations and are prepared to work with you. Small businesses tend to look at things from a different angle. (Kevin)

Whilst the majority of participants spoke positively about their employment experiences in SME context, their accounts also showed moments of implicit employer discrimination. A clear example of attitudinal discrimination based on negative perceptions of productivity was provided by Simon. When he worked for a small disability charity he was left "*shocked at the attitude of one particular non-disabled line-manager*" when she tried to take advantage of his Personal Assistant (PA). Simon recalls how she would regularly bypass him to ask his PA to perform job tasks on Simon's behalf. According to Simon, on several occasions she asked the PA to type a document "*because they are faster than me*" or would "*ask my PA to carry file boxes across the office*". Simon would then need to intervene and ask his PA not to perform such duties:

I do not want my PA to carry the box, they don't work for them, in the nicest possible way, they work for me, so I don't want my PA to carry a box for them. If they fall it comes down on my insurance. So yeah, that is when I felt discriminated against (Simon)

In the same charity Simon rang his line manager to let her know that he would need to work from home because of effects linked to his impairment which made it difficult for him to make it into the office that day. He was not sick, but simply needed to be excused from travelling because his legs were particularly shaky, but he knew if he stayed at home, he could still complete all of the day's workload. Instead of allowing Simon this reasonable adjustment, his line manager insisted that the day gets officially recorded as a "*sick day*". He argued with his employer that this was unfair treatment and discrimination based on his impairment, because it failed to consider his access requirements. What was most problematic for Simon was this treatment was "*from an organisation that is meant to help disabled people rather than discriminate against them*". Simon feels such poor experiences are clear examples of direct discrimination against him by his line manager, but he opted to leave the charity rather than make an official complaint.

Working from home was mentioned by others as critical when having an "*off day*" or to help get around problems with "*transport*".

I'm kind of fortunate that the job I've got is one that I can do from home, so you know, there is more opportunity for me to you know, state openly. It's like, look I'm not coming in the office today, my knee's playing up. Or I'm just absolutely shattered. I'm going to work from home. And they'll just be like, yeh fine [Paul]

Yeh next time, I'm job hunting I think I'm going to ask more questions about like the work environment and whether it would be ok for me to wear headphones and how much time I'm expected to be be at the desk, whether I can take work from home days, because I wasn't allowed to work at home in the old one because I was only temporary. And I also had a really long commute, which isn't their fault, but it does kind of, if you're supposed to be doing a seven-hour workday, you're actually doing nine, ten, eleven hours because you're commuting a long way, then it does make a difference to how much you can actually do. So, if I would be able to do one day a week at home and be in an environment that wasn't like threatening, then I think I'd probably have been able to do a lot better when I was actually at work [Holly]

It's working from home. But it's also the employer has to be willing to bend over backwards for you as well. Now with me, working from home suits much better but I would argue, even if in a few years they [business owners] decided, let's get an office space in London they would say, all right what we'll do, we will spend, I can envisage it, right because they've already made those adjustments, right. I can see them saying to me, oh we'll get a taxi to pick you up to bring you into the office. There will be two assistants waiting here for you whenever you need them all day. The toilet's accessible, it's got a hoist in it, X Y Z. [Paresh]

Dean's current role working in a small disability advocacy charity places him in a position to collect stories of discrimination by other disabled workers, during the recruitment process and whilst trying to retain employment. With a degree in law, Dean also understands the rights disabled people have set out in the legal system, although, living in NI he feels the protections

for disabled people are weaker compared to England because they are still “*stuck with the DDA*”. However, he suggests based on talking to disabled people who have experienced employer discrimination, the vast majority will not take legal action because of the expectation of damaging future employment opportunities. In his own experience of employer discrimination in the recruitment process when he was offered a job and then later the offer was revoked on the basis that the cinema manager decided a wheelchair user would be a health and safety risk, he says:

I could have taken them to the Equality Commission and because of my legal background and friends that I have, I was fully confident I could have taken a case against them and won. They would have settled probably before going to tribunal, but the problem for me as a disabled individual was, I would never get work again. (Dean)

These concerns illustrate the tensions and power dynamics inherent in the employer/employee relationship and the risk of challenging poor employer practice.

### **Access to Work (AtW)**

A significant and challenging theme overall related to problems with AtW. As discussed in previous chapters, AtW (DWP, 2019) has been referred to as “the best kept secret and a passport to successful employment” (Sayce, 2011:2). For the vast majority of participants, it was not a secret, they have heard of the grant scheme and more than half make use of the funding available. Participants cited examples that illustrate when employer attitudes or those of AtW “professional” staff have prevented them from obtaining the adjustments they felt would be the most beneficial in aiding their ability to perform well in their job. A recurring complaint made by participants related to delays or changes to the administration of the AtW scheme since it moved away from a local JobCentre Disability Employment Advisers (DEA) to a call centre-type operation. However, the quote from Tina below also suggests that DEAs in JobCentre’s are also problematic. She spoke about her experience of being out of work and visiting a DEA at her local JobCentre. She picked up on the assumptions made by the adviser, that were framed upon assumed low ability. For example, the DEA was surprised to hear that Tina had achieved postgraduate level qualifications:

I think disability employment advisers aren't good at all. Whenever I've spoken to them... I just thought, oh my goodness, you know nothing. I felt like I was training them because they said to me have you heard of the DDA and I said “yes, I bloody well campaigned for it”. The woman was reading through my form and she said: “you've got a Masters” and I said, “yes” and she said “you!” [laughter]. It was just the way she said it. So, if they have low expectations of disabled job seekers and your

confidence is already rock bottom from being unemployed for a long period of time, its just wrong. (Tina)

In terms of equipment, AtW advisors now expect disabled people to know what equipment they may need. This expectation creates a tension for not all disabled people will be in a position to educate themselves on the specific types of support available. Neither will they be confident enough to articulate, explain and justify why they need it. There were also concerns that many disabled people and employers are still unaware of the AtW scheme, and my interviews with SME employers discussed in the previous chapter confirm this:

I think there is a huge issue around the lack of knowledge of Access to Work and the support it can provide. The number of times when I have spoken to employers and I'm telling them about Access to Work for the first time. When I am giving talks and that, it's quite staggering and the Government really needs to get on this. (Tina)

For Tina, she was uninformed of the funding and support available to her for a long period of time. It was not until she went to work for a small disability organisation that she learned about the scheme and what could be on offer to her to enable a better employment experience. This is despite having previously spoken to JobCentre staff on several occasions:

My only issue was at the beginning when I started work, no one told me about it. The whole time I was there, my first year of work after graduating I was paying my own cabs on a credit card. Didn't know anything about this until I went to work for a disability organisation and a couple of months into that it was a colleague who was disabled who said to me, oh, how you getting on with Access to Work, is it working out for you? I'd never heard of it. I had already had a couple of meetings with disability employment advisers at that stage and not one of them had mentioned it. (Tina)

Dominic discussed his current dispute with an SME employer “because they have failed to understand their role in supporting him or how to go about doing so”. He says employers expect the disabled person to tell them “*what to do*”, when actually, the responsibility rests with the employer to understand the legal basis for non-discrimination:

It's about attitudes and a lack of understanding. I think any employer should know about policies and schemes that are there to help employ disabled people, like AtW. So,

we've got a law, but employers don't know or fully understand what the law is. (Dominic)

The main issue Tom faced was a reluctance from potential employers to recruit him knowing that he would need transport costs funded upfront via AtW. He recounted how several employers had previous bad experiences in getting those payments reimbursed from the AtW scheme:

Two or three companies I spoke to were reluctant and wouldn't use AtW because they had had prior experience of money being delayed. So, a couple of companies when they found out the travel costs were so much, and I would have to pay for them myself unless I got AtW - it was a non-starter (Tom).

In another instance the employer offered Tom the job and also covered the travel costs knowing they could reclaim them later. However, the reimbursement became an issue and, in the end, "my employer just wrote it off". This type of negative employer experience of scheme administration was also highlighted by Bruce in the previous chapter in relation to not getting paid in a timely fashion when he offered a work trial through an employment programme. Tom understood from their point of view the economic problems this caused them as a small business:

It's not the fault of the company, that's the fault of the process and the payment mechanism and the way that people run it. Some of the bills are £1,000 per month so if it's a small company or a one-man band, you can't expect them to wait. If that money isn't coming in for a couple of months, then that could even send somebody out of business. So, whenever anybody asks me about AtW I'm just like don't bother because it's not fit for purpose. Theoretically its good but in practice is doesn't really work. (Tom)

In contrast, Colin reported a far more positive experience of receiving AtW to fund overnight hotel accommodation based on his difficulty using public transport. Yet, this provision seems to be highly unusual. According to comments from other participants this type of payment would be very helpful, but when they have asked, they have been told AtW does not cover the cost of hotels. Colin even goes so far as praising AtW assessors for their willingness to be flexible, by which he means, a willingness to look beyond to offer a tailored solution although he also spoke about cutbacks in support:

I think especially for small businesses the Access to Work scheme is a really amazing scheme, but its not as

good as it was because they have cut back on staff and cut back on the packages. So, my Access to Work grant was cut back by 10%. I get Access to Work money to cover the costs of overnight stays because I find travelling difficult. So, if I was going to London for a meeting usually I won't go up the same day I'll go up the night before and stay over and Access to Work subsidises that. So its not just, can I have some equipment, they are open to a discussion about it. With that flexibility its really good. (Colin)

The reports of inconsistent treatment by AtW assessors, can be interpreted as evidence to of a discretionary scheme, whereby, different assessors can lead to different outcomes. This was noted in an evaluation of AtW for DWP in (Dewson et al., 2009). However, it also suggests that perhaps Colin's close working relationship with DWP as a lay panel member for PIP appeals, and his network of contacts helps him to influence and negotiate better support. Colin did also report getting his PIP decision overturned at the first stage (mandatory consideration) which he himself admits "*is highly unusual*".

Kelly says the main barriers she experiences relate to communication and relationship building. She is currently employed as a study skills tutor by a start-up SME who specialise in arranging Disabled Students Allowance (DSA) support for Higher Education (HE) students. She is also a self-employed piano teacher and considers this to be her primary job role. She says she will not apply for AtW funding "*because of the hassle caused by not having an official diagnosis of autism - so I probably wouldn't get anything. Plus, I get all the support I need anyway*". Her line manager allows her flexibility in work in terms of working hours, the speed at which she completes tasks and sharing workload with other colleagues if Kelly "*feels stressed – when it all gets too much for me*". Talking about the relationship with her line manager who she had worked with at the university before they were made redundant, she says:

She is well aware of my idiosyncrasies and aware that I need certain types of adjustments, but it's all done quite informally. She also knows that I'm quite fragile since I left the last job (due to bullying which she witnessed) and we've had several chats where she has sat me down and said, "look is there anything you need me to do?" (Kelly).

Kelly raises an important point about working for a small business and having a close relationship to the owner who she considers to be a friend. She worries about the impact her application for AtW would have on the business owner:

I also don't want my manager to get into a position where she is asked to pay for reasonable adjustments that I know she can't afford because the business is a fledgling business and its very precarious at the minute and I know their financial position is precarious. In terms of assistive software, I've already got it anyway. (Kelly)

Despite not having an 'official diagnosis of autism', Kelly's relationship with the line manager is built upon a sense of trust. The line manager also acknowledges Kelly's particular impairments as a business asset by valuing her "*autistic qualities*":

My boss has said to me lately that she comes to me for advice on Autism because now I have worked out that I am Autistic it seems to be my specialist interest. So, she keeps directing people towards me, and she sends me stuff to check and double check because she knows that I look at the fine detail, far more than she does. So, to her I'm not just an asset because I'm a study skills tutor, but I've got the extra assets that other study skills tutors don't have. (Kelly)

### **Psycho-emotional disablism: the barrier to being**

One insight that Kelly highlighted as important was the tendency for disabled people to gravitate towards jobs working with other disabled people. Indeed, only one participant had not worked within the 'disability' industry or for an organisation that is focused on issues around supporting disabled people in one way or another. There was a general feeling that it is better to work with other disabled people because they might be more empathetic towards the need for flexibility so disabled people gravitate towards organisations *for or of* disabled people.

Previous research has shown that some disabled people are worried about discussing their impairment with employers, concerned that it may damage their employment prospects (Scope, 2017). In light of the problems disabled workers can face within the workplace, it is understandable that they seek through various ways to influence the views of line managers and work colleagues. In attempting to "fit in" some participants reported efforts to influence and control how others perceive them within the workplace.

For example, Colin recalls "*modifying some of my behaviour*" during the recruitment process because "*I was looking to get in the room, so I didn't disclose*". Interestingly, he compares this to previous employment in the disability charity sector when he did not try and "*conceal my disability*", by saying "*I felt very aware and exposed that I was in a private sector business, I suppose I anticipated discrimination*". He said he was able to "*hide*" his impairments quite effortlessly from the potential employer during the first interview. He deliberately (strategically) opted not to disclose his impairment (or required adjustments) at the first stage of recruitment

– preferring to wait until he had secured a second interview – at which point he said, “*look this is the reality of my ability to get around*”. Thinking about the nature of his impairment, functional ability, and the option to “*hide*” his impairment in many situations he believes that has made a difference to the attitude of others and their response to him as a disabled person:

But I think there are some impairments where people go “oh that’s trouble, that’s difficult, that’s complicated”. Whereas, my impairment was, “oh, he just has a bit of trouble walking” (Colin)

For others, the denial of reasonable adjustments was just one concern, but more noticeable, it was the process (and requirement) to speak out about personal (and sometimes embarrassing) impairment effects (Thomas, 1999, 2007), and the anticipated negative consequence of doing so that induced a sense of fear – the psycho-emotional affect (Reeve, 2004, 2012). As theories of affect and disability studies illustrate, indirect forms of psycho-emotional disability may be less obvious but equally as damaging (Goodley et al., 2018). Looking back to his early employment experience at the commercial law firm Dean seems to accept that his own lack of knowledge was “*partly to blame for the lack of reasonable adjustments*”. He feels responsible for not gaining the support he needed, believing that employers would not intentionally discriminate against him. This notion of being “proactive” in asking for adjustments was echoed by Tina. In her role as a disability awareness trainer with organisations of all sizes, Tina describes the process of gaining reasonable adjustments, and the need for the employee to be “confident in asking for them”.

I am confident enough to do that, but I fear for a graduate coming in. You know, first job after graduation. If they have a situation that maybe it fluctuates or is not very well known I fear for them because how do they get into that kind of dialogue. (Tina)

But as noted by Tina and several other participants, opening up a discussion with the employer about what adjustments are needed can be problematic and the cause of much stress and anxiety. Disclosing an impairment at any stage of one’s career is an extremely personal act. Talking to family can be difficult enough, never mind talking to an employer, Human Resource (HR) team or colleagues about one’s impairment effects. Asking for adaptations to help perform a role can feel like a weakness and many of the disabled people I interviewed said they worried how other colleagues and managers would perceive their ability to perform the tasks satisfactorily. This excerpt from Dean reflects these concerns:

You know you are trying to keep up with a lot of other people in that firm and you don't want to look weaker (Dean)

These concerns illustrate how Dean attempts to “*not stand out*” amongst his work colleagues in his effort not to be viewed as “*different or requiring extra support*”. In this way, he wanted to be seen by his colleagues as “*just like them, fitting-in and proving I was recruited purely on merit*”.

Having the confidence to raise the subject of support with the employer often relies upon the relationship one has with their direct line manager. What is needed, Tina says, is a line manager who is “*willing to listen and be open-minded enough to then actually take the necessary steps to put the right support and resources in place*”. But I contend, this becomes a ‘disclosure dilemma’ with its own risks:

There is a gamble involved in expressing and revealing what can be perceived as a weakness to the person who pays your salary. The thing that I think has made a real difference for me in terms of whether I’ve had a good experience, or a poor experience has been my line manager. Whether or not they are supportive of me and also understanding of my support needs and how my impairment might affect me. That has been good, bad, and indifferent in lots of different jobs that I’ve done.  
(Tina)

Like Dean and Colin, Holly observes, her main worry was asking for adjustments in the early stages of her employment. Responding to the question about timing of disclosure for her hidden impairments, Holly described this as a “*dilemma*” because she would prefer to wait until she had settled into the workplace. She says this delay tactic allowed time to personally adapt and to fully understand what the employer expected of her in the way that tasks must be performed. She was unsure if she would require extra support when she agreed to the job offer, therefore, she “*chose to stay quiet*”. However, this silence became an issue for her later when she felt the need for support, yet by this stage of her employment she also felt too uncomfortable to request it.

Because it was my first permanent nine-to-five job that isn’t an internship or isn’t part-time, I wasn’t quite sure how well I would cope with it or what the obstacles would be. So, I didn’t want to ask for something and then have it turn out that it wasn’t an issue. And then by the time I’d realised I’m really struggling to keep my focus I thought it was too awkward to bring up.  
(Holly)

These feeling of “*awkwardness*” identify that Holly was consciously aware of the tension in the employment relationship but more importantly she was internalising this experience – blaming it on her “*Autism thing*” rather than seeing this for what it is - psycho-emotional disability caused

by a failure to consider affective dimensions of employment relations. But she also felt “*uncertain about the process for asking for adjustments, not knowing who to ask*”. She assumed it would be her line manager but felt awkward talking about personal impairment effects in what she perceived to be a professional relationship. The whole experience left her feeling “*daunted*”.

I would assume that it would have been my manager, and I worked with her every day so it's not like I didn't know who she was. But we had like a professional relationship, but I wasn't particularly comfortable to talk to her about outside stuff, which I guess is also like an Autism thing in and of itself. When I had to hand in my notice I was like, I don't understand what I'm supposed to do. So, the process of asking for adjustments was too like daunting for me to even work out what I would need to say. (Holly)

She feels the key to her gaining support from her next employer is going to require her asking far more practical questions during the initial interview and being “*upfront and proactive in approaching the issue at the earliest stage of the recruitment process*”:

I'm going to ask more questions about the work environment and whether it would be ok for me to wear headphones, and how much time I'm expected to be at the desk and whether I can work from home some days. (Holly)

The act of passing as non-disabled or concealing impairment (for those that can) during the recruitment interview process was described as a deliberate act taken to prevent anticipated discrimination. This was a concern for nearly half of the participants who spoke about strategies for deciding when to disclose their impairment, with most saying they do not declare their impairment on applications. Instead, the majority of participants said they prefer to wait until they meet in person at the interview stage. This finding is not surprising, given that evidence confirms the most common experiences of discrimination occurs in the recruitment process (Meager et al., 1999).

It was widely acknowledged that employers would prefer to know about potential adjustments that may be needed to perform the job, but that applicants would prefer to delay those discussions until after securing the job offer and commencing employment. Whilst there can be benefits to early disclosure, evidence from the interviews conducted for this thesis reveal there is still a fear, anxiety, and a reluctance. I have coined it, a *disclosure dilemma* because ‘coming out’ too soon is perceived as risky. For those with more obvious (visible) impairments it may not be possible to conceal, but when it is possible to delay disclosure, or if adjustments to working routines/tasks are not required, the *disclosure dilemma* is felt less. It also reveals how disabled people anticipate or pre-empt discrimination. By opting to conceal an impairment,

these workers are risking employment without support. Although, the participants have the right to delay disclosure, it was apparent from several of the comments that this causes an element of anxiety and fear about potential repercussions later in the employment relationship – again the ‘disclosure dilemma’ is revealed. There were real concerns that employers would be “*pissed off*” if they thought they had been “*lied to or deceived*”, which ultimately has the potential to create animosity from line managers and colleagues further along in the employment relationship.

### **Conclusion**

Findings presented in this chapter identified complex experiences of employment in SMEs. For example, knowledge of the social model of disability (Oliver, 1983) appeared to lessen the impact of psycho-emotional disablism (especially internalised oppression) for some people as it affirmed a positive disabled identity (Cameron, 2009, 2011) and added to their resilience to resist devaluation tendencies. For those participants with longer working trajectories, there is acceptance that in general attitudes have improved since the DDA (1995, 2005). Yet, they can remember back to the policies developed by the New Labour Government that had the potential over time to make a real positive difference in supporting disabled people through schemes and work programmes if they were adequately funded. Those same participants have the memory of AtW advisors who were enabled to tailor support and equipment to the individual worker far easier than the system that exists today.

Based on evidence that “going to university almost halves the gaps in employment rates between disabled and non-disabled people, compared to those who only have GCSEs” (Office for Students, 2019), the findings from this data becomes even more important because the majority of participants in this study are not representative of the wider disabled community (see participant characteristics in Chapter Five). It is perhaps even more enlightening to hear about the barriers that well-educated disabled adults face in negotiating flexibility from their employer or accessing reasonable adjustments. Also recognising this was a small qualitative study, made up of a self-selecting sample, means the findings are not intended to be generalisable but they are insightful. The experiences presented in this chapter have raised two notable concerns. First, disabled people view SME employers on the whole very positively because of the potential for building strong interpersonal relationships with key decision makers. These relationships become critical to gaining flexibility. Second, disabled people experience real concerns over timing of disclosure of their impairment and need for adaptations to working hours or other forms of adjustments.

In the following chapter I build upon the core themes identified from SME employer interviews and the interviews outlined in this chapter with disabled people to develop two new concepts: *flex-ability in work* and *disclosure dilemma*.

## **CHAPTER 8: DISCUSSION**

### **Introduction**

#### **Changing workplace cultures**

Observations made in chapters six and seven suggest that in general SME workplaces offer disabled people supportive employment experiences, but SME employers are not aware they are doing a 'good' job. Despite disabled people's positivity, there were still some issues that need to be addressed. First, SME employer attitudes still tend to veer towards ableist normative assumptions of expected ability linked to an able-bodied worker. This points to a need for a collective conscious effort to oppose ableism and the underlying ideologies that sustain it through Government policies and discourse.

Second, whilst many of the private sector employers had not heard of positive action provisions within the Equality Act (2010), which in itself corresponds with other research (EHRC, 2019), it seemed clear that some employers were anxious about adopting positive approaches, worrying this would constitute an unlawful act of positive discrimination. This highlights the confusion around the concept of positive action and most employers will interpret it as another form of discrimination when in fact there are legitimate times when discrimination is lawful in very limited and specific circumstances for disabled people (Lawson, 2008).

Third, at surface level, employers claimed to be positive about employing disabled people, "if they can do the job", but there was still a sense of ambivalence around some impairments in their own workplace. This points very strongly to a lack of knowledge and confidence around impairment and impairment effects which supports previous research that found employer anxieties and 'disability discomfort' (Lindsay et al., 2019). Developing employer confidence is also critical in helping them to start an open conversation about disability disclosure with their workforce and job candidates (Lindsay et al., 2020). Other research also highlights the need for developing a 'culture of disability disclosure' to avoid negative side-effects for disabled employees (Marshall et al., 2020; von Schrader et al., 2014).

In this way, two new concepts have been developed from these observations: *disclosure dilemma* and *flex-ability* in work aimed to attend to the affective cultural dimensions of the SME workplace.

Changing workplace cultures cannot happen without support from the rational policy dimension. Disabled people and SME employers need policy, and the relationship between affective and rational dimensions of the employment relationship are central to this thesis. At a practical level, this relies upon complementing the need to change policy with the need for creating opportunities for people with varying abilities to work together to build interpersonal relationships across the binary of disabled/non-disabled, impaired/non-impaired. Afterall, disablism and ableist logics are likely to fade away only when the common sense understanding of the 'norm' is replaced with an understanding of our shared interdependency and vulnerability.

In this study it appeared that flexibility for SME employers in more traditional manual occupation sectors means recruiting and retaining workers perceived as having certain abilities to perform specific roles. From this viewpoint, employees must be willing and able to perform work within certain predefined (although not always explicitly expressed) normative structures and rhythms. No account of embodied difference is considered because underlying these practices are ableist-logics that support the view of an ideal-worker (Foster and Wass, 2012). This tended to be the case for SME employers who operate within more traditional, manual-work sectors such as manufacturing, whereby concerns over health and safety seemed to dominate workplace practice and decision-making over who is welcome to 'fit' into their workplace.

Although it may seem impossible, employers can create inclusive environments by thinking about workspace in a thoughtful way, even in factory environments. There are obvious tensions and complexities though in needing to consider different access requirements for different impairments and full inclusion is therefore radical and challenging (Titchovsky, 2011). For example, some workers with Autism prefer a quiet space compared to an overwhelming open-plan environment, and removing unnecessarily strong lighting, smells and noise can help create comfortable spaces in which to work (Booth, 20016). For people with chronic energy limiting conditions, allowing employees to take regular rest breaks, allowing tasks to be done at a pace that suits the employee whilst still meeting deadlines can help. I am not suggesting this is an easy endeavour especially for SMEs who operate from older buildings, but that is where knowledge of AtW funding should be made available to cover the costs that would be deemed 'unreasonable' for a small employer.

Disabled people in this study made it very clear they appreciate a level of control and choice over how, where and when they perform their work duties. Employees who feel empowered and who have autonomy to choose how, when and where work takes place report being happier at work and therefore more productive making employee engagement in decision making important (CIPD, 2021a). The benefit to employers is employees who are happier, healthier, and more productive (ibid.).

Disabled people need a workplace culture that makes it easier for all employees to be themselves, putting their vulnerabilities on display, letting people see and hear the whole person. In this way, creating an atmosphere of ability-diversity acceptance lets workers know it is ok to say what they need to do their job without fear of prejudice or discrimination. Workers who 'trust' in the workplace culture, expect to receive a response that is appropriate and kind. In this atmosphere of trust and acceptance, disabled people will feel far more willing to talk about ('disclose') impairment effects (Thomas, 1999) (see comments made in chapter seven), thus reducing what I have coined, the *disclosure dilemma*. In turn, it reduces the impact of psycho-emotional disablism, especially the psycho-emotional insecurity felt during the process of asking for workplace adaptations or changes to the organisation of work. Responding to the needs of disabled workers by changing the workplace culture instead of changing the individual is therefore the essence of a social relational model of *flex-ability* in work.

I propose that psycho-emotional disablism is also created by the *disclosure dilemma* in workplaces that feel non-inclusive rather than inclusive to ability-diversity. Conversely, in organisations that adopt a more holistic understanding of ability, the *disclosure dilemma* is reduced or even removed because the employer takes full responsibility for ensuring a social relational approach to embed *flex-ability* within the employment relationship. This *flex-ability* approach is thus defined as: *being inclusive of embodied difference*.

The outcome of such an approach, I hope, is that employer ability expectations are not to 'fit' the worker into existing modes and rhythms of working, but rather to 'fit' the working environment to the needs of an ability-diverse workforce. Essentially, *flex-ability* is a way of thinking and reflecting about ability-diversity. It is an approach to change hearts and minds, to trigger those conscious thoughts about stereotypes and prejudice and unchallenged ableist beliefs. Therefore, reducing prejudice against disabled people relies upon deeper questioning of cultural and economic preferences for certain bodies and minds, certain abilities, and certain ways of functioning. As a form of inclusive practice, a social relational *flex-ability in work* approach raises consciousness among employers and co-workers making them consider other people's individuals' needs holistically, thus developing a workplace culture that supports and values interpersonal relationships for everyone. In this way, *flex-ability* is pre-empting a diversity of ability among the workforce. Employers who value human diversity will then become *flex-able* to the needs of all individual workers.

Essentially, I argue that existing cultural values, policy, and practice are often inflex-able and that by taking a *flex-ability* approach we can empower all workers, with all levels of ability in the workplace and beyond. My conceptualisation of *flex-ability* is constructed to take account of the embodied elements of impaired bodies and minds to accommodate impairment effects. However, significantly, it does not locate impairment as a sign of deficit or the cause of lower productivity. It places the focus upon wider ableist cultural ideology and ableist structure and it expects employers to take time to consider why they organise their workplaces the way they do, and whether they could envisage doing things differently if they realise this could improve productivity for their entire workforce.

*Flex-ability* is driven by a desire to accommodate and indeed celebrate difference and strive towards creating diverse workplaces, including a far wider range of functional ability in ways that make jobs accessible to the needs of the body/mind. Perhaps employers can be convinced of this argument when they are presented with the data that twenty per cent of consumers will also need flex-ability to access their products and services (We Are Purple, 2020), meaning that making these access changes has the potential to increase their profits by twenty percent too. At the moment, not only are employers who are customer facing creating psycho-emotional barriers for potential disabled employees, but also, they are giving the message to disabled consumers that their pound is not welcome. *Flex-ability* in work will be good for consumer relations creating loyalty and good brand image. Afterall, disabled workers are disabled consumers, and evidence suggests businesses who consider accessibility for their consumer

are more competitive and profitable compared to those who do not, with disabled people spending their “purple pound” in spaces that make them feel welcome (We Are Purple, 2020). This finding has the potential to be very powerful when presented to employers, and the Government must find ways to share this insight as an alternative to trying to ‘flog’ disabled people as missing ‘talent’. Given the profit-maximising potential, this message may be used to ‘persuade’ and ‘incentivise’ reluctant employers to hire and retain disabled people. This message will resonate with all employers in a capitalist society because without profit the business ceases to function. I suggest therefore that *flex-ability* in work as an approach promotes inclusive, non-ableist value-based employment relations but importantly it is equally beneficial for both the employer and the employee.

In summary, *flex-ability* in work can be characterised by equitable processes and practice that value diverse forms of ability and bodily difference. Therefore, as an inclusive approach *flex-ability* develops the foundation to combat individual and collective psycho-emotional and structural forms of disablism. As an approach, *flex-ability* in work develops non-disabling, non-normative, and anti-ableist employment relations. It does this by raising awareness of pervasive ableist logics that inform ability expectations, which sustain the privilege of ‘ideal’ workers and the false idea of ‘one best way’ to organise work (Foster and Wass, 2012) based on non-disabled abilities and characteristics. I contend, that extra thought by employers about difference and ability-diversity, accepting we are not the ‘same’ is critical. From this perspective, I argue that making disabled people feel welcome and included is a value decision enacted through social relationships. The observations made in chapter seven demonstrate that if employers act sensitively and remove externally imposed barriers, disabled people can benefit internally because destructive and limiting messages, that tell a person they are “out of place” Kitchin (1998: 351) can be replaced with messages of validation and acceptance. In this way, disabled people sense and feel they belong, in workplaces that are in tune with inclusive practice. From this perspective, employees who are made to feel welcome, are then encouraged to speak openly about impairment effects with non-judgement, which in turn reduces the ‘*disclosure dilemma*’. Viewing working lives in this way is underpinned by a set of values that privileges difference over sameness and disrupts discrimination based on normative ability expectations (Wolbring, 2012a).

### **An education approach to promote *flex-ability* in work**

In chapter one I outlined why the UK Government faces a challenge if it is serious about reducing the disability employment gap. It must balance acceptable levels of employer incentives and regulation against business needs for flexibility in a competitive labour market, and disabled people’s needs for accessibility and flexibility to accommodate impairment effects.

Disabled people in this study noted the importance of employer action to achieve accessibility via flexible working arrangements to reconcile the demands of paid work with the management of impairment effects. Based on the barriers highlighted in chapter six and chapter seven, how might change in SME accessibility for disabled people come about? The data from this research

suggests the answer lays in the *flex-ability* approach to inclusive employment, inspired by social model principles.

### **Conceptualising Flex-ability**

My concept of workplace flex-ability is different to existing literature on workplace flexibility and reasonable adjustments in three ways. First, the concept is based upon the characteristics that are often found in micro and small-sized businesses: informality, 'familyness', familiarity, mutual trust and appreciation for the other, shared vulnerabilities, flatter organisational structures, closer proximity between business owner and worker and strong interpersonal relationships. I contend that these characteristics and behaviours can change as the business grows and begins to employ more people. For example, when a human resource 'expert' is employed to implement formal policies and procedures, the benefits of being micro/small are irreversibly changed and lost. Whilst informal processes are one feature of the flex-ability concept, that does not negate the need for formal written workplace agreements between the employer and employee on agreed upon 'reasonable adjustments'.

Second, the concept of flex-ability deals with ability expectations and ableism because it expects employers of all sizes to educate themselves and their staff about ableism in the same way they would be expected to know about the consequence of sexism, racism, agism and homophobia. In particular the concept of flex-ability raises critical questions around engrained ableist ability expectations, something not covered in existing literature on workplace flexibility that tends to focus upon work-life-balance and the needs of parents or carers.

Third, the concept of flex-ability expects employers to consider the impact that sub-standard formal reasonable adjustments may have on creating psycho-emotional disablism. This is necessary because we know from existing studies that reasonable adjustments to service provision often fail to fundamentally address the ableist nature of workplaces. Yet, existing writing on workplace reasonable adjustments tend to focus only upon changing features which aim to make the disabled worker more productive by making the workplace/workspace environment 'fit' the needs of the impairment effect. Therefore, employers currently only perceive reasonable adjustments in terms of providing equipment, adjusting working hours and helping to reorganise workload allocation within the 'proportionate' duties outlined in the Equality Act (2010). In contrast, the concept of flex-ability goes further by expecting changes to the workplace culture which aim to ensure the relationships between employer/employee are built upon rights and equity principles. In this way, *flex-ability* aims to ensure that all workers are made to 'feel' welcome, trusted and valued for the contribution they make to the business. Employer's willingness to embed *flex-ability* requires a knowledge of ableism and the consequence of such beliefs before the workplace culture can be made sensitive to individual needs, rights and equity, and welcoming of ability-diversity.

I contend that policy such as the Equality Act (2010) and the provision of reasonable adjustments, the Right to Request Flexible Working, Access to Work and Disability Confident are not currently reaching SMEs and policy on its own is not enough to facilitate a change in

employer attitudes. There is a need for an educational agenda to support policy to challenge the engrained nature of ableist attitudes, and this must start at a young age. Education must run side by side with employment policy implementation because without that SMEs are out of their depth and left to unintentionally flounder with some of the requirements to respond to disabled people's needs for *flex-ability* in work.

In general, people do not think about disablism or ableism, so why should employers, line manager's and work colleagues? Indeed, many disabled people would struggle to identify negative experiences as such despite 'feeling' the affects. Both terminologies are largely unknown outside of disability studies and even then, I only came to read about ableism in academic literature during my postgraduate level studies. Expecting employers to reflect upon their taken for granted understanding of disability and their narrow ability expectations will require much deeper and complex conversations and finding a way to operationalise this is admittedly very difficult. Therefore, these lessons need to be learnt in childhood, and not left until the point of transition into adulthood and the world of work.

The argument posed is that making disabled people more visible in the workplace, makes them more accepted by employers, line managers and co-workers as a result. Gradually the prejudice and negative stereotypes against disabled people fades away because employers are given cause to rethink their attitudes and they get to see 'ability' (Moore, 2017). Building closer interpersonal relations should then become a Government priority, to rethink its approach to increasing segregated 'special' education at a young age. For example, between 2012 and 2019 the number of disabled children attending mainstream primary and secondary school in England has decreased by 24% with a subsequent increase in the number of disabled children attending school apart from their non-disabled siblings and peers (ALFFIE, 2020). The concern is that if disabled children are not visible to other children, what chance is there for a future without disablism and ablism? When children grow up into adults and enter the workplace without the experience of learning alongside children with impairments, they are much more likely to become the next group of adults who are blinkered by ableist normative 'wisdom' that the 'ideal worker' (Foster and Wass, 2012) looks and acts a certain way.

Reinforcing this argument, some employers in this study appeared better prepared psychologically to address the removal of barriers, and this tended to be because of previous relationships with disabled people either as family members, friends or work colleagues, or personal experience of disability. The reasons why some employers lack insight about the presence of workplace barriers are essentially no different to the wider population. That is, they can be attributed to a general lack of awareness of the disablist society in which we live (Beckett, 2009). For example, knowledge gained through researching inclusive education, could be a good starting point for implementing attitudinal changes in the employment domain and shifting practice to implement inclusive employment as the benchmark of 'Good' Work'. Inclusive education can be understood as:

...founded upon a moral position which values and respects every individual, and which welcomes diversity as a rich learning resource. According to this understanding of inclusive education, tackling prejudice, building community, and developing values are also key aspects of this approach (Beckett, 2009: 318).

From this perspective, there is the potential for 'inclusive employment', but this requires first of all creating a moral position from which the tackling of prejudice and developing values to respect and value ability-diversity is key. An important aspect of implementing 'inclusive' practice across domains can only happen with a change of attitudes. Therefore, developing this argument further, it is proposed here that education must play a significant role in tackling negative attitudes towards disabled people.

These negative attitudes tend to be held by non-disabled people, therefore, shaping non-disabling attitudes from a young age, prepares children to become part of the process of building inclusive communities of the future, "beyond the school gates" (Beckett, 2009: 318), and into the world or work. Ableist attitudes left unchallenged maintain the disabling society at large, and thus becomes reflected in non-inclusive employment relations. The role of education in challenging these attitudes has been noted as important because as children develop, they internalise the attitudes around them through the process of socialisation. In other words, we are not innately prejudiced against disabled people as children, but over time the messages presented through discourse and media, parents, teachers, and others shape our understanding of the world around us (Rieser and Mason, 1990).

When children become adults, they reinforce and legitimise the misinformation and fear in the form of policies and practices over which they have varying amounts of control (Rieser and Mason, 1990: 7)

Disrupting this ongoing cycle through education is clearly important and I argue, necessary if we are to move towards a sensitivity in the workplace that promotes ability-diversity and non-disabling employment practice. Relating this to the role that an education approach might play in tackling ableist attitudes and promoting disability awareness in the SME workplace, it is possible to conceive of an alternative approach to the one currently endorsed by Disability Confident which is focused on the promotion of 'disability as part of diversity' or the missing 'talent' of a diverse workforce. Although, this is well-intentioned, it nevertheless runs the risk of being too ambiguous and therefore misunderstood. And as the SMEs testified in chapter six, it is hardly well-known which concurs with existing research (FSB, 2019). Instead, what is needed is a genuine anti-ableist educational approach that, in addition to enhancing employer's critical engagement with issues of difference, seeks to enhance understanding of the causes and effects of prejudice and discrimination against disabled people.

At present the extent to which any Government is ever likely to implement an educational strategy targeted towards SMEs employers is questionable, given the general reluctance to meddle with the labour market. Although, as it currently stands, there is nothing in the legislation or in any Code of Practice or guidance for employers that explicitly rules out a truly 'anti-ableist' approach being taken. Consequently, this establishes an opportunity, to think about and raise the profile of inclusive employment, through a process of education or ableism awareness (rather than the current trend of disability awareness) raising, and the implementation of a social relational approach to *flex-ability* in work. Thinking about the current educational awareness raising approach, many disabled people's organisations offer 'Disability Equality Training' to employers. This is mainly in the public sector because it is seen as too expensive for SME private sector employers (this was confirmed during an interview with the Policy Adviser at Breakthrough UK in the preliminary stages of this thesis):

They cannot afford it. So, and it has become a bit more orientated towards the electronic versions where you will get multiple choice question about the Social Model of Disability. So, there's "which model of disability is this...disabled people are disabled by their impairments, medical model, social model or charity model"...tick box. So, you know, how do you learn like that? I mean the whole point of disability equality and social model training is the learning in a safe environment, people starting to challenge their own assumptions, look at the stereotypes they have, think about where attitudes towards disabled people have come from historically and where their responsibility lies within their own area of work for changing and removing barriers. Solutions to those. The move towards that type of equality and diversity training means they will probably bundle something together around compliance with the Equality Act. They will put in a few slides on disability and maybe a couple of slides on different models, but it's not really challenging people and it's very easy to pass those things. [Breakthrough, UK]

Whilst this is needed, I still believe it does not go deep enough into the underlying ableist ideologies and beliefs that sustain disabled people's disadvantaged position in the labour market. An analysis of the extent of Governmental support for an inclusive employment initiative is also required. The Government's choice of approach to the application of certain aspects of ensuring SME employer compliance with equality legislation and duty to make reasonable adjustments, clearly warrants further consideration.

A key question here is: to what extent is the Government really committed to the idea that employment in SMEs can and should be inclusive? What role should Government take in educating SME employers how to tackle disablism, psycho-emotional disablism, and ableist attitudes? Equally important however, addressing the extent to which the current labour market, economic and regulatory climate may act as a burden on SMEs in the implementation of the 'inclusive' requirements of the Equality Act. Exploring the 'unintended consequences' of one set of employment policies as they impact upon another is likely to be important here, but which this thesis has only begun to touch the surface. There is far more work to be done in this area.

Many SME pressures are the result of policies that aim to increase competition within the labour market. My aim is to propose a more radical policy agenda around the practicalities of implementing inclusive and enabling employment in SME workplace contexts, to promote the idea that there is a need to develop a concept of anti-ableist inclusive employment. Theorising on the relationship between employment and disabled people's inequality in the labour market, like others before me who lean towards materialism, remain committed to the idea that the relationships between employer/employee play a key part in reducing ableism in society. What is still needed however, is a strong commitment to embed an educational approach to tackle ableist attitudes from a young age. Given that our current education system is still not doing this adequately, the Government must also find a way to reach the adult population to grasp the opportunity to take a truly proactive role in challenging ableist attitudes that are held by non-disabled employers.

### **Reducing psycho-emotional disablism through *flex-ability in work***

Whilst access barriers can be measured and are easily identified (observable) and can then be responded to, it is the emotional barriers that are created by refusal of employers to accept and accommodate 'difference'. How employers make a disabled person feel about themselves is reinforced by partial responses to requests for flexibility in work organization, processes, and environments (Reeve, 2014). Consequently, some disabled people experience psycho-emotional damage and insecurity, and it is this element of disablism that policy has not addressed. However, some employers respond better to such requests and this tends to happen when the decision maker has personal experience of being near to disabled people and when they have a social relational understanding of disability as oppression rather than an individual understanding. These employers accept that it is their responsibility to change how, where and when work gets done, rather than expecting disabled people to 'fit' into exclusionary buildings and processes.

In chapter two, I outlined why the concept of psycho-emotional disablism is important, arguing that it attends to the 'inside' matters; to explore the way in which externally imposed or 'outside' barriers might impact on the sense of self. Taken further, both the physical and symbolic organisation of space is felt both upon and beyond the materiality of the body (Reeve, 2020). Consequently, disabled people can be made to feel like they "misfit" in a world which is spatially organised in such a way the materiality of their bodies which may need 'special' treatment

through workplace flexibility, marks them out as 'misfitting' (Garland-Thomson, 2011). Taking this line of thought forward, I propose that disabled people's requests for, and subsequent use of reasonable adjustments is often read as a reflection of their innate 'neediness' and 'difference'. In contrast, when a non-disabled worker requests flexibility from their employer to balance homelife matters (parenting, caring or any other reason), it is broadly uncontested. This is why we must move towards an understanding of *flexibility* in work that attends to how bodies are both positioned and felt by the circulation of ableism within everyday life. What becomes important to disabled people is a shift in attitudes that translate into *flex-ability* in employment practice.

The accounts in chapter seven show, a tension arises when disabled people must say what they cannot do and also have a medical diagnosis to prove their 'disabled' status according to the medicalised definition of the Equality Act (2010) in order to get a reasonable adjustment. But to get work disabled people must prove what they are capable of doing to convince an employer they are the right person for the job. As Soldatic (2013: 4) explains disabled people must fit the rhythm of their own body, their "temporal competency, predictability and synchronicity" to the existing rhythms of neoliberal workplaces. The problem is for many disabled people, "these two rhythms are not compatible" (Grover and Soldatic, 2014: 90), and the issue then becomes "one of employer perception of whether the rhythm of disabled people's bodies fits with the needs of their enterprises so that disabled people are not considered potentially problematic employees" (ibid: 91).

The Equality Act (2010) was supposed to tackle inequality and enhance the rights of disabled people, by outlawing disability discrimination at work, and by the removal of barriers with the provision of "reasonable adjustments". What the Act did not address was the psycho-emotional barriers [see below] caused by inadequate attempts to make workplaces accessible, or the 'disclosure dilemma'. Neither does it deal with the power imbalance in employment relationships that limit the choice and control of disabled workers who need flexibility in how, where and when they perform their work to take account of 'impairment effects'. Even those people interviewed who had some knowledge of the social model and disability rights movements said they had not experienced discrimination as their initial response to the questions. But as the discussion continued and they reflected back they came to remember examples, but their own internalizing of ableism had obscured these experiences as something to be expected, normal. Disabled people's accounts reveal psycho-emotional dimensions of disablism if their line manager and work colleagues make is uncomfortable to speak openly about impairment effects.

Relatedly, Reeve (2008, 2014) deals with the direct and indirect form of psycho-emotional disablism. For example, in this study, direct forms emerge from the negative interactions that disabled workers have with others in the workplace and outside of it. This would include the relationships and interactions they have with their line managers, co-workers, customers, and strangers that may involve careless comments, invalidating actions such as denying opportunities to Dean when his boss refused to let him go across town to "fetch files" from

another office location simply because he assumed this would be done quicker by a colleague who does not use a wheelchair, even though Dean drives himself and has access to his own vehicle.

One consequence of direct psycho-emotional disablism is the internalised oppression that arises from negative interactions which can be understood as the relationship that a disabled person has with themselves (Reeve, 2014). This can lead some disabled people, like Tom and Paresch to say they feel “*lucky*” for the support they receive, or in Holly’s case she felt less worthy of support, even “*feeling guilty*” for asking for reasonable adjustments. Then there were several who expressed a desire to avoid feeling like a burden on co-workers.

The indirect form of psycho-emotional disablism arises from the interactions a disabled person has with the material world as opposed to human relationships and in this way, it can be understood as the *consequences of the assumptions* of humans (Reeve, 2014: 103). From this position we can see that inaccessible or disabling workplaces are made and maintained by the broader, systemic issues such as the underpinnings of business assumptions related to capitalist imperatives for profit. At first reading disabled people in this study expressed everyday experiences of structural dimensions of disablism, caused by inaccessible buildings, transport systems to get them into the workplace, or inaccessible workplace conditions that have not considered the needs of a diverse workforce.

Physical inaccessibility to older buildings for example, cause wheelchair users and others with mobility impairments to be excluded from some spaces (Roulstone, 1998). For many disabled people, access to the built environment is best described as partial “a possibility, not a certainty” (Reeve, 2014: 111). While some employers did identify that disabled people face environmentally imposed access issues with historic buildings and ramps mentioned several times, there was very little acknowledgement of wider inaccessible provision in terms of work organisation, technology, or practice. Janita was especially adamant that the building in which she operates would never be suitable for a wheelchair user. When I asked what she would do if a quota was ever bought back into policy she got quite annoyed and said “*I’d invite them in [politicians] and ask them how the hell they would expect me to do it*”.

Kitchin (1998: 351) highlighted the ways in which inaccessible spaces act as “landscapes of exclusion” conveying a powerful message to disabled people about being and belonging, telling disabled people “you are out of place, you are different”. The effect of inaccessible working environments can make disabled people feel like they are trying to “fit” into a system that is shaped for other valued non-impaired, able-bodied workers. Again, it is clear that what becomes essential is the building of close working relationships with key decision makers and colleagues who inevitably hold the power to make disabled employees feel welcome and not made to feel out of place and therefore links back to the need for proximity and the avoidance of segregation (UPIAS, 1976).

Although the disabled people in this study are not representative in terms of level of education of the wider population of disabled people, there were still many examples that reveal elements of both direct and indirect forms of psycho-emotional disablism. For example, the insights gained from this small set of interviews does suggest a tendency for disabled people to coalesce in terms of the type of work they do. Amongst the participants, nearly all had some prior experience working in the disability-related sector or turning to self-employment, and for the majority this was not necessarily their first career choice but came about due to difficulties in getting or maintaining employment in other sectors or after experiencing direct and indirect discrimination. This trend can be enabling for some people but can also deny opportunities to thrive and survive (Roulstone et al., 2003) outside of this niche sector. Consequently, it can narrow disabled people's options, placing psychological limits on how they can demonstrate capability to potential employers in other sectors. Furthermore, such narrow experiences of employment make it difficult to challenge the ableist logic that values some abilities more than others. In this way, both structural and psycho-emotional dimensions of disablism may have shaped their choices. The example given by Simon who experienced extreme mistreatment whilst working in a disability charity is evidence that not all disability-related employment guarantees non-discrimination.

If support mechanisms fail or are limited, and prejudicial attitudes persist, mainstream employment can then become seen by some disabled people as something unattainable and out of reach, disablism and inaccessible or, like Paresh, you feel "*lucky*" to have entered the mainstream workplace. Consequently, insecure jobs such as his, with no employment contract are perceived as "*amazing opportunities*". But instead of criticising the employer or the state's weak legislative framework that allows this type of injustice to be sustained, often (as Paresh's story highlights), disabled people turn their critical gaze inwards – blaming themselves, blaming their body/mind functionality as just too difficult to accommodate. Paresh genuinely believed it is fair that employers should not be expected to accommodate his needs because "*disabled people are the minority*". This functionalist perspective emphasises "majority values" that underpin society to support the interests and activities of the non-disabled majority (Topliss, 1982). In this way, the internalised oppression operates as it creeps deep into the psyche to justify lower status ableist logics.

It also serves to configure impairment hierarchies – as comments made by several of the SME employers showed that some impairment types are perceived as more problematic compared to others. This often links to impairments which are deemed "stable" (although less so in relation to learning difficulties), easily managed, and therefore less risky, compared to other "fluctuating" impairments that are unpredictable, difficult to manage and therefore less predictable in terms of days lost at work. This poses a problem when the impairment effects mean that working regular or fixed hours each week is unrealistic. These are difficulties not yet addressed by policy which again leaves SME employers without the answers or direction so needed to help them to overcome any concerns. There is also a risk that employers will perceive fluctuating

impairments as more of a financial risk because, for example, if a ramp is needed only some of time and only needed for one member of the team, where is the incentive to invest when the employee could at any time leave to work elsewhere? What employers may not realise though is that many disabled people 'stick' with their existing employer who has accommodated their needs and again, this is a potential cost saving to the employer over the long run. However, again, the message used by the 'business case' narrative linked to 'missing disabled talent' misses the point. Also, missing is sharing with employers the benefits that workplace adjustments that are preventative in nature (that expect ability-diversity in advance), for example, supplying a standing desk to prevent employee back damage is a longer run economic benefit to the employer and employee. The immediate cost benefit may not be clear and given that 60% of small businesses fail within the first three years of business (The Telegraph, 2019b), perhaps this longer view is more likely to be accepted in businesses who themselves are more 'stable'.

The issue of the psycho-emotional dimensions of disablism were not understood by employers, and when disabled people discussed their experience of employment, none of them explicitly spoke about the impact upon them, although during the analysis stage, it became very clear that most had indeed experienced psycho-emotional disablism (without them even recognising it as such). When pursuing their rights to ask for workplace "reasonable adjustments", this type of emotional labour was sometimes met with negative and hostile employer responses which for some later became internalised (Reeve, 2014).

#### **Disclosure dilemmas: a new dimension to psycho-emotional disablism**

DWP has suggested that encouraging disabled people to disclose a disability early (DWP & DH, 2016: 52) will lead to better employment outcomes. They assume that once disclosed, employers will be able to offer support and reasonable adjustments. Yet, there is no discussion of how to create a workplace culture that encourages early disclosure. I would argue that the 'atmosphere' needs to be right before people begin to open-up about personal impairment effects and the need for workplace adjustments. There are two key differences between my concept of disclosure dilemma and previous research. First is the context of SMEs rather than a focus on process, and second, the connection with psycho-emotional dimensions of disablism. Within SME work contexts, I contend that the disclosure dilemma can be much reduced because of the flatter organisational structures which tend to encourage an atmosphere of support and the forging of closer, trusting and reciprocal relationships.

I argue that to fully understand the disclosure dilemma in more nuanced ways, it must be situated within a specific context, in which specific assumptions, values, beliefs, attitudes and actions take place – other writers have not prioritised the workplace in the same way in their analysis. But context is important to determine who or what is valued or devalued in the ableist-logics of the employment relationship at the micro level. It also enables a closer understanding of the wider ability and behaviour expectations to reveal what is deemed to be acceptable within individual SME employment contexts. The disclosure dilemma concept used here also aims to

extend the previous work of Reeve and Thomas on the psycho-emotional dimensions of disablism and uses this to explore the issue of disclosing or concealing impairment in a work environment to gain formal reasonable adjustments or informal flex-ability from the employer. Other writers have not used the lens of psycho-emotional disablism and have tended to explore the process of disclosing in terms of timing (Oldfield et al, 2016), as well as the need for building disabled people's self-determination (Scorgie and Scorgie, 2017), or the importance of line managers (Adams and Oldfield, 2011).

The concept of disclosure dilemma proposed in this thesis is far more focused upon the development of supportive relationships between disabled people and SME employers. Indeed, whilst obtaining reasonable adjustments at work are extremely important, disabled people in this study reported that relationships in the SME workplace context are more significant to them than any reasonable adjustment intervention. The disclosure dilemma becomes much reduced when trust and availability through closer proximity to the business owner is an everyday occurrence. The building of strong supportive relationships develops because SME owners take the time to get to know the person because each member of the team is a critical investment and knowing that the business owner has personally selected you and welcomed you into their small business builds emotional trust thus allowing disabled people to feel confident to talk openly about their impairment and any changes that may be needed.

It appears from observations made in this study that disabled people have three choices available to them when trying to find and sustain employment. First, they can be a flexible worker by adjusting themselves to fit the needs of the employer. This can be done by presenting themselves as having the ability to do the job in the same way other employees do the job without the need for any 'special' treatment by concealing impairment effects. This option enables the disabled worker to be perceived by the line manager, other colleagues, and customers as independently able and equal to non-disabled workers. The impairment then becomes insignificant - it is concealed (Thomas, 2007). If disabled people choose not to disclose impairment effects, then instead they are 'passing' but this is not a path always open to women, people of colour or those with a physical, visible disability (Tatum 2014). The disabled worker who opts to "pass" as non-disabled does so because they want to prove they can cope with the demands placed upon all workers. Doing this is perhaps the easiest option because it avoids bringing attention to the impairment, it avoids any further questioning of ability, and it avoids the stigma of disability (Tyler, 2013). Thus, this option of co-opting the flexible 'ideal-worker' (Foster and Wass, 2012) characteristic enables disabled workers (who have hidden impairments) to be accepted as a person who can "fit" into the existing workplace culture, and able to "fit" the business needs for maintaining profitability. The tension arises when disabled workers must on the one hand prove their sameness of ability to non-disabled workers, while simultaneously proving their embodied difference to gain adjustments. In other words, the employer's willingness to embed flexible working for employees with impairments is reflected in their practice and response to requests for reasonable adjustments to be made.

The second option available to disabled people is to ask their employer to be flexible in allowing changes to be made to the workplace environment, or the hours in which work takes place, or the location in which work takes place. Employer flexibility can change existing workplace practices and design to accommodate a wider range of functioning capability in ways which can be seen as non-normative. This option fits with the social model thinking around changing the environment as opposed to changing the disabled person and is the preferred strategy for barrier removal. It is also written into equality law to prevent direct and indirect forms of employer discrimination against disabled people.

The third option of course is to work for oneself and it was clear from the participants that in the end, after years of having to adjust themselves to “fit” ableist workplaces, sometimes the only option is to become self-employed (Pagan, 2009; Jones and Latreille, 2011). Only then can the work be truly employee-led and flex-able to the needs of impairment. The approach taken by participants in this study was to either look for opportunities in workplaces who were willing to be flexible or otherwise to carve a self-employed career, and mostly working from home. For some, a hybrid approach was adopted, so that they worked part time for an employer and part time on their own projects that quite often used their ‘disabled’ status as an asset and essential for the job – for example when delivering disability awareness training. Most of the disabled people who were interviewed for this study were graduates, and all had attained a level of education beyond secondary schooling. They were all striving for rewarding careers, and each had sustained successful employment, albeit, largely in disability-related charity-sector organisations interspersed with self-employment. The interviews with disabled people illustrated a pattern of self-employment either to enable flexible forms of working, considered unachievable when working for others, or as a route to crafting “portfolio” careers. This finding supports previous reports by disabled people of the benefits of self-employment as a flexible form of employment (Disability Rights UK, 2012). What was less easy to interpret from the data was whether or not working in this way was a deliberate strategy to circumvent around structural disablism or whether it was actually more illustrative of acts of resistance by framing career trajectories on choice, independence and attaining control in the relations of contemporary flexible labour markets.

In my study disabled workers confirmed the importance of close relationships with supportive line managers especially at the point of disclosure. This is not surprising given the role that line managers play in terms of decision making around providing equipment, adjusting working hours and helping to reorganise workload allocation (Adams and Oldfield, 2011; Holland and Clayton, 2020; Roulstone et al., 2003). These findings corroborate previous research that report that line managers’ knowledge, goodwill and attitudes are central to implementing flexible working practice (Cunningham, 2004; Foster, 2007; Foster and Scott, 2015).

Disclosure of an impairment is a sensitive and complex issue that requires a sensitive response from the employer. It involves a negotiation of emotions rather than a purely rational decision over timing. When is the best time? A good question but a complex answer. On the application

form, or during the interview? After a job offer? Or sometime after starting the job? The timing and the detail of what is shared with an employer, and at which point, under which circumstances, and with whom, have been described as “disclosure dances” rather than “disclosure declarations” by Oldfield et al. (2016, 1451). Disabled people in this thesis confirmed they can feel guilty if they put off the disclosure, believing they have not been open and honest.

The dilemma is multifaceted in that disabled people must weigh-up the risk and benefits – it is felt as a gambling decision. There are issues over the type of contract of employment too, meaning that for workers on permanent contracts disclosing is less risky compared to those workers who are either in a probationary period or on a temporary contract of employment. Ian noted that non-disabled people “*see your difference as a weakness*”, describing feeling “*worry, awkward and uncomfortable*” asking employers for adjustments if they chose to delay disclosure at the point of recruitment. Roulstone and Williams (2014) identified concerns about the ‘riskiness’ of disclosure among disabled managers who had concerns that being a ‘disabled person’ in the eyes of others would become prioritised over other aspects of self.

For some, there were clear tensions between disclosing a less visible impairment to a potential or current employer to gain support for ‘reasonable adjustments’, and how this decision-making process causes anxiety because they anticipate discrimination if they disclose. Some participants “blame themselves” for not being more forthright in asking for reasonable adjustments, others spoke about the psycho-emotional aspects of asking for adjustments “causing stress and anxiety”, and “not wanting to stand out”, and not wanting “to look weaker” than their non-disabled co-workers. For example, Boucher (2017) interviewed women leaders with visible impairments and found evidence that they feel the need to underplay and minimise impairment effects at work. These women used strategies of ‘surface acting’ and ‘passing’ (Garland-Thomson, 2016).

A specific contribution of this thesis is the data also reveals how internalised oppression (Reeve, 2014) can be reduced (and resisted) when people with impairments understand disability to be a form of oppression imposed upon them from the outside. When this oppression is understood as being caused by ableist-logic built into policy, practice and cultural attitudes as opposed to the individual understanding of disability that locates the problem with impairment itself an affirmative disabled identity is possible (Cameron, 2009, 2011). Several of the participants (the ones engaged in forms of activism mainly) noted understanding disability as a political rather than personal issue enabled them to see past the undermining responses from employer’s reluctance to transform the workplace into an accessible environment. It also gave them confidence to affirm and indeed celebrate their disabled identity (Cameron, 2009, 2011) which allowed them to resist and be resilient to ableist assumptions of ability. Participants who have a disability activism background tended to be more critical of policy and employer inflexibility. Also, the length of employment experience could be viewed as a key variable in how disabled people respond to poor practice, suggesting that those who have longer career histories are

perhaps more inclined to challenge ableist practice and attitudes that cause structural and psycho-emotional disablism.

Yet, for some of the participants in this study, identifying as a disabled person is not always so straightforward and therefore, approaching a conversation with an employer that requires acceptance of oneself as a disabled person in itself creates an emotional dilemma:

You know I'm very comfortable with sort of how do I put this? I'm comfortable with the part of my subjectivity that my disability represents. My disability is part of who I am if that makes sense. It doesn't define who I am but it's part of who I am and therefore to not declare it would be trying to deny its part of who I am. [Paul]

I'm not entirely sure how much I want to claim it [Holly]

My disability does not define who I am [Simon]

Another issue relates to disabled people feeling that their disclosure of an impairment made their employment tokenistic. Disabled people want to feel they have been selected on merit alone. This is a new dimension of psycho-emotional disablism that is highlighted by the *disclosure dilemma*.

I'd rather declare it and they still employ me then I feel like I've earned it with all the cards on the table. I've had a number of conversations with colleagues and friends about whether you declare your disability or not and people sometimes prefer not to declare it because they don't want to feel like they've been offered the interview purely because they've ticked the disability box. [Paul]

It's a constant dilemma for me. Have I only had an interview because of my impairment but then I'm like even if I was given a guaranteed interview, I've still got to perform on the day? You know still bring that element of competition on the day. And if you are the best candidate then you get the job. [Tom]

A key finding of this study is how disabled participants described the importance of the line manager because they often have the power to implement changes quickly when needed. Furthermore, building a good relationship with a line manager is seen as essential for disabled people to feel safe discussing individual requirements. The behaviour of a line manager can signal an inclusive culture, for example, line managers who consult with their team makes sure

everyone gets their voice heard, who take advice from their team and generally make it safe for employees to propose ideas. When a disabled person finds these character traits in their line manager, it is far less likely that disability discrimination and bias will take place (Adams and Oldfield, 2011; Holland and Clayton, 2020; Roulstone et al., 2003).

Disabled people must rely on building micro level relationships to make change happen. On the whole, it is a game of chance whether a line manager is willing to listen and willing to respond in non-ableist ways. They need to trust that the employer is not going to respond badly to a disclosure of impairment. On the whole disabled people said that is one of the benefits of working in a SME because you can develop a good relationship simply by being in the company of the business owner. When there are fewer staff, showing off your ability is easier. The interviews in this study attest to the importance of employer willingness to work in ways that respond positively and to shift their gaze from impairment to ability. Why is it that some people 'miss' disabled people's ability? Essentially, it points to the need for close proximity rather than social distancing between disabled and non-disabled people to change societal attitudes. This was one of the first arguments made by the disability activists Hunt (1966a, b) and Finkelstein (1980) when they called for deinstitutionalisation and the end to segregation (see chapter two). Consequently, the informal management style in SMEs has been noted previously for generating greater reciprocity between the employers and employees and it helps to create a sense of 'interdependence' through intimate everyday working and indeed 'family-ness' (Ram and Edwards, 2003; Ram et al., 2001, 2007). Previous research also supports comments made in this study – that with close working physical proximity between employer/employee, mutual dependence arises and leads to favourable informal accommodation and flexibility (Ram et al. 2001).

### **Valuing Difference and Resisting Sameness**

In this study, two service sector employers (Linda and Karen) both spoke about the need for their employees having the "right attitude to work" and a personality that would "fit in" with existing staff. A strong work ethic was valued by all of the employers, although there were differences by sector in how they interpreted this. For example, in the manufacturing firms, the employers expected compliance to strict processes and procedures with clearly defined job roles. In contrast, in the digital technology sector (Roulstone, 2016), employers were looking for a work ethic that included an element of creativity and entrepreneurial spirit, a willingness to drive the business forward, with employees having more autonomy than those in the manufacturing enterprises.

In short, the lack of engagement by SMEs in recruiting for "difference", preferring instead to recruit for, and value "sameness" – to find the people who will "fit in" must be another key concern for unconscious bias and discriminatory recruitment practice. This narrow view demonstrates inflexibility from some employers. Instead of focusing on the effects of impairment, I use the ability expectations of employers alongside impairment to show how employers struggle to see past bodily/mind differences. In the process, employers miss

disabled people's abilities because they are unquestioningly influenced by cultural ableist normativity and a preference for sameness. Consequently, they tend to employ people who present as the 'same' as themselves, believing this enables people to 'fit' into the organisation. They also fail to create supportive and enabling workplace environments when the workplace culture is inflexible to the needs of disabled people.

The government should promote positive action strongly to an SME audience to not only accommodate 'difference' but to expect 'difference'. Once it becomes an expectation, employers can plan and design for difference through *flex-able* working practices. The rebalancing of power relations through a two-sided approach to *flex-ability* will benefit both employers and employees. Both will be in a better position to thrive and survive, through a system that promotes workplace cultures of mutual respect and interdependence, and counteracting one-sided flexibility (LPC, 2018; Taylor et al, 2017).

In chapter six, Hannah's account demonstrated an open mindedness to valuing difference, by actively looking for what a person can do, not what they cannot do. Essentially, she privileged ability over deficit and realised as the employer it was her duty to be flexible rather than expect that flexibility from her employee. She prioritised and valued the abilities that Tim (an autistic man) has rather than seeing Autism as deficit. Hannah was then able to fit Tim's abilities to shape a job role (known in the disability studies literature as job-carving) (Woodin, 2015) into one that Tim said he aspired to do. She also listened to his concerns around working in an open-plan office environment which Tim has said triggered feelings of being overwhelmed by sounds, noise and smells which make it virtually impossible to function.

The cultural preference in many workplaces to open-up the space to stimulate collaboration and sharing of ideas amongst colleagues is often it is presumed such spaces are improving accessibility and indeed inclusivity of disabled workers. In reality, many employees find these spaces debilitating, affecting concentration, triggering headaches and other symptoms, and their work rate becomes impeded (Booth, 2016). Effectively, employers are reducing productivity by assuming one-space-fits-all and it seems limited to particular types of office-based work. These issues are far more difficult to attend to on a production line or in a bespoke manufacturing company.

These traditional recruitment practices require employers to carefully select people with specific skills and abilities to perform specific tasks, rather than shaping jobs to fit people's abilities (Hoque et al, 2018). Indeed, as a social enterprise organisation, Hannah and her business partners try to balance the commercial and social mission elements of their enterprise. As noted by Hall and Wilton (2015: 224), the potential of such organisation "lies in their capacity to strike a different balance between the demands of an employer and the specific needs of disabled workers with respect to accommodation and the appropriateness of work".

## **Conclusion**

Overall, the interviews with SMEs and disabled people have provided a rich insight into an area of employment experience that to date has been missing from academic enquiry. There were several striking themes that emerged from the data. The first is that employers accepted that discrimination against disabled people probably does occur – but not in their workplace. Second, the expectation is that employees must “fit” within the existing organisational culture and team, and that tended to mean that a preference for ‘sameness’ rather than looking for ‘difference’ as a business asset. There was also a theme around fair treatment for all employees, including concerns that in some way disabled employees could be advantaged over their non-disabled colleagues if they were treated ‘differently’. This also raised confusion around taking positive action and the consequent wrong assumption this is an illegal form of positive discrimination.

For disabled people, two key concerns have been raised. One is the disclosure dilemma they face when deciding if and when to open-up and come clean about their impairment. Relatedly, the second concern is the need for flex-ability. Perhaps the most significant finding from the study has been the extent to which informality in the SME workplace seems to support a two-sided *flex-ability* based upon mutual trust and interdependence between employee and employer. This suggests that recruitment decisions in SMEs are well considered despite not having formal human resource functions, and therefore each employee is valued as a business asset from the start. Unlike in larger organisations that may have a core and periphery workforce each employee in an SME has a ‘voice’. Subsequently, workers feel emotionally more secure because they feel valued, and the employer offers each team member autonomy. These insights cannot be generalised; however, they do offer an exciting path for future enquiry to test whether two-sided flex-ability suits the nature of smaller firms and whether the sectoral or occupational difference or similarities are a matter of degree.

In the final chapter of the thesis, I turn to specific policy and research recommendations that emerge from the insights gained from this empirical study as well as those already apparent within the existing literature.

## **CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSION**

### **Introduction**

In the final chapter of this thesis, I summarise the findings of this research, noting its limitations and reflecting upon the doctoral research journey. I also discuss the implications that my social-relational concept of *flex-ability* has for improving employment practice in SME contexts. The chapter concludes by reflecting on the events of the Covid-19 pandemic on the working lives of disabled people.

### **Summary findings from the study**

The strongest message from this research points to disabled people needing to find employers who are willing and able to offer workplace *flex-ability*. The good news is that for participants in this study, on the whole, SME employers seem willing to do so even when their inaccessible buildings make this approach hard to imagine. The significant difference that limits employer's willingness can be attributed to the degree of informal internal relations between employer and employee and is largely dependent upon line manager values and attitudes (which can be informed by previous relations with disabled people either inside or outside of work). A second significant finding is that disabled people experience psycho-emotional disablism caused by a *disclosure dilemma* in the process of finding and retaining work. This *disclosure dilemma* is multi-layered and includes decisions over who to tell, when to tell, and what level of detail about impairment effects is needed to be told in order to secure the required *flex-ability*.

In SME contexts, a particular feature of being 'small' makes it easier to form closer interpersonal relationships and as disabled people in this study confirmed, close proximity to the key decision maker makes it easier to obtain adjustments informally. These closer interpersonal relationships make conversations that can sometimes feel awkward and intimate feel less daunting. Talking about impairment effects (Thomas, 1999, 2007) with a line-manager can be tricky and uncomfortable if the relationship feels socially or emotionally 'distant'. By purposefully making the relationship socially and emotionally 'close', disabled workers should feel better about asking for adaptations, thus, reducing fear and anxiety that comes with *disclosure dilemma*.

A workplace culture that values and promotes *flex-ability* strives from the earliest moment of the recruitment process to support each worker. This culture aims to ensure that each individual worker can do their job to the best of their ability and managers and co-workers each take active steps to remove barriers. In much the same way that each employee is responsible for health and safety of themselves and others, a culture that embeds *flex-ability* expects each member of the workforce to respect and indeed take positive action to embrace ability-diversity. I suggest, these actions and responses can provide workers with 'psychological safety' a term used in leadership literature (Schein and Schein, 2018) and it may result in psycho-emotional wellbeing at work.

In this way, fostering *flex-ability* through the building of interpersonal relationships may hold the key for combating psycho-emotional and structural forms of disablism enabling disabled

workers to feel at ease and welcome. Disabled people in this study confirmed that when they find a line manager who is willing to adopt a social relational approach to workplace *flex-ability* they are more likely to feel welcome and respected because individual needs are taken seriously and responded to in mutually reciprocated ways. Of course, employers must still comply with the legal duties to avoid discrimination and reasonable adjustments, but the key contribution of *flex-ability* in work is the benefits that derive from reducing psycho-emotional barriers and the particular dimension of *disclosure dilemma*. In most situations, providing workers with adaptations is not difficult, not expensive, and requires an element of trust, creativity, and willingness to be flex-able in how, where and when the job gets done.

Just talking and thinking about developing a more inclusive workplace or offering *flex-ability* that could be useful for disabled people made some employers nervous. The idea of taking proactive steps caused some anxiety over unfounded concerns of health and safety. Consequently, I found that disabled people can still experience disablism in inaccessible working environments and experience psycho-emotional disablism linked to internalised oppression. However, overall, the disabled people who participated in this study were keen to express the importance of close working relationships with the key 'decision maker' in creating an atmosphere of trust and reciprocity that participants believed were easier to find when working for an SME.

The argument I presented in the introduction was that if the Government wants to get more disabled people into work, it has to understand the SME experiences of hiring and retaining disabled people. SME employer experiences are nuanced and informed by the sector in which they operate, the level of knowledge they have about their legal obligations to provide reasonable adjustments, their understanding of disability as either socially created or as an individual problem, and their attitudes and values which have been shaped by earlier proximity to disabled people (either through having a disabled relative or previous experience of hiring disabled people).

The study found employers still largely frame their understanding of 'disability' on deficit medical model understandings until the point they have an opportunity to question existing assumptions and the wide-ranging unconsciousness of some discriminatory workplace design and practices. Private-sector employers tended to report a lack of clarity on their legal duty to make reasonable adjustments, which makes them reticent about hiring people who they perceive to require 'special' treatment. They worried too about the impact of adjusting the organisation of work on other employees. SMEs and disabled people both highlight the inadequacies of AtW and Disability Confident because both initiatives have failed to reduce the disability employment gap. Furthermore, from a social relational perspective, these policies have not addressed the demand-side factors and the normative nature of the structural organisation of work which keeps some disabled people disadvantaged and oppressed.

### **Working life during Covid-19**

As technology continues to develop, the possibilities for more flexibility in how, when and where work takes place is advanced. As the experience of Covid-19 has shown, when forced to,

employers are quick to develop and change their practice and become flexible in response to Government-imposed lockdowns. The experience has been negative for many disabled workers. Evidence gathered by Citizens Advice (2020) in a survey of 6,000 workers showed that half of disabled workers who had been 'shielding' because of extreme vulnerability to the Covid virus were at risk of redundancy, this was a higher rate compared to parents or carers who also faced high rates of job loss. Similarly, the impact of Covid-19 on SMEs found that the number of employees had fallen during 2020 in 30 per cent of small businesses and 32 percent of medium ones. However, more SMEs experienced an economic decline in turnover rather than the number of employees as a consequence of Government support provided through the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (ERC, 2021). Overall, the net effect has been negative for both employment and turnover. However, in sectors such as construction and transport which cannot function with employees working from home on computers, they remained somewhat untouched by the effects of the pandemic as new opportunities emerged or their industry were enabled (and indeed encouraged) to continue to operate (ERC, 2021).

During this period, many (but definitely not all) employers have acted responsibly to consider their workforce's needs beyond concerns of family-friendly work practices. Pre-Covid many employers would have refused a request for flexibility on the grounds of unreasonableness (Bunbury, 2009). Yet post-Covid, it would seem unlikely the same refusal would be appropriate if the employee had proved no-detriment from working in new ways. Although, this depends very much on the business of the SME. Many have had no choice but to close during lockdown, placing their employees onto the furlough scheme. For these employers it was not viable economically to continue operating and there were no realistic possibilities to work flexibly.

A CIPD (2021b) survey found that three-quarters of employers believe that the demand for flexible working among employees will increase once lockdown measures have lifted. Whilst this may be good for some workers, it also raises other concerns. For example, there is a danger that flexible working is limited to certain areas of employment but the response to Covid-19 has created an impression that flexibility is more common than it is in reality (particularly for low paid and low skills work). Consequently, organisations will have to improve how they support and manage staff working remotely. Line managers will have to become more comfortable managing performance based on outcomes rather than the time people spend in the physical workplace, requiring a higher degree of trust. Experimenting with new adaptations to work organisation and practice, differentiating tasks according to ability, gathering employee feedback on what is working well and not so well will all be critical new features of more remote working practices. As the Taylor Review (2017) of modern working practices argued pre-Covid, the essential component of 'good work' is a relationship based on trust between employers and employees who work remotely and often from home.

Following the shift to remote working, many disabled employees have reported that they felt they have benefited from flexibility to organise their tasks with added discretion to decide when they do their work from home (Parry et al., 2021). That said, it should not be an uncritical

endeavour because many workers also report a negative impact on mental distress. The shift to remote working can also mask the significant disadvantage experienced by some because not all reasonable adjustments were or could be relocated to a remote space. There are also big differences in whether individuals have private space to work from home, whether broadband is adequate and there is a danger that middle class voices have dominated the working from home narrative. There is also a danger that 'problematic' bodies will be encouraged to work from home, therefore absolving the responsibility of employers and work colleagues from adapting their values or disabling practices. Consequently, there is a danger that working from home then becomes seen as the reasonable adjustment. It is with these concerns in mind that a social relational approach to workplace flex-ability is beneficial because it rebalances the employment relationship. At the heart of this approach lies the idea first outlined by UPIAS (1976): that the organisation of work can create barriers to participation as well as psychological wellbeing. It also challenges line managers to reflect upon their ableist beliefs and assumptions. Pre-pandemic, only some employers offered home working as an option to just some employees. Working from home was not always seen as a 'reasonable adjustment' with disabled people often told it was not feasible (TUC, 2021). However, the pandemic forced this change of work organisation onto employers and employees. Without question, employers can no longer claim that it is impossible, but it may still be felt as unreasonable (Bunbury, 2009) once (or if) things return to 'normal'. In terms of embedding workplace flex-ability then, this rests upon the social relationships and values within each organisation. There is a great variety in how far employers have covered the cost of this new way of working. Disabled people already incur additional living costs therefore any extra expense will need to be covered either by the employer, unless of course the Government decide to widen the current remit of AtW to take care of such additional costs for disabled workers.

Critically, the shift to homeworking was not a moral argument to support disabled workers to do their jobs better or deal with impairment-impacted ability. It was purely a necessary public health response way to enforce 'social distancing'. Yet, disabled people have been on the receiving end of social distancing before Covid-19, as noted by non-disabled people's deliberate avoidance of people with stigmatised psycho-social impairments (Bolt and Penketh, 2016), or by forms of segregation (Hunt, 1966a, b; UPIAS, 1976). When the public health crisis ends, what we need next is a policy focus on social proximity and an end to social distancing. A policy approach that focusses far more on demand-side issues, to create inclusive workplaces that are *flex-able* to meet all children's and adults needs. Employment must be inclusive of difference, this should be accepted as a universal aspect of human nature, not an anomaly. As with the colour of our hair or the size of our shoes, we are always-already different. Approach *flex-ability* in this way widens the remit of ability expectations and reduces psycho-emotional disablism in the process, expands the workforce, and increases productivity. If SMEs are going to employ more disabled people, then this thesis has presented a moral as well as strong

economic business case for thinking differently about a social relational approach to workplace *flex-ability*.

### **Limitations**

Despite employing a maximum variation sampling strategy some population groups were missed. For example, I missed people with learning difficulties, despite engaging with disabled people's organisations and producing Easy Read information sheets. However, as noted in the sampling strategy, I did get a broad range of people in terms of range of impairment types, age range, gender, and employments histories. The sample of SME employers was also diverse and therefore the combination of interviewing employers and disabled workers in one study adds to the value of this work. However, the sample of respondents in future research with SMEs could be widened to include responses from co-workers as well as the business owner/manager this would help to overcome perceptions of only one key informant from each responding SME. It would also be beneficial to capture the experience of disabled people and their employer to be able to compare and contrast the experience from one organisational setting. Another limitation of the study is its geographic scope since the study was conducted in England and the preferences of English SME employers and disabled people may differ from those of disabled people and SMEs in other parts of the UK (although I did include one disabled person's voice from Northern Ireland).

It must also be considered that the responses gathered during interviews with SMEs may have been influenced by my openness and positionality in support of a social model of disability at the start of each interview and in the pre-interview information sheet. Of note, I did not disclose to the employers about my own identity as a non-disabled researcher, therefore, it could be that they assumed I may have an impairment and identify as a disabled person (but they did not want to ask). Therefore, the overall general positive responses, may have been influenced over concerns of seeming to be respectful and non-discriminatory. Whether employers would express negative attitudes toward employing disabled people during an interview is important to consider when trying to draw conclusions from this data. So too is the question over whether their responses would have been different if I had not disclosed my allegiance with disabled people in fighting oppression and exclusion from the labour market.

Furthermore, the scope of this thesis draws predominantly on disabilities studies based in the UK and therefore the analysis of disablism and the forms it takes is very UK-centric. It would then be expected that disablism in all of its dimensions would look very different in other cultures, especially in non-capitalist countries. Whilst my conclusion can only be partial, I present this thesis to continue the discussions that are needed within disability studies to broaden further the empirical and theoretical study of *disclosure dilemmas* and *flex-ability in work*.

### **Actions for Government**

The UK government's desire to give disabled people the opportunity to move from welfare to employment is welcome but much more needs to be done in order to bring about positive social

change. Positive exposure of disabled people in the media, increasing opportunities for personal contact through social proximity between disabled and non-disabled people, and education on ableism are all necessary steps that have the potential to bring about a positive change in attitudes towards disabled people. The government has a role to play in each of these broader cultural changes. Simultaneously, the government also has a duty to support SMEs with access to clear information, resource funding and support.

The Government should improve disabled people's absolute employment rates as well as disabled people's experiences of work, and the quality of jobs disabled people have. There is real potential for change if Government and SME employers take responsibility to ensure that disabled people have equality of opportunity, quality jobs and equity in employment. The following are actions which should be taken to build on the existing positive responses captured by this research and ensure that disabled people are part of a vibrant and innovative SME workforce. It needs some joint action from employers and government. Many SME employers are already *flex-able* which enables them to make workplace changes so more disabled people can work successfully. Government should expect and help others to do the same and act upon non-compliance with the law more forcefully to act as a clear deterrent to discrimination.

The government must ensure that SME businesses have easy access to a multitude of resources, to raise awareness about best practice and reasonable adjustments. The benefit to society of such efforts will result in good outcomes for business, disabled people and wider communities.

The existing Disability Confident online site (<https://disabilityconfident.campaign.gov.uk/>) says it supports employers of all sizes but does not provide tangible information, tools, financial assistance, or advice on how to actually improve current practice or how to become strategically more inclusive to employing disabled people. In contrast, in Australia, the JobAccess Employers (<https://www.jobaccess.gov.au/employers/>) page is a dedicated national hub, or one-stop-shop, that offers employers of all sizes free and expert support to help remove barriers. This includes an advice service, employer engagement team, workplace modifications, support and training, videos, help with accessing funding, invitations to employer events, information about different impairments with links to further support services, and videos by disabled people who speak about the specific arrangements, flexibility in the workplace that have helped to support them in their workplace, as well as discussing being comfortable to disclose their impairment to the employer. In relation to SMEs, there is also an "Intermediary Toolkit" which offers a range of resources to help organisations who work with SMEs to promote the benefits of inclusive and open employment.

Changing employer perceptions can begin when Government policy deals with the root cause of ableism which requires a radical rethink of the types of support available to SME employers, yet policy is far from naming and addressing ableism. It is clear that policy attempts to reduce the disability employment gap have progressed slowly, and the findings from this study suggest that perhaps recognising the psycho-emotional dimensions of disablism as a barrier would help

shift the policy focus to one towards educating children and adults about the negative consequence of unconscious ableism and the need for a broader acceptance of 'difference' over 'sameness'.

One quick and simple change that the Government should implement is the 'business case' message used in Disability Confident material. Rather than encouraging employers to take on 'missing talent', they should inform employers that if they plan for diverse ability in their workplace then it has a long run economic cost benefit for the business. This is because they will have already outlaid to make the environment more accessible to a range of people. In the long run this will add value because when a disabled person finds an employer who is very accommodating and willing to support them, they tend to stay around longer resulting in less turnover of staff and a reduction in recruiting costs.

If the Government continues to use Disability Confident as the central hub for employers, they should use case studies using employers who have taken positive action to ensure more disabled people can enter and stay in their inclusive workplace. They should avoid using case study examples of disabled people who faced and overcame a barrier because this presents an individual problem as opposed to a systemic problem. Disabled people's organisations (DPO) who function as 'experts by experience' should be publicly praised and recognised in policy and practice as good employers because of their willingness to offer *flex-ability* in work. The Disability Confident scheme as a primary source of advice and guidance to employers, should use DPOs as 'case study' examples of good practice to show how implementing inclusive *flex-able* employment practice can be operationalised.

As it stands, Government disability employment policy tends to homogenise all firms in the SME category, which obscures the differences between them (Mallett and Wapshott, 2017). Any future policy development that aims to increase the number of disabled people in paid work must respond to the diverse challenges faced by SMEs. Understanding SMEs nuanced characteristics in terms of their workplace cultures, understandings of the law and funding support offered via AtW are a good starting point. This empirical study's findings add to existing studies highlighting the lack of information and guidance reaching SME employers and this varies by sector, size and previous experience of hiring and retaining disabled people.

The evidence presented in this thesis justifies some re-thinking of policy approaches. At the very least, the Government should pursue mechanisms that offset the implicit incentives in many policy initiatives to work with larger firms, because of the economies of scale that this offers. Given the significance of SMEs in the labour market and in their ability and indeed willingness to hire and retain disabled people, serious attempts need to be made to support micro, small and medium size employers. Government must consider the difference between those three discrete sizing categories rather than treating all SMEs as if they shared similar characteristics.

I would also suggest that 'payment by results' policy initiatives continue to push providers of the Work and Health programme (WHP) and also JobCentre Plus employment advisers to work with large employers. This is because in general large firms with HR departments, and often Public Relations who consider equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) issues, are easier to communicate with and gain access to compared to the SME business community. Therefore, the Government must incentivise providers of the WHP to engage with the SME local and community level employers.

Another option available to the Government is to share the cost of sick leave with SME employers at a higher level compared to big business. This type of economic incentive would support SMEs and reduce any fear of lost revenue.

The Government must produce annual reports on the number of disabled people in employment disaggregated by size, occupational sector, part-time/full-time work, type of contracts (permanent/temp), pay, average hours worked in a month, type of impairment, gender, age, highest level of qualification, number of employees using AtW funding. Without such data, it is impossible to gauge the quality and type of work that disabled people have.

The Government should engage far more directly with disabled people and SME employers - hear their views and concerns and use that information to shape services. This should not rely on completion of online surveys with tick-box generic answers. Far more qualitative narrative research is required to build a strong account of what works for employer and employee.

The Government should be investing heavily in placed-based services that meet the specific local requirements of disabled people and SME employers because the national approach does not appear to be improving either the number of disabled people in employment or the quality of jobs on offer.

The Government must raise awareness of the Equality Act, specifically the positive action measures and reasonable adjustments, Access to Work, Occupational Health services and other sources of support to SME employers to assist disabled people to access and stay in paid employment.

Finally, the Government needs to be far more transparent in its review of services to evaluate if they are meeting the needs of disabled people and SME employers.

### **Actions for Employers**

In light of the research findings presented in this thesis, the following examples of best practice would make a real improvement in disabled people's access to work opportunities if SME employers applied them more widely:

Firstly, SME workplace cultures tend to be viewed very positively by the disabled people who participated in this study suggesting that large employers could learn from this. SME employers should be proud of the role they play in employing large numbers of disabled people and they should share their good practice with the wider business community and with policy makers.

SME employers need to understand that 'difference' is an asset and therefore they should begin to consult and involve disabled employees in decision making. Speak to disabled employees about what it is they may need to ensure they can work productively and do not assume that all disabled employees want the same thing. Consider making hybrid-working or permanent home-working an optional arrangement if that is what the disabled employee requests and consider offering staggered start and finish times for the working day. Understand the impact that impairment may have and the need to adapt sickness policies and workplace accommodations to help support people suffering from hidden, fluctuating and chronic conditions. Consider the journeys that disabled workers must make and think about accessibility to public transport and car parking spaces, and access to electric charging points. Reserve spaces for disabled people who require accessible parking (either on site or nearby parking places). Ensure that support workers are also welcomed into the workplace environment so they can continue to support the disabled worker.

Embed a proper and accessible process for discussing possible adjustments with disabled employees at the earliest stages of the recruitment process in a way that feels welcoming and supportive. The best approach is to ask the individual about their specific needs to ensure they can perform their job role without unnecessary restrictions. Being open, indeed actively promoting innovative and creative ways of performing tasks, in non-ableist ways. This will engender a culture of inclusion. SME employers must provide line managers and other employees support and training on the negative effects of ableism, structural and psycho-emotional dimensions of disability. SME employers should embed non-ableist practice as a core value of their business. Creating a supportive workplace culture is a management issue and SME employers need to take full responsibility for educating themselves and their staff about disability issues. This can be achieved by adopting a 'can-do' approach, focusing on what the disabled person can do and how to maximise this rather than on what disabled people cannot do.

Conduct regular planned reassessment of reasonable adjustments and support plans to ensure they stay relevant to the changing needs of each employee. SMEs should create and promote policies on the right of disabled employees to reasonable adjustments and this should include the right to request flexible working. Employers can implement more flexible sick leave policies, annualised hours, hybrid working, and other forms of non-standard working hours and locations to make work more flex-able. SME employers must encourage discussion with disabled employees in recognition that they are the experts in knowing what needs they may have and avoid making assumptions. SME employers should be open and flexible to a range of reasonable adjustments, that are individually tailored to each employee needs. Critically, reasonable adjustments should not be viewed as a one-off action nor understood as a 'one size fits all' approach. Individual reasonable adjustment plans should be reviewed regularly to account for changes to personal circumstances. SME employers should review their human

resource policies and practices to ensure that they include measures to implement positive action for disabled employees.

Despite not being a requirement for SMEs, they should still collect data on the number of disabled people they employ and report this to DWP with details of the type of contract (permanent/temp), number of hours worked on average per month. By collecting this data it shows that disability gaps is a key concern of the business and something that is worthy of attention and action.

SMEs champions who understand the 'business case' benefits to be gained from open and inclusive employment can promote this message to others within their networks. They can also help empower other SMEs by sharing links to information and Access to Work support available. SME employers should ensure they are drawing upon all available advice and support available to them and that they are accessing the full the range of supports provided by disability organisations, Government departments, Trade Unions and other stakeholders.

#### **Actions for Chronically Impaired, Neurodiverse, Deaf and Disabled People+ (CINDDP+)**

I propose that disabled people and others who do not identify with the label but who would fall under the definition set out in the Equality Act should collaborate. In much the same way the LGBTQ+ community work together to enhance their power and influence over Government policy and employer practice, a united front would (I suggest) bring about a positive step forward for the wider disabled people's movement. I have created an umbrella concept, CINDDP+ to connect (not collapse) different people's experiences and issues. Coming together in this way could help influence when it matters most but still enable each group to continue to collect data on their own unique impairment specific lived experience.

The benefit of working collaboratively under the CINDDP+ (or any other preferred combination of initials) is that Government departments and employers hear one consistent and strong message on issues such as employment thus reducing confusion about how to be inclusive overall. The divisions between different impairment-specific groups needs must be addressed alongside other divisions between organisations *of* and organisations *for* disabled people. If the end goal is genuinely to empower the CINDDP+ community then the larger organisations (normally well-funded disability charities) must be willing to support smaller less well resourced (normally DPOs) by collaborating, offering financial and practical support, and share their 'insider' power and privileged position on policy making by ensuring the smaller DPOs are invited into policymaking circles. In relation to employment, the disability organisations must set the standard of expectation for inclusive employment by employing large numbers of disabled people at all levels of the organisation (but definitely in leadership roles) and then clearly articulating how they do this with practical examples which large, medium, small and micro-sized employers can learn from.

### **Future Research**

Policymakers require a qualitative evidence base to properly understand the nuances, and the challenges facing SMEs because it is very clear that legislation and policy that try to 'persuade' or 'incentivise' employers to employ more disabled people or retain existing disabled employees are not sufficiently working. Future research should include more nuanced analysis to capture the unique characteristics and experiences of micro, small, and medium size enterprises (MSME) because the COVID-19 crisis has taught us that policies do not impact businesses in the same way (United Nations, 2021). Policymakers will need to understand 'what works' for micro-sized enterprises to assist them with hiring and retaining disabled people, as they account for 96% of the total UK MSME population, 33% of employment and 21% of turnover (Rhodes, 2018).

Further work is needed on understanding how MSMEs understand organisational culture and the processes that are flex-able to the needs of individual disabled employees. This research should integrate the perceptions and experiences of disabled people alongside their employers and co-workers to explore contextual issues across employment industries and sectors and sizes. This should assess the crucial factors that either enable or hinder inclusive changes to the organisation of working practices because enhanced flex-ability is likely to be vital in creating more opportunities for good quality and sustainable employment for disabled people.

Future research should also explore if and how informality in MSME contexts builds more open and trusting relationships to assess if this reduces or eliminates psycho-emotional disablism. Also, whether these more informal conversations about impairment-impacted ability reduces employer-anxiety about 'disability' may facilitate more employment opportunities for disabled people. It may also benefit larger business practice that too often places adherence to procedural mechanisms through HRM at the expense of building truly personal relationships built on interdependency and mutual trust.

As the first UK study to research psycho-emotional disablism in the SME workplace, I hope this thesis offers disability studies and broader management and leadership disciplines valuable insights from which to learn. Collecting new data on the emotional and psychological impact that inflexible and inaccessible practice can cause disabled people when trying to obtain or keep paid work is indeed the missing link (Reeve, 2012, 2020) of the employment gap jigsaw and I feel there is space for post-doctorate work in this area. Indeed, a key focus for the study was to find practical solutions and I would hope that future post-doctoral study would build upon these findings and generate real world impact for employers and employees and feed into policy making. There is also a need for far more qualitative research on a larger scale than this thesis can do justice, if we are to capture data to understand what barriers prevent MSMEs from implementing *flex-ability* in work.

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## ***APPENDICES***

### **APPENDIX A: Email invitation sent to disabled people's organisations**

Dear .....

[optional] Thank you for taking my call and for passing this email onto the relevant people at xxxxxx.

Very little is known about how disabled people experience the transition from worklessness to working for small and medium size enterprises (SMEs). What are the barriers and what support is useful? Additionally, substantial gaps appear in existing research in relation to how SME employers experience the process of hiring and employing disabled people, and whether different interventions produce better outcomes for both disabled employees and SME employers. As a member of the Centre for Disability Research at Lancaster University I will be conducting research into this important area, and I hope that you find this of interest and would like to help me.

The study is due to commence in January 2018, with a view to conducting interviews with Small-Medium size employers and disabled people or people with a long-term health condition during 2018. At this stage, I am keen to hear if you can help me find disabled people who have either a work placement or are in employment with SMEs.

#### **The Aim**

The study will focus upon two issues: first, the nature of support that disabled people experience in the transition to, and in their employment for SMEs and experience of employment in SMEs more generally. Second, the attitudes of SME employers to hiring disabled people and their experience of accessing resources to enable this. In doing this, the study will elicit important knowledge that will have practical impacts in informing the development of good practice for SMEs in their employment of disabled people and for those agencies charged with supporting disabled people into paid employment.

Findings from the study will be presented at the internationally renowned Lancaster Disability Studies Conference in September 2020. The project will contribute to knowledge and build understanding of what works well for both SME employers and disabled employees.

The project will result in recommendations outlining good practice in the hiring and employment of disabled people in SMEs. A “Good Practice Guide” will be launched via a seminar with invited participants representing disabled SME workers, the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) and organisations supporting disabled people into work.

If you would like me to come and visit you to discuss this further, please let me know some dates and times that suit you. Alternatively, please drop me an email or give me a call on 07766088609.

With best wishes,

Cara Williams

PhD candidate

Sociology Department

Lancaster University

[c.williams10@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:c.williams10@lancaster.ac.uk)

**APPENDIX B: Screenshot of the website used to recruit disabled people to the study**

**APPENDIX C: Screenshot from Disabled People Against Cuts (DPAC) webpage  
advertising my call for participants**

**<https://dpac.uk.net/2018/02/research-into-disabled-people-work-and-small-medium-size-enterprise-smes-20-people-20-smes-needed/>**

The screenshot shows the DPAC website with a red navigation bar at the top containing links: Home, Blog, About, Join DPAC, Stuff To Buy, Local DPAC Groups, Research, Accessibility, Contact. Below the navigation bar is a banner with the DPAC logo (a circle with 'Disabled' on the left, 'People' on the right, 'Against' at the bottom, and 'Cuts' at the top, with a central figure holding a banner) and the text 'Disabled People Against Cuts'. To the right of the banner is a photograph of a white banner with the text 'DISABILITY RIGHT CUTS KILL! NEVER AGAIN'. Below the banner is another navigation bar with the same links plus 'Categories' and a search box. The main content area features a post dated Feb 01 2018 with the title 'Research into Disabled People, Work and Small/Medium Size Enterprise (SMEs) 20 people & 20 SMEs needed'. The text of the post reads: 'Cara Williams, a PhD student at Lancaster University is conducting research into disabled people's experience of working for small and medium size organisations (SMEs), and the SME experience of employing disabled people in their workplace. She is looking to recruit twenty disabled people and twenty small and medium size organisations to take part in interviews.' To the right of the post are utility buttons: 'Toggle High Contrast', 'Toggle Font size', 'Please Support DPAC' with a 'Donate' button and logos for Mastercard, Visa, American Express, and PayPal, and 'Subscribe to blog via email' with an input field and a 'Privacy & Cookies Policy' link.

This screenshot shows the bottom portion of the DPAC website. It includes a paragraph of text: 'If you are interested, you can read Cara's blog to know more about this research here <https://disabledpeopleworksmes.wordpress.com/>, contact her by email [c.williams10@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:c.williams10@lancaster.ac.uk), or find her on Twitter @Cara\_J\_Williams'. Below this text are social media sharing icons for Facebook, Twitter, Email, RSS, YouTube, Tumblr, Pinterest, and Print. To the right of the text is a 'Subscribe' button with a red background and white text, and the text 'Delivered by FeedBurner'. At the bottom right, there is a 'Recent Posts' section.

## **APPENDIX D: Screenshot from Breakthrough UK website advertising my call for participants**

<https://www.breakthrough-uk.co.uk/academics-and-education>

The screenshot shows the Breakthrough UK website. The header includes the logo "Breakthrough UK including disabled people" and navigation links for "Easy Words" and "Donate". A green navigation bar contains links for "Who we are", "Get support", "Support our work", "Opinion", "Join us", and "For organisations". The main content area features a video of a woman with curly hair, and a certificate titled "Peer Group Facilitator Training" awarded to Annette Cooper. The breadcrumb trail reads "Opinion > Research > Academics and education". The main heading is "Academics and education". The text describes the organization's work with academics and education institutions, mentioning a project with Manchester Metropolitan University. A "Latest" section highlights a "Brilliant donation of Suffragette statue sales a boost to our work".

Opinion > Research > Academics and education

## Academics and education

Breakthrough has worked with many academics and education institutions over the years, both on research into the inclusion and equal participation of disabled people and on evaluations of the effectiveness of our approach. Recently, we worked with Manchester Metropolitan University on a project about the meaning of value in the lives of disabled people:  
<https://rebuildingvalue.wordpress.com/>

We currently have three student researchers working closely with

**Latest**

**Brilliant donation of Suffragette statue sales a boost to our work**

We're delighted! A year after the unveiling of the #OurEmmeline bronze

Breakthrough, either on placement or on research projects.

We have delivered Disability Equality Action training to academic staff at several universities in the North West and beyond.

Please get in touch if you require information or would like our assistance to reach disabled people for your research project.

**Current research projects seeking participants:**

**Disabled People, Work and SMEs**

I am Cara Williams, a student researcher at Lancaster University. I would like you to take part in a research study about disabled people who work in small and medium size businesses. I use the "social model of disability" in my research to support the rights and aspirations of disabled people.

I would like to find out about the support you received to find work.

I am also interested to hear about the support you receive now you are in

statue in Manchester City Centre, award winning sculptor Hazel Reeves is donating proceeds of sales to Breakthrough!

**Voting in the General Election**  
Your Voice Counts!  
Voting in the General Election. Read all about voting in the General Election here.

**Matthew's connecting story**  
As with all our services, Breakthrough's

work and your experience of work.

This information will help me to find out what works well and what can be improved. It is very important to hear your view.

**What happens in the study?**

If you decide to take part, this would involve either meeting up with you to talk about your experiences face to face or we could talk over the telephone or Skype.

The conversation will last less than an hour and is likely to be in May, June or July 2018.

You can decide where you would like to meet me, but a good idea might be to meet at your place of work or another public place. You will be paid up to £10 for your travel costs.

If you would like to take part in the study, please get in touch with Cara at [c.williams10@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:c.williams10@lancaster.ac.uk) or contact us.

Community Connecting project puts the person at the centre. Find out how Connector Tracey worked with Matthew to support his choices to become a reality.

**World of words opens up for Michael**  
"I've always been nervous about reading in case I got laughed at. I use pictures a lot, as they help me get around in everyday life."

(easy read and standard information sheets to link to this)

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Your comment

Add a picture

Click or just drag and drop a photo here

Notify me when someone makes a comment

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Colin – "If you've got someone to walk with you side by side – you're able to go anywhere then."

**Volunteering at Breakthrough**  
Whether it's working directly with clients or an office based activity, there are plenty of ways for you to volunteer with Breakthrough and learn

**APPENDIX E: Flyer advertising the study used to recruit disabled people**

**DO YOU WORK FOR A BUSINESS WITH LESS THAN 250 EMPLOYEES?**

**YES!**

**DO YOU HAVE A LONG-TERM HEALTH CONDITION OR DISABILITY?**

**YES!**

**WOULD YOU TAKE PART IN A SHORT RESEARCH INTERVIEW?**

**YES!**

Want More  
Information?

**CONTACT CARA BY EMAIL:**

**[c.williams10@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:c.williams10@lancaster.ac.uk)**

**TO MAKE ARRANGEMENTS FOR A TELEPHONE INTERVIEW**



FUNDED BY:



## **APPENDIX F: Information sheet - disabled people**

### **Information about the research**

This research is being carried out by Cara Williams at Lancaster University between January 2018 and June 2019. Please take time to read the following information carefully before you decide whether you want to be involved. I want to make sure that you are happy to give consent to take part and that you understand what is involved.

### **Why is this research needed?**

We know disabled people are much less likely than non-disabled people to be in paid employment (45.7 percent compared to 80.5 percent). However, there are significant gaps in current research and very little is known about how disabled people experience the transition from worklessness to working for small and medium size enterprises (SMEs). What, for example, are the barriers and what support is useful? Additionally, substantial gaps appear in existing research in relation to how SME employers experience the process of hiring and employing disabled people and whether different interventions produce better outcomes for both disabled employees and SME employers.

### **Why have I been invited to take part?**

You have been invited to take part in this research because you identify as a disabled person.

### **What are the possible benefits from taking part?**

The study will elicit important knowledge that will have practical impacts in informing the development of good practice for SMEs in their employment of disabled people and for those agencies charged with supporting disabled people into paid employment. Ultimately, I want the research to lead to real benefits for disabled people and SMEs and your insights will contribute to our understanding.

### **What will I be asked to do if I take part?**

If you decide to take part, this will involve an interview with me. The interview should last less than an hour and will be audio recorded.

You will have a choice of format, either face to face, by telephone or by Skype. You can let me know your preferred interview method by email or telephone. If required, you will need to organise your own interpreter to attend the interview. If you would like a trusted person (family member, colleague, friend, support worker, interpreter) to accompany you during the interview, you must consent to this. The process of consent can be managed to suit your individual needs, meaning you can provide verbal or written consent or alternatively a trusted person can sign on your behalf.

You will be reimbursed up to £10 for your travel.

**Do I have to take part?**

No, your participation is voluntary.

**What if I change my mind?**

You are welcome to withdraw from the study at any time before or during the interview and you do not need to explain why. After the interview, if you change your mind, you can ask me by email or telephone to remove your data up to two weeks following our interview.

**What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?**

It is unlikely that there will be any major disadvantages to taking part although it will mean investing 30-60 minutes of your time for an interview.

**What will I do with the data?**

This study is funded by an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) studentship award. Whilst not compulsory, ESRC-funded students are strongly encouraged to offer copies of data created or repurposed during their PhD for deposit at the UK Data Service as it is considered good research practice, however, on this occasion I will not be sharing the transcription or the recording of our interview.

**How my data will be stored**

Your data will be stored in encrypted files (that is no-one other than me, the researcher will be able to access them) and on my password-protected laptop. I will store hard copies of any data securely in locked cabinets in my office. I will keep data that can identify you separately from non-personal information (e.g., your views on a specific topic). In accordance with University guidelines, I will keep the data securely for a minimum of ten years.

**How will I use the information you have shared with me and what will happen to the results of the research study?**

The information given to me during the interview will be used in my PhD thesis and may be used in future academic articles, publications, or presentations.

When writing up the findings from this study, I would like to reproduce some of the views and ideas you shared with me. I will only use anonymised quotes (e.g., from my interview with you), so that although I will use your exact words, you cannot be identified in our publications.

**Who has provided ethical approval for this study to proceed?**

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and the Management School Research Ethics Committee at Lancaster University.

**What if I have a question or concern?**

If you have any queries or if you are unhappy with anything that happens concerning your participation in the study, please contact me, Cara Williams [c.williams10@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:c.williams10@lancaster.ac.uk) or my supervisors: Hannah Morgan [h.morgan@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:h.morgan@lancaster.ac.uk) and Chris Grover, [c.grover@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:c.grover@lancaster.ac.uk).

If you have complaints that you wish to discuss with a person who is not involved in the research, you can also contact: Professor Corinne May-Chahal, Head of Department, Sociology, Bowland

North Lancaster University, Lancaster LA1 4YL [c.may-chahal@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:c.may-chahal@lancaster.ac.uk) Telephone:  
01524 594104

**Thank you for considering your participation in this project.**

**APPENDIX G: Information sheet – disabled people with a learning difficulty**

(interview – but the word “meeting” is preferred here)

I am Cara Williams, a student researcher at Lancaster University. I have two supervisors, Hannah Morgan, and Chris Grover. I would like you to take part in a research study about disabled people who work in small and medium size businesses.

I use the “social model of disability” in my research to support the rights and aspirations of disabled people.

Please take time to read the following information carefully before you decide whether you want to be involved.

**What is the study about?**

I would like to find out about the support you received to find work.

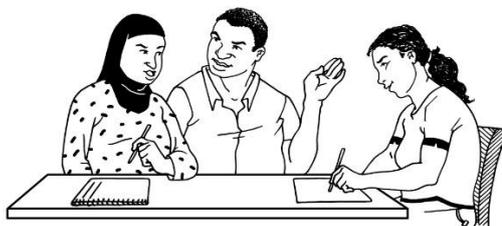
I am also interested to hear about the support you receive

now you are in work and your experience of work.

This information will help me to find out what works well and what can be improved. It is very important to hear your view.

### **What happens in the study?**

If you decide to take part, this will involve either meeting up with you to talk about your experiences face to face or we could talk over the telephone or Skype.



The conversation will last less than an hour.

You can decide where you would like to meet me, but a

good idea might be to meet at your place of work or another public place. You will be paid up to £10 for your travel costs.



### **What are the good things about taking part?**

If you take part in this study, you will help me to understand how small and medium size employers (SMEs) support *disabled people/people with learning disabilities/people with long-term health conditions (delete as appropriate)* to gain work and during their employment.



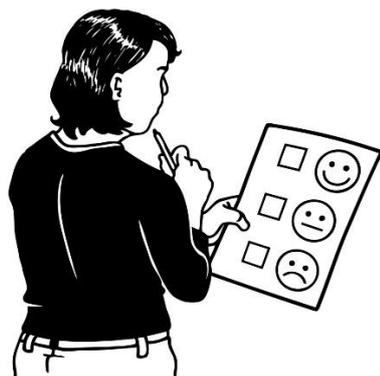
### **Do I have to take part?**

If you do not want to talk to me,  
just say no.

This will not affect the way you  
are treated now or in the future.

If you say yes, but then you  
change your mind, that is OK.

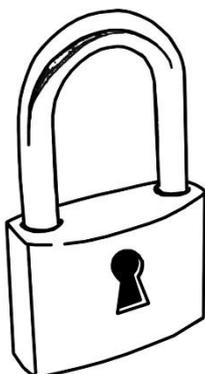
You can stop at any time just tell  
me 'I want to stop'. You do not  
need to tell me why you want to  
stop.



What if I change my mind?

If you change your mind, you can leave the meeting at any time.

You are welcome to withdraw from the study at any time before or during the meeting and up to 2 weeks following the meeting.



What will happen to what you say to me?

I will not tell your employer or anybody else what you have said during our conversation.

After the meeting, I will type into the computer what we talked about.

Your name, age and employer will not be typed, what you said will be kept private.

I will keep the information securely on a password protected computer.



After the research is over, I will store what you said according to Lancaster University policy – usually for ten years.



The report (thesis)

I will look at what you and the other people I have interviewed have said. I will write a thesis about this. The thesis is a long piece of academic writing to gain a qualification. I may also present the findings at conferences and in academic research papers. Your name or any other personal thing about you will not be included.

Who has reviewed the project?

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and the Management School Research Ethics Committee at Lancaster University.

What if I have a question or concern?

If you have any queries or if you are unhappy with anything that happens concerning your participation in the study, please contact me, Cara Williams [c.williams10@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:c.williams10@lancaster.ac.uk) or my supervisors: Hannah Morgan [h.morgan@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:h.morgan@lancaster.ac.uk) and Chris Grover, [c.grover@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:c.grover@lancaster.ac.uk).

If you have complaints that you wish to discuss with a person who is not involved in the research, you can also contact:

Professor Corinne May-Chahal, Head of Department, Sociology Department, Bowland North  
 Lancaster University, Lancaster LA1 4YL  
[c.may-chahal@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:c.may-chahal@lancaster.ac.uk) Telephone: 01524 594104

Thank you for considering the project.

## **APPENDIX H: Information Sheet - SMEs**

### **Information about the research**

This research is being carried out by Cara Williams at Lancaster University between January 2018 and June 2019. Please take time to read the following information carefully before you decide whether you want to be involved. I want to make sure that you are happy to give consent to take part and that you understand what is involved.

If you agree to take part in an interview, I will negotiate with you whether or when you wish to be named as a participant in the research and will not name you or your organisation unless this is something you want.

### **Why is this research needed?**

We know disabled people are much less likely than non-disabled people to be in paid employment (45.7 percent compared to 80.5 percent). However, there are significant gaps in current research and very little is known about how disabled people experience the transition from worklessness to working for SMEs. What, for example, are the barriers and what support is useful? Additionally, substantial gaps appear in existing research in relation to how SME employers experience the process of hiring and employing disabled people and whether different interventions produce better outcomes for both disabled employees and SME employers.

### **Why have I been invited to take part?**

You have been invited to take part in this research because you are a representative of a SME.

### **What are the possible benefits from taking part?**

The study will elicit important knowledge that will have practical impacts in informing the development of good practice for SMEs in their employment of disabled people and for those agencies charged with supporting disabled people into paid employment. Ultimately, I want the research to lead to real benefits for disabled people and SMEs and your insights will contribute to our understanding.

**What will I be asked to do if I take part?**

If you decide to take part, this will involve an interview with me. The interview should last less than an hour and will be audio recorded. That data will be protected on encrypted devices and kept secure.

**Do I have to take part?**

No, your participation is voluntary.

What if I change my mind?

You are welcome to withdraw from the study at any time before or during the interview and you do not need to explain why. After the interview, if you change your mind, you can ask me by email or telephone to remove your data up to two weeks following our interview.

**What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?**

It is unlikely that there will be any major disadvantages to taking part although it will mean investing 30-60 minutes of your time for an interview.

**What will I do with the data?**

This study is funded by an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) studentship award. The funder expects me to make my data available for future use by other researchers. Fully anonymised data taken from the SurveyMonkey questionnaire and transcribed interview will be offered to the UK Data Service and will be made available to genuine research for re-use (secondary analysis). I will not be offering to share the audio recording.

**How my data will be stored**

Your data will be stored in encrypted files (that is no-one other than me, the researcher will be able to access them) and on my password-protected laptop. I will store hard copies of any data securely in locked cabinets in my office. I will keep data that can identify you separately from non-personal information (e.g., your views on a specific topic). In accordance with University guidelines, I will keep the data securely for a minimum of ten years.

How will we use the information you have shared with us and what will happen to the results of the research study?

The information given to me during the interview will be used in my PhD thesis and may be used in future academic articles, publications, or presentations. Your personal information and organisation name will not be included unless you request to be identifiable and provide consent to do so.

When writing up the findings from this study, I would like to reproduce some of the views and ideas you shared with me. I will only use anonymised quotes (e.g., from my interview with you), so that although I will use your exact words, you cannot be identified in our publications.

**Who has provided ethical approval for this study to proceed?**

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and the Management School Research Ethics Committee at Lancaster University.

**What if I have a question or concern?**

If you have any queries or if you are unhappy with anything that happens concerning your participation in the study, please contact me, Cara Williams [c.williams10@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:c.williams10@lancaster.ac.uk) or my supervisors: Hannah Morgan [h.morgan@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:h.morgan@lancaster.ac.uk) and Chris Grover, [c.grover@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:c.grover@lancaster.ac.uk).

If you have complaints that you wish to discuss with a person who is not involved in the research, you can also contact: Professor Corinne May-Chahal, Head of Department, Sociology, Bowland North Lancaster University, Lancaster LA1 4YL [c.may-chahal@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:c.may-chahal@lancaster.ac.uk) Telephone: 01524 594104

Thank you for considering your participation in this project.

**APPENDIX I(a): Consent form (for use with disabled people)**

Project Title: Disabled people, work, and small/medium size enterprises (SMEs)

Name of Researchers: Cara Williams

Email: c.williams10@lancaster.ac.uk

Please tick each box

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw within 2 weeks of taking part in the interview and my data will be removed.	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that any information given by me may be used in future reports, academic articles, publications, or presentations by the researcher, but my personal information will not be included, and I will not be identifiable.	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that my name will not appear in any reports, articles, or presentation.	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that any interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed, and that data will be protected on encrypted devices and kept secure.	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that data will be kept according to University guidelines for a minimum of 10 years after the end of the study.	<input type="checkbox"/>
I agree to take part in the above study.	<input type="checkbox"/>

\_\_\_\_\_

Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature

If this form is signed on behalf of the participant, the consent form has been signed by:

\_\_\_\_\_ [Name of trusted person/Proxy],

\_\_\_\_\_ [signature of trusted person/Proxy], on behalf of the participant.

The participant understands the information on the participant information sheet. The participant gave verbal consent to take part in the study on \_\_\_\_\_[Date]

I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly and to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily.

Signature of Researcher /person taking the consent\_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

One copy of this form will be given to the participant and the original kept in the files of the researcher at Lancaster University.

**APPENDIX I(b) Consent form (for use with SMEs and Disability Confident Leaders)**

Project Title: Disabled people, work, and small/medium size enterprises (SMEs)

Name of Researchers: Cara Williams

Email: c.williams10@lancaster.ac.uk

Please tick each box

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw within 2 weeks of taking part in the interview and my data will be removed.	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that any information given by me may be used in future reports, academic articles, publications, or presentations by the researcher, but my personal information will not be included, and I will not be identifiable, (unless I provide consent to be identified – see point 5 below).  Fully anonymised transcribed interview data will be offered to UK Data Service and will be made available to genuine research for re-use (secondary analysis). Audio recordings will not be shared.	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that my name/my organisation's name will not appear in any reports, articles, or presentation without my consent.	<input type="checkbox"/>
I consent to my name/my organisation's name appearing in reports, articles, and presentations.	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that any interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed, and that data will be protected on encrypted devices and kept secure.	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that data will be kept according to University guidelines for a minimum of 10 years after the end of the study.	<input type="checkbox"/>
I agree to take part in the above study.	<input type="checkbox"/>

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly and to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily.

Signature of Researcher /person taking the consent\_\_\_\_\_ Date  
\_\_\_\_\_ Day/month/year.

One copy of this form will be given to the participant and the original kept in the files of the researcher at Lancaster University.

**APPENDIX J: Interview guide - Disabled People**

Tell me about your experience of support to find work in SMEs

Tell me about your experience of support to stay in work in SMEs

Tell me about your experience of discrimination in the employment process.

Access to information, guidance, and support to obtain funding and resources to support disabled people in the workplace. Eg. Access to Work or other sources of support.

What engagement did you have with disabled people's organisations?

How did you get to know about the social model of disability?

Knowledge of equality and human rights legislation and how discrimination can be challenged.

Attitude of SME employers

Attitude of other staff in SMEs – including direct line manager and other colleagues.

Impact of ESA and wider welfare reform. Eg. how has this impacted (or not) on the ability to find work.

What changes do you think are needed to reduce the “disability employment gap”?

**APPENDIX K: Interview guide - SMEs**

Broadly, the topics to be covered will include:

Experience of employing a disabled person – good, bad, or indifferent?

Experience of supporting an employee return to work following a long period of absence.

Impact of Health and Safety and Equality Act legislation

Steps taken to reduce workplace discrimination (if any)

Access to information, guidance, and support to obtain funding and resources to support disabled people in the workplace – where do they find information?

Attitude towards hiring disabled people, people with mental health related illness and people with long-term health conditions (to assess if the attitude differs according to the “label”/condition/impairment)

Understanding of equality legislation and employer responsibilities

Experience of making “reasonable adjustments”.

What changes are needed to reduce the “disability employment gap”?

Thoughts on perceived “risk”

Thoughts on perceived extra costs

Thoughts on perceived lower productivity levels

Thoughts on paying disabled less.

**APPENDIX L: Ethical Approval**

• Ethics approval (REC reference number FL17057-please quote this in all correspondence about this project) Yahoo/PHD ★



• **FASS and LUMS Research Ethics** <fass.lumsethics@lancaster.ac.uk>  
To: Williams, Cara  
Cc: Morgan, Hannah, Grover, Chris

Mon, 4 Dec 2017 at 14:35 ★

Dear Cara

Thank you for submitting your ethics application and additional information for *Disabled people, work and small Medium Size Enterprises (SMEs)*. The information you provided has been reviewed by member(s) of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Lancaster Management School Research Ethics Committee and I can confirm that approval has been granted for this project.

As principal investigator your responsibilities include:

- ensuring that (where applicable) all the necessary legal and regulatory requirements in order to conduct the research are met, and the necessary licenses and approvals have been obtained;
- reporting any ethics-related issues that occur during the course of the research or arising from the research (e.g. unforeseen ethical issues, complaints about the conduct of the research, adverse reactions such as extreme distress) to the Research Ethics Officer;
- submitting details of proposed substantive amendments to the protocol to the Research Ethics Officer for approval.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you require further information about this.

Kind regards

**Debbie**

Debbie Knight

Secretary, FASS-LUMS Research Ethics Committee [fass.lumsethics@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:fass.lumsethics@lancaster.ac.uk)

Phone (01524) 592605 | D22 FASS Building, Lancaster University, LA1 4YT | Web: <http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/arts-and-social-sciences/research/ethics-guidance-and-ethics-review-process/> & <http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/lums/research/ethics/>



• RE: Ethics application further information requested (REC reference number: FL17057 please quote in all correspondence about this project) Yahoo/PHD ★



• **Noble, Stacey** <s.noble1@lancaster.ac.uk>  
To: cara williams

1 Dec 2017 at 12:50 ★

Hi Cara

Your updated forms have addressed all of my queries and feedback, well done.

One small note - Apologies if I am not seeing it but can you please add the £10 travel bursary on the disabled participants PIS?

best wishes  
Stacey

Dr Stacey Noble  
Senior Teaching Associate  
Department of Accounting and Finance  
Room C33 Management School  
Lancaster University  
Bailrigg  
Lancaster  
LA1 4YX

tel - [01524 593 625](tel:01524593625)  
email - [s.noble1@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:s.noble1@lancaster.ac.uk)  
website - [linkedin.com/in/stacey/noble](https://www.linkedin.com/in/stacey/noble)

**APPENDIX M: Letter from DWP in response to a Freedom of Information request**

Department  
for Work &  
Pensions

Ministerial

Correspondence

[www.dwp.gov.uk](http://www.dwp.gov.uk)

Caxton House

Tothill Street

LONDON

SW1H 9DA

[ministers@dwp.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:ministers@dwp.gsi.gov.uk)

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Ms Cara Williams

[carawilliams2000@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:carawilliams2000@yahoo.co.uk)

Our Ref: TO/17/06106

26 October 2017

Dear Ms Williams

Thank you for your recent correspondence with regard to the Disability Confident scheme. Government Ministers receive a large volume of correspondence and they are unable to reply personally on every occasion. I have been asked to respond.

Disability Confident supports the Government's commitment to support one million more disabled people into work over the next ten years by focusing on the role of employers, who have a crucial role to play in ensuring disabled people are recruited, retained, and developed in their careers.

As you are aware, Disability Confident is about creating a movement for change - getting employers to think differently about disability and to take action to improve how they attract,

recruit, and retain disabled workers. This involves business talking to business, with disability confident employers sharing their evidence and experiences with other employers.

The Disability Confident scheme has 3 levels that have been designed to support employers on their Disability Confident journey. An employer will complete each level before moving on to the next. By working through the scheme employers will also get access to a wide range of information, good practice and other resources including links to DWP programmes that can provide practical assistance, such as Access to Work.

When employers sign up as Disability Confident, they are asked to make specific meaningful offers of opportunities for disabled people such as jobs, apprenticeships, internships, and work experience opportunities.

To start their Disability Confident journey, an employer will sign up via Gov.UK with their Disability Confident commitments and identify at least one thing that they can do that will make a difference for disabled people. To take the second step and to become a Disability Confident Employer, an employer will need to undertake a self-assessment, testing the business against a set of statements.

To become a Disability Confident Leader an employer will need to put their self-assessment up for external challenge and then identify the organisation that has done this external assessment. They will also need to take on a role working with other employers to encourage and support them to follow their own Disability Confident journeys. This may involve the DC Leader working with other employers in their supply chains, their sectoral and professional networks, and their local and national communities.

Because of this rigorous assessment process, it is unlikely that a registered employer would knowingly breach its own commitment to be Disability Confident. However, if an individual were to make a complaint against a Disability Confident employer of failing to comply with a commitment of the scheme, in the first it would be for the employer to investigate in the normal way and put things right. If they were unable to satisfactorily reach a solution, then a third party may become involved.

You also ask for an up-to-date list of Disability Confident Employers. This can be found on Gov.UK.

<https://www.gov.uk/Government/publications/disability-confident-employers-that-have-signed-up>

Information on Disability Confident with further web links that may be of use can be found at:

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/disability-confident-how-to-sign-up-to-the-employer-scheme>

Yours sincerely

A John

Ministerial Correspondence Team

**APPENDIX N: Letter from Ministry of Justice in response to a Freedom of Information request**



**Ms Cara Williams**  
 carawilliams2000@yahoo.co.uk

Disclosure Team  
 Ministry of Justice  
 102 Petty France  
 London  
 SW1H 9AJ

data.access@justice.gov.uk

4<sup>th</sup> November 2020

Dear Ms Williams,

**Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) Request – 201020027**

Thank you for your request dated 20<sup>th</sup> October 2020 in which you asked for the following information from the Ministry of Justice (MoJ):

**I would like to obtain statistics on the number of annual cases of employment tribunals for disability discrimination (even when included along with other claims) broken down by size of employer (in terms of number of employees) since 2017 (or the most recent annual figures if easier).**

**I am trying to determine if small and medium size employers (SME) (defined as less than 250 employees) are more likely to be taken to a tribunal for disability discrimination compared to large employers (over 250 employees). If the SME category data can be broken down further ie. 1-10 employees; 11-50 and 50-250 that would be very helpful. I would need data on large employer (+250 employees) to make the comparisons.**

**I am also interested to see the outcome data to assess if the "reasonableness" criteria exonerates them more often than not. Therefore, can you please provide numerical data on decision outcomes to show number of cases found in favour of claimant versus number of cases found in favour of defendant. If you have data on the number of claims that are made but later withdrawn before a decision is made that could also be interesting.**

**A summary table would be sufficient if that makes the request easier and quicker.**

Your request has been handled under the FOIA.

It has been passed to me because I have responsibility for answering requests relating to data in Her Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service (HMCTS). HMCTS is an executive agency of the MoJ and is responsible for the administration of the magistrates' courts, the Crown Court, the County Court, the Family Court, the High Court, Court of Appeal and tribunals in England and Wales and non-devolved tribunals in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

The MoJ does not hold any information in the scope of your request. This is because there is no legal or business requirement for MoJ to do so.

With regards to your request, I should explain that Employment Tribunals do not keep any records regarding the size of employers involved in Employment Tribunal claims.

The FOIA does not oblige a public authority to create information to answer a request if the requested information is not held. The duty is to only provide the recorded information held.

However, outside of FOIA and on a discretionary basis I can tell you that Employment Tribunal Jurisdictional outcomes are published in page ET3 of the official statistics. This provides information regarding the percentages of disposals by outcome and jurisdiction, which can be accessed via the following link:

[Tribunal Statistics Quarterly: April to June 2020 - GOV.UK](#)

Also, outside of FOIA and on a discretionary basis, I can tell you that there is a Public Register of Judgments issued by the Employment Tribunals.

- For data from February 2017 onwards judgements can be reviewed at:

[www.gov.uk/employment-tribunal-decisions](http://www.gov.uk/employment-tribunal-decisions)

- For data up to February 2017

A Public Register of Judgments issued by the Employment Tribunals is maintained. The judgments can be inspected at the Public Register which is located at Bury St Edmunds for judgments issued in England and Wales, and Glasgow for judgments issued in Scotland. Members of the public can also request copies of judgments direct from the Public Register either by phone or letter, however if a case settles or withdraws before the final hearing a judgment may not be held.

Alongside the Register, there is an electronic index which allows members of the public to search for Employment Tribunal cases. The electronic index is searchable by case number, claimant name, respondent name, jurisdiction (type of claim), office and year.

The address of the Public Register is provided below, it is open to the public from 10.00am to 16.00pm Monday to Friday (except public holidays). (Phone lines are open between 9.00-1700)

HM Courts & Tribunals Service  
Ground Floor  
Triton House  
St Andrews Street North  
Bury St Edmunds  
Suffolk  
IP33 1TR  
Telephone: 01284 762 171

HM Courts & Tribunals Service  
Eagle Building  
215 Bothwell Street  
Glasgow.

**APPENDIX O: SME participant characteristics**

Participant	Gender	Organisation Type	Business Sector (SIC, 2007)	Congenital or acquired impairment	Human Resource Expertise In-house mentioned during the interview	Number of employees	Role in the organisation
Frank	Male	Private Enterprise	Disability Sector - Education & Training	Congenital	No	30 plus some freelance workers	Owner
Andy	Male	Private Enterprise	Manufacturing	Acquired	No	15	Owner
Peter	Male	Private Enterprise	Manufacturing	Acquired	Yes	132	Owner

Hannah	Female	Social Enterprise	Disability Sector – training, advocacy, access audits and social care projects, with social model principles embedded into the mission	Acquired	No	8	Owner/Partner
Bev	Female	Registered Charity	Provides allotment space for disabled people and disadvantaged and vulnerable children	N/a	No	1 full time and 10 freelance seasonal workers (grant dependent)	Owner
Rachel	Female	Disabled People's Organisation (DPO) is the key identity and	Disability Sector – research, advocacy, training, with social model principles	Hidden impairment, but not discussed during the interview	No	12	Manager

		purpose – set up as a Registered Charity	embedded into the mission				
Zoe	Female	Registered Charity	Affiliated member of a national charitable organisation. Each local service operates individually to obtain grants and funding. They offer advice and guidance across social security, housing, employment to the general public	n/a	Yes	1 full time and 7 part time	Manager

Diane	Female	Social Enterprise – Community Interest Company	Health and Social Care including two Healthwatch Services	n/a	No	20 paid staff plus unpaid volunteers	Owner
Janita	Female	Private Enterprise	Manufacturing	n/a	No	33 full time	Owner
Linda	Female	Private Enterprise	IT	n/a	No	3 full time	Owner
Chris	Male	Private Enterprise	Other – cleaning and security	n/a	Yes	630 mix of full / part time	Owner
Bruce	Male	Private Enterprise	IT	n/a	No	5 full time and 1 part time	Owner
Karen	Female	Private Enterprise	IT	n/a	No	6 full time	Owner
Daniel	Male	Private Enterprise	Manufacturing		No	18 full time	Manager

Fiona	Female	Private Enterprise	Other - recruitment		Yes	276 mix of full/part time	Manager
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**APPENDIX P: Disabled participant characteristics**

<b>Participant pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Acquired or Congenital Impairment</b>	<b>Type of Impairment</b>	<b>Education level</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Employment Sector Experience</b>
Tom	Male	Congenital	Mobility - wheelchair user	HE - Doctorate	England - South outside London	Currently employed full-time in the disability sector working in a small charity
Simon	Male	Congenital	Mobility - wheelchair user	FE College	England - North West	Disability sector - large charity
Kevin	Male	Acquired (after 18)	Brain Injury, aphasia, memory loss	HE - undergraduate	England	Currently unemployed, previously worked in the private sector as an accountant
Colin	Male	Congenital	Mobility	HE - undergraduate	England - South outside London	Currently self-employed, previously worked in the private sector in public relations

Kelly	Female	Congenital	Self-diagnosed Autism, dyspraxia, depression, anxiety and a previous eating disorder	HE - undergraduate	England	Currently employed part-time working in a small start-up business. She is also a self-employed piano teacher.
Dean	Male	Congenital	Mobility - wheelchair user	HE - postgraduate	Northern Ireland	Currently works in a social enterprise that is focused on disability advocacy, access audits, and research
Tina	Female	Congenital	Mobility - wheelchair user	HE - postgraduate	England - London	Currently a self-employed disability awareness trainer
Dominic	Male	Congenital	Mobility - wheelchair user	unknown	England - North West	Currently works in a social enterprise and previously for a disability charity
Paul	Male	Congenital	Mobility	HE - Doctorate	England - North West	Currently working in a private enterprise in the hospitality industry

Holly	Female	Congenital	Neurodiversity, chronic pain, autism, and ADHD	Higher Education – postgraduate level	England - North of England	Currently works in a medium sized charity.
Paresh	Male	Congenital	Mobility - wheelchair user	Tertiary level – Further Education College	England - South outside London	Currently works for a private enterprise in a recruitment agency run by disabled people.
Bradley	Male	Congenital	Mobility	unknown	England - South outside London	Currently works for a private enterprise in a recruitment agency run by disabled people.

**APPENDIX Q: SurveyMonkey Questionnaire for Disability Confident Leader****Organisations****DISABLED PEOPLE, WORK AND SMEs**

## Information

We know disabled people are much less likely than non-disabled people to be in paid employment (45.7 percent compared to 80.5 percent). However, there are significant gaps in current research and very little is known about how disabled people experience the transition from worklessness to working for SMEs. What, for example, are the barriers and what support is useful? Additionally, substantial gaps appear in existing research in relation to how SME employers experience the process of hiring and employing disabled people and whether different interventions produce better outcomes for both disabled employees and SME employers.

By completing this online SurveyMonkey questionnaire you are providing informed consent. If you provide me with your contact details when completing the questionnaire, you will be free to withdraw your responses from the research up to two weeks following completion. If you do not provide contact details, I will be unable to identify your questionnaire and you will not be able to withdraw your data from the research.

I look forward to reading your responses and hope that you can continue your involvement by volunteering to take part in a short follow-up interview. If you agree to take part in a follow-up interview, I will negotiate with you whether or when you wish to be named as a participant in the research and will not name you unless this is something you want.

As a Disability Confident “Leader”, and therefore a champion for disabled people, can you please respond to the following the questions?

Total number of employees: _____
Total number of disabled employees: _____
Business sector _____
What does your business do?
_____

What prompted your organisation to sign up to the Disability Confident scheme and to progress to the highest level of commitment?

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What are the benefits to your organisation of becoming a Disability Confident "Leader"?

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What types of data do you collect on your disabled members of staff? How does this data inform your recruitment and retention strategy and how is the data used at different levels of the organisation?

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What strategies do you have in place to attract, recruit, and retain disabled employees? \_\_\_\_\_

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How do you work with local networks of SME employers to encourage and support them to improve support for disabled employees?

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What challenges do you anticipate in fulfilling your commitment to disabled people and SMEs, and how will you overcome them? Do you have any support needs in order to fulfill your commitment, what are they and how will you get the support you need? \_\_\_\_\_

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How important is it to your business that disabled people are not discriminated against in the recruitment process and once employed? Why is this important? What measures do you take to reduce the chances of discrimination?

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What experience do you have of working with external agencies to support disabled people in the \_\_\_\_\_ workplace?

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In your view, what five changes to workplace arrangements or practices are key to supporting disabled \_\_\_\_\_ people?

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In your experience, what are the main barriers disabled people face in accessing employment on an equal basis to non-disabled people?

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Thank you.

I would like to follow-up on this questionnaire by conducting a short interview either by Skype or in person. If you are willing to take part, please provide me with your name, email address, a suggested time/date, and your preferred method.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Time/Date for interview: \_\_\_\_\_

If you prefer to use Skype, what is your Skype address:

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If in person, preferred location address

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**APPENDIX R: Freedom of Information Request: Access to Work by sector and firm size.**



Department  
for Work &  
Pensions

[www.gov.uk/dwp](http://www.gov.uk/dwp)

Central Fol Team  
Caxton House  
6-12 Tothill Street  
London  
SW1H 9NA

Cara Williams  
[carawilliams2000@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:carawilliams2000@yahoo.co.uk)

Email: [freedom-of-information-request@dwp.gov.uk](mailto:freedom-of-information-request@dwp.gov.uk)

Our Ref: FOI2020/17225

Date: 10 July 2020

Dear Cara Williams,

Thank you for your Freedom of Information request received on 6 April 2020. You asked for:

*"I understand that the DWP holds some data in relation to type, sector and size of firm a person receiving Access to Work works in.*

*Can you please provide the most up to date data that shows the number of people who receive Access to Work, split by those who work in businesses that have 1-49 employees, 50-249 employees and 250+ employees.*

*Where possible, I would like this data to know the number of people who receive Access to Work, split by type/sector of business, to include, charitable organisations, private sector (national organisations) and private sector (local employer).*

*If you could also provide the total value of Access to Work payments that would also be helpful.*

*I have attached a table which may help."*

**DWP Response**

Please accept our apologies for the delay in responding to your Freedom of Information request. You can normally expect a response to your Fol request within 20 working days, however due to the current Covid-19 situation we are focusing resources on frontline high-priority areas and would respond as soon as we are able to do so.

I confirm that we hold the recorded information to respond to your request.

Please see the attached Excel table you requested.

**Please note:**

1. The employer type data recorded in the Access to Work dataset does not meet the standards required to be included in the Official Statistics.  
**Please treat all values as guide figures rather than actual figures.**
2. Number of people who receive Access to Work refers to number of people who receive at least one Access to Work payment in 2018/19.
3. Number of people is rounded to the nearest 10.

4. The dataset that enables breakdowns of Access to Work expenditure by employer type does not provide a fully accurate total expenditure figure, whereas the data used for the total expenditure figure in the Access to Work statistical publication is fully accurate but it does not enable breakdowns by employer type. Therefore, expenditure by employer type are calculated as proportions of total expenditure using the former dataset, and these proportions are applied to the accurate total expenditure figure as used in the statistical publication, in order to estimate Access to Work expenditure by employer type.
5. Total £ of Access to Work funding is rounded to the nearest £10,000
6. Where total number of employees is 'not recorded' this is where within the data the value for size of employer is missing or invalid.
7. Type/Sector of business is recorded under 7 options; these are:
  - a) Government Departments
  - b) Other Public Sector
  - c) Charitable Organisations
  - d) Private Sector - national organisation
  - e) Private Sector - local employer
  - f) Franchise
  - g) NoneValues (Charitable/ Private (National)/Private (Local)) therefore will not sum to total.
8. The Access to Work Statistics can be found here:  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/access-to-work-statistics-april-2007-to-march-2019>

If you have any queries about this letter, please contact the Department quoting the reference number above.

Yours sincerely,  
Policy Group FOI Team  
Department for Work and Pensions

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**Your right to complain under the Freedom of Information Act**

If you are not happy with this response you may request an internal review by e-mailing [freedom-of-information-request@dwp.gov.uk](mailto:freedom-of-information-request@dwp.gov.uk) or by writing to DWP, Central FOI Team, Caxton House, Tothill Street, SW1H 9NA. Any review request should be submitted within two months of the date of this letter.

If you are not content with the outcome of the internal review you may apply directly to the Information Commissioner's Office for a decision. Generally, the Commissioner cannot make a decision unless you have exhausted our own complaints procedure. The Information Commissioner can be contacted at: The Information Commissioner's Office, Wycliffe House, Water Lane, Wilmslow Cheshire SK9 5AF

Web: [ico.org.uk/Global/contact\\_us](http://ico.org.uk/Global/contact_us) or telephone 0303 123 1113 or 01625 545745

Total number of employees	Total number of people who receive Access to Work	Total £ of Access to Work funding	Total number of people who receive Access to Work who work in a Charitable Organisation	Total £ of Access to Work funding	Total number of people who receive Access to Work who work in a Private Sector (national) organisation	Total £ of Access to Work funding	Total number of people who receive Access to Work who work in a Private Sector (local) organisation	Total £ of Access to Work funding
1 to 49	10,220	£37,910,000	900	£4,550,000	670	£1,080,000	2,850	£12,350,000
50 to 249	2,000	£8,630,000	330	£1,580,000	220	£780,000	750	£2,890,000
249+	23,610	£82,370,000	820	£5,800,000	5,220	£15,180,000	1,360	£6,330,000
Not recorded	410	£190,000	30	Less than £5,000	100	£20,000	100	£20,000

**Note:**

1. The employer type data recorded in the Access to Work dataset is not robust and does not meet the standards required to be included in the Official Statistics. **Please treat all values as guide figures rather than actual figures.**
2. Number of people who receive Access to Work refers to number of people who receive at least one Access to Work payment in 2018/19.
3. Number of people is rounded to the nearest 10.
4. The dataset that enables breakdowns of Access to Work expenditure by employer type does not provide a fully accurate total expenditure figure, whereas the data used for the total expenditure figure in the Access to Work statistical publication is fully accurate but it does not enable breakdowns by employer type. Therefore, expenditure by employer type are
5. Total £ of Access to Work funding is rounded to the nearest £10,000
6. Where total number of employees is 'not recorded' this is where within the data the value for size of employer is missing or invalid.
7. Type/Sector of business is recorded under 7 options; these are:
  - a) Government Departments
  - b) Other Public Sector
  - c) Charitable Organisations
  - d) Private Sector - national organisation
  - e) Private Sector - local employer
  - f) Franchise
  - f) None

Values (Charitable/ Private (National)/Private (Local)) therefore will not sum to total.
8. The Access to Work Statistics can be found here:  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/access-to-work-statistics-april-2007-to-march-2019>

