

## **Obstacles, obligations and optimism: enhancing transition(s) to employment for people with disabilities in a post-COVID context**

Annelies Kamp (PhD), University of Canterbury, New Zealand  
Geraldine Scanlon (PhD, Dublin City University, Ireland

Published in: International Journal of Disability Management, 2020. Vol 15.

### **Abstract:**

The global lockdowns of 2020 associated with COVID-19 have highlighted how, with sufficient impetus, employers can innovate with telecommuting and other accommodations that offer new forms of employment, and new potential for employment inclusion for people with disabilities. This article draws on research, funded by the National Disability Authority of Ireland, to explore the employment of people with disabilities from the perspective of 45 employers in the Republic of Ireland (Ireland). A survey circulated across all counties probed employers' attitudes, knowledge and experience in working with people with disabilities. The research suggests no one sector, organizational size or governance model excelled in recruiting, selecting and supporting employees with a disability. However, the vast majority were committed to lifting their performance in this regard. The current focus of using wage subsidies as the primary policy mechanism to support employers in lifting the employment of people with disabilities was not supported by our research. Such financial incentives were not seen as essential, regardless of the size or industry of the organization. Rather, employers sought assistance in building their capacity to attract applications, encourage disclosure of disability, and meaningfully support the professional progression of employees with disabilities. A passive investment made to an individual employer, particularly in the private sector, to offset the perceived costs associated with an individual employee does not build capacity for future employees in what will be a fluid post-COVID employment context.

## Introduction

‘While the coronavirus pandemic has led to unprecedented restrictions for billions of people, for many with disabilities, the lockdown has paradoxically opened up the world. As society embraces “virtual” living, disabled people – who for years have missed out due to poor access – are suddenly finding themselves able to take part in work, culture, or socialising from their own home’. (Ryan, 2020)

This article presents research undertaken in the Republic of Ireland (Ireland) on the experiences of the transition to employment for people with a disability. In particular, it focuses on the employer in the context of that transition. When we generated the data on which this paper draws, Ireland was emerging from the profound economic impact of the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) of the late 2000s. During that period of recession in Ireland, unemployment rates for the general population had soared to around 16 %. By 2019 – in a context of economic recovery – the unemployment rate for the general population had dropped back to around 5 % given a growth rate well in advance of the European average (European Commission, 2019). Yet, at the time of writing, Ireland – along with the rest of the world – is in the midst of a global pandemic that has had a profound impact on both economies and societies. With the introduction of public health restrictions deemed necessary to curtail the COVID-19 virus, human interaction has been severely curtailed. The economic impact for those industries that cannot operate without human interaction has seen employment in some sectors plummet. Having been one of Europe’s fastest growing economies in 2019, Ireland is now forecasting unemployment for the general population to peak at 22 % in 2020 (Daly, 2020).

The OECD (2003) suggest the strongest predictor of employment levels for people with disabilities is the general employment rate. Thus while we may be able to celebrate the ‘normalizing’ of, for example, the provision of telecommuting accommodations that can enable access to employment (Doyle, 2020), and the potential of Coronavirus ‘revolutionizing’ work opportunities for people with disabilities (Schur & Kruse, 2020), the

prospects of employment for people with a disability in the current context will likely remain problematic. In this dynamic employment context, policies in Ireland and elsewhere around the inclusion of people with disabilities have focused on supply side issues. That is, on the potential to enhance the employability of people with disabilities particularly through the provision of education and training. This research presented in this paper sought to understand this issue from the demand side perspective of the employment relationship, the employing organization. The article begins by reviewing what is known of employer perspectives on recruiting, selecting and retaining employees with disabilities, before outlining the research design. In the subsequent sections, selected findings provide insight into Irish employers' attitudes, knowledge and experience in working with people with disabilities. The paper closes with our reflections on the transition opportunities for people with disabilities in the current context, and outlines the implications of the research for diverse transition to employment stakeholders.

## **Literature Review**

In Ireland, as elsewhere, paid employment remains a key indicator of both adulthood and citizenship status, as well as acting as the primary mechanism for economic well-being in the context of a liberal welfare regime (Walther, 2006). This expectation of paid employment persists despite contextual vulnerabilities that result from Ireland's exposure as the second most globalized economy in 2019 (Gygli, Haelg, Potrafke, & Sturm, 2019). While any recessionary context severely compromises employment opportunities for all people seeking employment, this is even more the case for people who have yet to establish an employment history and for people with a disability. Ireland has one of the lowest employment rates for people with disabilities in the EU (26.2 % compared to 48.1 % in the EU in 2017) (European Commission, 2019). A 2017 ESRI report found that among working age people with a

disability, most (82 %) had worked at some stage in their life but that 35 % had been without work for more than four years.

If they do secure employment, people with disabilities are more likely to find themselves in low paid work, compared to those without a disability, even when they have the same qualifications (MacInnes et al., 2014; World Health Organization and World Bank, 2011). They are also more likely to experience involuntary job loss at times of economic downturn (Mitra & Kruse, 2016). While statistics might suggest that people with disabilities are less likely to experience discrimination in the labour market, analysis indicates this is because they are far less likely to be categorized as economically-active in the first place (Banks, Grotti, Fahey, & Watson, 2018). In seeking employment, or in the context of employment, Banks et al. suggest people with disabilities are twice as likely to experience work-related discrimination compared to those without disabilities. There is now an increasing focus in research on ‘the cultural, discursive and relational undergirdings of the disability experience’ (Goodley, 2013, p. 634), including the experience of seeking paid employment in the context of globalization. In this context, it is increasingly argued that the most that can be said of transition to employment is that it involves a shift from a dominant engagement in formal education to a dominant engagement in employment (Brzinsky-Fay, 2014). Particularly for those in transition to first-time employment, there is increasingly a ‘yo-yo’ effect where employees move into, and out of, employment more than once (Walther, 2006). Many first-time employees – including those without disabilities – find themselves maintaining marginal connections to paid employment (Standing, 2011).

Yet, in countries such as Ireland, work is often a central source of identity and social status. People with disabilities are as likely as others to want a job even if they are less likely to be actively searching; they have similar views of the importance of income, job security, and other valued job characteristics (Ali, Schur, & Blanck, 2011). Some research suggests

workers with a disability value non-pecuniary characteristics of their employment – a healthy environment, appropriate work, learning opportunities and good professional relationships – more than their non-disabled colleagues (Brucker & Henly, 2019; Pagan, 2014).

Type and age of onset of disability render generic employment policy responses problematic. For example, employment opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities have been found to be structurally limited by centralized recruitment process, technological changes, productivity and efficiency demands, even when an employer celebrates their diversity strategies (Moore, McDonald, & Bartlett, 2018). There is a large body of research that indicates employer concerns about employing people with mental or emotional disabilities (Amnesty International Ireland, 2011; Hall & Wilton, 2011; McDowell & Fossey, 2015; Millbank Foundation for Vocational Rehabilitation, 2003; Shankar & Collyer, 2003; Unger, 2002). For those with musculoskeletal conditions, pain mediates employment aspirations and opportunities (Morris & Rennane, 2019). People with chronic conditions experience employment barriers associated with a lack of societal understanding, and with the onset of their disability often having occurred before an employment history has been developed (Bevan et al., 2013). Further, factors associated with chronic conditions can be misinterpreted as personal deficiencies if a condition is not disclosed (Shier, Graham, & Jones, 2009). Research also indicates that employers experience challenges in providing accommodations for individuals with complex needs, including those with fluctuating conditions (Sayce, 2011).

Research concerning employers' attitudes towards individuals with a disability shows mixed and inconsistent findings. Early research in the United States found favorable attitudes to employing people with disabilities among certain employers: those who have experience in working with people with disabilities, large organizations, women employers and employers who have higher levels of education (Millbank Foundation for Vocational Rehabilitation,

2003). However, more recent research suggests that, even if employers are open to the idea of recruiting people with a disability, they can lack the confidence in their own knowledge, understanding, and capacity (Business Disability Forum, 2020; Waterhouse, Kimberley, Jonas, & Glover, 2010). A review of the evidence from the United Kingdom indicates employers favour employing non-disabled people (Needels & Schmitz, 2006). Employers who are not aware of the issues surrounding disability may not be willing to consider employing someone with a disability if they have an alternative (Piggott & Houghton, 2007). Employer assumptions have also been shown to affect employment opportunities for adults with developmental disabilities (Teindl, Thompson-Hodgetts, Rashid, & Nicholas, 2018).

Negative attitudes of supervisors or co-workers can affect the socialization of new employees and limit the ability for them to be fully accepted members of the workforce (Schur, Kruse, & Blanck, 2005; Schur et al., 2014). A good fit between role and employee, as well as well-timed support and appropriate accommodations, are critical to successful labour market engagement for people with a disability (De Urris, Verdugo, Jenaro, Crespo, & Caballo, 2005). A key concern for employers appears to be a lack of disclosure, particularly in relation to mental illness (Waterhouse et al., 2010). Yet, more than a third of respondents in research by Bevan et al. (2013) indicated they were unlikely to disclose their disability to any future employer, even in the absence of personal experience of discrimination, a finding that supports earlier research (Bishop, Stenhoff, Bradley, & Allen, 2007).

Prior to the impact of the lockdowns associated with the current pandemic, people with disabilities were more likely than their co-workers without disabilities to require accommodations. However, the type and costs of accommodations were similar for all staff (Schur et al., 2014). Both disabled and non-disabled people benefit from accommodations such as ergonomic equipment, specialist software, flexible working or adjusted hours, working from home and time off to attend appointments. The Business Disability Forum

2020 survey suggests accommodations for people with disabilities required minimal budget; monetary benefits gained from the employment are likely to equal or exceed costs in over two thirds of cases<sup>1</sup> (Schur et al., 2014). Despite this, and that anticipated negative reactions of co-workers to accommodations have not been realized (Schur et al., 2014), employees with disabilities report finding the conversation about accommodations ‘sensitive and fearful’ (Business Disability Forum, 2020, p. 5), a finding that is consistent with earlier research (Baldrige, 2006). For some commentators, a key policy problem lies in a focus on employability skills for people with a disability, rather than ‘the inaccessibility and the inappropriate social and spatial organization of work (despite the enactment of legislative measures)’ (Hall & Wilton, 2011, p. 868). This refocusing of the issues derives from the foregrounding of the right of people with a disability to make their economic contributions (Morris, 2005). It shifts the gaze to the responsibility of those who are in positions to do so to ensure any additional and personalized support required for engagement in diverse forms of employment, including, but not limited to, employment in competitive labour markets. Adopting such a system-level approach demands system change actions (Winsor, Gritz-Swift, Pearce, Darm, & Murray, 2019), based in input and evidence from all stakeholders.

## **Methods**

The presented research is one component of a project that was funded by the National Disability Authority of Ireland, and approved by a university Human Research Ethics Committee. In the first component of the research, a series of literature reviews were conducted through relevant academic databases. Subsequently, a search was completed of relevant publications from global policy actors, including the OECD. The second component of the research comprised semi-structured interviews with 36 people with disabilities who

---

<sup>1</sup> While this research was extensive involving surveys of over 5,000 employees, and interviews and focus groups with 128 managers and workers with disabilities in the US, the ability to generalize is limited given all participants were located in large companies.

were in the process of, or had completed, a transition from education and training to employment in Co. Dublin, Ireland (see Scanlon, Kamp, & Cochrane, 2019 for a full review).

The third component comprised an anonymous on-line survey, on which this article draws. The survey was informed by the literature review and was piloted with four employers who were members of a Project Reference Group, and Ibec<sup>2</sup>. The survey sought demographic information from respondents (location, industry and respondent position) and included questions probing awareness of, experience in, and attitudes to employing people with disabilities. The survey was designed to address five key themes of interest negotiated with the National Disability Authority:

- Attitudes of employers to the recruitment and selection of young employees with disabilities
- Knowledge of employers, as to the dimensions and impact of disability on individuals
- Experience of employers in working with young employees with disabilities and the impact of those experiences in terms of employer attitudes and knowledge
- Barriers that employers perceive in the recruitment, selection, and retention of young employees with disabilities
- Support that employers would find effective in building their ability to recruit, select, and retain employees with disabilities

The demographic data was collected through six fixed choice demographic and organizational questions, and one dichotomous question as to whether, or not, the organization had a formal policy of recruiting employees with disabilities. Then, rating scales (high, medium, low) were used to measure personal awareness of disability issues,

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibec represents the interests of business in Ireland. At the time of the research it had 7,500 member companies



knowledge of the legislation, and knowledge of agencies who are available to support employers. Employer perspectives, processes, and awareness of support mechanisms were measured in nine questions using five point Likert scales (strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree). The fifth theme concerning preferences for support was an open-text response question ‘what is the single most important factor that would make a difference to your organization in being able to recruit, select and progress an employee with a disability’. The survey pilot resulted in no changes being made to the survey.

The live version of the employer survey was launched in April 2015 and an email link, and covering text, was provided to both Ibec and Chambers Ireland. As negotiated, Ibec circulated the survey to their membership list. The project team added the survey link to all email signatures and LinkedIn pages. The team made individual contact with all organizations listed in the 2015 Best Workplaces in Ireland survey (16 large employers, 23 medium employers, 20 small employers); the survey was also circulated to organizations connected to the university and to organizations connected to the Project Reference Group.

The survey was open from April to August 2015. 45 employers engaged in engineering, retail, hospitality, health, utility management, education, information and communication technology and professional services completed the survey. One response was subsequently excluded, given its incompleteness. The responses were from human resource professionals (39 %), executive team members (18 %), hiring managers (18 %) and other (25 %). An ‘other’ category included account managers, professional support staff and corporate social responsibility staff. The survey data were cleaned and analysed for frequency and cross-tabulated by organizational sector and size.

## **Results**

### *Experience in working with people with disabilities*

In terms of organizational type, all organizational types other than micro organizations (one person only) were represented by the respondents. Four respondents were in small private organizations and one was a small public organizations. In medium size organizations (between 10 and 50 employees), five were in the private sector and two were in the public sector. 22 respondents, slight over 50 %, were based in large (over 50 employees) organizations with 12 respondents in organizations in the private sector and 11 respondents in organizations in the public sector. The remaining 9 respondents (20 %) were based in multi-nationals. The organizations were based in all counties of Ireland.

Respondents were equally balanced in terms of experience in working with people with disabilities; 50 % indicated no experience of directly supervising the work of a person with a disability while 50 % indicated some direct experience. Half of the respondents answered the ‘did not know’ the question of the types of disability of current employees; those that could respond indicated current employees represented all the forms of disability listed in the survey (physical impairment, sight, hearing or speech impairment, intellectual disability, mental health condition, a combination of disabilities). Most often, respondents (particularly in large organizations) suggested staff with disabilities all had a ‘combination of disabilities’. Given the limitations of the data, it is difficult to read too much into this; the data may suggest that people with disabilities are categorized as ‘disabled’ rather than their individual characteristics being identified. However, the disability identified as the most difficult to accommodate was intellectual disability.

### *Awareness of disability issues*

In terms of their self-assessed personal awareness of disability issues, 36 % of respondents felt they had high levels of awareness, 55 % felt they had medium levels of awareness, and 9

% felt they had low levels of awareness. The majority of respondents who identified as having a high level of awareness came from large, public sector organizations (18 %) with 9 % coming from multi-nationals, and 5 % coming from large, private sector organizations. The majority of respondents who identified as having a medium level of awareness were based in large, private organizations (18 %), while 9 % were based in multi-national organizations and large public sector organizations. The four respondents with self-assessed low levels of personal awareness of disability issues were based in a multinational, a large private sector organization, a medium private sector organization and a small private organization. No large or medium public sector respondent indicated a low level of personal awareness.

Thirty-four percent of respondents rated their awareness of legislation that deals with equality in the employment of people as 'high', 36 % rating their awareness as 'medium' and 30 % rating their awareness of legislation as 'low'. Analysis of the location of the respondents indicates that those who were highly aware were mainly working in large public organizations (n=7) with respondents in roles as human resource professionals and two being diversity officers. The next highest scores were reported in large private organizations, again with the presence of human resource professionals being evident (n=6). Multinationals reported mixed results: respondents were equally spread across low and high levels of knowledge of the legislation. However, where high levels of legislative knowledge were reported, they were reported by staff in human resource roles (one of whom nonetheless indicated low levels of personal awareness of diversity issues). Only one public sector employee (a front line manager in a medium sized organization) indicated a low level of knowledge of the legislation. The lowest levels of awareness of the legislation were reported by employees in large, private sector organizations and in multinationals (each indicated by four respondents).

Respondents were asked to rate their agreement or disagreement with the statement ‘our business provides sufficient and useful disability awareness training for all employees.’ The majority of respondents indicated disagreement with the statement (50 %); only 32 % strongly agreed or agreed. In regard to whether their organization had formal policies for hiring people with disabilities, 41 % indicated yes; 43 % indicated no and 16 % did not know whether there was a formal policy or not. When asked about unwritten policies – that is norms and precedents – respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement with the statement that ‘our business does a good job of recruiting people with disabilities.’ No respondent strongly agreed with this statement. 27 % agreed, 40 % neither agreed nor disagreed and 30 % disagreed and 2 % strongly disagreed.

Question 15 of the survey probed respondents’ professional links and familiarity with programmes and agencies related to employees with disability such as (in the Irish context) EmployAbility. Only 20 % of respondents indicated a great deal of familiarity with existing programmes and agencies that would build awareness and offer support in the recruitment, selection, retaining and progression of employees with a disability.

### ***Attitudes to employment of people with disabilities***

In Question 16 respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement with a range of statements which probed attitudes to employment of people with disabilities: The first question probed the extent to which employees with disabilities were valued in the organization. 23 % of respondents strongly agreed with this statement while a further 45 % agreed. A quarter of respondents neither agreed nor disagreed, one respondent disagreed and two respondents strongly disagreed. Respondents who disagreed with the statement were drawn from a range of sectors: a small private engineering company, a small private retailer, and a large public education provider.

43 respondents answered this question. One respondent agreed with the statement that employees with disabilities are absent from work too often. This respondent was based in a medium sized private organization, working in the ICT industry. 35 % of respondents neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement while 44 % disagreed and 19 % strongly disagreed. The survey also probed whether employees with disabilities lacked specific and necessary training for employment opportunities. No respondent strongly agreed with this statement however nine respondents agreed. Respondents who agreed that employees with disabilities often lack specific and necessary training were based in the education industry (n=3), the utilities industry (n=3) and one respondent from the following industries: financial services, retail and community services. 37 % of respondents neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement while 26 % disagreed and 16 % strongly disagreed.

Along with provision of education and training to people seeking employment, policy has centered on financial support and incentives for employers in the recruitment, selection and retention of employees with disabilities. The survey asked respondents to rate their agreement with the statement 'wage subsidies are necessary for us to retain employees with disabilities'. A large majority of respondents (63 %) disagreed with the statement that wage subsidies are necessary to retain employees with disabilities. However, 12 % agreed or strongly agreed that wage subsidies are necessary. These five respondents were from a range of industries (hospitality, manufacturing, utilities, education and retail) and were both large and small (two multinationals, two small private organizations and one large public organization). The survey also asked whether the cost of necessary accommodations required for employees with disabilities would be too great for their organization to bear. On this question, 69 % of respondents disagreed and only 10 % of respondents agreed. The respondents who agreed with the statement were based in small, medium and large organizations but also included one multinational working in the hospitality sector.

Respondents strongly rated the dependability of employees with disability with 33 of 43 respondents either agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement. Only two respondents disagreed with the statement; these respondents were based in the construction industry (large private ownership) and the education sector (large public ownership). The survey also asked respondents whether their organization believed that the presence of employees with disabilities was good for their corporate image. On this question, 53 % of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that there was a corporate image benefit in the recruitment, selection and retention of people with a disability while 42 % neither agreed nor disagreed. No respondents strongly disagreed with the statement, while two respondents disagreed. The respondents who disagreed were based, first, in a large, private organization working as a governing body and, second, in a multinational working in the ICT sector.

The final survey question asked respondents to state the single most important factor that would make a difference to their organization in being able to recruit, select and progress an employee with a disability. A number of respondents noted that the single most important factor in this regard was attitudes and levels of knowledge of staff with recruitment and/or line management responsibilities. Respondents indicated the need for greater awareness and information among staff with recruitment responsibilities that a workforce should be representative of a given community and/or customer base. However, it was noted by one respondent that their organization did not receive employment applications from people with disabilities. This may reflect the form of recruitment mechanisms; it may also reflect supply factors in that people with disabilities do not put themselves forward for employment opportunities for a variety of reasons (we return to this point in the discussion).

Some form of professional development could be beneficial in assisting staff with recruitment responsibilities to orient their processes towards people with disabilities, as well as ensuring recruitment occurred through disability-appropriate channels. A number of

respondents made reference to what one referred to as ‘unconscious bias’. In this, while there is no policy around *not* hiring people with disabilities, there was also no policy around interrogating barriers in mindset, recruitment processes and organizational design that functioned invisibly to compromise the opportunities for people with disabilities. While respondents often noted a desire to ensure ‘everyone is treated equally’, equal treatment occurs in context and, in Ireland, the recent recessions have contributed to contexts of fiscal restraint and high levels of unemployment. Respondents noted that organizations could not employ staff at all; they also noted limited funding for major accommodations. For example, a respondent in an education setting noted that the lack of physical accommodations meant some roles were, quite simply, not accessible to employees on an equal basis, not matter what the legislative context or organizational policy might be.

Responses in regard to accommodations that employees with disabilities would require were noted by a number of respondents. It was noted that existing buildings can place structural barriers in the way of employment and progression for people with disabilities. However, smaller accommodations can be sought and respondents noted that if the person can do the role, the accommodation can be absorbed: ‘for us the person’s qualifications and ability to do the job should be enough and we don’t need a particular factor to influence us other than these’. Another respondent noted the need to ‘focus on ability rather than disability’. However, respondents also suggested more could be done if prospective employees disclosed their disability; one indicating that they were ‘open to it’. In line with the literature we surveyed, our respondents noted that accommodations facilitating higher levels of employment of people with disabilities created the potential for a ‘halo effect’: success in recruiting people with a disability would lead to further success:

In other words, we need to actually hire some people who have (obvious) disabilities so that people just get used to it. At the end of the day, the focus is on ability and I am

confident that our hiring process will focus on that. I just don't know if there is a talent pool available for our open positions of candidates who just happen to have a disability.

Numerous respondents spoke to the importance of organizational leadership in realizing the potential to contribute to labour market participation. The need for succession planning, management-level training and 'buy-in' along with 'visible support, in practice and discourse, from senior leadership' was specifically referenced by two respondents. Two respondents made reference to the need for enhanced policy at the organizational level. The first called for 'A formal policy that all staff would be aware of'. Others were less optimistic that such measures, on their own, would be sufficient:

Promotion and progression of employees with disabilities (extremely rare) is needed for a fundamental shift in attitudes within the organization. Current high-profile exercises are media-friendly window-dressing for publicity, leading only to fixed-term employment at the lowest levels of the organization (sic).

## **Discussion**

*'Disabled people risk being hit with the mirror of the abled self. This self looks back at the disabled Other knowing disabled people in deficient ways. Disabled people are their impairment. They are broken individuals. They lack development. They cannot do. They do not have the abilities to lead an independent life'.* (Goodley, 2011, p.80, original emphasis)

We opened this article with a recognition of the COVID-19 pandemic and the interesting tensions in how that has, on the one hand, made people with disabilities more similar to others while, on the other hand, further entrenching some of the barriers they face to active citizenship, including through gaining employment in an economic context where employment has again become highly-competitive. This is, perhaps, a time of opportunity, a time when the possibilities for people with disabilities to engage in employment through diverse and wide-ranging accommodations, and for those accommodations to involve no more than what all employees need. In these times of pandemic, governments have demonstrated their ability to swiftly enact sweeping policies; employers too have shown immense ingenuity.



Our research achieved its research aim in highlighting that there is no one sector, organizational size or governance model that excelled in the recruitment, selection, and support of employees with a disability. However, the more visible accountability processes of public sector organizations may yield some positive effect here. Large organizations in both the public and private sectors were aware of their responsibilities. The finding that the lowest levels of awareness of the legislation were reported by employees in large, private sector organizations and in multinationals might suggest that these organizations could be a rich point for government to invest in capacity-building. Only one public sector employee indicated a low level of knowledge of the equality legislation. A similar pattern held in terms of personal awareness of disability issues: while high and low levels of awareness were evident across the research sample, respondents working in large public sector organizations were more evident towards the high-awareness end of the spectrum.

The research supports earlier arguments that policies focused on maintaining a buoyant labour market will be of benefit to people with disabilities. As one respondent noted, in a recessionary context, it is difficult to do anything for anyone. However, what can be done is to progress capacity-building across all organizational levels. The respondents in this research suggested that employers in all categories were falling short in terms of providing their staff with sufficient and useful disability awareness training, and one in five was unaware of external supports that were already available to them to remedy this shortfall.

This research showed that the majority of respondents had positive attitudes to the recruitment and selection of people with disabilities. The majority also strongly disagreed that disabled employees were absent from work too often, and strongly agreed that disabled employees were dependable employees. In this research, a respondent suggested employers in their industry do not receive applications from people with disabilities. This may be evidence of self-stigma where potential employees 'select out' of opportunities before the

employer has a chance to assess an application. In not actively putting themselves forward to employment opportunities, and thereby not being deemed to be economically-active, people with disabilities personalize their experience and the discrimination that is evident in the labour market and organizational design is not foregrounded. One of the findings from the qualitative component of this research with people in transition to employment (Scanlon et al., 2019) was the importance of a sense of self-determination as a characteristic of successful transition to employment. We argue that this is vital in the current context where employers will, of necessity, once again seek greater levels of flexibility in their hiring and staffing practices. The policy focus on the development of employability skills goes some way to addressing this need to build change-resilience in employees, through equipping workers with the ability to go on learning in the workplace, to cope with role redesign or in the face of redundancy. It is our position that people with disabilities in the mainstream labour market need to be as prepared for these changes in career pathways as any other employee.

In Ireland, legislation requires employers to provide reasonable workplace accommodations to enable prospective employees with disabilities to fulfil the requirements of a job. This research suggests Irish employers were highly supportive of this requirement and the great majority disagreed that such workplace accommodations were beyond their capacity. Given recent experiences from COVID-19, this position may well be stronger again given the swift uptake of telecommuting accommodations and the greater ‘flexibility’ of a workforce seeking flexible scheduling and shorter hours as they attend to domestic labour such as home schooling children during lockdown measures. However, these in turn demand greater attention to sustain productive human interaction, through digital means, for all employees. For people with disabilities, these non-pecuniary aspects can be particularly valued (Pagan, 2014). And, while flexible human resource practices such as reduced hours or working from home might benefit people with some disabilities and might also make

workplaces more family friendly, this has to occur within the context of adequate industrial relations arrangements and reasonable opportunities to regain social protection as and when it is required.

In terms of wage subsidies, our findings strongly suggest that these were not vital to the recruitment and selection of employees with a disability, regardless of the size or industry of the organization. This is not a point that had been identified in earlier research. Given the suggestion in this research of the singular importance of those in recruitment roles, including but not limited to human resource professionals, it is our position that such investments by government would be beneficially used in a more proactive manner to ensure more employers, and particularly small private sector employers, are linked to existing supports such as, in Ireland, EmployAbility. In the current arrangement, a passive investment made to an individual employer to offset some of the perceived or necessary costs for an individual employee does little to build capacity in fluid employment contexts. This, coupled with investments to build employment opportunities for all who are seeking employment, and sustained targets for the employment of people with disabilities, could result in a generative cycle of opportunity and achievement.

### **Concluding comments**

‘For those who have found home working and the absence of a commute positively liberating, let’s remember that when lock down restrictions are eased we don’t have to spring back to business as usual. It will be much harder to argue that remote working is ‘unreasonable’ as a disability adjustment, and we should note the productivity gains of our less extroverted colleagues right now’. (Doyle, 2020)

This research highlights some important points about what works, and what doesn’t work, in connecting social policies and economic policies for people with disabilities. While this small-scale study cannot, and does not, claim to be representative of the perspectives of Irish employers, it does provide insights into the attitudes, knowledge and experiences of private and public, large and small, employers from a range of industries in all counties of Ireland.

The research provides some evidence of the commitment of participating employers in Ireland to make a difference for people with disabilities. For education and training providers, the employer survey suggests supply side initiatives are important. This must, however, include providing training and mechanisms to ensure people with disabilities apply for advertised employment opportunities and feel confident to disclose their disability so that a collaborative approach to management can be developed. For employers, the research would suggest, first, the benefits of building broad-based organizational awareness and expertise in hiring and supporting people with disabilities and, second, the value of networking with agencies that are funded to provide support in this regard. For policy makers, the research gives an indication of where funding allocations might be future investigated. These include optimal mechanisms for social protection that acknowledge necessary movements into and out of the labour market and a weighing up the benefit of individual subsidies against a greater investment in. and proactive orientation to, building employer capacity for consistently recruiting and supporting employees with disabilities in the context of changing labour markets. It is our position that such a multi-stakeholder approach involving people with disabilities, employers, policy makers, health services and education and training providers is essential if we are to move the discussion beyond a focus on the challenges of employing people with disabilities, to refocus on the rights of people with disabilities to make their desired economic contribution and the support the desire of employers to flourish in working with people with disabilities.

## **References**

- Ali, M., Schur, L., & Blanck, P. (2011). What types of jobs do people with disabilities want? *Journal of Occupational Rehabilitation*, 21(2), 199-210.
- Amnesty International Ireland. (2011). *Briefing paper on employment and mental health*. Retrieved from <https://www.amnesty.ie/reports/employment-and-mental-health-briefing-paper>
- Baldrige, D. C. (2006). The impact of anticipated social consequences on recurring disability accommodation requests. *Journal of Management*, 32(1), 158-179.

- Banks, J., Grotti, R., Fahey, E., & Watson, D. (2018). *Disability and discrimination in Ireland. Evidence from the QNHS Equality Modules 2004, 2010, 2014*. Dublin: Economic and Social Research Institute. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.26504/bkmnext363>
- Bevan, S., Zheltoukhova, K., Summers, K., Bajorek, Z., O’Dea, L., & Gulliford, J. (2013). *Life and employment conditions of young people with chronic conditions*. Lancaster: The Work Foundation.
- Bishop, M., Stenhoff, D. M., Bradley, K. D., & Allen, C. A. (2007). The differential effect of epilepsy labels on employer perceptions: Report of a pilot study. *Epilepsy & Behavior, 11*(3), 351-356.
- Brucker, D. L., & Henly, M. (2019). Job quality for Americans with disabilities. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation, 50*(2), 121-130. <https://doi.org/10.3233/JVR-180994>
- Brzinsky-Fay, C. (2014). The measurement of school-to-work transitions as processes. *European Societies, 16*(2), 213-232.
- Business Disability Forum. (2020). *The great big workplace adjustments survey*. London: Business Disability Forum. Retrieved from <https://businessdisabilityforum.org.uk/policy/the-great-big-workplace-adjustments-survey-2019-20/>
- Daly, J. (2020). *COVID-19 Regional economic analysis*. The Regional Assemblies. Retrieved from <http://www.southernassembly.ie/uploads/general-files/CV19-Regional-Economic-Analysis.pdf>
- De Urris, F., Verdugo, M., Jenaro, C., Crespo, M., & Caballo, C. (2005). Supported employment and job outcomes. Typicalness and other related variables. *Work, 25*(3), 221-229.
- Doyle, N. (2020, April 29). We have been disabled: How the pandemic has proven the Social Model of Disability. *Forbes*. Retrieved from <https://www-forbes-com.cdn.ampproject.org/c/s/www.forbes.com/sites/drnancydoyle/2020/04/29/we-have-been-disabled-how-the-pandemic-has-proven-the-social-model-of-disability/amp/>
- European Commission. (2019). *Country report Ireland 2019*. Retrieved from [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/file\\_import/2019-european-semester-country-report-ireland\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/file_import/2019-european-semester-country-report-ireland_en.pdf)
- Goodley, D. (2013). Dis/entangling Critical Disability Studies. *Disability and Society, 28*(5), 631-666.
- Gygli, S., Haelg, F., Potrafke, N., & Sturm, J.-E. (2019). The KOF Globalisation Index – Revisited *Review of International Organizations, 14*(3), 543-574.
- Hall, E., & Wilton, R. (2011). Alternative spaces of ‘work’ and inclusion for disabled people. *Disability & Society, 26*(7), 867-880.
- McDowell, C., & Fossey, E. (2015). Workplace accommodations for people with mental illness: A scoping review. *Journal of Occupational Rehabilitation, 25*(197-206).
- Millbank Foundation for Vocational Rehabilitation. (2003). *A study of employer attitudes toward hiring individuals with disabilities*. Florida: Florida: Centre for Information, Training and Evaluation Services.
- Mitra, S., & Kruse, D. (2016). Are workers with disabilities more likely to be displaced? *The International Journal of Human Resource Management, 27*(14), 1550-1579. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2015.1137616>
- Moore, K., McDonald, P., & Bartlett, J. (2018). Emerging trends affecting future employment opportunities for people with intellectual disability: The case of a large retail organisation. *Journal of Intellectual & Developmental Disability, 43*(3), 328-338. <https://doi.org/10.3109/13668250.2017.1379250>
- Morris, J. (2005). *Citizenship and disabled people. A scoping paper prepared for the Disability Rights Commission*. London: DRC.
- Morris, Z., & Rennane, S. (2019). Functional limitations and employment among disability benefit recipients with musculoskeletal conditions: A mediation analysis. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation, 50*(1), 49-59. <https://doi.org/10.3233/JVR-180987>
- Needels, K., & Schmitz, P. (2006). *Economics and social costs and benefits to employers of retraining recruiting and employing disabled people and/ or people with health conditions: A review of the evidence*. Norwich: Department for Work and Pensions.
- OECD. (2003). *Transforming disability into ability. Policies to promote work and income security for disabled people* Paris: OECD.

- Pagan, R. (2014). What makes workers with disabilities happy? The importance of non-pecuniary characteristics. *Health Economics*, 23(2), 241-247.
- Piggott, L. A., & Houghton, A. (2007). Disability and transitions from education to work. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 26(5), 573-587.
- Ryan, F. (2020, 20 April ). Covid lockdown opening up world for people with disabilities. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/20/covid-lockdown-opening-up-world-for-people-with-disabilities>
- Sayce, L. (2011). *Getting in, staying in and getting on. Disability employment support fit for the future*. London: The Stationery Office.
- Scanlon, G., Kamp, A., & Cochrane, A. (2019). Transition(s) to work: the experiences of people with disabilities in Ireland. *Disability & Society*, 1-21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2019.1696748>
- Schur, L., Kruse, D., & Blanck, P. (2005). Corporate culture and the employment of persons with disabilities'. *Behavioural Sciences and the Law*, 23(3-20).
- Schur, L., & Kruse, D. L. (2020). Coronavirus could revolutionize work opportunities for people with disabilities. *The Conversation*. May 5. Retrieved 2 July, 2020, from <https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-could-revolutionize-work-opportunities-for-people-with-disabilities-137462>
- Schur, L., Nishii, L., Adya, M., Kruse, D., Bruyere, S., & Blanck, P. (2014). Accommodating employees with and without disabilities. *Human Resource Management*, 53(4), 593-621.
- Shankar, J., & Collyer, F. (2003). Vocational rehabilitation of people with mental illness: The need for a broader approach'. *Australian e-Journal for the Advancement of Mental Health*, 2(2), 77-89.
- Shier, M., Graham, J. R., & Jones, M. E. (2009). Barriers to employment as experienced by disabled people: a qualitative analysis in Calgary and Regina, Canada. *Disability and Society*, 24(1), 63-75.
- Standing, G. (2011). *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Teindl, K., Thompson-Hodgetts, S., Rashid, M., & Nicholas, D. B. (2018). Does visibility of disability influence employment opportunities and outcomes? A thematic analysis of multi-stakeholder perspectives. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 49(3), 367-377. <https://doi.org/10.3233/JVR-180980>
- Unger, D. (2002). Employer's attitudes toward persons with disabilities in the workforce: myths or realities? *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, 17(1), 2-10.
- Walther, A. (2006). Regimes of youth transitions. Choice, flexibility and security in young people's experiences across different European contexts. *Young*, 14(2), 119-139. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1103308806062737>
- Waterhouse, P., Kimberley, H., Jonas, P., & Glover, J. (2010). *What would it take? Employer perspectives on employing people with a disability*. Canberra: NCVER.
- Winsor, J. E., Gritz-Swift, S., Pearce, J., Darm, D., & Murray, M. (2019). Using the High-Performing States Model to facilitate Employment First in Florida. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 50(3), 339-346. <https://doi.org/10.3233/JVR-191016>