Let's level up:

Unlock the power of inclusivity and discover the potential of the disabled workforce.
Key findings

HANGA-ARO-RAU
Manufacturing, Engineering and Logistics
Workforce Development Council

WAIHANGA ARA RAU
Construction and Infrastructure
Workforce Development Council

All is for All

Contents

Figures

Acknowledgements

Glossary

Pacific Disabled People	Terminology for Pacific Peoples who are disabled. We obtained expert advice on the terminology.
Total Sample	Refers to everyone the report engaged with, including all survey, focus group or interview participants.
Whānau Hauā me Tāngata Whaikaha Māori	Whānau hauā refers to disabled Māori people. Whānau hauā acknowledges that the experience of disability is a collective whānau experience. Tāngata Whaikaha Māori is a more recent term for disabled Māori people, and Tāngata Whaikaha refers to the determination and ability of Māori disabled people.[1]
Hazing or Hazed	Defined as any activity expected of someone joining or participating in a group that humiliates, degrades, abuses, or endangers them, regardless of a person's willingness to participate.[2]

1 (Mirfin-Veitch et al., 2022).
2 (Stop Hazing, 2020).

"These reports serve as powerful tools for analysing current social realities faced by disabled people in accessing meaningful workforce opportunities. By drawing on lived expertise, they help address entrenched workforce inequities for disabled individuals, including tāngata whaikaha Māori. Additionally, they contribute to shaping the discourse on the future of work and industry."

- Tracey McIntosh, Professor in Indigenous Studies, Wānanga o Waipapa | Faculty of Arts University of Auckland, Chief Science Advisor, Ministry of Social Development
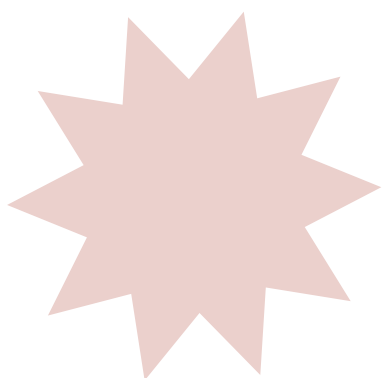
"Recent changes to disability funding will be positive if they align with the direction indicated by this report. The needs and aspirations of people with disabilities are diverse, and the supports that significantly impact their lives can't be predetermined by policy. The disability workforce recognises this, and the report outlines how to help them become more responsive, skilled, and aspirational."

- The Rt. Hon Sir Bill English, KNZM

"This report and the research behind it is so important because it was led by disabled people. It helps us to understand the barriers that prevent the full realisation of our right to work on an equal basis with others in open, inclusive and accessible work environments."

- Prudence Walker, Disability Rights Commissioner, Te Kāhui Tika Tangata Human Rights Commission

"It's vital to have industry-specific research into disabled people's employment in New Zealand. The more we know about what helps, or hinders, disabled people to get into all types of work, the better we know what to do to change attitudes and remove barriers. This report illustrates the role employers can play and the kind of systems we need for disabled people to have the chance to contribute in such key industries as construction, infrastructure, manufacturing, engineering and logistics."

- Paula Tesoriero, Chief Executive, Whaikaha Ministry of Disabled People

"Efficient manufacturing typically requires uniformity of components. When you're in that mindset, it can feel simpler to require uniformity of the people who do manufacturing work. But this research reflects the reality that people are not uniform, and by effectively resourcing our local manufacturing businesses, all people can benefit. To do this let's collaborate. Let's use the shared need for best-fit training for the clothing manufacturing industry and disabled people. Together we can create opportunities for all people who want to work as makers. Local manufacturing is extraordinarily challenging. The industry is facing enormous pressures. Let's give our manufacturers a pipeline of trained employees and the tools to meaningfully develop them to ensure the continuation of a thriving local industry. This research sets out the opportunity in front of us."

- Emily Miller-Sharma, General Manager, RUBY

"As a business owner, I am in a position to make a difference. It's my responsibility back to society. No matter whether someone is disabled or not, they deserve meaningful employment, and I get to be part of helping make that happen. Collaborating with the person and their support agencies is key, and everyone wins from this, so I hope to see more businesses stepping up and seeing the benefits."

- Nicky Forsyth, Owner and Communications Manager, Industrial Site Services (ISS)

Introduction

The implications of the underutilisation of disabled people in the workforce have been long known, and disabled people have long called for equitable access to meaningful employment. The Office of the Ombudsman documented that "there would be a fiscal benefit of $1.45 billion per year if the participation of disabled people in the labour market was equalised."[3] At the same time, the coalition government has clearly signalled that resources will be invested into initiatives prioritising employment for all.[4] Despite this, there have been few sustained improvements for disabled people's employment. For example, in 2013, 45 per cent of all disabled adults were employed, compared with 72 per cent of all non-disabled adults;[5] a decade later, in 2023, 44.1 per cent of disabled people were employed, compared with 84.7 per cent of non-disabled people.[6]

In commencing this research, we saw an enthusiasm and desire by employers to engage in understanding disabled communities, but the full power of this is yet to be leveraged. For example, international research analysed 45 companies classified as 'Disability Inclusion Champions'. Compared to others, they achieved, on average, 28 per cent higher revenue, double the net income and 30 per cent higher economic profit margins over the four-year period they analysed.[7] The potential of disability inclusion for industry, properly executed, is immense. Participants to the research indicated interest in understanding what this might look like, although, like most New Zealand employers, they were impacted by implicit prejudices.

In light of the longstanding need for forward momentum, we have asked ourselves the following question throughout the research process: what is required to achieve meaningful inclusion of disabled communities in the workforce? A missing aspect of employment-related evidence to this point has been industry-specific insights from Aotearoa New Zealand. A sharper focus on specific areas of relevance and concern to construction, engineering, infrastructure, logistics and manufacturing [hereafter the Industries] will support these critical industries to make a meaningful and sustainable shift toward the responsive and equitable employment of disabled people.

3 (Office of the Ombudsman, 2021).
4 (National, 2024).
5 (Statistics New Zealand, 2014).
6 (Statistics New Zealand, 2023).
7 (Meares, 2024).

Executive summary

Background

Currently, 55.9 per cent of working-age disabled people are not participating in the labour force.[8] At the same time, construction, engineering, infrastructure, logistics and manufacturing industries, which are core to Aotearoa New Zealand, are facing workforce shortages and an inability to meet future demand.[9] Disabled people, if properly understood, enabled and supported, can form a more meaningful part of the labour force, supporting industry to be more resilient and equipped for the future. However, for the potential of disabled people to be realised in this context, it is necessary to spark positive change at all levels, from quick wins to systemic shifts. This journey begins with understanding the voice and perspective of both disabled people and industry - and grappling with the current state so we can collectively head toward a more resilient and inclusive industry that works for everyone.

Hanga-Aro-Rau and Waihanga Ara Rau Workforce Development Councils commissioned research, resulting in this report, which provides key insights from disabled people working in the construction, engineering, infrastructure, logistics and manufacturing industries and from non-disabled industry leaders and employers. Our goal was to better understand the enablers of and the barriers preventing a disability-inclusive workforce for these industries. This report places equal focus on what is needed to achieve an affirming workforce for disabled people and what is required to support non-disabled people to champion this in their workplaces systemically.

Realising the potential of disabled people and, therefore, enabling this to strengthen industry in a meaningful way requires a collective commitment to confront bias and examine prejudices, which are often implicitly embedded in industry and are considered norms. By examining and changing our beliefs, we can move from exclusion to inclusion and from adversity to equity.

Research process and findings

The Northern B Health and Disability Ethics Committee approved this research. In total, 272 employers participated in the research, either as survey respondents, interview participants, or focus group participants. This reflects industry enthusiasm for engaging in this kōrero, which should be celebrated and provides an optimistic foundation for change.

Additionally, the research findings indicate that employers have an awareness of disability as present in their workplace, with 44 per cent of industry respondents saying they have worked with disabled people. Conversely, 51 per cent of respondents reported that they had never had a conversation about disability or considered hiring more disabled people in their workplace. The absence of knowledge and confidence is a barrier, preventing disability workforce inclusion. Nearly half of industry employers surveyed

8 (Statistics New Zealand, 2023).
9 (Deloitte, 2022).

indicated they wanted greater knowledge about disability. Ultimately, a desire for learning exists among industry. This desire, however, needs to be supported to transition into ongoing conversation, knowledge access and sharing to enable change and increased employment. This report seeks to begin scaffolding a path to support this change.

Employers also expressed persistent concerns about health and safety, which prevented the employment or inclusion of disabled people in the workplace. More than half of surveyed employers cited increased health and safety risks as a barrier to the inclusion of disabled people. Many employers also believed that their industry lacked suitable roles for disabled people, which also inhibited inclusion. The disabled people this research engaged with, and who had successfully managed health and safety demands in their sector, reflected that concerns around health and safety, and a lack of suitability, might be largely perceived rather than actual risks. When a better understanding of disability is built across the industries, these perceptions will likely begin to shift.

There were some bright spots across industry where efforts were being made to increase disability inclusion, but the passion and goodwill of an individual was relied on to enable this. Ultimately, this reinforces that disability employment is often considered a charitable endeavour, not an expected workforce feature; and this was a barrier to the meaningful inclusion of disabled people. There is a big opportunity to change this. We should help people in industry to believe in the holistic potential of disabled people. This is the

groundwork required to enable sustainable and meaningful workforce inclusion.

Many disabled research participants working in industry had non-traditional employment pathways. Job-placement support, family connections or the advocacy of one person in their workplace enabled people to gain employment. Traditional employment processes often overlooked disabled people, preventing their inclusion. Some participants had their credentials and had applied for several jobs, but had not been successful. Employment processes continue to be built without consideration for disabled people, and employers are affected by ingrained beliefs about disability. Together, these impinge upon disabled people's ability to contribute. The experience of disabled people was compounded by the enduring impact of racism, sexism and other legacy behaviours in industry.[10] Māori, Pacific people and some women we spoke to were less likely to benefit from the family connections, advocacy or support that enabled others' workplace success. These legacy practices or beliefs need to be challenged and eradicated entirely.

In regional Aotearoa New Zealand, disabled people were more likely to benefit from their capabilities being known in their community and obtaining employment on this basis. In urban areas, disabled peoples, inclusion was prevented, because they were not always afforded the assumption of ability. Consideration should be given to how regionally allocated resources can provide momentum to enable disability inclusion since bright spots exist already.

10 (Trade Careers, n.d).

Another key finding for disabled people was the importance of a diagnosis. A diagnosis had transformative power for disabled people working in industry, and was a critical tool for equipping individuals to understand themselves in the workplace or ask for help and support. Pathways to diagnosis need to be further enabled and accessibility needs to be embedded into standard industry practices for a more inclusive future.

Lastly, and most critically, many disabled people did not want to disclose their disability to their employer or had struggled to do so for fear of their job being lost or their pathway limited. Conversely, at times, employers desired more disclosure, and some felt they had a right to know about impairments. Undoubtedly, widespread disclosure of disability will support increased workforce inclusion, but a safe industry is required to enable this. Responsibility for creating a safe, disability-responsive space where people can share their access requirements, disabilities or concerns preventing their inclusion should be shared across industry, decision-makers, the disability community and government. The weight of disclosure and creating change should not rest solely on disabled people's shoulders. Stakeholders need to come together, to make a plan about how this load is best shared.

Opportunities for consideration from the research

These can be taken up across New Zealand to help make positive change.

Understanding the opportunities

The opportunities are divided into categories for employers, agencies working across disability, employment and with workforce responsibilities, educators, and government and policy makers. These opportunities are a collective responsibility for different communities, organisations or businesses to take up. The opportunities take a whole-of-system approach to consider how changes made in workplaces, employment strategy, education, and the way policy is implemented and/or monitored will together make industry accessible, and inclusive, for disabled people. These opportunities, if comprehensively actioned, will benefit Aotearoa New Zealand economically, and increase the productivity, resilience and capacity of the industries studied. The opportunities span a spectrum—from more easily achievable steps to bold, systemic shifts. To create real impact, we must embrace change across all levels—small wins and game-changing movements alike.

Nothing about us without us

A "nothing about us without us"[11] approach was taken in the design of these opportunities. This is particularly important given disabled people are part of every community in Aotearoa New Zealand, which means that the opportunities must reflect our obligations to Māori, and recognise the different roles disability plays in people's lives and communities.

The structure of the opportunities

The opportunities are structured as the identified enablers discovered in the research, the potential opportunities the enablers represent, a set of actions to harness these opportunities, which lead ultimately to the outcomes should those actions be completed. In other words, the opportunity is what can be changed, or work to be done; the outcome is the impact of that action and how it supports the inclusion of disabled people in the workforce.

These opportunities should be considered by stakeholders alongside already existing and documented priorities for other communities.

11 (Khedr & Etmanski, 2021).

Opportunities for employers

Enabler

Employers told us that they wished to attract and retain more talent. They want to understand what practical actions they can implement in their workplaces to understand and support disabled workers.

Opportunity

Employers are provided with, and can access and apply the industry-specific knowledge, skills and tools they need to create an affirming environment for disabled people in their workplaces. Existing tools, like those on the Whaikaha – Ministry of Disabled People's website, provide a starting knowledge base.[12]

Action 1	Action 2	Action 3
Identify the tools currently available to employers to inspire greater accessibility and determine if they are fit-for-purpose. Implement these into workplaces, existing industry bodies[13] could be supported to do this. It may be that support for the development of specific resources to serve particular industry need/s is required. Tools that can be implemented immediately include flexible working and/or the use of appropriate assistive technologies such as text-to-speech.	An immediate action employers can take in their people and culture processes is to ask all employees and potential employees: "what support do you need to do your job?" This will help people begin the broader journey, to recognise implicit bias within recruitment and demonstrate a willingness to engage in a conversation about what employees need to succeed. Asking how all people can be better enabled in your workplace, and creating space for a kōrero about accessibility, would be beneficial for employers and employees. The tools mentioned in Action 1 can support this.	Uplift knowledge and capacity about disability across whole organisations, and do this as a regular workplace function. The research gave some ideas for how this could look. For example, a worksite learning basic Sign Language, both as an effort to incorporate New Zealand Sign Language, and to help foster communication on noisy worksites, or a programme to identify industry role models with disabilities who can support others. Each business unit of a workplace could take up practices that meaningfully build their understanding of disability. Developing a common vision about why this is important is a critical first step.[14]

Outcome

Employers have the tools and some actionable, relevant and tangible ways to ensure their workplaces are disability inclusive. Employees are provided the support/s they need to do their job well. This means that employees' ability to succeed is not necessarily dependent on the disclosure of their impairment, but rather through the purposeful development of an inclusive organisational culture, with the meaningful participation of disabled people.

12 Other existing tools are viewable here: https://www.workandincome.govt.nz/employers/help-with-recruitment/hire-someone-with-a-disability-or-health-condition.html https://www.msd.govt.nz/about-msd-and-our-work/work-programmes/lead-programme-work/lead-toolkit/index.html
13 In the research we found that industry bodies were a strong source of advocacy, but they would need to be resourced and supported to do this work.
14 Hanga-Aro-Rau and Waihanga Ara Rau are developing Disability Action Plans that will provide resources and tactical support to uplift knowledge.

Cross sector opportunities

Enabler

Employers want help to access, navigate and apply available tools and support for attracting, retaining and better supporting disabled people in their workplaces.

Opportunity

As part of their role in learner achievement and workforce development strategies, Hanga-Aro-Rau and Waihanga Ara Rau can use their functions to support employers to train, attract and retain a pipeline of talent.

Action 1

Work with job placement, employment agencies, disability support agencies and industry associations to establish workplace guidance materials. These would have an embedded review mechanism, allowing for employee feedback once implemented by workplaces, so the impact of the guidance materials on employer and employee behaviour and confidence is measured and can be adapted accordingly.

Action 2

Create an ongoing and multi-jurisdictional awareness campaign that shines a spotlight on best practice examples of disability inclusion across industry. Use these to inspire others to make changes within their own organisations.

Action 3

Work with support agencies and employers to establish post-job placement support for employers and their disabled employees so that disabled workers are retained and can advance/thrive in the workplace.

Action 4

Promote understanding among educators of specific criteria for standards setting, programme endorsement, and assessment moderation, ensuring that accessible learning practices, like the use of reader-writers, are considered and effectively monitored.

Outcome

Employers across industry develop and are supported to implement evidence-based, fit-for-purpose approaches[15] to workforce disability inclusion. More disabled people are supported to enter and remain in the industries, becoming a larger and more visible part of their workforces.

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15 Approaches need to be fit for diverse business size and operating models.

Opportunities in education

Enabler

Learners who are holistically supported in education, and throughout their transition to work, have greater employment success than those navigating alone.

Opportunity

Learners who are provided with accessible and equitable curricula, teaching and assessment practices experience fewer barriers to qualification achievement, and greater employability.

Action 1

Establish programme quality assessment and education provider self-assessment practices that ensure that disabled students' educational outcomes are monitored in work-based, online and on-campus learning environments. Ensure sufficient flexibility within these practices and assessments, so that providers are able to respond appropriately to different impairment types and cultural identities.

Action 2

Identify and/or develop an industry tailored disability confidence education programme to build employer and employee skills, and contribute to more accessible workplaces.

Outcome

All learners are supported in a way that best meets their needs, resulting in improved student achievement.

Opportunities for Government and policy makers

Enabler

Current policy settings are long-standing and do not always meet the needs of disabled people or employers. Disability employment policies should be reviewed to better enable and support disabled people in industry and respond to research/community insights.

Opportunity

Shift from supporting individual disabled people to enabling collective employer responsibility for disability employment by tying support funding to workplaces. Shifting the responsibility for disabled people's employment strategy and policymaking so that it is co-located with the employment strategies for other groups will support a shift in culture away from disabled people's employment as welfare and based on individualism. This will benefit the overall economy and strengthen disabled people's ability to

Action 1

Transition responsibility for disability employment strategy from the Ministry of Social Development (MSD) to the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE), creating a strategy and infrastructure for disabled people's employment that is not entangled with welfare connotations.

Action 2

Consider additional ways to incentivise and fund employers to attract and retain disabled people in their workplaces.[16] Incentives should not lessen the value of disabled people's contribution (i.e. via wage subsidies or the minimum wage exemption). A range of incentives should be considered to encourage greater flexibility in what is funded and how, and to target employer sustainability goals for their workforce. An example of this might be through the existing apprenticeship boost, or some kind of tax incentive.

Action 3

Include incentivising ongoing, comprehensive employer disability confidence education as part of the employment strategy, alongside an awareness programme. This could involve attaching the requirement to complete the training as part of employer eligibility to receive funding incentives.

Action 4

Create a body of evidence using data about disabled people's education (including the types of support they receive) and their transition into work in order to make decisions about what support enables successful outcomes, and in turn what support is funded.

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16 A range of supports are available. The research reflected a need for these to be strengthened, diversified and industry-specific.

Opportunities for Government and policy makers
cont...

Action 5

Given the potential of people with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome Disorder (FASD) to contribute to industry,[17] and FASD being a large part of communities in Aotearoa New Zealand,[18] FASD should be funded to give people access to workplace and other foundational support. The current funding status of FASD under the Disability Support Services system should therefore be reviewed and appropriate workforce support for all those with FASD should be developed, aligned with international examples of good practice.[19]

Action 6

Given that transport to and from work or training is often required, consider how to provide more accessible and affordable transport options for disabled people engaging with industry. Pair this with other wrap-around support services so that barriers to meaningful work are reduced and more disabled people can participate in industry training or employment.

Action 7

Consider how to better leverage and support industries' disability inclusion efforts in regional / rural Aotearoa New Zealand, and within sector representative groups.

Outcome

Overall economy is strengthened through the ability of employers to train, attract and retain more disabled people, and for disabled people to better access and sustain employment with appropriate levels of support.

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17 (Makela, Kapasi, Pei & McFarlane, 2018).
18 For example see 1 in 10 Far North children could be affected by fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (Dinsdale, 2024).
19 Currently, people with FASD are specifically excluded from accessing DSS unless they have an intellectual disability (i.e. a diagnosed IQ of less than 70) (Hunter, 2024b).

Research purpose and questions

This report is designed to provide readers with insight into applied principles and the key themes and insights generated through this research. The summary of methodology section gives readers an overview of the methods deployed throughout this research. For a more comprehensive description of the research approach and findings, please see the Lets Level Up – Unlock the power of inclusivity and discover the potential of the disabled workforce **Full Report** here.

This research aims to provide foundational information with the potential to support industry stakeholders to understand both the barriers and enablers of disability employment and employers' awareness and experiences of disability.

This purpose is embodied in the two research questions:

> What are the barriers to and enablers of sustainable, fulfilling work for disabled people, Tāngata Whaikaha Māori and Pacific Disabled People in Hanga-Aro-Rau and Waihanga Ara Rau industries?

> What are employers and business associations' awareness and experiences of employing disabled people, Tāngata Whaikaha Māori and Pacific Disabled People in Hanga-Aro-Rau and Waihanga Ara Rau industries?
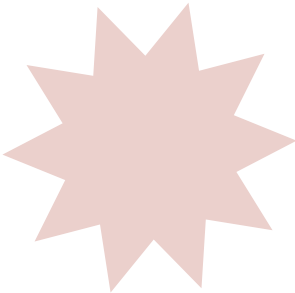
Summary of methodology

Below is a summary of the methods and principles applied to answer the research questions.

Ethics process

The Northern B Health and Disability Ethics Committee (20003) approved this research on April 2, 2024. The accompanying reports for this research detail the ethics approval process.

Values underpinning research methodology

Several core values underpinned our methodological approach. Nothing about us, without us, is central to this work. Hanga-Aro-Rau and Waihanga Ara Rau ensured the project was overseen by a diverse expert reference group representing the contributions of disabled communities from various backgrounds, including Tāngata Whaikaha Māori. Hanga-Aro-Rau and Waihanga Ara Rau also worked to ensure the voices of those they represent informed the research as it progressed by, for example, meeting industry stakeholders to inform work at each stage.

Nothing about us, without us also underpinned our research methodology in the following ways:

The commissioned research team from All is for All, supported by the DBI, represented various experiences of disability or identified as long-term allies and subject matter experts.

Throughout the project, the research team engaged specific community expertise and created equitable space for the inclusion of industry voice in the data collection methods and sample selection strategy. This meant that there was wide representation across the communities that were the focus of this research. Furthermore, those entrusted to carry out the kaupapa also had lived experience of employment as disabled people. Team members built relationships with the industry stakeholders to better understand the operational constraints they were experiencing, such as concerns about halted projects, the rise of synthetic materials and the cost of living impacting customer pipelines. Understanding the experience of disabled people and ensuring industry concerns were heard provided a strong foundation for empathetic engagement with all stakeholders.

Another value foundational to this research is the recognition that disability is part of every community, but not everyone has an equal voice. This is linked to ableism. Those disabled people with closer proximity to the 'aspirational norm' often have access to a greater ability to be heard because, for example, their ethnicity, socio-economic status or gender is favoured. Therefore, throughout this research, we have sought to reach and prioritise the most marginalised disabled communities and apply a critical lens so that different groups of disabled people are included.

Further, in Aotearoa New Zealand, all research must respond appropriately to Māori and Te Tiriti o Waitangi. In line with Waitangi Tribunal

submissions, we recognise that 'disability' is a 'tool of colonisation.'[20] By this, we mean that the connotations and implications of the term 'disability' have no place in Te Ao Māori, and the continued use of 'disability' as a tool for social order erodes whānau and infringes upon tino rangatiratanga. In bringing this research together, we understand that Tāngata Whaikaha Māori me Whānau Hauā identity is intrinsically about being part of whānau. Therefore, making the workforce more equitable is linked to re-indigenising and delivering Tāngata Whaikaha Māori me Whānau Hauā what they are promised under Te Tiriti o Waitangi. This includes the space to determine their futures and define themselves on their own terms. Across this research, we sought to give people space to shape their kōrero and share on their terms.

This research and its methodology was also underpinned by an acknowledgement that Aotearoa New Zealand society has long valued certain characteristics as the aspirational norm, such as being male, Pākehā, non-disabled, able to work a 40-hour week, and not being poor.[21] Society is structured to favor these traits, often unconsciously, making it harder for those who don't fit this mold to navigate the workforce.[22] The challenges experienced by communities are frequently attributed to their differences rather than to a system not designed for them.[23] We can build systems, structures and policies that account for people's impairments, but we most often choose not to do that because we are taught to primarily account for the non-disabled person.

Ableism describes this value system, which underpins other forms of discrimination, such as racism and sexism, by reinforcing that it is 'better' to be non-disabled, male, or Pākehā because these characteristics are considered more 'valuable' in society.[24] This research argues that by challenging ableism, we can create a more equitable society, including in employment.

Data collection methods and analysis techniques

The data collection methods for this research included a self-completion survey, one-on-one interviews and multiple participant focus groups. Employers were identified and invited to participate in all available data collection mechanisms. They largely elected to participate in either an interview or the survey. Disabled people were offered the ability to participate in either a focus group or an interview. Due to the need to ensure informed consent aligned with our ethics approval, disabled people were not offered the opportunity to participate in a widely disseminated survey. The collected data was analysed thematically to answer the research questions.

A series of personas have been created to encapsulate the shared experiences of the research participants. These personas do not reflect the individual experiences of any single person; instead, they synthesise various experiences into cohesive narratives that vividly illustrate the collective insights for the reader.

20 (Kingi & Bennion Law, 2023).
21 (Wolbring, 2012; 2022).
22 (Shue, 2021).
23 (Wolbring, 2008; 2012; 2022).
24 (Mirfin-Veitch et al., 2022).

Employer sampling and recruitment methods

Survey

Employers were recruited for the survey by disseminating it out through our collective networks. At the beginning of this process, the research team intentionally connected with communities under-represented in the construction, engineering, infrastructure, logistics and manufacturing industries to enable their participation in the survey. The primary recruitment method used for the survey was self-referral and a combination of purposive[25] and snowball sampling. Self-referral occurred when Hanga-Aro-Rau or Waihanga Ara Rau industry stakeholders saw a link to the online survey and chose to participate. Purposive sampling enabled us to select participants based on their employer or senior leader role in one of the relevant industries. Snowball sampling[26] meant survey participants helped grow our sample by sharing the kaupapa in their workplaces, in digital newsletters, or on other platforms.

Interviews and focus groups

Self-referral, purposive and snowball sampling were also the primary recruitment methods for employer interviews or focus groups. Some survey participants elected to participate in an interview after having completed the survey. Employers largely opted for one-on-one interviews, as these suited their requirements and responded to concerns around lack of time and engagement fatigue, interviews were shorter than focus groups and enabled a more private environment for them to share authentically. The research team shaped employment engagement around the needs of industry, with guidance from Hanga-Aro-Rau and Waihanga Ara Rau. Participants were largely recruited using online platforms like LinkedIn. The research team used purposive sampling to identify relevant industry leaders and ensure diverse representation in the sample. These individuals often suggested others we could speak to. During interviews and focus groups with employers, time was invested in relationship building so participants felt comfortable coming forward themselves or were willing to be referred by others. Community experts were also engaged to support building trust among Māori, Pacific and regional employers.

Disabled people sampling and recruitment

In order to ensure informed consent, a planned survey was not widely disseminated to disabled people. Disabled people were invited instead to participate in either a focus group or an interview. Most elected to participate in one-on-one interviews. The main recruitment method used was, as for employers, snowball and purposive sampling. Potential participants were identified in the first instance through the research team's networks (purposive sampling), which then led us to others (snowball sampling). Disability community regional networks and community 'shoulder tapping' were critical to obtaining a diverse sample. After commencing the work, we came to understand that many disabled people were reluctant to engage. This appeared to be largely due to potential participants' fear that they might lose their jobs if they talked honestly about their employment experiences, as well as discomfort around the topic. For this reason, the recruitment of disabled people for interviews and focus groups took longer than anticipated.

Combined sample breakdown

A total of 306 people took part in this research. This breaks down in the following way, noting that data collection methods occurred in parallel with one another:

247 employers responded to the survey.

25 employers took part in an interview or focus group.

34 disabled people took part in an interview or focus group.[27]

The overall representation of disability was **37** people, as three employers identified as disabled.

Expert voice

Given the prevalence of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) across the country and its exclusion from disability support funding, we wanted to make sure the FASD perspective was included in this research. Despite our best efforts, however, we did not speak to anyone living with FASD. To address this gap in the research,[28] we spoke to an industry expert in FASD, Dr Valerie McGinn, who is a Clinical Neuropsychologist and the Clinical Director of The FASD Centre, Aotearoa.

27 As noted in the Executive Summary, a total of 272 employers took part in this research.
28 (Hunter, 2024a).

Participant demographics

We did not ask compulsory demographic questions in line with our research values. This provided participants with agency and control over what they shared about themselves. Across the total sample (employers and disabled people), the following demographic information was collected:

279 disclosed the industry they worked in
(includes both non-disabled and disabled people working in the sectors)

Manufacturing
26%

Engineering
8%

Logistics
13%

Construction
47%

Infrastructure
5%

231 disclosed their ethnicities
(many identified with more than one group)

31 identified as Māori
15 as Pacific
203 as Pākehā/European

Participants disclosed a number of other ethnicities, including Thai, Chinese, Indian, Latin American, Irish, Canadian, or Welsh.

176 formally disclosed their gender identity

57 women   **119 men**

183 disclosed their age
16-60 years old

240 disclosed the region they lived within

Auckland (70)
29%

Regional Aotearoa (101)
42%

Wellington (46)
19%

Canterbury (23)
10%

37 individuals identified as disabled

22%
Learning disability

32%
Physical disability

5%
Blind

3%
d/Deaf

16%
Invisible disabilities or health conditions

22%
Neurodivergent

Key survey insights

The employer survey, designed with quantitative and qualitative questions, gathered information about employers' awareness and experiences of employing disabled people. The survey results and insights have also informed the emerging themes.

The survey represented a range of industry voices. Executive-level Managers and Business Owners were the most common respondents at 43 per cent, followed by Senior Leadership team members at 15 per cent. **Figure 1** shows the types of employers who completed the survey. The 'other' category included training advisors, learning and development managers, senior employees and other employees across the Industries.

Overall, 40 per cent of survey respondents said they were currently or had previously employed a disabled person. The percentage of those who had not employed a disabled person was slightly higher at 45 per cent. The significant portion of people who had no experience of employing a disabled person reflects a potential for gaps in understanding regarding disability.

Respondents' roles

Legend:
- Business Owner/Chief Executive/Director
- Senior Leadership
- Other
- Human Resources
- Team Leader/People Manager/Supervisor
- Operations Management
- Project Management
- Diversity and Inclusion

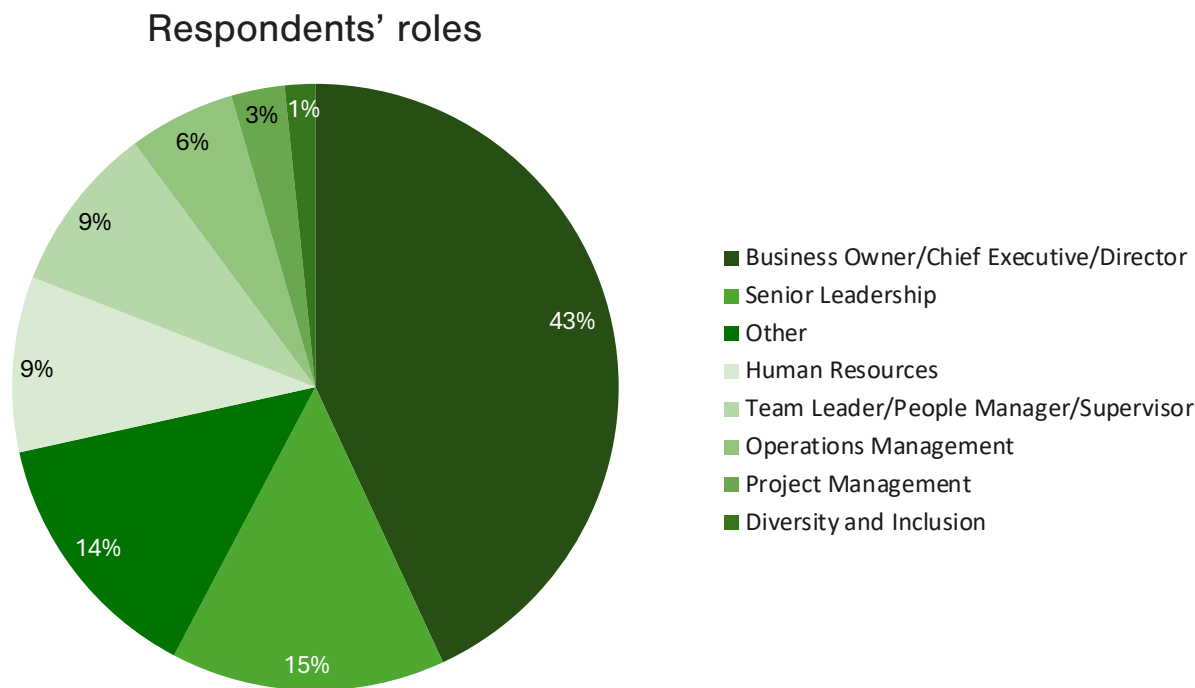Pie chart values: 43%, 15%, 14%, 9%, 9%, 6%, 3%, 1%

Figure 1: Respondents' roles

Employers were asked about their awareness of disabled people in their workplaces: 44.2 per cent said they did have disabled people in their workplaces, 43.2 per cent said they did not, and 12.4 per cent were unsure. In the comment box of this question, some respondents seemed unsure about what was considered a disability, which may have influenced their responses to the original question and suggests a need for a foundational understanding of disability amongst some employers.
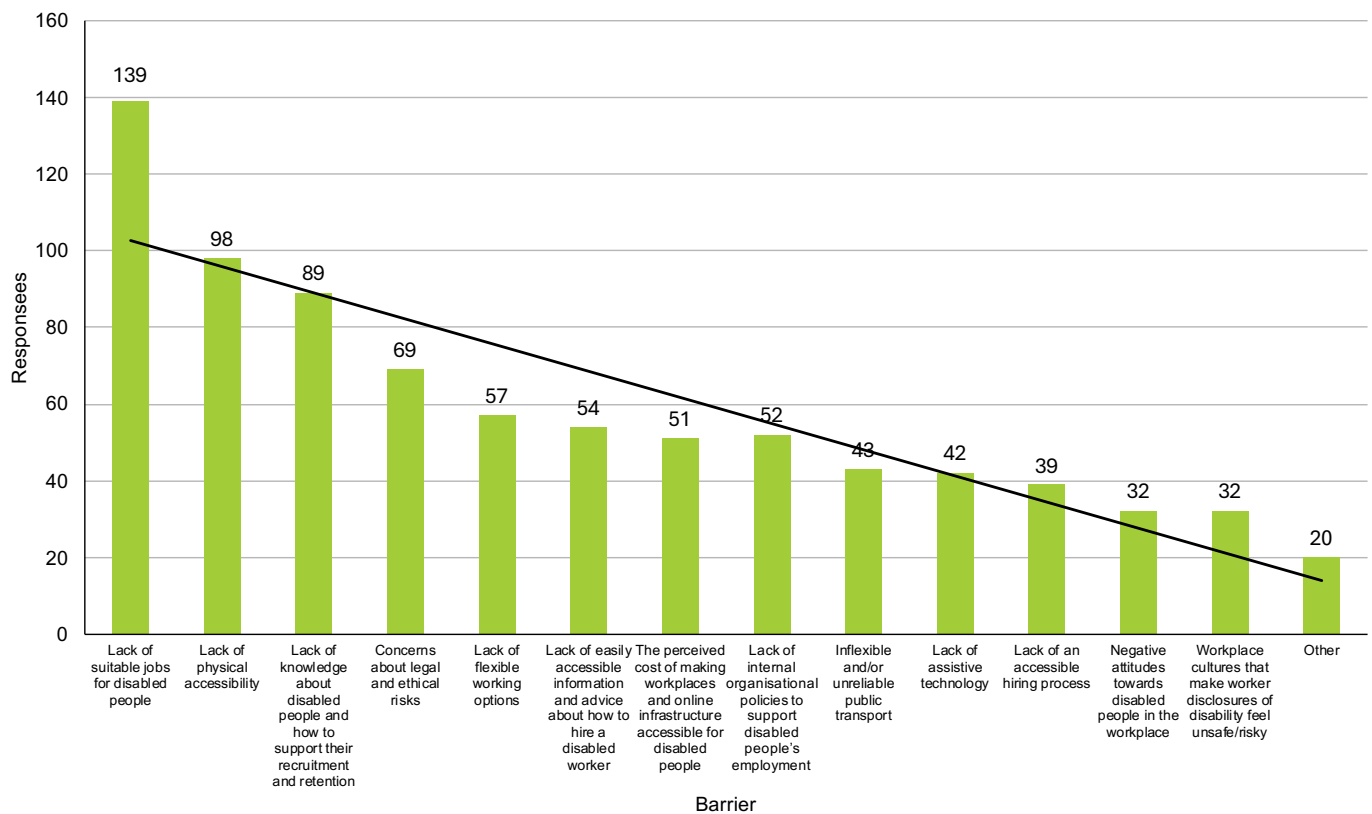
Barriers of concern to respondents

Figure 2: Barriers of concern to respondents

When asked to select the barriers that might impact disabled people in the workplace, lack of suitable jobs was considered the most significant, with 139 respondents selecting this option (see **Figure 2**). Ninety-eight participants chose lack of physical accessibility, while 89 chose lack of knowledge about disabled people. This reflects a need to better communicate the diversity of the disability community to employers, and emphasise the diversity of available roles in the Industries. It is also important to support employers in learning about disability so that they are able to effectively recruit and retain disabled people and address inequities across the Industries.

'Other' barriers identified by respondents included a lack of respect for disabled parking, health and safety risks, and a lack of promotion by the disability community of jobs that are available for disabled people in the Industries.
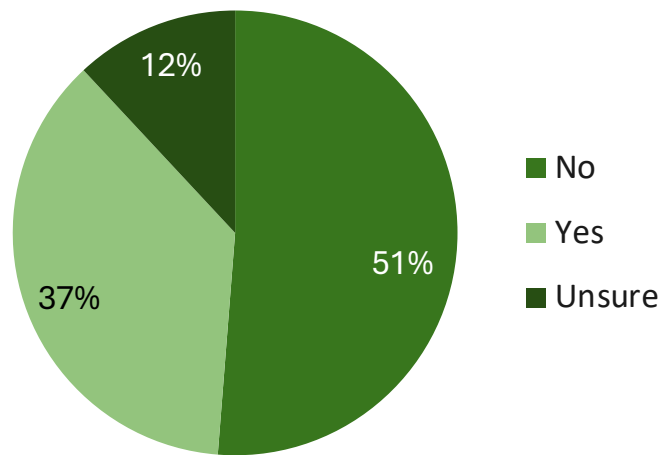
Disability discussions In the workplace

Figure 3: Disability discussions in the workplace

Employers were asked if they had ever had a conversation about disability or conversations about hiring more disabled people in their workplace. As illustrated in **Figure 3**, 51.2 per cent said they had not, 37 per cent said they had, and 12 per cent were unsure. Many participants used the comment box on this question to signal the unsuitability of their workplace for disabled people in general.

Presence of disability-inclusive recruitment practices in the workplace
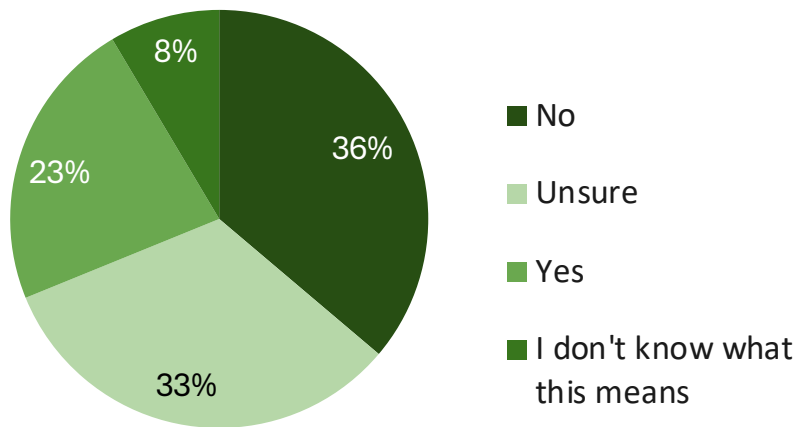
Figure 4: Presence of disability-inclusive recruitment practices in the workplace

When employers were asked whether they use disability-inclusive recruitment practices (**Figure 4**), only 23 per cent said they did, 36 per cent did not, 33 per cent were unsure, and 8 per cent did not know what the term meant.

The qualitative comments for this question indicated that some employers use recruitment companies and are unsure of their methods. Others reported they did not have a high staff turnover therefore rarely hire new staff. Another group of employers noted that they did not believe it was applicable. These responses suggest that a holistic assessment of recruitment practices in the Industries would be very useful, firstly in order to understand them and secondly to assist with the development of a cohesive plan to minimise barriers to entry for disabled people.

Presence of disability confidence training in workplaces

Figure 5: Presence of disability confidence training in workplaces
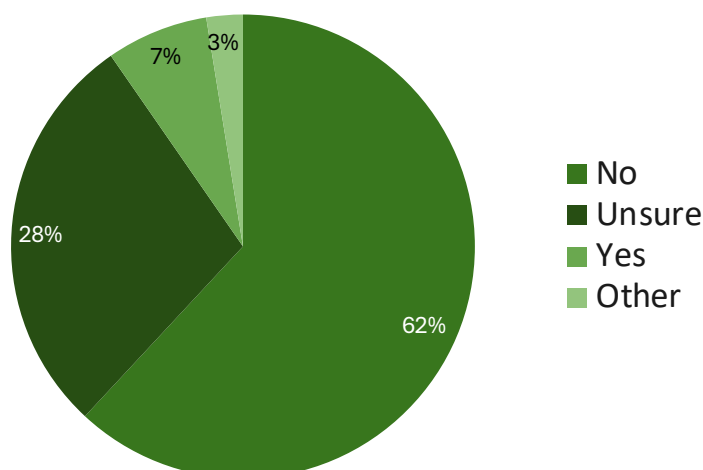
Figure 5 shows that the majority of survey respondents (62 per cent) had not offered disability confidence training in their workplaces, with only 7 per cent indicating that they had. In the comment section of this question, some respondents disclosed a willingness to supply training if a disabled person were on-site; however, they expressed that for small companies, such training was perceived as not being financially viable. Of those who had offered training, none indicated knowledge about the experiences or needs of Tāngata Whaikaha Māori or Pacific Disabled People.

This suggests that participants believed that training is only important once there is a disabled person in the workplace. Working on this premise, disabled employees would be expected to disclose their impairment, which is a considerable individual burden given societal attitudes relating to disability. Supporting employers in understanding the importance of disability, regardless of whether a disabled person is present in their workplace, will go some way towards addressing the knowledge gap. Further, the absence of culturally competent disability training suggests that Māori and Pacific Disabled People will continue to endure compounding barriers in the workplace.

Pg 28

Perceived challenges of employing disabled people
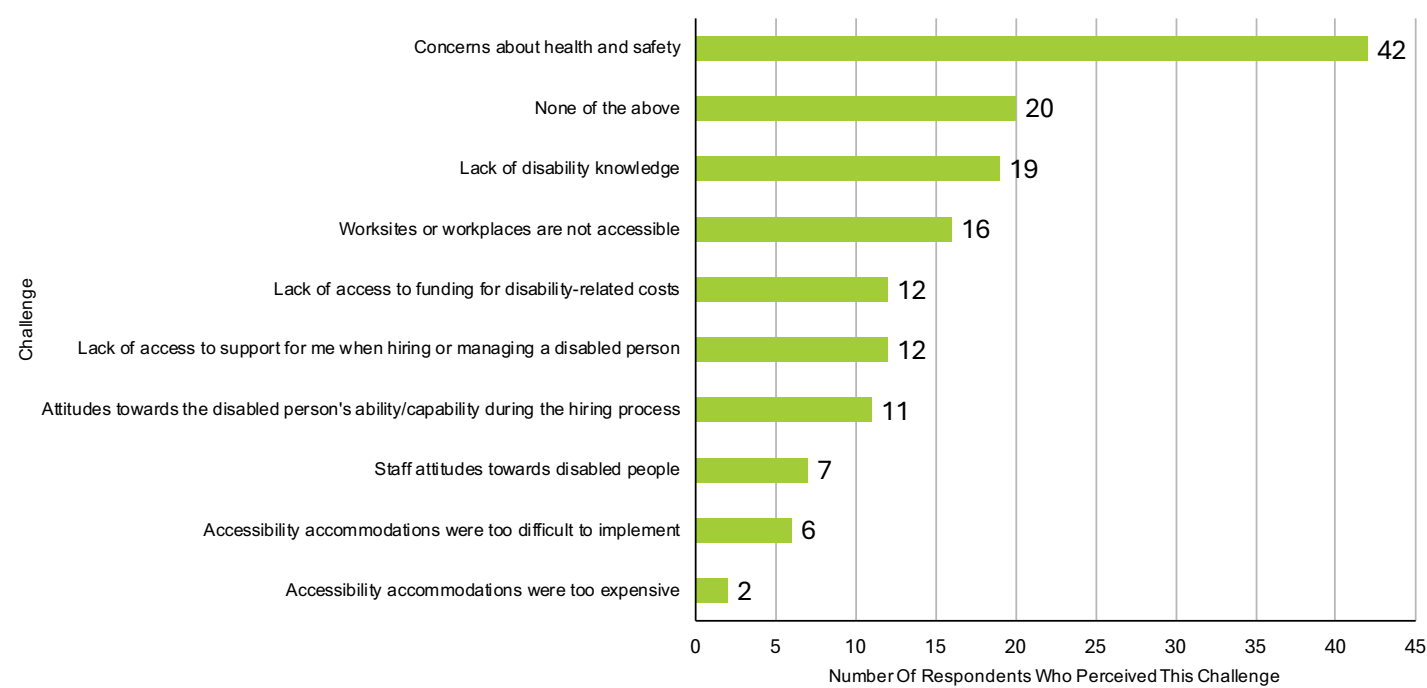
Figure 6: Perceived challenges of employing disabled people

When employers were asked about the challenges they had experienced regarding disabled employees, concern about health and safety was the most prominent response, with 42 participants selecting this response. Lack of disability knowledge and physical accessibility were also common choices. **Figure 6** shows the complete results for this question.

Twenty respondents selected the 'none of the above' option. However, the comment sections provide some insight as to why this may be, with many respondents highlighting that they "haven't thought about challenges for disabled people" or that they are "employing disabled people and feel equipped to navigate this." The fact that some employers had not even considered potential challenges for disabled employees reflects a knowledge gap that needs to be remedied to ensure disabled people succeed in the workplace. Without consideration of these challenges, the burden rests solely on the disabled person to mitigate the barriers they experience or self-advocate. Equally, it is encouraging that some respondents felt equipped to support a disabled employee.

Perceived challenges of hiring a disabled employee
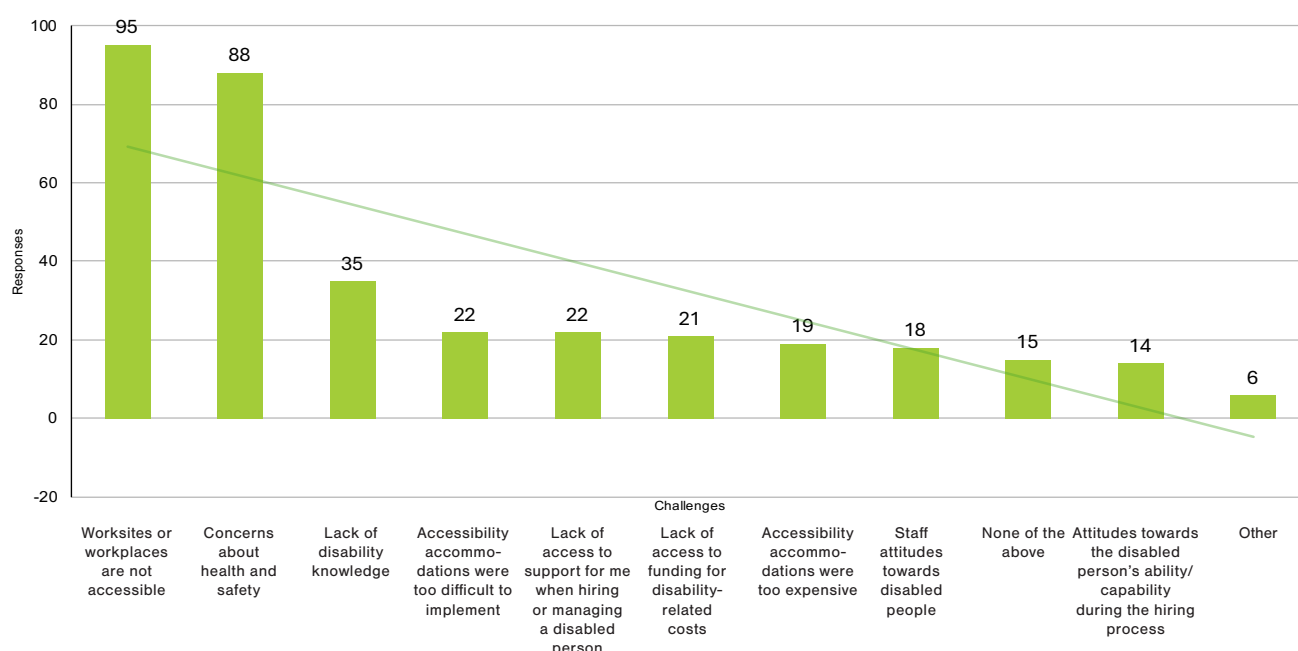
Figure 7: Challenges of hiring a disabled employee

When asked what the perceived challenges might be for hiring a disabled person, and asked to select all options that apply, concerns about health and safety were again front of mind for participants, with 88 selecting this option. Lack of accessibility in the workplace was the most commonly identified challenge, with 95 respondents selecting this option. **Figure 7** shows the complete results for this question.

Supports employers felt would make a difference
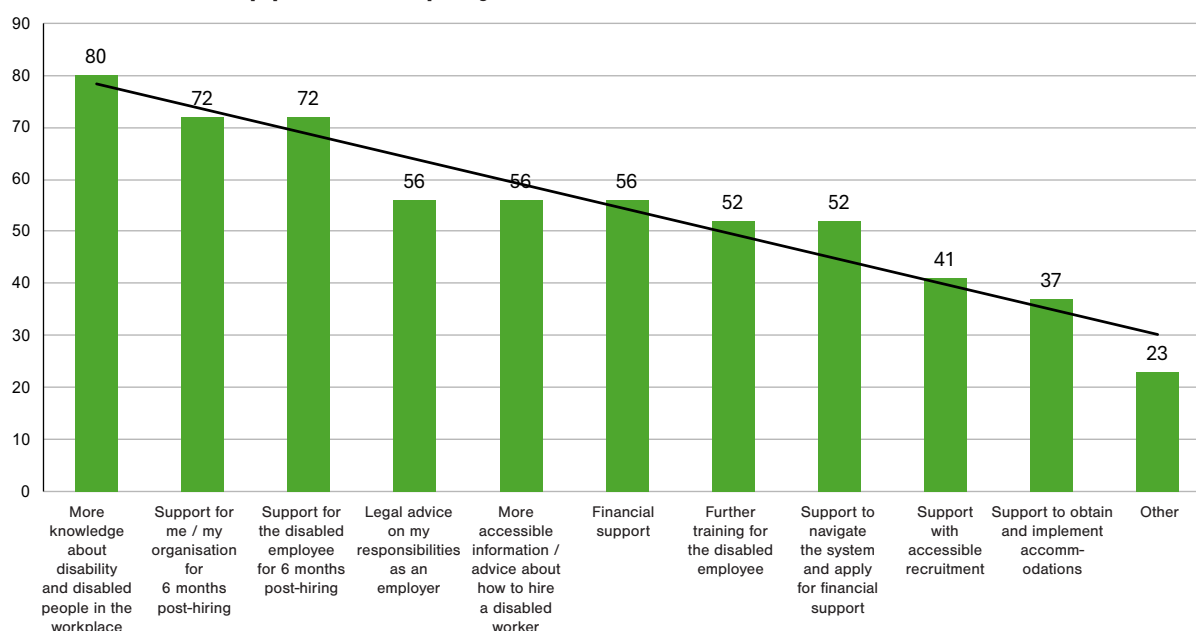
Figure 8: Making positive differences in the experience of hiring disabled people

When asked to select all the options that would make a positive difference to employers' experiences of hiring disabled people (**Figure 8**), participants said more knowledge about disability, while 72 wanted more support for their organisation and more support for the disabled employee. Fifty-six respondents also said increased knowledge about their legal obligations, more accessible information, and more financial support would help make a positive difference. This indicates that many employers are willing to learn and engage with the right kind of support.

Emerging themes and what they mean

This section identifies and discusses the core themes emerging from all data collection methods: surveys, interviews and focus groups.

Enablers
The importance of getting a foot in the door

A large majority of disabled participants working permanently in the Industries had benefited from "being given a chance", this was a significant employment-related enabler. For example, one wheelchair user now working in a senior role spoke about how a CEO gave him work experience after he had struggled to obtain employment for a number of years after he had graduated. He described turning up on his first day:

> "I turned up at [the workplace]. They arranged for a guy to meet me downstairs. He helped me out of the car. This was the CEO—he was acting CEO—and he met me downstairs, got my chair out, helped me up, showed me where I'd be working, and introduced me to some of those teams. And then, I worked with a guy from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. for the first month, and then the second month, I got pneumonia.
>
> [So, I] only ended up working those one, one to one and a half months out of three months [with them]. But he [the CEO] kept ringing me and kept in contact with me to make sure I was feeling okay because I'd worked for those hours, you know, I gave my best and worked hard …

> …I didn't, you know, you didn't spend too much time having lunch … And then [later] he rang me up and said, Oh, we've got a job going, [in our] structural teams, would you like to come in for an interview? And I said, yeah, that'd be great. But I got in there, and there was no interview. He, [the CEO] just said, here's your boss. Took me over and introduced me to my boss. [The CEO] said, that's your desk. This is the key to the basement where you can park your car, and I'll show you where to park it."

This wheelchair user remained with the firm and subsequently progressed to a senior position. The person who first gave him a role retired after 40 years, about this he said:

> "If it wasn't for him, I probably wouldn't be [at the firm] today because he was the one that just saw me as a person willing to give me a go and helped me give it a go."

Most of the other participants working in long-term roles had similar stories about a fantastic leader or manager who had believed in them and helped them get "a foot in the door" of their career. Many of those interviewed who had this experience were Pākehā men. Some participants we spoke to in one-on-one interviews did not have the benefit of this assistance to get a foot in the door and were still looking for that critical opportunity. Interview participants who were still looking for that first opportunity were often Māori or Pacific People, rangatahi in early career stages, or older people

perceived to be at the end of their career. Those we interviewed who were looking for an opportunity to get a first foot in the door were less likely to be currently in sustained employment and were more likely to be between jobs or in seasonal/casual employment when we spoke with them.

Educational attainment also supported "getting a foot in the door." Among the participants interviewed, those who had access to a first chance in the workforce most often also had some sort of qualification - either a degree, apprenticeship, or certificate. Obtaining the qualification often came with significant challenges, but gaining it meant they had a slightly smoother path toward employment and found it easier to get that first opportunity. Disabled participants who entered the Industries without qualifications experienced greater difficulty getting their first employment opportunity.

While employers and individuals supporting disabled people and communities to obtain a foot in the door of industry employment are enablers of success, they also represent a potential barrier. Reliance on workplace champions suggests that the system does not support the employment of disabled people in industry and instead relies on the goodwill of individuals. Some disabled people told us that when their supportive manager changed or their encouraging leader left, their jobs became much harder, and, in some cases, they lost their roles. This is neither sustainable nor meaningful workforce participation. Furthermore, not every person benefits equally from this goodwill. This is not the fault of any one person but rather the result of a system that relies on individual champions. An over-reliance on the goodwill of the

existing leadership pool[29] may open the door for some. However, it is recognised that they are more likely to open the door for those they can personally relate to or who are somewhat like them.

Therefore, while the outreach of employers to support people in gaining initial entry to employment in the Industries is an enabler for some individuals, it cannot be relied on in the long term. To advance all members of the disabled community across gender, ethnicity, educational attainment or age, we must equalise the provision of opportunity. For this reason, systemic support that positively influences change within systems is needed alongside individual goodwill. The insights suggest that systemic support may be catalysed by government leaders making tangible long term commitment to enabling employment for disabled people and supporting employers to achieve this goal. And the data suggest that the economic prosperity of Aotearoa New Zealand will follow.

29 (Cullen & Perez-Truglia, 2023; QBS IT, 2024; Rink, Stoker, Ryan, Steffens, & Nederveen Pieterse, 2019).

The impact of robust, holistic support

Disabled participants reported that what most enabled them to perform their role was a robust, holistic support structure that they could consistently access. This included consistent visibility of industry role models, supportive family connections, and access to a diagnosis. In combination, these factors supported disabled people into employment by establishing a wrap-around baseline of understanding, support, and recognition that remained for the long-term.

However, many people needed greater access to such holistic, long-term support or had access only to parts of it. The impact of fragmented support is that it makes it harder for disabled people to obtain sustainable employment because they are frequently without connection and a sense of belonging in industry. Employers echoed the importance of this robust, holistic support that can be consistently accessed.

Persona: Donald
Amputee working as an Artificial Limb Manufacturer Salesperson

Donald is a 55-year-old salesperson for a manufacturer that produces artificial limbs. Donald was involved in an accident while working construction in his late 20s. He was rising through the ranks and dreaming of running his own business when the accident occurred, resulting in him losing his right arm above the elbow.

Determined to get back to work, Donald soon realised that his biggest barrier would not be the physical elements of his job but the attitudes of colleagues who struggled to come to terms with his accident and its impact on the team. Donald began to feel like an outsider. He started looking for other jobs but struggled to get past the interview stages where he felt that employers were discriminating against him because of their perceptions of his disability. He found some of the questions hurtful; he questioned if he would work in construction again.

During a visit with his Occupational Therapist, Donald asked a number of technical questions about his prosthetic arm. She put him in touch with the company's local sales representative and the pair bonded. The sales representative was impressed with Donald and believed that he had the skills and lived experience to be an asset to the company.

Donald wasn't sure about the job as he had never worked in sales, and despite living with a disability, he didn't feel disabled. Hesitancy aside, Donald was excited about working again, so he agreed. The company made his workspace accessible, and colleagues took on some of the tasks that he couldn't easily do.

Donald is now one of the top salespeople in the country. He has built strong relationships with the disabled community and he is grateful for how this job has helped him accept his disability. Donald has since joined a mixed ability Rugby League team and mentors young people with disabilities. He doesn't think about going back into construction anymore; he is happy where he is, although he would like to explore pathways into artificial limb development.

Role models

The Chief Executive of a peak body said that what the sector needed was greater visibility of disability:

> "Our challenge with diversity in the profession is most [in the profession are] seen represented in media, on television, on the radio, storybooks and that sort of thing, [are] male, white, normally able-bodied, there are very few people [featured] in the media who don't fit that stereotype. And if people know [people in this profession] in their community, most of them fit that kind of mould. So, if you don't fit that mould, it is hard for you to imagine yourself as [someone in this profession]."

Further, a disabled student in one of the Industries spoke about feeling alone while studying as she is the only person known to be disabled in the class. Her course content did not often consider disability, but if it did, she believed that it would make a difference. She commented:

> "I still think they can do a bit more in terms of making the topic of accessibility more talked about. I feel like I'm the only one in the class who really likes advocating for it. And if the lecturers actually talked about it more, it would make me feel more accepted into [chosen field]. And that my whole idea of improving accessibility is, yeah, important, that they're showing that it's important, [it's] not just me trying to root for it."

These insights, from both disabled people and employers, indicate that access to and visibility of a community of role models is an enabler for disabled people in the Industries. Role models help instill a sense of belonging and shift the narrative toward the inclusion of disabled people, which people told us would "improve long-term outcomes." Very few of the participants in this research knew another disabled person working in their sector. This highlights another barrier - that disabled people feel alone in their employment contexts. Most participants reported that they did not have a community of peers who could encourage greater visibility or help them establish a community of role models relevant to their work and career.

Persona: Gerald
Disabled Senior Leader working for an earth works company

Gerald is on the senior leadership team at a medium-sized infrastructure company based in Wellington. He acquired his disability in his late teens and uses a wheelchair for mobility. Gerald is now in his 50s and is an avid gym goer who values his independence.

When Gerald was completing vocational education, he received great support. After graduating, he quickly came up against obstacles, including prospective employers making assumptions about his disability. This was frustrating because Gerald knew he could do the job just as well as anyone else if some small adjustments were made; because Gerald had access to the Accident Compensation Corporation scheme (ACC), he believed many of these adjustments would be paid for.

Despite holding a qualification, a licence to drive machinery, and having experience driving diggers before his accident, Gerald was unable to secure a role in his desired field. His interactions to obtain income support were dehumanising. Gerald realised that his income potential was blunted by perceptions of his impairment. He wondered if he should have pursued university-level studies.

A friend of Gerald's who owned an earthworks company offered him a job working in the site office. While it wasn't Gerald's desired role, he agreed on the condition that if he could prove himself with more physical tasks, his friend would give him a chance to work in those roles too.

Gerald has since built a successful career in earthworks. He has a supportive team and the necessary accommodations to feel fully included in the workplace, partly enabled by ACC funding. Gerald thinks that if he can succeed in a physical job, others can, too. He believes that people with disabilities should be more proactive and confident when approaching employment.

Gerald's workplace doesn't have a formal disability inclusion policy, and he doesn't believe it needs one. Instead, Gerald believes that they should focus on employing the right person for the role regardless of ability, and he would be open to hiring a disabled person if they were the right fit and could do the job.

Family connections

For many of the disabled people we spoke with, family connections and support provided them with access to work in their chosen industry. Family support helps disabled people to keep working or obtain employment in the first place. We often heard that a family connection to a business meant that the business was more likely to support the disabled person. For example, a wheelchair user who acquired his impairment said he got his job and obtained endorsements only because of a personal friendship, which led to him having a go on a digger and then getting his licence.

"[I started] driving diggers and rollers and that sort of stuff. And [my friend] then he was like, well, okay, let's get you those licences so that you're legally allowed to be on the worksite. [...] I'm a hundred percent certain. There is no way I could have applied for a job [in the usual way] because I've applied for several jobs since and have not gotten a single one, and this is after I've had my endorsements."

Another example of the positive impact of family support was shared by a mother and neurodivergent son, who were interviewed together. They shared their story of how he obtained his apprenticeship with assistance from his mother, who was able to support him during the application process to secure employment as an apprentice with a local firm. He told us:

"I'm not that comfortable asking stuff, but I have a bit of help from my mum just trying to work out emails. I'm not as good at talking in person. [Mum helps me] script out an email to write to them. Yeah, I do need it."

His mum told us that her support was necessary so that her son's needs could be better met, and she encouraged other parents or close supporters to become involved in supporting young people as they navigate the workplace, saying:

"I think the process of obtaining employment is quite daunting. Like, the interview to get a job, and so yes, I went along as well. And I think … just understanding what was being asked and the contract and there's a lot … to unpack for anybody, like, you know, not just because … [my son] is autistic, but I think … all young people should have a parent go along … There's a lot of negotiating. It's actually really difficult for young people to stand up for what they think they should be paid."

Despite having the support of his family, this young person still described the workplace culture as being discriminatory rather than inclusive, particularly after the departure of the team member who supported and understood his needs. While family support is an essential enabler for some, it must be recognised that not everyone can access this assistance. Furthermore, when employment is sought outside of the family's influence, it can be much harder to find and keep a job.

Participants in this research who had less comprehensive family support experienced significant hurdles. For example, a Pacific Disabled Person who had comorbid health conditions told us that they had been trying to get back into the logistics workforce since their last job several years ago. The participant had minimal family support to advocate on their behalf while navigating health and income support services in general. This meant that trying to find employment while addressing these issues and challenges was extremely difficult.

Traditional pathways are a barrier for disabled people. While some people may be able to move easily through education, training and employment, this pathway is riddled with obstacles for disabled people.[30] Research participants told us that employment processes, such as interviews, are frequently biased against them due to deficit-framing of disability being consistently, implicitly embedded. The impact of stereotypes and the influence of ableism were also continually referenced. For example, ableism influenced how jobs were shaped and the expectations around them, such as the expectation of working 'full time.' This was the embedded norm. Many spoke too of the difficulties they experienced during the application process for educational programmes, some were told programmes would be too hard for them to complete as disabled people, others had trouble accessing support to obtain qualifications.

Therefore, while personal connection or family support are enablers, without access to these natural supports and within regular processes, disabled people are not always assumed to have capacity when they enter the job market. Instead, their success sometimes comes via someone who knows or understands them and is willing and able to advocate for their inclusion within a particular employment context. Further, the emphasis on family support to navigate the workplace or obtain employment places additional stress on disabled people's family members, who may also be dealing with medical trauma, intergenerational trauma, legislative trauma and the trauma of life-long advocacy, or the compounding impact of all of these. Therefore, while family can be a valuable employment-related support, effort needs to be invested in strengthening employers' understanding of the capabilities of disabled people so they are afforded the same opportunities as their non-disabled peers.

An employer shared an example which illustrates that disabled people are not generally assumed to have capacity. The subtext of this quote is that a non-disabled person is likely to be considered more valuable to an employer based on the employer's assumption of deficit in a disabled applicant.

"Although [under] the Human Rights Act you can't discriminate, if you were advertising for a job for a new graduate or a new person and you had two candidates [whose] paperwork credentials were excellent and, on a par, it would certainly be a strong consideration from the interviewer's perspective, or the employer's perspective, around can they do the entire job? ... There's an element that an able-bodied engineer would be more valuable to an employer than somebody who was restricted."

30 (Vedeler, 2024).

It is interesting to note that in this case, the employer did not consider asking the disabled person a question that could build a common understanding and allay their concern—such as: "What do you need to do all aspects of this job well?" This is perhaps indicative of a lack of knowledge among employers that disabled people know their experience best and so are most qualified to speak to their capacity.

Unless foundational changes are made to support a shift in the traditional employment process and address the assumptions employers make about disabled candidates, then family and personal connections will continue to be the primary conduit to employment for disabled people. An assessment of industry employment processes can underpin the development of training programmes to support employers' transition to more inclusive recruitment policies and protocols.

Perceptions of inaccessibility and health and safety limitations were a significant concern for employer participants in the survey and the interviews or focus groups, sometimes even more than assumptions of incapacity. While physical access and health and safety might be a genuine limitation for some, in general, the preoccupation with health and safety is often based on inaccurate assumptions about disabled people. When asked about the kinds of challenges employers face when hiring disabled people, survey participants selected lack of physical accessibility (69 per cent) and concerns for health and safety (64 per cent). One respondent also commented that "in construction (building), Health and Safety would limit most disabled persons due to liability."

As noted previously, an assessment of the assumptions that frequently underpin hiring processes will help to distinguish between real and perceived barriers and lessen pressure on the families of disabled people. They may also support other candidates, such as young people, who may need greater support to negotiate entry into the workplace.

Access to a diagnosis

Inequitable access to the health system or primary care,[31] and the resultant inequitable access to a diagnosis, or the absence of a diagnosis, impacted a number of participants. We interviewed disabled participants in the Industries who obtained a diagnosis later in life. A senior peak body member who is neurodivergent and experiences mental distress commented on the impact of obtaining an adult diagnosis in this way:

> "Once I was diagnosed, life became a lot easier because now I understand the why. Now I can explain why. ... [I can say] I told you right at the beginning of this that I can't read your facial expression and don't understand the context."

Two participants had obtained adult diagnoses of neurodivergence. A construction employee with a recent diagnosis of autism had been hesitant to let others know but, after initial discomfort, told us that the diagnosis has had a positive impact on their life:

> "My discovery of myself and my disability happened while I was in the workforce. Yeah, it was certainly something I kept to myself...

> ...because I'd seen other people who were clearly keeping... ...other things to themselves ... in the construction industry, [it was] quite an eye-opening because people are going to bottle that up and not say anything. ... [A diagnosis] just actually gives you more tools, ... and that was magic for me, you know, to kind of be like, oh, I can start to actually look at things differently now."

The other participant worked in both engineering and construction and was not diagnosed as neurodivergent until relatively recently, after having worked in the industry for many years. They described their journey in the workplace as being characterised by trial and error, explaining that their diagnosis supported their self-understanding of why they worked in certain ways, like needing a day off during the week to recharge. Access to a diagnosis was, therefore, a critical part of the holistic support that enabled people in the workplace, and even if they chose not to disclose their impairment, a diagnosis supported self-understanding. This better-equipped participants for workforce success and enabled them to ask for help when they needed it.

However, for some disabled people, it is harder to obtain a diagnosis, and this can be a significant barrier to workforce inclusion. Women, for example, often find it more difficult to obtain a neurodivergent diagnosis because "[t]he model that we have for a classic autism diagnosis has really turned out to be a male model. That's not to say that girls don't ever fit it, but girls tend to have a quieter presentation, with not necessarily as much of the repetitive and restricted behaviour, or it shows up in a different way."[32] Furthermore, some disabilities are under-

diagnosed, such as Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), which is thought to affect 3,000 births each year.[33] An expert, Dr Valerie McGinn, told us that FASD is "very difficult to diagnose" and that it's "easier to get diagnosed as a child, but then that depends where you live. Most adults only get diagnosed within the criminal justice system." The expert explained that even adults with multiple identifying features of FASD remain undiagnosed. This means that many people with FASD and their families learn about their impairment after it has led to relationship breakdowns and limited their employment opportunities and/or access to daily life. Some people will never obtain a diagnosis. The absence of a diagnosis is destructive; it is critical to workforce enablement, or the potential for workforce enablement, and it is also essential for people's understanding of the self they bring to work.

In addition to the fact that men are more likely to be diagnosed neurodivergent, many diagnostic tools for disabilities are Westernised and obtaining a diagnosis often requires assimilation to Western concepts.[34] Therefore, it is more likely that Pākehā will obtain a diagnosis. Accordingly, to support workforce enablement for the Industries, we heard that effort must be taken to support early and equitable diagnoses. This means, in part, critically assessing whether diagnostic tools and processes are appropriate for the whole population and aligned to Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

31 (Jeffreys et al., 2021).
32 (Arky, 2023).
33 (Te Whatu Ora Health New Zealand, 2024).
34 (Tupou, Curtis, Taare-Smith, Glasgow & Waddington, 2021).

Persona: Chloe
An autistic woman working in HR for a construction company

Chloe is in her late 30s and received an autism diagnosis about 10 years ago. Because of her later-in-life diagnosis, Chloe feels that much of what she knew about being a professional has had to shift. Overall, her diagnosis has positively shaped her thinking about life and employment; she now understands why she didn't fit in for so long.

As a human resources manager for an engineering firm, Chloe thrives on structure and detail. It is easy for her to go on tangents or get stuck inside her head. She used to think this was a frustrating quirk, but she knows now it is because she is neurodivergent. By telling co-workers about her diagnosis, they can better understand her actions. She's grateful for her supportive manager, who can help her shift her perspective and focus when she goes off-task. Chloe's manager has also helped her create a routine with regular breaks to keep her sharp while positively utilising her flare for structure and detail.

Chloe hasn't always had this type of support; previous managers have tried to shame her for being so focused. Chloe says that for most of her working life, she felt the weight of societal stigma around mental health and disability and that her passion for getting things right was being misconstrued as caring too much. Chloe believes that part of this stigma is due to sexism and commented that the comments from co-workers about her habits got worse when she returned from maternity leave. Now, in a much more positive workplace, Chloe is grateful for the safe environment created for her.

She would like to see that support extended to others in the workplace, especially on work sites. Creating a truly inclusive workplace is a goal she champions, and she's interested in meeting with senior leadership to understand how she can contribute. Chloe finds that working in a male-dominated industry can often highlight issues of sexism. Whilst she has never felt discriminated against because of her autism, she has experienced sexism in the workplace.
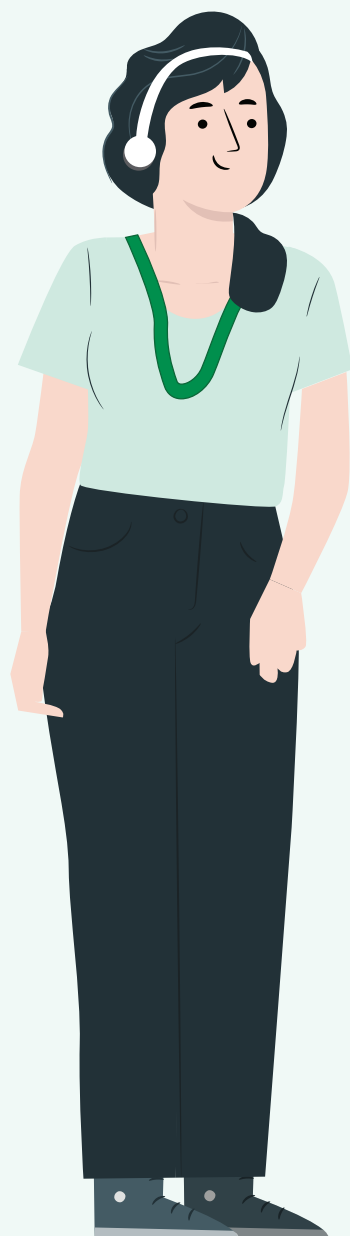
Support equity

Connected to the access to diagnosis, is that while a diagnosis (should) facilitate access to support, available supports are themselves inequitable. Interview participants reported that the Accident Compensation Scheme (ACC) was a key enabler for disabled people, paying for technology, adaptations and support workers for disabled people in the workplace. However, ACC funding is only available to a segment of the disability community.[35] Those funded by other community and government agencies have proportionally fewer resources.[36] This has significant implications, including the fact that it is harder for those funded by Whaikaha (previously funded by the Ministry of Health) to succeed in the Industries. This claim is supported by the fact that the disabled participants in this research had, by and large, acquired their impairments after study or in the workplace and were, therefore, funded by ACC. Of course, it is even harder in the workplace for those with no funding. Those we spoke to were not readily aware of anyone with FASD who is in long-term employment. The absence of funded support does nothing to enable those with FASD to succeed in the workplace. Dr McGinn also noted that in countries like Canada, where people with FASD have funded support, they are much more likely to succeed in the workplace. People with FASD can also successfully take on labouring roles that are often difficult to fill. While an acquired impairment is often a significant trauma, those with acquired disabilities frequently have greater access to funding in Aotearoa New Zealand. This funding supports their employment, and this group is more likely to benefit from their capacity, which is evident through prior study or workplace success. Efforts must be made to equalise the support available for all those wanting to work in the Industries. A significant contributor to greater equity would be the inclusion of FASD as a funded disability.

35 (ACC, n.d.).
36 (Shivas, 2022).

Persona: Aroha
Disabled train operator who struggles to connect with her culture

Aroha is a 35-year-old woman who identifies as Tāngata Whaikaha Māori. As a child, she was in an accident and had her leg amputated; she has also struggled for many years with episodic mental distress and anxiety. Aroha chooses to see herself as enabled rather than disabled. This outlook has helped her adapt and build skills so she can get on with life. Currently, Aroha works as a train operator but does not feel fulfilled.

Despite her positive outlook, finding and keeping meaningful employment has been challenging. She is a proud wahine Māori but feels that often counts against her in the workplace. She constantly needs to prove herself and is uncomfortable asking for help if her colleagues bully her. At times, Aroha experiences racism, sexism and disablism. Hers is a male-dominated industry, and when she needs time off due to her impairments, colleagues suggest she can't "keep up with the boys."

Aroha admits it's not her dream job but feels discriminated against when applying for others due to her disability. She hasn't been offered opportunities to advance despite having been at the company for three years. The workplace culture is not inclusive and does not respect or celebrate other cultures. This has left Aroha feeling deeply isolated at work.

Aroha wonders if this isolation makes her more vulnerable to episodic mental distress. Additionally, because Aroha lives regionally, she believes she doesn't have equitable access to resources or support for employment or her disability. She hasn't had an appointment with her General Practitioner for many months and instead uses forums in her community where fellow disabled people provide support and potential solutions.

Aroha wishes that employers would be more open to employing disabled people. She believes that disabled people have a lot to offer a workplace if they are given a chance. Aroha clearly states that racism has to be confronted. It can't just be about disability. She is hopeful that she will find a job in the future that values her skills, culture and lived experience.

Navigating legacy behaviours and the application of self-advocacy

Workplaces that had started their journey away from legacy behaviours[37] better supported disabled people in the workplace. Racism, sexism and ageism have a compounding impact on disabled people. One Pacific Disabled Person spoke of the impact racism had on his mental wellbeing in this way:

> "I will really rely on my faith, but sometimes, the way they talk to you. It broke my team down, like there's a Fijian boy I used to work with. He said he felt like he was back in the slave days. ... It just got really dark, I know I'm Tongan, but I classify myself as a Kiwi. He made me feel like a real Pacific Islander from 'the islands'."

Both employers and disabled women told us that sexism was still an issue. Some disabled women told us that sexism had impacted their career choices, so they feel disability would have had an even more significant impact. One woman in construction commented:

> "It was kind of a little bit like, hey, what do we do with this promising young woman? We put her into a managerial position. I probably would have loved to have gone down a bit more of a technical route, but that just really wasn't available in the space that I was in. So I was, I was definitely encouraged to ... go into leadership and ... bring people up with me. Yeah, but yeah, I'm not. I don't really know ... how that would have played out if I was speaking more openly about disability."

Disabled women said they wanted to work part-time to manage their impairment and be there for family but were penalised for doing so and, as a result, were often burnt out because full-time work was not sustainable. Young people who were disabled also shared with us that workplace bullying or hazing also impacted them more because of their impairment. Additionally, for disabled people who also face sexism, racism or ageism, navigating their participation in the workforce has been made that much harder.

Workplaces that recognised and moved away from bullying, hazing, sexism, racism and other similar behaviours were praised by disabled people as being more accessible and inclusive workplaces. It was understood that grappling with these forms of prejudice would assist disabled communities to work in more fulfilling and sustainable ways because disability is only one of many identities a person may carry into their workplace. Therefore, enabling all disabled people in the workplace is not separate from enabling other under-represented groups, such as women, wāhine Māori, or young people. Ultimately, to create positive workplaces for disabled people, it is important to take an inclusive approach whereby all prejudices are identified and addressed. Disabled people are a dimension of every community. Therefore, transforming the entire value system of workplaces to one that functions for everyone will benefit all under-represented groups across all of the Industries.

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37 Behaviours that were previously common-place or generally accepted within society, which we now understand to be discriminatory, unfair, or limiting.

Partly in response to these legacy behaviours and to keep themselves safe in the workplace, many disabled people we spoke to worked hard to protect themselves. For example, a participant with mental distress and neurodivergence took extra steps to negotiate a redundancy package and established their own business to fall back on if they were unable to maintain their position within the Industries. This same person also took up a combat sport to self-protect from social stigma within the workplace. Other disabled people took steps to work only part-time or paid for their own note-takers and assistants. Taking steps to self-manage allowed disabled people to fit in, look after themselves or get the job done. However, the implication of this is that a significant burden falls onto the individual despite the fact that they are already navigating a complex situation. This burden means that disabled people are prevented from enjoying long-term sustainable employment that allows them to advance in their career. A disabled participant working in infrastructure provided an example of this when they told us that they made less money working than they would "on the dole" because they paid for their own assistants to preserve their employment.

Persona: Gary

Disabled Business Owner frustrated with status quo

Gary is a recently retired business owner of a medium-sized business in a rural Waikato town with a large Māori population. He acquired a physical disability later in life, sparking a passion for inclusivity. Under his guidance, the business established disability-focused employment programmes to help the community advance and gain employment opportunities. Gary sees the inclusion of Te Ao Māori as central to his business' success. Therefore, many of his disability employment initiatives integrate Tikanga Māori. He believes that a more inclusive workforce for disabled people is connected to re-indigenising ways of working.

Gary believes in the transformative power of active engagement; he often recounts stories of individuals gaining confidence through work, receiving positive recognition, and ultimately moving on to new employment opportunities. He is unequivocal that the people in his community have contributed meaningfully to maintaining local infrastructure. Gary measures his programmes' success on their ability to empower and build the confidence of those who have taken part in them, believing that this supports them throughout their life.

Despite Gary's successes, he is frustrated by the lack of tangible support disabled people receive for employment, especially from the government. He describes a recurring pattern of empty promises or piecemeal investment in initiatives. Gary desires concrete action. He firmly believes that the lack of commitment from decision-makers discourages other employers from implementing similar programmes.

Gary is also critical of peak bodies in the disability sector because he believes they could be doing more to influence meaningful change by working alongside the industry. He feels 'bogged down' by jargon that prevents inclusive progress; Gary would like greater communication and collaboration across the disability sector.

Gary acknowledges that running a rural business comes with other challenges such as proximity to resources and supporting infrastructure, though he recognises the advantage of being part of a tight-knit community. To enable the employment of disabled people, he stresses the importance of gaining the community's buy-in and pushing through hurdles by being solution-focused, persevering, and communicating openly.

Experiences of employers

Employers want to engage but require appropriate guidance.

In the survey, some employers said that they had employed a disabled person (40 per cent), while a similar proportion (34 per cent) had not. Employers described their employees as wheelchair users in office roles, people with acquired brain injuries and/or epilepsy, those who have experienced hearing loss and neurodivergent people. The similar proportions of those who had experience employing disabled people and those who did not may be indicative of a need to support employers to engage with disability and build their own knowledge about what disability is and what it means.

The employers we interviewed were largely engaged with the issue of disability and had good intentions to include disabled people within their workplaces and organisations. However, these intentions were not typically accompanied by well-developed knowledge or understanding about the community. Disability inclusion was often framed as an act of charity, with employers wanting to be seen as doing something 'good' or 'right' - rather than as an acknowledgement of the disabled person's contributions and capability. A regional Master Joiner told us that while they currently had disabled people on staff, the level of support these employees required was significant and had, at times, led to financial loss.

This employer was passionate about giving people a chance and often went the extra mile to support their staff. This person explained the impact of providing this support, saying:

"I've got someone doing the work, which takes twice as long as someone capable. I've got someone who is capable of checking it. If there are mistakes, they have to go back and be fixed. So, something that you know might take a couple of hours for a capable person who's really good at their job is taking two days."

This employer was not aware of the strategies they might have adopted to make their workplace more accessible. They had specifically designed and implemented processes to respond to their disabled employees but had not sought or utilised external support. Similarly, many other employers had not accessed external support or expertise to better understand their disabled employees' needs.

Employers who responded to the survey also did not believe that the disabled community as a whole had the capacity to be part of their industry. In the survey, when asked whether their workplace was suitable for different disability types, the results showed that neurodivergence was considered most suitable for the Industries and being blind or having low vision was considered the least. As already mentioned, employers consistently cited health and safety concerns in the employment of disabled people. They also believed there was a lack of suitable roles for people with particular impairments and were concerned about physical access barriers.

There was a persistent and particular concern around the risk of disabled people operating heavy machinery and being exposed to hazards on a construction site. Some employers suggested that the concern around health and safety may be based on ignorance or stereotypical views of disabled people rather than reality. Further, some

employers spoke about including disabled people in entry-level positions only rather than leadership roles, which suggested a perception that disabled people could not advance to senior positions. Sometimes, positions referenced as suitable for disabled people were those undertaken under the Minimum Wage Exemption.[38] Cumulatively, these insights reflect employers' lack of knowledge about the potential of the disability community and illustrate a widespread belief that disability is fundamentally a deficit.

This underestimation of disabled people's potential was also reflected in the experiences of the disabled people we talked to. Disabled participants reported that they did not feel supported to advance in their roles. One neurodivergent person said he knew that he would never move beyond his current role into a leadership position because of his perceived social deficit.

Ultimately, the perceived barriers to disabled people gaining employment are consistent across Industries rather than specific to individual sectors. Employers need support to understand the diverse nature of disability and to extend their understanding of impairment beyond stereotypes. There is an urgent and particular need to educate people about Tāngata Whaikaha Māori and Pacific Disabled People.

The research findings reported here indicate that employers are not widely accessing available support and knowledge about hiring disabled people. This has left some employers in a position of financial loss because they have had to invest considerable time correcting mistakes made by their disabled employees. This situation contributes to an embedded discourse that employing

disabled people is something 'charitable' or 'good' to do rather than being of mutual benefit to the organisation and the disabled employee. While this discourse remains, it will be difficult to achieve employment-related equity. It is critical to transition away from charitable beliefs about employing disabled people. Implementing easily accessible industry support for employing disabled people is one aspect of sustainable change and helps ensure employers do not associate disability employment with loss or charity.

The long-term benefit of investment in comprehensive support and training for employers cannot be underestimated. Transforming foundational beliefs about disability can only be achieved by tangible investment in long-term learning and support. Individual businesses cannot be expected to make such an investment alone. This expectation can also not be placed on employers in Hanga-Aro-Rau or Waihanga Ara Rau industries alone. It needs to be the collective responsibility of all stakeholders.

38 (Bremner, 2024).

Persona: Claire
Senior Team Member who needs support to make a difference

Claire is a passionate senior member of the marketing team. She recently learned that mental distress and mental health conditions are included within the disability community; this opened her eyes to how relevant disability is in her workplace.

Claire views disability as a source of strength and inspiration, offering unique qualities and lived experiences that can benefit any business. Claire has one direct report who is neurodivergent. She's struggled to build a relationship with this person because her workplace doesn't have any formal resources to guide her. Claire is disheartened by the lack of appropriate support. Her company does what it can but, as a family business, Claire worries it will always be limited, particularly with economic pressures on the rise.

Watching disabled people, including those experiencing mental distress, try to navigate a less-than-inclusive society has frustrated Claire. She has witnessed the impact of bias firsthand. This has ignited her commitment to making her workplace more inclusive. She sees a need for deeper action, policy and data to create holistic change.

Claire thinks that, ultimately, the business owners will be slow to invest in anything without an immediately visible economic return. Her senior leaders continually emphasise that people must "be able to do the job." Within this context, Claire struggles to advocate that disabled people should be given a chance, and she truly believes that if some tweaks were made, disabled people could succeed in her facet of the business.

Claire recognises the importance of diverse spokespeople for the company. She understands that an inclusive customer experience may help signal to potential workers that her workplace is inclusive.

Claire leverages communication, innovation and the power of marketing to create real change within her company. She embodies the potential for a new generation of leaders eager to embrace disability as a source of strength. She needs tangible support and infrastructure to influence her colleagues to invest in disability education and employment. Claire would also benefit from support in learning how to engage her direct report better.

Regions fostered change

Many regional employers who participated in this study demonstrated a greater capacity to invest in their employees holistically, which, as discussed previously, is an enabler for disabled people. For example, a successful food product manufacturer celebrates employees and their out-of-work time commitments and hobbies by sharing stories and images. Many disabled people who worked for this employer said they felt supported and understood. A peak body representative explained to us:

"[In regional Aotearoa New Zealand, because the talent pool is smaller] in some respects, if you can get a talented individual, they [employers] will be more accommodating ... So, for example, we had someone working for a while on our [team] who was in a wheelchair. And that was because he was someone known to the community. And he wanted to explore that as a career. And so, the council gave him an internship to do it, and everyone was just on board with it straight away because [they knew him]. So, I think in some respects, in rural and provincial New Zealand, it may be easier...especially if someone is part of the community."

This supports the earlier insight that a personal or family connection enables disabled people to obtain meaningful employment. In a tight-knit community, such a connection is more easily made. Greater investment in regional areas is likely to move disability inclusion forward more quickly, and urban employers might consider how they could mirror the community-centred nature of their regional peers to better support disabled people.

Persona: Brendon
Disabled Entrepreneur with a learning disability

Brendon is a young man from rural Aotearoa, New Zealand, who lives with a learning disability. Since leaving high school without formal qualifications, Brendon has struggled to find sustainable and meaningful employment. He lives with his Aunt Cathy, a staunch advocate for disabled people in the community.

Brendon used to work at the local supermarket, but they had to let him go because of ongoing health issues that meant he couldn't always turn up to his shifts. Brendon was devastated, and it had a profound impact on his mental well-being and self-confidence.

After that, Cathy struggled to help her nephew find a suitable job. Many people didn't want to hire Brendon because of assumptions about his productivity. Cathy and Brendon's support worker, Heath, helped Brendon set up a business making and selling custom gardening boxes.

Planter Boxes By Brendon quickly became a "must-visit" for locals and visitors charmed by Brendon's positive spirit and bespoke products. Brendon opens and closes the store, serves customers, and builds the boxes. Heath is on hand to support Brendon while managing the business side of things.

Travel is a barrier for Brendon as he doesn't drive, so he relies on Cathy or the bus to get to work. Sometimes neither option is available, particularly because the bus route in his rural town is not reliable. Brendon would like his local council and the Prime Minister to understand how critical walkable cities, free public transport, and cycleways are to enable workforce participation.

Heath and Brendon recently decided to hire another disabled person to come and work with them. It has been a struggle for Heath and Cathy to find resources about making job applications accessible or what they might need to consider for employees with other types of disabilities who may want to work for them.

They are working through the process as best they can because offering meaningful and purposeful work for others like Brendon is their mission, but Cathy would like to see much more proactive support from those with funding and resources.

Emphasis is on perceived 'ability'

It was common for employers, regardless of their experience with disabled people, to say in their interviews that disability 'didn't matter', that it was about being able to do the job, or about personality fit. Even employers who were themselves disabled said:

> "No matter your disability, provided you fit the right skills, you'd find work within our business across New Zealand."
>
> "Nothing would really be stopping them from doing just as well as anyone else."

It was common for employers to say in interviews, "it's about being able to do the job," "it's about the right person for the right job," or "the stars aligned" for a disabled person to gain employment because "they have such a great attitude." We also frequently heard from businesses that are family-owned and operated that personality fit was their motivation for choosing an employee. Employers, like many in wider society, are uncomfortable focusing on disability and believe that people are served through a focus on ability. An unintended outcome of this focus can be that disability and its impacts are not taken seriously. While the emphasis on ability and attitude may be interpreted by some as positive, it ultimately represents an erasure of disability and of difference. It was also common for employers to emphasise the importance of personality. Hiring based on personality fit risks establishing an echo chamber of similar people. This can mean that disabled people are unexpected or even excluded in the workplace. Some employers were aware that all of their team was very similar in social position and perspective.

Further, employers frequently commented that if resumes were equal, there would be nothing stopping the respective applicants from getting a job. When researchers enquired if they understood the barriers disabled people might face in order to gain the qualifications and experiences needed for a competitive resume, most had not considered this before. The insights from the survey and interviews support the need for increased awareness of equity to support employers' understanding of disability; a continued emphasis on job fit alone will not support inclusion in the long term. Some employers agreed with this and, in their interview, cited the need for actions that supported disabled people to compete in the job market. Alongside this, it is necessary to support employers to get comfortable with disability and shift from a belief in disability as a deficit towards understanding the experience of disability as a social construct.

Persona: Darren
HR Manager of a firm who sees the case for change

Darren, a Pākehā man, is the HR Manager of a firm with over 80 employees, some of whom are disabled. He acknowledges the lack of diversity within the engineering sector and is an outspoken advocate for change.

Darren has two pressing concerns: a looming workforce shortage and a recent pause in government projects. He believes disability representation is still an afterthought to many. He has good intentions to overcome this but is unsure how to change the legacy of his sector.

Darren perceives a reluctance to recruit and train disabled apprentices. He sees a real need for more collaboration between employers and apprenticeship programmes to break down these barriers and foster a more welcoming environment for all. He knows that many neurodivergent people are successfully working in the field but is equally aware that many of them haven't formally disclosed their disability, or even recognised it themselves.

Darren acknowledges that there are other challenges for under-represented groups, such as media stereotypes that paint his field as a "white male" profession. At times, he grapples with why his sector is so inequitable when, internationally, the field is much more diverse.

While many express good intentions, Darren sees a lack of systemic change. He supports people from diverse, underserved communities to gain apprenticeships; however, he acknowledges that disability has not been a specific focus for the organisations he's involved in. Darren has observed many apprentices who would benefit from learning support and has noted the need to address the apprenticeship courses' Pākehā nature.

Darren also struggles with the lack of data in his sector. He is frustrated that Aotearoa, New Zealand, doesn't have data that properly reflects the size of his workforce, let alone how many underrepresented groups are participating.

Darren is a passionate advocate for greater inclusion in his sector. He believes there's "a place for just about everyone." He would particularly like to see increased visibility of neurodivergent and disabled people, acknowledging the bravery it takes to self-identify within the current environment.

## Awareness of employers

Overall indications of awareness

Among survey respondents, there was an even split between employers who were aware of disabled employees working in their industry and those who were not. Twelve per cent of respondents were unsure of disability status. This suggests that there may be a lack of awareness or discussion within the industry about disabled people and, likewise, a lack of confidence by staff to disclose. Supporting this, interviewees across construction and engineering said that they believed many in their industry were neurodivergent but either had not disclosed or were not themselves aware of their potential neurodivergent status.

Employers' awareness of disability was generally limited to several specific impairment types. For example, there was awareness of wheelchair users, learning disabilities, and visual impairments, but some respondents were unclear about the breadth of impairments included under 'disability'. For example, one survey participant wrote:

> "Unsure if learning disabilities are classified as disabled, but we certainly have workers with learning disabilities."

When asked what they understood disability to mean, interview participants often referenced physical impairment and did not consider health conditions or neurodivergence as being included under the disability umbrella. Ultimately, this shows a vague understanding of what disability encompasses, but it also shows a willingness to learn and an interest in better understanding the issue. Further, most participants, both employers and disabled people, were not able to confirm that their workplace had an accessibility or disability inclusion policy, which also reflects a lack of disability focus and recognition. To create more responsive and inclusive workplaces, it is necessary first to build a foundational awareness of disability, which is then given expression in a tangible way, for example, through policies that are kept up-to-date, widely used, and evaluated regularly. Currently, this is not happening in the Industries that were the focus of this research.
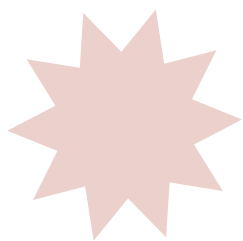
Persona: Joanne
Senior Business Leader exploring opportunities

Joanne has been working for the same textile manufacturer for nearly 40 years, rising through the ranks to a senior leadership position. The business has experienced recent challenges with cheaper, synthetic alternatives becoming more readily available, forcing Joanne to think about new avenues to ensure the sustainability of the business. She believes employing a more diverse workforce could be one solution, partly because she wonders if disabled people might be more fiscally effective labour.

Joanne is motivated by finding staff with the right skills and experience. She thinks that focusing on personality fit and job competence is a positive approach; however, she also recognises that this could result in her overlooking qualified candidates who present differently due to disability. She has not proactively changed her hiring behaviour, but she would if a candidate requested it.

Joanne fosters a culture of staff disclosure, relying on employees to ask for what they need to succeed in their roles. She recognises that, while well-intentioned, this reactive approach might create barriers.

Joanne believes her business is practical, solution-oriented, and open to implementing basic accommodations like transportation support for those who need it. However, she does have some reservations about hiring disabled people. She worries about inadvertently drawing unwanted attention or singling out individuals by using the wrong terminology.

Joanne is concerned that she has not had any formal training on disability. While she believes some basic adjustments could make their workplace more accessible, she has some reservations about what more substantial adjustments would look like and cost.

Overall, navigating disability is uncharted territory for Joanne. She is committed to embarking on a journey to learn and adapt. Still, she recognises that the complexities of disability inclusion will require shifting from reactive to proactive strategies, and she worries that she might not have the time to do this.

Joanne is a senior leader who would benefit from a better understanding of the disability sector and the funding and programmes available to support her knowledge journey.

Awareness is limited because disabilities are not disclosed

Disclosure is a significant challenge for the Industries, and as discussed in the **methodology** section, also posed difficulties during the recruitment phase of this study. Employers also told us that disclosure of impairment was a challenge for them. One provider who employs apprentices said that only three of his cohort had disclosed their disability. He believed that a further 37 students would benefit from disability support but had not disclosed their disability status.

An interview participant said that some of their fellow employers appeared to believe that they had a right to know if someone was disabled. For example, an employer told us that she had circulated a resume of a d/Deaf person without disclosing their impairment, only to be contacted by an industry peer and told she should have let people know the candidate was d/Deaf. It was common for participants to want to know if their employees were disabled, but it was not always clear if this was because they desired to support disabled people in the workplace. It is critical to support employers in understanding and being aware of the limits on their right to ask candidates about their impairments. Operating effectively within these limits will support employer preparedness while upholding the legal and ethical rights of the disabled person.

Increased disclosure would support employers in building more accessible environments and increasing their understanding of their employees' needs. There was, however, little confidence among disabled interviewees that disclosure would positively affect their employment. Some said they had lost jobs upon disclosure, while others

explained that they already felt their advancement opportunities were limited without disclosing their impairment. Disclosing their disability needs within the context of their employment was therefore considered a significant risk by many participants. Ultimately, until an effort is made to demonstrate an understanding of disabled people in the Industries, disclosure will continue to be limited.

Disclosure status was linked to levels of comfort in asking for support; those who had disclosed or had no choice but to disclose were more likely to ask for support. Those who were yet to disclose were often less comfortable asking for support. To enable the inclusion of disabled people in the Industries, there is a need to shift responsibility away from the individual. Accessibility cannot be dependent on individual disclosure. Employers must instead be supported to implement a baseline for accessibility that all candidates can benefit from, whether or not they disclose. Responsibility for implementing this baseline should be shared across industry, decision-makers, the disability community and government.

Concluding remarks

The increased employment of disabled people and the ability of the Industries to be responsive to disabled employees are essential for the long-term resilience of construction, engineering, logistics, infrastructure and manufacturing. Employers are generally engaged in the idea of disability inclusion for their workforce. However, there are considerable gaps in understanding, support, knowledge and awareness. This prevents sustainable progress and accelerates a culture where disability is neither discussed nor disclosed, leading to the normalisation of inequities. The research suggests that the systems within these industries do not yet support disabled people's employment. When disabled people do succeed, this is often because of support from their families and friends, industry connections, or their personal tenacity and resilience.

Action is needed to address these realities and to embed disability inclusion and equity into industry systems, processes and people. This requires supportive action from systems across government, in education and health, for example, to make diagnoses easier to obtain and decrease the barriers to qualifications. Support from leaders at all levels is also needed to maximise the potential of disability employment - actions must be enacted with disabled people and industry. This kōrero must shift from good intention into meaningful action.

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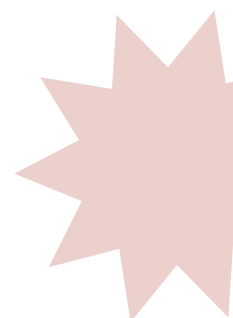
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