

How Do Employers View People with Disabilities in the Labour Market?

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Emploi et approches inclusives : le droit des personnes ayant des incapacités à participer, par un travail décent, au développement économique

Work and Inclusive Approaches: The Right of People with Disabilities to Participate, by Way of Decent Work, to Economic Development

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Résumé de l'article

Cette étude a comme but d'examiner les perceptions des employeurs à l'endroit des personnes ayant des incapacités sur le marché du travail. La recherche antérieure a démontré que les employeurs maintiennent des perceptions qui peuvent paraître déroutantes. Quoique les employeurs rapportent des attitudes favorables à l'endroit des personnes ayant des incapacités, ces attitudes ne se traduisent pas en embauche (Chan et al., 2010). Afin d'examiner cette question, les auteurs font appel aux préjugés aversifs à l'endroit des personnes ayant des incapacités (Deal, 2007). En tout, 64 employeurs du Nouveau-Brunswick et du Québec ont participé à une entrevue. La théorie des représentations sociales (Moscovici, 1973) a servi comme approche permettant de dégager le cadre de référence limitant la participation des personnes ayant des incapacités au marché du travail rémunéré. Les représentations sociales des employeurs à l'endroit des personnes ayant des incapacités sur le marché du travail consistent en des exigences du marché du travail, des caractéristiques de l'employé ayant un handicap, les insuffisances des moyens visant à faciliter l'intégration en emploi et les décisions d'embauche. Les retombées des résultats sur l'embauche des personnes ayant des incapacités sont abordées.

How Do Employers View People with Disabilities in the Labour Market?¹

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Abstract

The object of this study was to examine how employers view people with disabilities in the labour market. Previous work had shown that employers maintain some perplexing views. Although they report positive attitudes toward people with disabilities in the workplace, these attitudes are not associated with the hiring practice of employers (Chan et al., 2010). To address this issue, researchers called upon the concept of aversive disablism (Deal, 2007). A total of 64 employers from New Brunswick and Quebec participated in an interview. Drawing from Social Representation Theory (Moscovici, 1973), findings revealed a system of common understanding that serves to limit the participation of people with disabilities to the paid labour force. Social representations of employers concerning people with disabilities in the workplace feature the demands of the market place, characteristics of employees with disabilities, inadequacies of the efforts designed to promote their inclusion in the workplace, and hiring decisions. Implications of these findings for the employment of people with disabilities are discussed.

Keywords : employers, social representations, disability, attitudes, integration, labor market, prejudices

Résumé

Cette étude a comme but d'examiner les perceptions des employeurs à l'endroit des personnes ayant des incapacités sur le marché du travail. La recherche antérieure a démontré que les employeurs maintiennent des perceptions qui peuvent paraître déroutantes. Quoique les employeurs rapportent des attitudes favorables à l'endroit des personnes ayant des incapacités, ces attitudes ne se traduisent pas en embauche (Chan et al., 2010). Afin d'examiner cette question, les auteurs font appel aux préjugés aversifs à l'endroit des personnes ayant des incapacités (Deal, 2007). En tout, 64 employeurs du Nouveau-Brunswick et du Québec ont participé à une entrevue. La théorie des représentations sociales (Moscovici, 1973) a servi comme approche permettant de dégager le cadre de référence limitant la participation des personnes ayant des incapacités au marché du travail rémunéré. Les représentations sociales des employeurs à l'endroit des personnes ayant des incapacités sur le marché du travail consistent en des exigences du marché du travail, des caractéristiques de l'employé ayant un handicap, les insuffisances des moyens visant à faciliter l'intégration en emploi et les décisions d'embauche. Les retombées des résultats sur l'embauche des personnes ayant des incapacités sont abordées.

Mots-clés : employeurs, représentations sociales, handicap, attitudes, intégration, marché du travail, préjugés

¹ This research project has been conceived and supervised by the CCTTH (Comité de concertation et de consultation pour les travailleuses et les travailleurs handicapés) and coordinated by Independent Living (Centre-ressource pour la vie autonome – Bas-Saint-Laurent region) due to a grant received by the Department of Human Resources and Social Development Canada.

Ce projet de recherche a été conçu et supervisé par le Comité de concertation et de consultation pour les travailleuses et les travailleurs handicapés (CCTH) et coordonné par le Centre-ressource pour la vie autonome – région Bas-Saint-Laurent grâce à un soutien financier obtenu de la part du ministère de l'Emploi et Développement social Canada.

There has been notable progress in the inclusion of people with disabilities in the Canadian paid workforce (Statistics Canada, 2008). The unemployment rate of people with disabilities declined from 13.2% in 2001 to 10.4% in 2006. This decrease was particularly pronounced among people with disabilities rather than people without disabilities, narrowing the unemployment gap between both groups (Statistics Canada, 2008). The employment rate of people with disabilities has also increased by 4.2% between 2001 and 2006, a notable gain next to people without disabilities (Statistics Canada, 2008). Yet, in the wake of this progress have emerged some rather disquieting trends. There is a significant rise in the proportion of working-age adults with disabilities that are now better educated than before, ready to work, but are more likely to be unemployed than their non-disabled counterparts (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2008). Furthermore, a significant proportion of people with disabilities rather than people without disabilities have left the labour force (Statistics Canada, 2008). Yet, as research has found, the former are still more likely than the latter to express the desire to work, but feel less optimistic about their prospects (Ali, Schur, & Blanck, 2011). While legislative measures in Canada and the mobilization of disability rights organizations have made it clear that discrimination on the basis of disability in the workforce is not only intolerable but also illegal, 38.2% of people with disabilities who are non-employed in Canada report that they have been refused a job due to their disability status during the last five years (Statistics Canada, 2008). All in all the exclusion of people with disabilities from the Canadian labour force deprives individuals of a crucial source of self-fulfillment (Kabano & Beaton, 2011), and the country from an untapped pool of talented workers.

The perception of the employer has been identified as one of the most important factors that determines whether a person with disabilities will be hired (Fraser, Ajzen, Johnson, Hebert, & Chan, 2011; Hernandez, Keys, & Balcazar, 2000; Lengnick-Hall, Gaunt, & Kulkarni, 2008). The purpose of this study is to examine the

employers' view of the participation of people with disabilities to the Canadian economy, in the wake of social and legislative pressures that prohibit discrimination on the basis of disability. Studies have shown that employers hold mixed views concerning employees with disabilities (e.g., Wang, Barron, & Hebl, 2010). Some authors even declare that evidence provided thus far concerning the employer's perspective of people with disabilities in the workplace is inconclusive (Colella & Stone, 2005). There is a need to address the complexity of viewpoints expressed by employers to better understand the beliefs and motives that guide their hiring decisions. To reach this objective, the analysis of the employer's perspective will draw upon the concept of aversive racism.

Kovel (1970) discussed the expression of two different forms of racism, that is, *dominative racism* characterized as a blatant form of denigration. In addition, according to Kovel (1970), due to the civil-rights movement, prohibiting racial segregation and bias, *aversive racism* emerged as a more subtle, albeit pernicious expression of racial bias (see Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000, for a review). Aversive racists hold the egalitarian value system very dear. They object to the expression of prejudice or discrimination, and "...in contrast, sympathize with victims of past injustice, support principles of racial equality, and genuinely regard themselves as non-prejudiced..." (Pearson, Dovidio, & Gaertner, 2009, p. 316). However and paradoxically, aversive racists have acquired, through socialisation, deep-seeded negative beliefs and feelings of "...discomfort, uneasiness, disgust, and sometimes, fear" (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986, p. 63) regarding ethnic minorities. These well-entrenched biases are reflected in the decisions or actions that favour the in-group 'we' over the out-group 'they'. However, as staunch advocates of egalitarian values, aversive racists will behave in a biased fashion only when a non-biased explanation can account for their discriminatory behaviour. For instance, in a task designed to evaluate the candidacy of two job applicants, aversive racists will equally recommend the White or Black applicant, provided it is clear that they are both highly qualified. However, when the qualifica-



tion of both candidates is ambiguous, that is, if both candidates are described in positive and negative terms, the aversive racist will give preference to the White over the Black job applicant (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000). Results of a meta-analysis have supported the propensity of aversive racists to express preference for White rather than Black applicants with ambiguous qualifications (Aberson & Ettl, 2004), allowing respondents to justify their decision on a nonprejudiced basis and thus preserving their egalitarian self-image.

Extrapolating from research on aversive racism, Deal (2007) has introduced the concept of aversive disablism to account for the treatment of people with disabilities in the workplace. Essentially, according to Deal (2007), aversive disablism harbours positive views toward people with disabilities and professes an egalitarian self-image. By the same token aversive disablism is gripped by deeply rooted disparaging beliefs and feelings about disability. This author argues that aversive disablism will transpire in practices that hamper the full participation of people with disabilities to the paid workforce. Aversive disablism will, as Deal (2007) explains, support "...well-meaning social policies..." meant to *protect* the person with disabilities from what is believed to be demanding, stressful or unwieldy job situations. In fact these measures isolate people with disabilities from others and limit their contributions to the organisation or prospects for meaningful work (Deal, 2007).

We believe that drawing from the work on aversive racism and aversive disablism might disentangle some mixed and perhaps perplexing views expressed by employers concerning people with disabilities in the labour force. For instance, while there is evidence of positive attitudes toward people with disabilities at work (Ren, Paetzold, & Colella, 2008) these positive attitudes are not associated with hiring decisions and evaluations concerning the candidate's true potential (Chan et al., 2010; Hernandez et al., 2000; Lengnick-Hall et al., 2008). To illustrate, Wang, Barron and Hebl (2010) found that applicants with disabilities were rated significantly more favourably on personality

characteristics (e.g., conscientious, agreeable), than their without disabilities counterparts. However, this positive orientation did not translate into a more favourable hireability rating for the candidate with disabilities. Furthermore, criteria used to evaluate the application of a person with disabilities are ambiguous. According to research, employers not only admit that they are unable to evaluate a person with disabilities (Houtenville & Kalargyrou, 2012), but also rely on different standards (Ju, Zhang, & Pacha, 2012; Smith, Webber, Graffam, & Wilson, 2004). For example, employers do not evaluate the skills of workers with disabilities as well as their future job performance on the basis of their previous job performance (Colella, DeNisi, & Varma, 1998). Instead, employers base their evaluation of the employability of the applicant on criteria other than the professional assets of a person with disabilities, such as, perceived benefits for the employer of having them on staff (Gilbride, Stensrud, & Vandergoot, 2003; Morgan & Alexander, 2005), corporate responsibility (Luecking, 2008), costs involved (Kaye, Jans, & Jones, 2011; Siperstein, Romaro, Mohler, & Parker, 2006; Unger, 2002), safety and potential litigation (Kaye et al., 2011), the suitability of a job (Hernandez et al., 2000), and the weight of the demands for supervision and training (Copeland, Chan, Bezyak, & Fraser, 2010).

The analysis of the perspective of the employer regarding a person with disabilities in the workforce will be conducted with the aversive racism, or more specifically, aversive disablism perspective in mind. This concept may serve to shed light on the complexity of the employer's view of persons with disabilities in the workforce. Furthermore, although much work has been conducted to examine the employer's view of the barriers to the employment of persons with disabilities (e.g., Hernandez et al., 2008; Lengnick-Hall et al., 2008) there is a need to add to this research by providing a comprehensive view of the employer's perspective. To capture the essence of the employer's discourse, the study is conducted in line with Social Representation Theory (Moscovici, 1984). This decision is based on the conviction that an analysis of the social repre-

sentations will allow researchers to identify the contemporary common sense that guides the behaviour of employers toward employees with disabilities.

Method

- Participants

Different organizations were selected on the basis of three diversification criteria: private and public sector organizations, a range of company sizes and rural as well as urban locations in New Brunswick (Greater Moncton area and Acadian Peninsula) as well as Quebec (Bas-Saint-Laurent). All in all, a list of 126 organizations was created. Among these, individuals from 64 different organizations agreed to participate in this study. All participants were selected if they were directly involved in hiring employees. These individuals were either the director of human resources or in other cases, the head of the company. Many had reported an experience with persons with disabilities in their workplace (82.8%). All in all, respondents consisted of 26 women and 38 men. Most were over 40 years of age (79.6%) and had post-secondary education (84.3%). Respondents worked in a range of sectors, such as the public service (35.9%), the industrial sector (28.1%), service and hospitality industry (21.9%). Most organizations contained more than 100 employees (54.6%)

- Measures and Procedure

Different methodologies were selected to tap into the social representations of the participants. The data collection was based on developments in the area of Social Representation Theory. In this manner, we opted for a multimethod approach by combining:

- associative technique (Vergès, 1994);
- open-ended and semi-structured interview. The purpose of the associated technique is to invite participants to produce either verbally or in a written format, the words that come spontaneously to mind.

Respondents can produce associations that include a term, a phrase or expression, or an image. Initially, the task was conducted without restraints. In other words, the respondent was asked to generate as many associations as possible. Once this exercise was completed, the respondent was asked to identify the three most important words or terms that were evoked. Open-ended and semi-structured questions were used to allow participants to convey their thoughts, beliefs and experiences of inclusion of employees with disabilities. Interviews were conducted during work hours by both authors, in a quiet location situated in the participant's workplace (e.g., office).

Social representations are defined by Moscovici (1973) as a:

system(s) of values, ideas and practices with a twofold function; first, to establish an order which will enable individuals to orient themselves in their material and social world and to master it; and secondly to enable communication to take place among the members of a community by providing them with a code for social exchange and a code for naming and classifying unambiguously the various aspects of their world and their individual and group history. (p. 13)

Social representations of employers of the person with disabilities in the workplace are the product of a socialization process within the family, school, workplace and community at large. Throughout these social interactions, employers have developed a set of values, beliefs, and a system of categorization about people with disabilities in the workforce that are accepted as common knowledge. One of the most prominent methods for studying social representations is free association (Flament & Rouquette, 2003). In fact, this technique is also useful to uncover the implicit biases that are characteristic of aversive prejudice (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000). Participants were asked to generate a number of associations in response to a stimulus word or an expression. The first question was designed to invite participants to spontaneously evoke words that came to mind following the expression, the labour market for



people with disabilities (*When you hear the terms 'employee with a disability', what are the words or the expressions which spontaneously come to your mind? Indicate as many words or expressions.*) Interviewers carefully recorded each response on a form. As a follow-up question, respondents were asked to identify the most prominent words or expressions that were evoked (*Could you please also indicate the three (3) most important words or expression, in order of importance*). To further elaborate and contextualize responses, participants were asked to partake in an exercise. Specifically, interviewers read aloud each response generated in the free association task and asked participants to explain how these words or expressions were related to the labour market for people with disabilities (*Could you now please tell me why you associate each of these words/expressions to an employee with a disability.*). This exercise helped to generate meaning by probing into the semantic field, social construction, and cognitive organization of a given social representation (Tsoukalas, 2006). In a follow-up question, participants were asked to identify and explain factors that either positively or negatively affect the hiring of people with disabilities (*In your opinion, what are the factors that could bolster the employment of persons with disabilities? Indicate the most important.*). At the end of the interview, participants were asked if they would like to add further information or expand on any issue concerning the inclusion of people with disabilities in the workplace that had not been discussed previously and deemed important (*Before we finish, I would like to ask whether there is other information, a message or a comment, that you would like to share, but did not have the chance within the context of this interview.*). Each interview was audiotaped and transcribed verbatim.

- Analyses

Transcribed data was analysed with two software programs, that is, QSR NVivo 7 (Richards, 2005) and the Program analysis of evoked words (Programmes d'analyse des évocations; Vergès, 1994) by both researchers. Data analysis was conducted in light of Content

Analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and according to the following steps:

- codes and subcodes were created in the initial reading of the transcript data thus allowing common themes to emerge;
- a more in-depth coding system was produced whereby significant and frequent themes were compared to each other to search for similarities and differences;
- themes were then organized and integrated in an attempt to display the employer's social representations.

As the analysis progressed, researchers often proceeded by coding and recoding the data to clarify the meaning and allow the themes to emerge.

Principles of Social Representation Theory guided the data analysis. Specifically, according to this approach, researchers sought the meaning participants gave to events or issues. For instance, in conducting the analyses, work was devoted to searching for the way in which the employers view their relationship to the world, the meaning given to their life experiences and their behaviour. The intention of the researcher was to identify the logic (Deslauriers, 1991) of the formal systems (Mucchielli, 1991) that guide human thought and behaviour. It is important to add that the unit of analysis are the words that are generated by the respondent. The analysis was conducted in a way to better understand how respondents organize their common knowledge concerning people with disabilities in the labour force. Essentially, by following the Social Representation approach researchers sought to produce "...des traces collectives et à raisonner sur l'organisation de ces dernières." [...collective traces and reasoning on their organisation] (Flament & Rouquette, 2003, p. 58)

Further steps were taken by researchers to ensure a reliable and valid analysis. First, each researcher coded the data separately and met on several occasions to compare their codes, discuss discrepancies and to build consensus on the final coding scheme. Second, at different steps of the analysis, researchers consult-

ed with two advisory committees composed of individuals ($n_1 = 5$ and $n_2 = 7$) from different regions of eastern Canada. Each committee consisted of people with disabilities, representatives from community advocacy groups for people with disabilities and governmental departments responsible for policies regarding the status of people with disabilities. Third, the final results of the analysis were presented to members of the advisory committee for further discussion.

Results

Four central themes characterize the social representations of employers, that is:

- features of the market place;
- characteristics of employees with disabilities;
- inadequacies of the efforts designed to promote inclusion in the workplace;
- hiring decisions.

These themes are interrelated and form a coherent narrative. In sum, employers use the goals, values and norms of the market place as a frame of reference when discussing the employability of people with disabilities. They conclude that both people with disabilities and efforts to facilitate their participation in the workplace are not in line with the demands of the market place. Specifically, respondents contend that employees with disabilities and practices meant to facilitate their contribution to an organization are not adapted to meet the needs of the employers. The respondents explain that as a result, they are faced with a dilemma. That is, according to employers, by hiring a person with disabilities, they place both the candidate and the organization at risk. Faced with this dilemma, two hiring decisions are contemplated by employers. They either chose not to consider the application of a person with disabilities or instead, offer a job that limits the contribution and visibility of the candidate. Each of these themes is presented in the following section. When necessary, French quotes are presented in brackets and the English translation is provided.

- Features of the market place

Employers see a person with disabilities in the workforce through the lens of organizational values and norms. They explain that the company operates on the basis of two criteria, that is, profitability and productivity. Therefore all hiring decisions are made to maximize the returns on investments. In essence, according to employers, candidates for a job must be able to demonstrate that they can provide quality and efficient work that will ensure the viability of the company. Naturally, employers add, they attend to the competence, training, and professional experience of the candidate, irrespective of the disability status: "When you hire someone, you don't hire a person who is normal or not normal, you hire a person who has skills." [« Quand tu engages une personne, tu engages pas une personne qui est normale ou qui est pas normale, t'engages une personne qui a des compétences. »] (Véronique, Quebec, industrial sector). As Paul (Quebec, public sector) adds: "It's not obsessive, but you can't look past it. The allowed budgets do not consider the loss of productivity." [« Ce n'est pas obsessionnel, mais on peut pas passer à côté. Les budgets alloués ne prévoient pas la perte de productivité. »] Therefore, employers explain that people with disabilities must be able to demonstrate that they can meet the job requirements, that is, be productive employees, otherwise, as Gregory (New Brunswick, industrial sector) warns:

The day when these people will not contribute toward making profits or being efficient, whether you want it or not, then, it will be the organisation with a capital O in general which will look to exclude them or put aside that project because the project is no longer profitable.

The priorities of an organization guide the evaluation of the suitability of an employee with disabilities. Features of the market place, as we will see in the next section, clash with their views of a person with disabilities in the workforce.



- *Characteristics of employees with disabilities*

When employers discuss employees with disabilities, they refer to their experience in the workplace. Respondents observe that disability varies along an array of dimensions: type, severity, visibility, origin and manifestation. Employers most frequently refer to physical and intellectual disabilities. Both of these forms of disability are discussed in terms of their implication for the workplace. For instance, when discussing an employee with physical disabilities, employers bring up the topic of workspace accommodations. In addition, when employers refer to an employee with intellectual disabilities, they elaborate on supervision and monitoring requirements. Despite these nuances, a person with disabilities in the market place is commonly viewed as someone who is 'different', an 'outsider', 'those people there', 'them', 'difference'. Differences are discussed at length and on many levels. An employee with disabilities is expected to function in a way that differs from the demands of an organization. They are believed to come with a different skill set and will require the employer to introduce uncommon employment practices. Respondents further elaborate on the personal and professional attributes of employees with disabilities.

- *Personal attributes*

Both positive and negative personal characteristics are evoked when employers describe the psychological features of an employee with disabilities. In other words, it is at this level of the discourse that ambivalence toward an employee with disabilities is most notable. On the one hand, they attribute positive characteristics to employees with disabilities, depicting them as courageous, dedicated, having tremendous willpower and persistence despite hardships. This discourse does not account for the economic contributions of the employee with disabilities, but rather the social values that they can convey to others. These are attributes that they believe could help promote the corporate image:

People who will normally have extraordinary work presenteeism. They're people who are faithful and who will speak

well of the company in their entourage. It can give a corporate image in society, in the community. It's important to distinguish ourselves. [Des gens qui vont avoir un présentéisme au travail habituellement extraordinaire. C'est des gens qui sont justement fidèles pis qui vont parler en bien de l'entreprise dans leur entourage. Ça peut donner comme une image organisationnelle dans la société, dans la communauté. C'est important j'pense de se démarquer.] (Grégoire, New Brunswick, industrial sector).

On the other hand, employers view employees with disabilities as miserable, pitiful, troubled, hostile, obstinate and insecure. These negative personal traits are viewed as an impediment to a harmonious workplace, as Marthe (Quebec, health sector) recounts the conduct of an employee with disabilities in her office:

It was a young woman who was always going to fight and probably, we know that children are mean, who probably had always fought and became like a little monster...Probably her physical disability made her a person who always defended herself, you know. [C'était une jeune qui allait toujours se battre et probablement qui, on sait que les enfants sont méchants, qui avait probablement toujours combattu et était devenu comme un petit monstre... Probablement, sa limitation physique a fait qu'il est devenu une personne qui se défend, là, tout le temps.]

Throughout their discourse, employers do not associate the personal traits of employees with disabilities with the efficiency of the organization. In other words, the personal characteristics of an employee with disabilities are either irrelevant or counterproductive to organizational practices and priorities, from the employer's perspective.

- *Professional attributes*

Aptitude is the professional attribute most commonly discussed of employees with disabilities. By aptitude, employers refer to the individual's

capacity to perform the required tasks in a way that maintains the expected level of productivity. Essentially, employees with disabilities are viewed as unable to perform the job. Rather extreme cases are used by employers to make this point:

The equipment also emits LED, but it is not enough, because at any given moment, the loader driver can say 'we're going to be careful', there are things he can't see, you know. People need to be able to hear. [Ces équipements-là émettent aussi des voyant lumineux, mais c'est pas suffisant, parce qu'à un moment donnée, le chauffeur du loader peut dire 'on va faire attention', y'a des choses qui voit pas, là. Les gens doivent les entendre.] (Marc, Quebec, forestry sector)

"We had an experience with a (name of trade) that wanted to work and had a visual impairment. It did not work because she had to go into homes alone with customers, we can't anymore." [« On a eu une expérience avec un (nom du métier) qui voulait travailler qui avait un handicap visuel. Ça n'a pas marché parce que, elle devait se rendre dans les domiciles seule avec des clients, on ne peut plus. »] (Ginette, New Brunswick, health sector). Respondents explain that employees with disabilities cannot meet the necessary work standards unless the workplace is adapted to their needs. Workplace accommodations and tasks tailored to the individual's capabilities are identified as appropriate means to ensure that the employee with disabilities can function according to the expected standards. However, employers do not plan upon these contingencies. Employees with disabilities are expected to point out their needs in terms of accommodation. Sheila (New Brunswick, industrial sector) explains:

Until someone had to tell me, someone in a wheelchair said 'have you noticed how hard it is for me to pay my bill?' or 'have you noticed how hard it is for me to pick up my lunch?'. And then there came a point when I began to see it.

Yet, persons with disabilities are reluctant to identify their needs in terms of accommodation, for fear of being perceived as a burden to the employer (Kabano & Beaton, 2011). Otherwise, they will not have a chance. This is very clearly illustrated in a statement by Clément (Quebec, industrial sector): "It's certain that if there are ten candidates that require no work accommodation, the nine candidates have more chances than the person who will require additional effort to provide work accommodation. He/She has fewer chances." [« C'est certain que si y'a ten candidats qui a aucune adaptation à faire de son poste, les nine candidats ont plus de chances que la personne qui va demander un travail supplémentaire pour faire une adaptation de poste. Elle a moins de chances. »].

All in all, the personal and professional characteristics of an employee with disabilities are discussed in light of the demands of the work environment. According to employers, an employee with disabilities is not equipped to function adequately in the organisation. The personal and professional attributes are not believed to be in line with organizational norms and priorities. Employers expect optimal performance only if support mechanisms are provided. As we will see in the next section, these resources designed to facilitate the inclusion of employees with disabilities are generally viewed by the employer as lacking.

- Inadequacies of the efforts designed to promote inclusion in the workplace

Employers explain that they have very little experience with means designed to promote the inclusion of employees with disabilities. They admit that they are ill-informed and reluctant to devote any time or effort in searching for available resources. We suspect that this might be one of the reasons that much of the onus is on employees with disabilities to initiate change to the work environment. Among the few resources discussed by employers, all were viewed as essentially flawed. Specifically, employers describe their experience with community agencies. These events have left them to doubt that community advocates truly under-



stand the realities of the workplace, as Bruce (New Brunswick, industrial sector) explains:

And there's a knowledge gap there. They're so well intentioned, they're almost tripping over themselves to try to make it happen but they don't know what they're doing. So, if you have, you know, social agencies or government agencies for particular groups, that do good in other areas but they've never worked in employment, they have no understanding of business needs, and they're the resource trying to help the individual in need, then it's just not going to be easy for them.

Employers further complain that these agencies lack engagement and fail to meet their obligations: "We had one in last year and he said: 'We'll send you our list of employees' and that's fine. And we said no problem with that. And we never really saw anything more after that." (Claire, New Brunswick, health sector). Our results are unequivocal; there is a clear lack of communication between employers and community services that promote the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the workforce.

Employers discuss the funding opportunities available for an employer planning to hire a person with disabilities. These are viewed as important incentives for an employer:

...there needs to be a little help with employment because a company lives for profit. Hiring a disabled person is running a little risk. It's certain that when you have help when it comes to funding, you can take a risk." [« ...il faut un peu d'aide à l'emploi parce que une entreprise vit pour faire des profits. Engager une personne handicapée, c'est courir un petit risque. C'est sûr que quand tu as de l'aide au point de vue subvention, tu peux prendre un risque. »] (Gilbert, Quebec, municipal sector).

Yet, these benefits are short-lived. When funding opportunities cease, so does the employment. In other words, and as employers remark, funding opportunities do not provide sta-

ble, permanent employment for employees with disabilities. Employers express a discomfort with providing limited term employment. This situation reduces the desire to invest in the career development of employees with disabilities and the opportunity to learn of their aptitudes.

Although employers recognize the importance of providing workplace accommodations to employees with disabilities, these measures are viewed as problematic for several reasons. Most employers are convinced that accommodating an employee with disabilities is a difficult and costly venture. This view can undermine the employability of the person with disabilities:

You know, the candidate for a job who has a disability, if he says to the company 'well I need five thousand dollars for the equipment', it's not suppose to play against him, but the reality is that it could. The potential is there because if he hires another person without disabilities, well that person does not require, you know, it'll be cheaper.

[Tu sais le candidat pour un poste qui a un handicap, s'il dit à l'entreprise 'ben moi j'ai besoin de cinq milles dollars pour l'équipement', c'est pas censé jouer contre lui, mais la réalité est que ça pourrait. Le potentiel est là parce que s'il embauche une autre personne qui n'a pas d'handicap, ben la personne là n'a pas besoin, tu sais, ça va coûter moins cher] (Nathan, New Brunswick, public administration).

Accommodating a candidate with disabilities also means having to review long-standing hiring practices:

I do interviews with tests measuring cognitive level, the level of adjustment and social integration, these types of things. I must not expect these people to score on these tests, that aren't adapted to them, to score the same thing. Because we know that they're people with mental disabilities, physical disabilities, so they certainly do not have the same life expe-

rience than a normal person, on which the test was based. [J’fais des entrevues avec des tests au niveau cognitif, au niveau d’ajustement et à l’intégration sociale ces choses-là. Faut pas que je m’attende que ces gens-là cotent à ces tests-là, qui sont pas adaptés à eux, cotent la même chose. Parce qu’on sait que c’est des personnes qui sont avec un handicap mental, un handicap physique, donc y’ont certainement pas la même expérience de vie qu’une personne normale, sur quoi le test a été basé.] (Grégoire, New Brunswick, industrial sector).

The measures designed to promote the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the workplace are generally discounted by employers. Our respondents are not informed or even convinced of their ability to overcome the challenges associated with hiring a person with disabilities. As a result, employers conclude that they are left to their own devices. Without viable supports, hiring a person with disabilities for an employer remains a risky business. Employers expect that by including a person with disabilities in their workplace, they will incur loss of profits, investments and productivity which cannot be recouped. For instance, Jeanne (New Brunswick, retail sector) explains that she expects to lose time by having to provide extra supervision “It’s a lot, you must monitor more and it’s a business here, we don’t have the time to always monitor them.” [« C’est beaucoup, il faut surveiller plus pis c’est un commerce ici pis on n’a pas le temps de toujours les surveiller. »]. For others, people with disabilities may also make customers feel uncomfortable and drive them away. Employers further add that employees with disabilities face risks in the workplace. Respondents argue that the work environment is not adapted to the needs of employees with disabilities, and in many cases can be rather unwelcoming. They contend that by hiring people with disabilities, you set them up to work with dangerous equipment, hostile employees and to experience the frustration of not being able to perform adequately. It is this perspective in mind

that guides the hiring decisions of persons with disabilities.

- Hiring decisions

Employers contend that the characteristics of an employee with disabilities and the efforts designed to promote their inclusion do not meet organizational objectives. Indeed, our findings point out that these employers are ill-prepared for the inclusion of persons with disabilities in their workplace. For many respondents, the hiring decision is rife with fear and apprehension. This has been commonly expressed by employers in the following manner: “We are afraid of difference, we’d all like to hire someone who looks like us. There would be no problems, no differences.” [« On a peur de la différence, on aimerait tous engager quelqu’un qui nous ressemble. On n’aurait pas de problèmes, pas de différences. »] (Michelle, Quebec, industrial sector). Fearful of the impact of hiring people with disabilities in the workplace, many employers chose not to consider their application. Exclusion is discussed on the basis of a carefully crafted pretext that highlights the priorities of the organization. Employers rationalize that by excluding the candidate with disabilities, they are behaving responsibly and in lieu of organizational priorities. Ménard (Quebec, academic sector) describes this discourse in the following manner:

‘I will not hire a receptionist in a wheelchair in my company...’ Oh! No. Never. A person will not say that. He will say to himself, ‘she’s not able to do the job’... he will say ‘Not productive, not profitable. I’m here to make money. This person is not capable of doing the job.’ [‘J’engagerai pas une réceptionniste en chaise roulante dans mon entreprise...’ Oh! Non. Jamais. Une personne dira pas ça là. Il va se dire, ‘elle est pas capable de faire la job’...il dira plutôt ‘Pas productive. Pas payante. Moi, je suis ici pour faire de l’argent. Cette personne-là est pas capable de faire la job.’]

With this rational, employers are reassured that their decision does not reflect discrimination. Instead, they are convinced that they have act-



ed in the best interest of all concerned, as Mé-
nard adds: “We don’t feel remorse when we get
home at night.” [« On n’a pas de remords lors-
qu’on rentre chez nous le soir. »]

The hiring decision does not always lead to the
exclusion of a person with disabilities. Some
respondents have elected to hire the individual.
Yet, employers base their decision on a ration-
al that does not call upon economic or organi-
zational considerations. For instance, Bruce
(New Brunswick, industrial sector) had hired an
individual with disabilities and was quickly re-
minded by his superior that “This is not a hospi-
tal here, this is a business.”

The hiring decision is based on a different psy-
chological model, one that does not recognize
the true potential of the employee with disabili-
ties. For some employers, hiring a person with
disabilities is based on a social justice rati-
onale. By including the person with disabilities
within their workplace, they explain, they are
acting as a responsible and tolerant corporate
citizen that is open to diversity. The gesture is
viewed as essentially humanitarian and akin to
a charitable donation: “It’s our responsibility as
corporate citizens to do our part in society, as
we do when we give \$100 to a cause or \$50 to
a cause. We’re simply doing our part for indi-
viduals who are in need.” [« C’est notre res-
ponsabilité de citoyen corporatif de faire notre part
dans la société, comme on le fait quand on
donne 100\$ pour une cause ou 50\$ pour une
cause. C’est notre part tout simplement qu’on
fait pour des individus qui sont dans le be-
soin. »] (Hubert, Quebec, commerce). Employ-
ers expect a loss but are willing to make a *sac-
rifice* for the good of the individual and commu-
nity.

Another way to rationalize the hiring decision is
to address the need to enhance a corporate
image. Of course respondents do not maintain
that the hiring decision is solely based on the
need to promote the company as a tolerant and
diverse entity. However, employers do recog-
nize the benefits that can accrue from the
presence of a person with disabilities on the
corporate image. The employee is not ex-
pected to contribute to the bottom line of the

corporation. Instead, hiring a person with disa-
bilities is a gesture meant to demonstrate the
corporation has met some ethical standard and
as such has proven itself to be trustworthy and
of high moral standing. Such an image is
thought to be good for advertising: “...hiring
demonstrates a great open-mindedness, open
people. ‘I would deal with that store’.” [« ...l’em-
bauche démontre une belle ouverture d’esprit,
des gens ouverts. ‘Moi je ferais affaire avec ce
magasin-là’ »] (Hélène, Quebec, industrial sec-
tor).

The hiring practices described by respondents
stem from the conviction that employees with
disabilities and the insufficient and inefficient
resources meant to promote their inclusion do
not meet organizational objectives. Persons
with disabilities who apply for a job are not
viewed as capable to perform the expected
tasks under ‘normal’ conditions. Employers are
either ignorant or sceptical of the mechanisms
designed to facilitate the employability of per-
sons with disabilities. As a result, employers
experience discomfort and even fear of the
prospect of hiring such an individual. Risks are
believed to be associated with the presence of
this ‘other’. Employers expect a loss of produc-
tivity, time, effort and in certain sectors of ac-
tivity, customers. As a result, for employers,
hiring decisions are not made on an economic
basis. The application of a person with disabili-
ties is either dismissed or accepted on the ba-
sis of principles other than profitability. All in all,
employers maintain the exclusion of persons
with disabilities from participating fully to the
work force and shield themselves behind a
discourse that protects their self-views, corpo-
rate priorities and the person with disabilities.
In other words, the discourse maintains the
status quo.

Discussion

The object of the present study was to examine
the perspective of the employer concerning
people with disabilities in the market place.
This research was meant to provide a compre-
hensive view of the employer’s discourse.
Drawing on the concept of aversive prejudice,
namely aversive disablism (Deal, 2007), our

analysis showed that the views expressed by the employer may reflect some aspects of covert bias. In addition, in light of Social Representation Theory (i.e., Moscovici, 1973) an approach was taken to explain how employers come to make sense out of the employability of people with disabilities and their hiring decisions. All in all, findings reveal that the logic of the labour market is used by employers as a lens through which they assess the employability of people with disabilities. For the employer, a person with disabilities is viewed as essentially incompatible with the priorities, norms and values of the labour market. Disability, for employers is associated with difference: different performance outcomes and different work practices. These differences, discussed in light of the personal and professional characteristics of a person with disabilities jeopardize profitability. Employers complain that the support systems in place do not address the expected loss in terms of organizational productivity. Concerned with the risks involved in hiring a person with disabilities, respondents explain that they behave according to a sensible, responsible and fair employer. The applicant with disabilities is either dismissed or hired on the basis of considerations other than profitability. These findings are discussed in lieu of aversive disablism.

There are some elements to the discourse of the employer that reflect the features of aversive disablism. According to the tenets of an aversive prejudice perspective (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000), individuals who adhere to this form of covert bias support egalitarian ideals. Our findings suggest that employers maintain egalitarian ideals in two ways. First, by advocating for the logic of the market place, employers conclude that all individuals, regardless of the disability status, must be treated with the same set of rules. In this sense, employers insist that they consider, first and foremost, the qualifications of the applicant, and not the disability status. Second, respondents maintain their self-view as fair-minded employers through their hiring decision. By reducing the risks associated with hiring a person with disabilities, the employers are convinced that they are behaving in a responsible manner. They convey benevolence in their conviction that

they are protecting others by limiting the contribution of the person with disabilities in the organization. As Deal (2007) argues, individuals are convinced that they are 'just doing their job' and do not recognize that they are perhaps contributing to the unemployment and underemployment of people with disabilities.

These behaviours, as is argued by Deal (2007) are rooted in cultural stereotypes that depict the person with disabilities as essentially different. In the present study, employers spontaneously evoked difference, when reflecting upon the expression of people with disabilities in the market place. By inviting the employer to elaborate on the concept of 'difference', it was possible to elaborate on the beliefs commonly held about people with disabilities in the workforce. The concept of difference was associated with limitations, underperformance, costs, burdens, in essence, a view that the disability represents an insurmountable challenge for the employer. There is also reason to believe that the hiring situation is ambiguous for employers, a condition that is amenable for aversive disablism to behave in a biased way (Aberson & Ettl, 2004). Specifically, employers evaluate the person with disabilities on criteria other than job performance and qualifications (i.e., costs, job monitoring demands). In this sense, the employability of the applicant with disabilities remains unclear. Furthermore, their lack of experience or knowledge concerning mechanisms designed to promote the participation of people with disabilities in the workplace, prevents employers to determine the level of fit between the job candidate with disabilities and the job requirements. All in all, these conditions generate ambiguity in the hiring process. In turn, this ambiguity leaves an employer that maintains aversive disablism, the opportunity to discount the potential of an applicant with disabilities in a fashion that protects a fair-minded self-view.

This study represents a first endeavour to depict the employer's view of a person with disabilities in the workplace in line with the concept of aversive disablism. This study, however, does contain some limitations that must be addressed. Most importantly, despite our ef-



forts to include employers from diverse regions and sectors, our pool of respondents express attitudes and describe experiences that cannot account for the views of employers in general. This concern has been raised by other researchers (e.g., Luecking, 2008; Ren et al., 2008; Unger, 2002). Kaye and his colleagues have attempted to avoid this methodological bias by presenting employers a survey with questions phrased in an indirect manner (Kaye et al., 2011). For instance, employers were not invited to express their personal attitudes, but rather to speculate on the views of employers in general. Researchers believed that this technique would increase the level of participation to their survey. Respondents were asked to identify reasons why employers do not hire people with disabilities. Interestingly, employers agreed with a list of barriers that were also identified by our respondents, namely costs, unable to assess the applicant, concern with lack of productivity, time and efficiency. These observations lead us to suspect that our findings may in fact reflect common knowledge (Moscovici, 1973) shared by employers concerning people with disabilities in the market place.

Much work has been done to prepare the person with disabilities to meet the demands of the workforce, such as providing training to gain meaningful employment. This supply-side is an essential approach that empowers people with disabilities to take their place in the Canadian economy. Yet, these efforts are insufficient if they are not applied in tandem with measures that address the 'demand-side' of the employment equation (e.g., Gilbride & Stensrud, 1992). Specifically, and as our findings point out, there is a need to understand the characteristics and beliefs of the employer that affect the treatment of people with disabilities in the workplace. Prejudice can take many forms and not all are easy to identify, albeit can be just as harmful. Aversive disablism is a covert form of prejudice that can easily permeate the collective discourse because the holder may not even recognize its biased and denigrating character. Aversive disablism must be met with effective strategies to reduce its impact. For instance, as Chan and his colleagues argue,

'...rehabilitation professionals must have a thorough understanding of the real concerns of employers about hiring and retention of people with disabilities and be able to address their concerns and needs.' (Chan, Strausser, Gervy, & Lee, 2010, p. 408). In lieu of this call to action, one promising avenue stems from the research conducted on mediated contact and implicit attitudes (Dasgupta & Rivera, 2008, see Dasgupta, 2013 for a review). Essentially, this research has shown that irrespective of the level of prior contact with members of a disadvantaged group, participants who are exposed to positive exemplars of a stigmatized group (e.g., famous and admired gay celebrities) report less implicit bias than those who were not exposed to positive exemplars. Based on these compelling findings, one way to reduce aversive disablism discourse would be to present employers with employees with disabilities that have made important contributions in the workforce. Further research is needed to investigate the long-term effects of such an intervention on aversive disablism discourse among employers. Another avenue that may impede aversive disablism stems from the findings obtained by Chan and his associates (Chan, et al., 2010). Interestingly, Chan and his associates discovered that irrespective of the employer's level of contact with disability and company size, demand-side predictors, namely knowledge about job accommodation and policies, concerns about the job performance of a person with disabilities, for instance, predict commitment to hire the applicant (Chan, et al., 2010). Our findings are believed to contribute to these efforts by shedding light on subtle biases that, unless challenged, will continue to limit the contribution of an important segment of the Canadian labour force.

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