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Traversing Disability: Employers' Perspectives of Disability Inclusion

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Abstract: Persons with disabilities still experience challenges in obtaining employment even though obligations associated with their employment are in place in legislative frameworks that strive to support transformation within the labour market. This paper explores employers' perspectives on the employment of persons with disabilities in South Africa identified in a case study. The influence of social capital on disability inclusive employment was explored from the perspective of two employers who employed trainees who completed an auxiliary training programme for persons with disabilities, which provides opportunities to facilitate pathways to economic inclusion and/or employment. Findings reveal that despite the call for increased labour inclusivity, the development of social capital is not clearly apparent when persons with disabilities are considered for employment. Organisational attitudes and beliefs seem to stem from the obligatory standpoint of the organisations. The paper highlights the need for employers to look beyond impairments so that employment goals are shared and re-enforced by understanding and possibly re-evaluating their views on their organisation's obligations, norms, values and mission, and goals. Insights can guide employers to think more holistically about ways to facilitate the economic inclusion of persons with disabilities.

Keywords: employment; employers; social capital; disability



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1. Introduction

While employers continually seek to diversify their workforces and acknowledge the benefits of employing persons with disabilities, the ways in which employers can ensure sustainability require attention. A diverse workforce, inclusive of persons with disabilities, is seen by many as important in terms of an effective transformation agenda. Yet, in South Africa, the national disability prevalence rate is 7.5 per cent and persons with disabilities make up only one per cent of the workforce. The implementation of legislation has influenced change, with companies in 2020 reporting that persons with disabilities comprised 1.5% of their workforce, which is a shortfall of 0.5% of the target set in 1998. South African employers, both private and public, reported in 2021 that persons with disabilities comprised 1.3% of their workforce [1]. Disaggregated data regarding types of disabilities, the severity of the disability, and the age and gender of persons with disabilities are not available or accurate. South Africa's post-apartheid legislation is generally viewed as progressive in its focus on inclusive development for previously disadvantaged people, women and persons with disabilities. Despite policies such as the Employment Equity (EE) Act (1998), the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE) Act (2003), and the National Skills Development Strategy III (2011) driving the agenda for skills development and inclusive employment, the general unemployment rate in South Africa is high—recorded at 32.5% in the last quarter of 2020 [2].

When persons with disabilities are employed, they are less likely to be in full-time jobs and more likely to be in low-paying jobs with poor working conditions, and poor prospects for career progression as compared to their non-disabled peers. Persons with disabilities

have lower relative income levels and a higher likelihood of living in poverty [3]. The unemployment rates for persons with disabilities in the formal sector are still considerably higher than those of non-disabled persons in South Africa, and the employment rates of persons with disabilities have not improved significantly over the last 15 years [4]. Research has identified a number of barriers which hinder the full inclusion of persons with disabilities in the open labour market, which include limited knowledge of and access to reasonable accommodation; inadequate accessible infrastructure and information, and attitudinal barriers in society including a narrow belief that equates disability with an inability to work [5]. A common attitude is that persons with disabilities will not be able to enter the job market so there is no need to focus on career development [6].

It is acknowledged that management processes, recruitment processes, and employer attitudes are transforming and becoming more inclusive [7,8] and that there is greater awareness about the rights of persons with disabilities. However, it is still important to know more about how employers can further promote and facilitate education, skills development, inclusion, and full participation in work, for persons with disabilities.

This paper seeks to understand employers' perceptions of disability through the lens of social capital theory and to identify elements related to the cognitive dimension of social capital, such as organisational beliefs, attitudes, norms, goals, obligations, and reciprocities, that influence persons with disabilities in obtaining employment. This aim is achieved by looking at the relationships between individuals, training received, and employment prospects. Given the unique historicity and systemic disablement which still pervades the South African labour landscape, the International Labour Organisations' definition of "decent work" [9] seems idealistic and perhaps an exploration into other factors that could facilitate the transition from training to employment is necessary.

This paper is organised by first providing an outline regarding disability inclusion in employment, whereafter literature supporting how social capital could influence the employability of persons with disabilities is presented. This literature is followed by a description of the methods used for data generation. Findings emanating from critical conversations with two employers who have employed persons with disabilities from a cohort of trainees who received training between 2015 and 2017 are presented. These findings are then discussed in light of four themes which were generated deductively through using existing literature around the cognitive dimension of social capital theory. This deductive process provides insights into how employment and/or economic inclusion of persons with disabilities are viewed by employers and makes suggestions as to how these insights could be used to support the development of disability inclusive employment practices.

1.1. Disability Inclusion in Employment

It is necessary to consider policy mandates as a background and to note that the terms "work" and "employment" are used interchangeably in literature [10,11]. However, it must be noted that there are distinct differences between "work" and "employment". The most recent international recommendations recognise employment as the form of work that serves as a basis to produce labour market statistics. The ILO defines "employment" as: "Persons in employment or the employed population comprise all those of working age who, in a short reference period, were engaged in any activity to produce goods or provide services for pay or profit" and "work" is categorised as: (1) own use production work, (2) volunteer work, and (3) unpaid trainee work [11].

Article 27 of the United Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities recognises "the right of persons with disabilities to work on an equal basis with others; this includes the right to the opportunity to gain a living by work freely chosen or accepted in a labour market and work environment that is open, inclusive and accessible to persons with disabilities" [10]. The International Labour Organisation makes special mention of a concept called "decent work" [8]. Decent work involves providing opportunities for work that is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace, and social protection for families. Decent work offers better prospects for personal development and

social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organise, and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all [9]. The definition of decent work here equates to what I am terming as employment as per the ILO.

The current South African legislative backdrop, including the Employment Equity Act [12], Social Assistance Act [13], Skills Development Act [14], and Skills Development Levy Act [15], have helped create a sense of awareness of the needs of persons with disabilities. However, the implementation of these policies has had a marginal impact on the lives of the majority of persons with disabilities in South Africa [16]. Slow implementation in the government sector has been associated with insufficient budgetary allocations, the unfamiliarity of civil servants charged with the responsibility of implementing these policies, and procedural impasses. Obtaining employment poses a significant challenge to those with disabilities, despite the fact that many countries such as Australia, the USA, the United Kingdom, and South Africa have ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [10], which includes principles for inclusion and participative rights. In South Africa, however, labour market inclusiveness is relatively weak [7].

In addition, the experiences of persons with disabilities were historically also the experiences of people living in a deeply divided and unequal society during apartheid [7]. Inequalities and divisions between people were longstanding and arose from a political, economic, and social system that aimed to keep people subservient and deny them access to basic rights. For the majority of persons with disabilities, life under apartheid was about struggling on a daily basis to cope with the poverty, deprivation, and violence of the colonial system. These inequalities were worsened by their disability [7]. They were discriminated against and further marginalised because of their disability and their access to fundamental socio-economic rights such as employment, education, and appropriate health and welfare services was restricted. Discrimination and marginalisation occurred because persons with disabilities, in general, were seen as people who were sick or in need of care, rather than as equal citizens with equal rights and responsibilities [7].

Post-1994 democratic South Africa has developed and has enforced legislation to prevent discrimination [16]. Despite legislative support to assuage discrimination, persons with disabilities continue to experience poverty, poor housing, short terms of employment, unemployment, social exclusion, abuse, and overt discrimination [16,17]. Fujimoto [18] postulates that these factors impact how persons with disabilities see and evaluate themselves and how they interact with work colleagues. For persons with disabilities, finding their unique self is complex and is delimited by learning challenges and workplace exclusion [19–22].

In this arena, it is thus important to note the influence of social capital for making connections that would allow persons with disabilities to join networks of education and employment opportunities and ultimately improve inclusion by considering the importance of attributes such as shared understandings, values, attitude and beliefs. To promote these attributes, it is useful to look at how existing theory on social capital may be utilised to support the sustained employability of persons with disabilities.

1.2. Social Capital

As a generic concept, social capital refers to relationships and social ties with organisations and individuals that can expand choice-making opportunities, increase options, and lead to a more enriched quality of life [23] (p. 1). In positioning social capital in this study, it must be noted that physical capital refers to physical objects such as the built environment; human capital refers to the knowledge, skills, competencies, and other attributes held by individuals, and which are used to produce goods, services, or ideas in market circumstances [24]. Social capital, conversely, refers to connections among individuals. These connections include social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them [25] (p. 19). An important element to consider is the potential difference in social capital between those who enter the labour market with a disability and those who

have acquired a disability later on in their lives and so they have had the opportunity to build connections and networks as a person without disabilities.

This paper has viewed social capital through the lens of critical disability theory in order to understand the complexities of disability inclusive employment. It can be said that critical disability theory on its own provides context and space in which persons with disabilities' voices are foregrounded. Social capital theory presents an understanding from which solutions to some challenges can be gleaned. In the sphere of employment, it is necessary that both the context and individualism of persons with disabilities are considered. Employing persons with disabilities inclusively requires that more human elements of a person and not only their knowledge or skills or infrastructure are considered.

Following the argument of Zinnbauer [24], social capital facilitates learning and skills acquisition. However, learning and skills acquisition are subject to historicity, cultural narratives and discourses, as well as systemic and attitudinal disablement. If social capital creates economic opportunities and enhances their employability, then the influence of how disability is understood and how impairment is responded to requires consideration. If social capital is to stimulate political participation and community engagement, a critical lens is required to expose hidden motivators and to identify how social attitudes are conditioned by the portrayal of impairment. By using critical disability theory and social capital, more effective policy responses to disability can be developed and there can be stronger, more democratic political control of social institutions, like places of work, which deal, in one way or another, with issues related to disability [24].

As a mechanism to support employability and to support sustained enactment of disability inclusive employment practices, the notion of social capital can potentially play an important role for those who may be at high risk of being marginalised and experiencing diminished self-determination [25]. It has become essential to create social places and spaces within communities where persons with disabilities are fully accepted and are furnished with the same opportunities for participation as non-disabled people. Chenowith and Stehlik [23] argued that for participation to occur, an accepted and shared understanding of what inclusion is and what it means is needed. Social capital has the potential to create economic opportunities and assist individuals with seeking employment, enhance their employability, and generate the trust and reciprocity required for efficient markets [2].

The measurement and value of social capital for business was conducted in 2014 by The Network for Business Sustainability South Africa (NBSSA) [26]. South African businesses have recognised the need to examine the impact of social capital as part of their reporting on sustainability. In a broad sense, the NBSSA [26] summarised the components of social capital as they relate to employment into four broad categories. These categories include networks, relationships, and connections; trust; civic engagement and voluntary activities (including cooperation, political participation, social participation, associational memberships, and community volunteerism); civic norms (which include expectations of behaviour that occur in public settings and consist of prohibitions of behaviours that are not tolerated in public), shared norms, and values. These categories are important to consider on an individual level in terms of how they allow individuals to use or build on their own social capital.

Social capital has further been studied at individual and organisational levels and it has been found that in so doing, one should consider the context of the group. The NBSSA [26] asserts that because groups and organisations, particularly in South Africa, are hierarchical in structure, the executive leadership of these groups or organisations creates the culture of that particular grouping or organisation. This culture forms the cognitive dimension of social capital. The culture or cognitive dimension has a strong influence on the individual actions that have productive outcomes [26]. Chow and Chan [27] suggest that the cognitive dimension of social capital refers to resources that increase understanding between parties. It is postulated that knowledge sharing requires shared understanding, and as such, shared culture and goals were important factors. The cognitive dimension comprises attitudinal and value-based elements, which include shared norms, values and obligations, reciprocity,

shared goals and mission, and attitudes and beliefs. Understanding the cognitive dimension of social capital is more challenging as questions around shared attitudes and beliefs between employers and their employees with disabilities; whether goals and missions are shared and whether there is a sense of reciprocity, arise. When considering the difficulties that employers have with the concept of reasonable accommodation [26], for example, the value of the cognitive dimension of social capital is highlighted. The relationship between reasonable accommodations and organisational values and culture is important to examine. McNeil [28] and Frank and Bellini [29] comment that broken trust and betrayal between employees and an organisation are one of the barriers associated with the failure to request needed job accommodations by persons with disabilities. Sustaining reasonable accommodations in the workplace may not be easily achieved without making changes in the values and culture of an organization [29]. Changes in value systems and cultures of organisations, which typically operate in an ableist fashion, may be a direct result of the impact of social capital, which is essential to facilitate the economic inclusion of persons with disability.

2. Methods

A training programme offered by a Disabled Persons' Organisation (DPO) is the case being reported in this paper. The DPO has developed strategies and business plans to address issues of rehabilitation, advocacy, access, and education and skills development in response to the difficulties faced by persons with disabilities. It endeavours to assist persons with mobility impairments to lead independent lives and a decent standard of living in areas ranging from personal care and assistive devices to adequate skills development and employment. To this end, in 2012 they developed and established training centres offering a basic computer literacy training programme in three major South African cities. This training course is non-accredited (auxiliary) and is aimed at any person with an impairment wanting to improve upon their existing skills or gain new skills, with a view to gaining employment. Digital technologies have been identified as one of the most important factors that can contribute to reducing existing social gaps and can be used to encourage and support social inclusion and increase persons with disabilities' quality of life [30].

An intrinsic case study approach was utilised as it identified and described the DPO's employability related skills development programme for persons with disabilities [31]. This paper reports on interviews with two employers of trainees who completed this course between 2015 and 2017 as a means to understand the value of the training provided as it relates to the employability and employment of persons with disabilities. Critical conversation interviews [31–35] were conducted with one project manager of a non-governmental Disability Organisation and with three human resource practitioners in a department of the national government, who are involved with employing persons with disabilities from the DPO. The DPO employed mainly persons with mobility impairments, while the government department was unable to disaggregate in terms of what types of impairments their employees had. Both the DPO and the government department had accessed the auxiliary training programme in order to upskill their employees with disability.

The overarching research question for the study was *"Whether and to what extent do the auxiliary skills development programmes build social capital in order to facilitate pathways to economic inclusion and/or employment for persons with disabilities?"* Sub-questions were related to the value of auxiliary training opportunities in terms of skills acquisition opportunities for persons with disabilities; factors that occur during skills development opportunities that potentially build social capital and how skills development opportunities can be better used in advancing the economic inclusion and/or employment of persons with disabilities.

This portion of the data collection, which focused on employers, utilised the approach of critical conversations. These conversations asked the "hard" questions about the intended outcomes of this training and the motivation behind sending their employees on this type of training. Critical conversations are often associated with opportunities for participants and researchers to build knowledge and awareness of socio-political issues [32].

Silvers [33] explains that critical conversations lead to further knowledge development outside of the discussion event. The trigger questions, “*What motivated you to employ someone with a disability?*” and “*What are the advantages or disadvantages of this strategy in your context?*” were posed to initiate the conversations and the analysis of this data is reported in this paper. Interviews were conducted in English and at the workplaces of each of these employers. Interviews lasted between 45 min and 2 h each.

Data were reviewed, and codes were assigned through a deductive process, which meant that the analysis was based on pre-existing social capital theory [31–35]. Employers’ experiences and opinions were examined and coded in relation to the categories of the cognitive dimension of social capital [26]. Following the analysis of the data, four themes relating to values and obligations; attitudes and beliefs; shared norms and reciprocity; shared goals and missions were generated.

The challenge of doing research where the sample is small warranted an in-depth, albeit non-generalisable, case study design to better understand how policy and practice need to become more inclusive. Despite the small sample in this context, relevant information was still gathered, which will help employers strengthen their practices.

This study was approved by the Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of Cape Town under ethical approval number HREC740/2016 and informed consent was received from each participant.

3. Findings

Employer’s perspectives related to categories identified from the cognitive dimension of social capital theory are presented. The themes presented relate to the employer’s understandings of values and obligations, attitudes and beliefs, shared norms, reciprocity, and shared missions and goals.

3.1. Theme 1: Equal but Different—Values and Obligations

One of the points highlighted through interviews with the employers was that there are apparently specific guidelines utilised when appointing persons with disabilities to positions. A phrase such as “*It’s to ensure that we appoint accordingly*” (HR1) was utilised repeatedly during the interaction with the government department officials and points directly to the notion of having an obligation to appoint persons with disabilities. Upon probing regarding what an appropriate appointment was, responses were vague and unclear. Internal organisational policies were mentioned, but the content and location of these policies were vague. This dichotomy is quite telling in that while there is an obligation to “appoint accordingly”, the value of “appointing accordingly” is not understood.

On further probing into this notion of “appointing accordingly”, one employer responded that: “*Our advert says ‘disability’ or ‘disadvantaged’. People from disadvantaged background will be given preference*” (HR2). This response suggests that disability and the notion of being disadvantaged are either similar or interchangeable. It also suggests that if one is disabled, one is also from a disadvantaged background. Another dichotomy arises in that despite being given preference, persons with disabilities are also “measured with the same yardstick” as their able-bodied counterparts. There seems to be a misunderstanding regarding the difference between persons with disabilities being treated equally as opposed to being treated equitably. This sentiment is further evidenced by a comment from one of the employers who explained that “*if a disabled person come for the interviews, they—he had the same questions than the normal persons . . . but they are treated exactly the same. And I think they wanted that. People with disability, they don’t want to be treated differently. They want to be treated the same than I am treated*” (HR2). Additionally, participants from the government department mentioned that all prospective employees need the same form or level of qualification. In this context, employers assume that they know what applicants with disabilities want. However, they continue to use the same measuring tool for every applicant. This too indicates the obligation that employers have in terms of equitable treatment of applicants, which is most likely based on legislative mandates. Employers require

the same level of qualification for all applicants despite acknowledging that persons with disabilities are disadvantaged and categorised when applying for employment. Through further discussion, evidence of an apportionment system was revealed when HR1 indicated that *“basically, whether its disabled people, whether of race, we’ve got a rate—what do you call that programme? Target [statistics]. It’s a target that we need to reach. But we do not specifically advertise the post”*.

It is construed that while there is an obligation to meet quotas in terms of equity categories, this practice is not always transparent, nor is it value-based. There seems to be an understanding that if one meets the qualification requirements and the equity requirements, then the job is almost guaranteed. This assumption indicates a murky understanding of value versus obligation. Advantaging a person with a disability may be interpreted as obligatory or it may be interpreted that the employer values the contribution of a person with a disability in the workplace. This ambiguity is further evidenced by a telling response illustrating obligation: *“usually, even if you [potential employee] go to an interview and you find a disabled person with you in the interview, you know already you are disadvantaged to get that post” (HR1)*.

Even before an interview, a screening process or job-matching process occurs, the outward appearance of equity and qualification seems to point to a better chance of obtaining employment. The resounding sentiment around how persons with disabilities experience obtaining employment is captured by one participant: *“basically it’s [employing people with disabilities] because we need to reach the target, and in my opinion, your disability will speak for yourself” (HR2)*.

An indication of obligations to meet legislative mandates is reflected in levels of education that seem to play a large role in terms of obtaining employment. When looking through the lens of obligations and values, employers appear to be particularly aware of the challenges that potential employees face and accede that: *“... they go to school [basic education] but their level of education is more often than not, very low ... and not enough to find employment afterwards” (E2)*. It appears that with respect to employability, obligatory factors trump value-based decisions as evidenced by the response from a participant who explained that *“For the internship, you must have your N5. So, it’s a contract for 12 months. It’s no guarantee that he’ll be placed. The contract says they are not obliged to appoint you after the training” (HR1)*.

Upon reflecting on the types of employment available to persons who have acquired disabilities, the employer at the DPO presented an alternate understanding regarding the employability of persons with disabilities. He intimated that: *“people may be employed [at the time of acquiring their disability] but very often the demographic of the people that get injured, would have been a builder, you know a bricklayer, a labourer, a security guard, it’s not a career that can continue [post injury] ... ” (E2)*. The reference to the demographic of people who get injured suggests that persons with disabilities have lower levels of education to start with and had previously developed skills, predominantly in manual labour, that enabled them to find work. If they are not able to use their existing skills, it is implied their level of education also does not allow them to pursue other skills development opportunities and possibly then it is not obligatory to employ them, and career opportunities are even more restricted.

3.2. Theme 2: Building Up—Attitudes and Beliefs

A sentiment shared by both employers in this study is that of improving the quality of life of persons with disabilities and suggests that *“... the best way of improving a person with disabilities life, the quality of it, is by improving their financial situation, because everything costs money. It’s about economic empowerment. You invest in them as people as much as investing in skills development. Just build up the person” (E2)*.

What is absent is how this investment in the “person” is understood or how it will be undertaken. One participant expressed: *“I will say that the disabled people ... they must also get a chance in life. Because to disadvantage these people is not correct. They can make a*

difference in the [organisation] in the office bound positions” (HR2). This statement resembles a double-edged sword, in that while employers understand the importance of employing and empowering persons with disabilities, it is done with provisos, such as meeting the obligatory organisation mandates that are in place or only working within certain occupations. This attitude is corroborated by a participant who opined that: *“The job itself limits them. Certain disabilities cannot be accommodated. You can’t have a blind man in ‘tronk’ [Afrikaans for working in a jail]” (HR2).* This response alludes to an attitude towards disability, which believes that some occupations or jobs are outside of the capabilities of persons with disabilities. No reference to reasonable accommodation or task adjustments were made. It was interesting to note that in the context of the government department that participated in this study, the appointment to positions took place under separate legislative regulations. The difference in regulations guiding the appointment of employees indicates that assumptions and beliefs about disability and function, influence how, when, and if persons with disabilities obtain employment. Furthermore, depending on which regulatory body approves the appointment, persons with disabilities are afforded employment opportunities in selected and sometimes restricted job functions only as suggested by HR3: *“If they are employed under [government departments’ act], then they will be in control rooms” (HR3).*

The discussion around policies and procedures relating to the employment of persons with disabilities revealed the deep-rooted beliefs of those tasked with recruitment and appointment. HR2 indicated that: *“they [persons with disabilities] can make a difference in the office bound positions. You know, administrative-wise. There’s nothing wrong with your brain whatsoever or your hands. You can sit at the computer and do good; you can be a good administrator” (HR2).*

It is apparent that disabilities are categorised internally within the organisation and that certain disabilities preclude one from engaging in certain job tasks. The researcher was interested to see if this belief extended beyond the participants’ understanding of physical disability and posed the question: *“What other kinds of disabilities do people have who are employed here? Psychiatric conditions, depression?”* The response received was: *“When it comes to depression, usually we don’t categorise it as a disability. It’s not openly talked about” (HR1).* This response speaks to how organisational attitudes and beliefs influence the employment experience of persons with disabilities. If one’s disability is not categorised or understood, it is essentially not recognised, and stigma and discrimination leading to workplace exclusion are promulgated. The researcher was directed to the organisation’s website to view the policies relating to disability. However, only policies related to service users were found as opposed to policies related to employees with disabilities. This finding has highlighted the continuing influence of the attitude of others on the development of persons with disabilities. The contention between personal beliefs and regulatory mandates remains, as employers attempt to implement disability inclusive practices.

3.3. Theme 3: Disjuncture; Disconnection and Deviation—Shared Norms and Reciprocity

As noted by Claridge [36], common values and beliefs provide the concord of interests that improve connection and reciprocity between individuals. The response to a question about other possible reasons, other than equity mandates, that would allow persons with disabilities to obtain employment was: *“Uhm, it’s a very difficult question that you ask” (HR1).* This response suggests that regulations are not always obvious and that those who implement the regulations do not have a clear understanding of why the regulations are as they are. The connection between policy and implementation thereof is indistinct. Further evidence of this uncertainty was expressed through HR2’s response: *“I know they [top management] discuss disabilities there, but those kind of information don’t come down to our level” (HR2).* It might be that information and policy processes are diluted or misunderstood, and implementation of the policy may not be successful due to miscommunication or even non-communication. The disjuncture between decision-makers and decision-implementors makes it clear that norms are not shared. Different understandings of organisational

norms possibly have an influence on persons with disabilities who are trying to obtain employment. It is evident that there is a distinction and disjuncture between “them and us” with respect to the levels of hierarchy within the organisation, which may very well filter down to a distinction between “them and us” in terms of recruitment of persons with disabilities.

Further probing around disability-specific policies or how decisions are made or how disability is understood in the organisation revealed that: *“The thing is there is an equity [policy], but the person who is in charge is on temporary incapacity leave, so that policy is not available” (HR1)*. This admission provides an indication that disability inclusion is not necessarily ingrained into general institutional operations and organisational norms within the organisation in question. In this instance, there is one individual who holds knowledge and decision-making power.

Participants were questioned about the training received by some of their employees with disabilities due to an interest in the reasons why certain individuals were afforded the opportunity to do the auxiliary ICT training offered by the DPO in this study. The response to this enquiry was: *“Remember every year there’s a skills gap identified in your performance management [review]” (HR1)*. This response was interesting in two ways. The fact that persons with disabilities are “performance managed” and upskilled within this organisation is positive and bodes well in terms of career progression. However, there is also a sense that employees with disabilities were sent to a training provider that was “suitable” for them. The researcher questioned why that particular training programme was chosen (as opposed to the myriad of other accredited ICT programmes available) and no response was offered. Without shared understandings, disconnection and disjuncture between policy and policy implementation become apparent and the persons responsible for implementing these mandates may find navigating disability inclusive employment practices challenging.

3.4. Theme 4: Silence—Shared Goals and Missions

Shared goals and the mission of social capital are the “force that holds people together and lets them share what they know” [22] (p. 460). Upon reflection on the findings from the interactions with the employers, it was clear that the human element of employing persons with disabilities is absent or ill-considered by both employer participants. In the analysis of the data, no codes relating to a shared mission or goal between the employer and the persons with disabilities were located. Even references to employers and employees sharing a common understanding and approaches to the achievement of tasks and outcomes were absent. There was no evidence in the data collected from employers that persons with disabilities were consulted in terms of what their needs or requirements were; knowledge sharing was absent and there seemed to be a distinction between “them” (persons with disabilities) and “us” (employers). Instead, policies, procedures, and expectations of persons with disabilities were discussed. The types of impairments the skills possessed and what benefits employment can bring to persons with disabilities were foregrounded. So, while both employers hope to achieve employment for persons with disabilities, it appears to be all about persons with disabilities, without them.

4. Discussion

The findings of this paper have highlighted that integral elements of social capital are absent or limited in the employment of persons with disabilities. An obligation to implement policy has meant that shared goals and missions between employers and their employees with disabilities are unexplored, discriminatory attitudes still exist in employment processes, and value is not ascribed to the employment of persons with disabilities.

Of significance are the legislative frameworks that govern, support, and contextualise the employment of persons with disabilities. These policies and procedures, while instituted to increase the accessibility of the labour market, are open to interpretation and might require consideration of the influence that social capital has on employing

persons with disabilities. These mandates often influence organisational attitudes and emphasise the obligations associated with employing persons with disabilities, without recognising the differences in practices required when employing persons with disabilities. While legislative frameworks relating to the obligations associated with the employment of persons with disabilities are in place and have filtered down to employers from policy makers, institutionalised and deeply sedimented beliefs and practices of what persons with disabilities can do or cannot do, still influence whether or not persons with disabilities obtain employment. A deeper understanding of social capital might provide insight into policy effectiveness, the unintended effects of policy, as well as the equity goals that are to be achieved by emphasising the value gained by employing persons with disabilities. These insights may deter employers from viewing potential employees as only disabled and thus defined by their impairments.

Considering the ways in which persons with disabilities are positioned within the policies and practices of employment in South Africa [35–37] may shed light on the efficacy of government-led programmes, in particular, related to whether persons with disabilities are taken up into employment. Skills development strategies, including quotas and incentives, employment equity targets, and B-BBEE legislation apply not only to persons with disabilities but also to designated groups including black women and youth. It is important to note that, unlike other designated groupings, the inclusion of persons with disabilities tends to be framed by language and culture suggestive of a moral imperative. Employing persons with disabilities is “the right thing” to do [38].

Persons with disabilities in South Africa have to navigate a social welfare system that, it has been argued, holds them hostage as persons with disabilities may be reluctant to risk losing their disability grant [38,39]. A view of persons with disabilities as state dependents with little likelihood of moving into self-sufficiency means that there are no clear pathways from receiving a government grant to entering formal employment, and very little support for those making this transition [38].

To achieve transformation of the South African labour market requires consideration of the complexities of what causes the exclusion of persons with disabilities from the current labour market. By promoting reform that caters only for inclusion, complexities that keep exclusion suspended in the lives of persons with disabilities are ignored [38]. Organisational attitudes and beliefs are apparent and seem to stem from the obligatory standpoint of the organisations and factors such as quotas, impairment-type, and qualifications are foregrounded. Instead, one’s impairment is given more consideration than one’s ability. Persons with disabilities are not seen as “workers” but are seen only through the narrow lens of their impairment. Despite advances in diversity and inclusion practices in workplaces, the entry and progression of persons with disabilities in the workforce remain challenging, especially when employers hold stereotypical beliefs which are fuelled by insufficient information [39]. Social capital is integral to an individual’s career path as it supports employment goals by re-enforcing and increasing the number of people who may be willing to provide support to persons with disabilities, while at the same time creating a sense of competence within the job seeker or employee [40]. This notion suggests that shared goals and missions (between employer and employee) are imperative in terms of increasing reciprocity between employees with disabilities and their employers. In particular, persons with disabilities may benefit from the social capital of others in their networks, provided that stakeholders share the same goal in terms of employment and/or economic inclusion. Mentorship, employee–employer relationships, and social networks are important aspects of career building [40].

Should employers understand the social networks, the vocational themes and the importance of sharing knowledge, norms, and goals with persons with disabilities, they can then provide valuable knowledge about work, job tasks, skills needed, ideas, business leads, and insight into where the individual’s skills would be a good fit, in terms of both skill and value. This approach would then eliminate the focus on the inability of the job

seeker with a disability and rather focus on matching existing skills. A shift in focus from impairment to a focus on value has the potential to improve labour market inclusivity.

5. Conclusions

The employment of persons with disabilities is complex. Beyond legislation and process, there are many factors that require consideration when viewing the employment of persons with disabilities through the lens of social capital theory. Consideration of the structural and relational dimensions of social capital is commonplace and often unconsciously inherent in employment planning for persons with disabilities. What is absent is a sense of mutual and shared understanding between employers and employees with disabilities.

Social capital allows access to privileged information, provides job opportunities, and enhances skills [40,41]. The value of social capital for employers and businesses includes gains in efficiency, increased market share, and enhanced productivity and performance. However, these gains are of little value if persons with disabilities are viewed only in terms of these gains, and not as a full members of a workforce. A critical issue, revealed through the theme of “silence”, is that there is a disconnection between employees with disabilities and their employers. There is an absence of shared discourse and understanding that would facilitate the development of better connections between employer and employee. It appears that the employment of persons with disabilities fulfils a checkbox exercise, but employers fail to see the value that persons with disabilities could bring to the workplace.

There is currently no best practice which incorporates the use of social capital, which would humanize the workplace. This absence of valuing the human element decreases the possibility of developing networks that would facilitate increased economic inclusion for persons with disabilities. To further understand and promote the employment of persons with disabilities, employers require an understanding of how to increase social capital in all of the factors which influence the role of being a worker. This study focused on how social capital could be better considered in the employment of persons with disabilities and how its use could be supportive and mutually beneficial.

To this end, persons with disabilities need to acknowledge and expand their own social capital. Furthermore, training providers need to support the expansion of networks and capital through their engagements with trainees. Employers are encouraged to look beyond the disability so that employment goals are shared and re-enforced by understanding and possibly re-evaluating their views on their organisation’s obligations, norms, values and mission, and goals as they pertain to the economic inclusion of persons with disabilities.

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