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Workplace inclusion: Exploring employer perceptions of hiring employees with disability

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Abstract

The unemployment rate for people with disability in Australia has remained unchanged for decades, despite policy and strategy focus. Therefore, understanding perceptions of those making hiring decisions is important. This research used a qualitative approach interviewing 13 participants who made hiring decisions. Reflexive thematic analysis uncovered four themes about altruistic hiring motivations, organisational culture barriers, sharing of disability during the hiring process, and negative emotions towards disability. There were distinct perspectives between people with and without experience of disability. People without experience tended to encourage early sharing of disability in the hiring process, cite organisational culture as a barrier, and shared strong negative emotions towards people with disability. People with experience of disability tended to prioritise autonomy of people with disability in sharing during the hiring process, and an intersectional approach to improve organisational culture. Regardless of disability experience, participants tended to share altruistic motives for hiring people with disability, despite this potentially contributing to the maintenance of power dynamics. Future research should continue to

explore personal attributes and decision making of employers, ideally conducted by people with lived experience of disability. Please refer to the Supplementary Material section to find this article's Community and Social Impact Statement.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Employment is a contributing factor towards a person's physical, psychological, and social wellbeing. Employment is linked to better quality of life and increased self-esteem, particularly for those in marginalised communities (Bush, Drake, Xie, McHugo, & Haslett, 2008). However, the employment rate and labour force participation (which includes people looking for work) are lower for people with disability compared to those without disability. In Australia, the employment rate for people with disability is 48%, compared to 80% for those without disability (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2022). This rate has remained steady, except for those with 'severe' disabilities where the employment rate is decreasing (AIHW, 2022). Moreover, people with disability are twice as likely to be unemployed compared to people without disability (AIHW, 2022). People with disability are also more likely to work part-time, be underemployed, and be willing and available to work more hours (AIHW, 2022). Improving the employment rate for people with disability is recognised as important and therefore a current focus of the Australian government and peak organisational bodies. Current initiatives focus on building the capacity of employers to hire, improving systems, upskilling people, and changing attitudes towards employing people with disability (Australian Government Department of Social Services, 2022). This is in the context that there are no specific public policies in Australia that govern company obligation to employ people with disability. However, companies are obliged to comply with anti-discrimination and disability discrimination laws to protect people with disability in recruitment processes and in the workplace (New South Wales Government Public Service Commission, 2024).

Over the past two decades, various strategies have been utilised to improve the rates of employment for people with disability worldwide. These strategies have included wage subsidy schemes, specialised disability employment service providers, assistive technology, and accommodation programs. However, these strategies have not improved disability employment rates (Baert, 2016; Hemphill & Kulik, 2016). For example, an increase in spending on Disability Employment Services in Australia has not improved the employment rate. Rather, there has been a decline in overall outcomes with less than 25% of disability employment service participants obtaining and maintaining employment (Devine et al., 2021). Similarly, longitudinal data has shown that the labour force participation and unemployment rates for people with disability have remained stable since 2015, whereas labour force participation has increased and unemployment decreased for people without disability (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2019). This suggests current strategies are not impacting employment rates for people with disability. Reflecting on the failure of past strategies to lift employment rates for people with disability, it is likely that the full picture is not understood. The focus of these strategies was on reducing barriers cited by employers and providing incentives to hire; however, these strategies have been aimed at environmental or structural barriers and barriers pertaining to people with disability building capacity for employment, but have not addressed the perceptions of those making hiring decisions and their willingness to hire people with disability. It may be that attitudes towards disability continue to pose barriers for people with disability to obtain employment, which is an area highlighted by the current disability employment strategy as a focus for change (Australian Government Department of Social Services, 2022).

Explicit attitudes are the beliefs and perspectives that people are consciously aware of. Amongst the wider community, explicit attitudes towards people with disability are generally positive. However, in workplace settings, attitudes towards people with disability were found to be less positive (Burke et al., 2013). Implicit attitudes differ to explicit attitudes in that people are not consciously aware of their implicit preferences and beliefs; these unconscious attitudes have been linked to behaviours and decision making (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). Implicit bias is usually measured in the context of experimental studies with the use of indirect cognitive tasks (Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998). Implicit attitudes amongst the community towards people with disability are negative, with people with disability stereotyped as incompetent (Antonopoulos, Sugden, & Saliba, 2023). This suggests that the community in general hold views, both consciously and outside awareness, that people with disability are less capable of completing work roles.

In employment settings, research has found biases towards job applicants with disability. For example, applicants who disclosed they have a disability on job applications were less likely to be contacted for interview and were less likely to be considered for a position even if they were more experienced than other applicants (Ameri et al., 2018). This suggests attitudes and perceptions of employers may impact employment opportunities for people with disability, contributing to the unchanged and low employment rate.

Current research relating to perceptions of employers in hiring people with disability is mostly conducted outside of Australia, with the focus on barriers or challenges. For example, employers have highlighted barriers including lack of training or policies, lack of funding to provide accommodations, and the skills of potential employees (Jasper & Waldhart, 2013; Munsell et al., 2022; Shahid & Zahid, 2021). Alternatively, research that focuses on job seekers and employees with disability perspectives has found that even with access to adjustments, assistive technology, and other schemes, they continue to have difficulty finding meaningful employment, despite their education, skills, and experience (Mckinney & Swartz, 2019; Meltzer, Robinson, & Fisher, 2019). This suggests there is a discrepancy between employers' and employees' perceived barriers to employment and other factors may be contributing to the unchanged unemployment rate. Research investigating the successes and failures of current disability employment strategies often did not include the impacts of discrimination and employer attitudes. Instead, these were noted as areas for future research (Devine, Dickinson, Brophy, Kavanagh, & Vaughan, 2021). Investigating employers' perceptions could be an important area of research as employers have the power to choose whether to hire people with disability and their explicit and implicit attitudes, biases, and beliefs may be affecting their decision-making. Therefore, it is important to investigate and understand what may be influencing employers on a more personal and individual level, rather than a strategic and organisational approach. To understand and explore the experiences and beliefs of a person, a qualitative approach will be used as it facilitates exploration of personal experiences. Past qualitative research exploring barriers to disability employment has often been conducted from a social policy, economic, or sociology lens (Devine, Dickinson, et al., 2021; Khayatzadeh-Mahani, Wittevrongel, Nicholas, & Zwicker, 2020; Kocman, Fischer, & Weber, 2018; Meltzer et al., 2019). This research uses a psychological perspective to explore the experiences, attitudes, beliefs, and biases of people making hiring decisions to investigate how this may be impacting decision making on an individual level. The aim of this research is to understand the personal perceptions and lived experience of employees of hiring people with disability, as well as including the lived experience of disability of the researchers to provide a rich understanding and perspective of disability employment.

2 | METHODS

2.1 | Positionality statement

Positionality is an important consideration in how researchers' backgrounds may influence research questions, analysis, and findings (Jamieson, Govart, & Pownall, 2023; Massoud, 2022). All three authors had some form of experience with disability. The first author is a woman from a culturally diverse background with a sensory disability and is a

registered psychologist working with people with disability. The second author is a woman with a mobility disability that is employed in psychology academia and research. The third author has lived with an autoimmune disease most of his life and works in psychology academia and research. Throughout this paper we have chosen to use person first language (e.g., people with disability) as this is our personal preference based on our lived experience. We acknowledge that that there are diverse perspectives within the disability community, and some people prefer identity-first language. Furthermore, we have used the phrase 'sharing of disability' rather than 'disclosure of disability' in accordance with the United Nations Disability Inclusive Language Guidelines (United Nations, n.d.).

2.2 | Participants

This research received institutional ethics approval. Participants were recruited via targeted sharing of the research advertisement on LinkedIn. Specifically, a research flyer was shared with people employed in Australia as human resource managers, operations managers, recruiters, or business owners. Additionally, all authors shared the research flyer within their professional networks. Upon completion, participants were offered a $50 gift voucher to thank them for their time.

To be eligible to participate, participants were required to be over 18 years old, Australian citizens or permanent residents, and had been employed in the past 12 months and made hiring decisions as part of their role. Participants did not have to have experience hiring a person with disability and could choose to share if they had a disability themselves. Participants were seven females and six males, ranging in ages from 26 to 55 years old. Participants resided in rural, regional, and metropolitan areas of New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, and the Australian Capital Territory. Years of experience making hiring decisions ranged from 3 to 33 years. Participants were employed in a variety of fields including health and community, retail, manufacturing, agriculture, and utilities. Two participants identified as having a disability.

2.3 | Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted by the first author using either Zoom or over the telephone. If Zoom was used, neither the interviewer nor participant used their camera. This was to limit any bias or socially desirable responding as the first author conducting the interview has a disability. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Participants' identifying details (e.g., names, place of employment) were removed from the recording and transcription. Pseudonyms were used in the results to preserve anonymity. Participants were provided with the transcript to review and confirm within 2 weeks. Questions included history of hiring, contact with, and feelings towards hiring people with disability. Participants were also asked about strengths/skills and barriers to hiring people with disability.

2.4 | Analysis

Data was analysed using a reflexive thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2021). In reflexive thematic analysis, codes are identified, which then inform themes that contain similar ideas underpinning a concept that can be either implicit or latent (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The reflexive nature of this approach posits that themes are not separate from the researcher; rather, they encompass their values, skills, and personal experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This approach was chosen as it aligned with the research aims and valued the lived experience of the researchers. For example, rather than a focus on eliminating bias in interpretation of data, reflexive thematic analysis encourages reflexivity and engagement with the data to provide unique interpretations (Braun & Clarke, 2021). As the first author who has a disability completed data analysis, her lived experience was not omitted from the analysis process;

rather, it was used as a lens to engage with the data. As reflexive thematic analysis centres the researchers' interpretation based on their relationship with the data, the other authors did not conduct any part of the data analysis nor was consensus sought between researchers (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Byrne, 2022).

The coding process was unstructured and evolved as the researcher understood the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). After codes were generated, initial themes were developed by the first author by grouping codes with shared ideas. The researcher maintained a reflexive journal throughout the coding and theme generation process to consider how their assumptions or experience might shape their interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2021). After initial themes were identified, the first author reviewed and named themes, and cross checked the understanding of themes with other authors.

3 | RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Four main themes were found during analysis. First, 'The Right Thing To Do' highlighted underlying motivations for hiring people with disability, both individually and at an organisational level. Second, 'Inclusive Means Inclusive' demonstrated the impacts of organisational culture on hiring practices. Third, 'To Share or Not To Share' captured the diverse perspectives on whether a person should share that they have a disability. Finally, 'Disability Makes Me Feel' explores the emotions and internal process of participants towards people with disability. Common to all themes was a focus on the disability, and not the person or skillset.

3.1 | The right thing to do

During interviews, participants were explicitly asked why they would hire people with disability. A common reason shared was that it was 'the right thing to do', and that the participant was willing and open to hiring people with disability. Therefore, this theme reflects underlying motivations of both people and organisations in hiring people with disability. The idea of 'the right thing to do' could reflect social consciousness and a sense of assisting people who are considered 'less fortunate'. For example, people with a disability are viewed as 'different' or 'less than', due to having different ways of accessing the world around them or limited use of their bodies or senses. With this belief that people with disability experience significant barriers or daily challenges, being socially responsible or conscious means a person should 'do the right thing' and provide employment opportunities. This belief was illustrated by Rob who stated:

> ...it's about what's right in terms of our own behaviours when it comes to people who have, um, different challenges in their lives.

Thus, some participants viewed hiring as a responsibility to hire a person from a group that had experienced hardship rather than a focus on hiring people with disability due to their skills, experience, or merit. This motivation may be rooted in altruism, where a person is doing an act that is to benefit someone else, sometimes at their own expense (Kerr, Godfrey-Smith, & Feldman, 2004). In the case of hiring people with disability, there may be the belief that if the person hiring does not make that altruistic choice, people with disability would not get a job due to their disability and therefore people with disability are benefiting.

Not only was hiring people with disability 'the right thing to do' on a personal level but it was also seen as an organisational benefit. Hiring people with disability was viewed to positively impact a company brand and public image, as it demonstrated a commitment to diversity and inclusion, an area which has gained substantial focus in recent years. Furthermore, organisational motivations for hiring people with disability were stemmed in being socially responsive, as demonstrated by the following:

> it's very big in the corporate space, you know, probably now more than ever, you know, what business can give back in terms of social responsibility. —Marie.

Again, this socially responsive motivation for hiring people with disability, is not based on skills, experience, or merit; rather, the impact or social perception that a decision can have for the organisation. Similarly, these motivations tend to be linked to sense of 'helping' others who are viewed as having experienced challenges or are less fortunate, rather than treating all potential applicants as equal. This also suggests altruistic motivations which usually underpin charitable values and can be linked to power dynamics. For example, Wuthnow (1993) stated that when a person acts charitably to someone who is disadvantaged, it serves to raise the status of the person engaging in the charitable act. Furthermore, previous research has found that when employment of people with disability is altruistic, it increases positive reputations and perceptions of corporate social responsibility of an organisation (Dwertmann, 2023). Hence, when an organisation is motivated to hire people with disability because of social responsiveness or the 'right thing to do', the focus is on the organisations 'good will' or charitability, rather than focusing on equity.

This theme of 'the right thing to do' also included actions undertaken within organisations that could be viewed as tokenistic. This was evidenced by a participant with disability discussing her role on a recruitment panel:

> [At] times a little bit tokenistic, that I, my presence there was really about the fact that I had a disability, and less about my own skills in the workforce. —Beth.

While 'the right thing to do' as a motivator can be seen as a positive step towards inclusion, if it is not performed genuinely, fairly, and equitably, it can lack sincerity and potentially negatively affect the employment experiences of people with disability. 'The right thing to do' as a motivation to hire people with disability may be seen as a way to increase participation of people with disability in the workplace; however, the underlying principles that evoke the motivation, such as people with disability as 'less than', as a group that need to be 'helped' or are 'challenged', maintains stereotypes that people with disability may not be as competent or capable as applicants without disability. This in turn, does not lead to genuine outcomes for people with disability and could maintain existing underlying biases towards people with disability, such as implicitly stereotyping people with disability as incompetent (Antonopoulos et al., 2023).

3.2 | Inclusive means inclusive

There were divergent perceptions on how an organisation or company's culture impacted hiring decisions relating to people with disability. For example, workplace cultures were either seen as a strength of an organisation or as a barrier to hiring people with disability. Participants who had themselves, or their organisation had hired a person with disability noted that their workplace culture was welcoming, or that they had to shift the culture prior to hiring to make it more inclusive. A welcoming, inclusive culture was linked to inclusion of diversity in general; for example, First Nations Australian cultural values within an organisation, or an organisation's commitment to supporting the LGBTIQ+ community:

> It's hard to describe it, it's almost like it's a welcoming approach because they know how hard it is to be seen as black and Aboriginal in Australia. It's not about disability in their eyes, it's about how people treat 'em... I think it's all about working alongside a community. Like I said, there's a lot of resilience here and diversity, and those things become the norm. —Rob.

This quote highlights that cultural collectivist values embedded in First Nations culture is a strength when creating an inclusive organisational culture. Similarly, organisations who had prioritised inclusivity of their LGBTIQ+ staff shared similar sentiments. Having already addressed discrimination and attitudes towards one marginalised group within the workplace, it made it easier to hire people with disability, as the culture and staff were educated and open to diversity and inclusion. These inclusive organisational cultures are created through a top-down process led by executives and leadership teams. For example, health care organisations with executive staff that held values of inclusion linked their alignment with this value to their ability to employ and retain staff with disability (McDonough et al., 2020).

On the other hand, some perceptions towards hiring people with disability showed that the organisational culture was a barrier for participants to be willing to hire. For some participants, hiring people with disability was not a priority at the present time as it was felt people with disability would have negative experiences due to the existing workplace culture. For example:

> …even if I can hire people with physical disabilities, I'm just not quite confident that the whole company working environment is friendly… —Rose.

Organisational culture factors that were considered barriers to hiring people with disability included individualistic environments where staff are competitive and 'out for themselves' (Sally). This included fast-paced and high stress organisations, whereby the perception was that people with disability would struggle to fit in and complete their work role. This perception highlights another underlying stereotype of people with disability: that people with disability are incompetent, slower, and less capable in a work environment which may be linked to implicit biases (McDonnall & Antonelli, 2018; McDonnall, Cmar, Antonelli, & Markoski, 2019; Rohmer & Louvet, 2016).

Another barrier noted was when organisational cultures were stated to be male dominant, have limited cultural diversity, and staff who were older in age, participants felt that people with disability would not be readily included and supported in the team. For example:

> I think workplace culture, we probably still have a way to go. We are a, um, a male dominated organisation and the age bracket, average age is probably between like, late 30s to mid-50s, um, so… and a lot of white males around, so that probably doesn't help a lot with stuff. —Samantha.

The theme highlighted that intersectionality is important, that being inclusive to disability on its own is not enough. For example, the organisations that prioritise equality across gender, culture, sexuality, and disability tended to have hired people with disability or were committed and focused on doing so.

Taking an intersectional approach to inclusion, rather than targeting marginalised groups individually, may lead to a more inclusive work environment for all. Practically, intersectionality by organisations would consider the interplay of different individual factors that shape a person's experience, privileges and/or oppression (Thomas et al., 2021). Research has highlighted the importance of intersectionality in the workplace specific to people with disability, noting that different combinations of personal attributes and marginalisation can impact a person's workplace experience and risk of harassment (Shaw, Chan, & McMahon, 2012). Furthermore, when participants in this research reported their organisation likely would not be accommodating for people with disability, they attributed this to a lack of diversity including gender, age, and culture. Therefore, increasing diversity across the board may be a good strategy for increasing inclusivity of the workplace which may lead to hiring of more people with disability.

3.3 | To share or to not share

Whether people with disability should share with their potential employer that they have a disability, and when in the hiring process is the best time to do so, was a clear point of tension. Two distinct perspectives were described.

First, some participants believed that people with disability should share their circumstances in the initial stages of the hiring process. This included on their application, cover letter, resume, or during interview. Often, when a participant held the view that a person should share their disability early in the hiring process, they had not personally hired people with disability in the past and had little experience working alongside people with disability. This view can possibly be linked to a lack of understanding of disability or implicit stereotyping of people with disability as incompetent (Antonopoulos et al., 2023; Rohmer & Louvet, 2016). For example, some participants believed that sharing was necessary so that an employer could decide whether people with disability were capable of doing a role, rather than trusting that people with disability would likely not apply for a role where they did not meet the skills, experience or criteria. In the literature, this has been a common barrier reported by people with disability. People with disability indicated that they often felt employers made judgements about their capacity and disability without including their perspective (Meltzer et al., 2019). This view is potentially underpinned by stereotypes of incompetence, thus decreasing autonomy for people with disability in making decisions about when to share their experiences. This can be illustrated by the following:

> And from the employer's point of view, I think you would like to know the candidate's disability as well, so you can make sure, like, you are OK with this, and your job duties and responsibilities, that the person can still fulfil everything that you hired the person to do. —Rose.

This suggests that employers, or those without disability, are responsible for making judgements on the capabilities of the applicant with disability. This is instead of facilitating an environment where a shared discussion could take place, centring people as the 'expert' on their capabilities. Furthermore, there was the perception and experience of participants whereby, when a person shares that they have a disability during the hiring process, employers can perceive the disability as too 'difficult' or 'challenging'. For example:

> I've heard many times over the years, you know, through friends, people I know, work colleagues, that as soon as something like that pops up, it's, they're not even going to look at you. —Lara.

This finding that sharing of disability reduces the likelihood of people with disability being considered for a position contradicts some participants' perceptions that the optimal time to share is in the early stages of recruitment, to ensure an employer can be prepared and hire people with disability. However, given that most participants who held this view also stated they had not hired people with disability, it may suggest an underlying implicit bias that excludes people with a disability from progressing to the latter stages of the hiring process. People with disability have reported that they do not share their disability in the workplace due to potential ableism and to maintain the perception that they are 'able-bodied' to employers (Stibbald & Beagan, 2022). Similarly, when people shared their disability on applications, they often were not selected for an interview despite meeting essential criteria although did receive interview when they did not share (Mckinney & Swartz, 2019). These experiences are likely influenced by the attitudes reported in this research, that sharing of disability is in fact used to make judgements about a person's capabilities rather than as a means to provide supports or accommodations.

Alternatively, participants who had experience hiring people with disability or had a disability themselves, suggested that a person share their experience at interview, when they had been offered the role, or not at all, if that was their choice. There was a strong belief by those who had experience hiring and working alongside people with disability that sharing the nature of their disability was 'irrelevant' to the hiring process and to whether the person was capable of performing the job. For example:

> It's not a screening question we would use and I certainly wouldn't allow any of my team to even, um, entertain asking that question, because it's completely irrelevant to the person's ability to do the role. —John.

The contrast between the two perspectives on when to disclose a disability provides some important insights into the hiring of people with disability. First, that discrimination does exist for people with disability in disclosing their disability during an interview process. Second, that underlying biases towards the capabilities of people with disability may be influencing hiring decisions either consciously or unconsciously. Third, those who had personal or lived experience of disability tended to be more open to hiring. This suggests that education and meaningful interactions with people with disability may lead to hiring processes that are more equitable for people with disability.

3.4 | Disability makes me feel

This theme captures emotions and feelings towards disability, both conscious and unconscious. Participants stated they felt scared, awkward, and uncomfortable when considering hiring people with disability or when considering what having people with disability in the workplace might look like. For example:

> I try really, really hard to overcome whatever's happening in my head cause I do I do sense some discomfort but it is very hard to articulate why I feel that way. —Shelley.

This example highlights that people can be aware of discomfort and other strong negative emotions they might be feeling towards people with disability. However, they are unsure where these feelings originate. These emotions may also influence hiring decisions, as those who expressed fear and discomfort tended not to have hired people with disability. These emotions were typically expressed by participants who had little or no personal experience with disability, such as having a family member, friend, or colleague with disability. Such strong emotions may be due to this lack of experience or contact with people with disability. Historically, people with disability were not included in education, the workplace, or the community in general, and were kept segregated and institutionalised (Pfieffer, 1993). This led to little exposure and interaction with people who have different experiences. This segregation of people with disability may have also led to feelings of fear towards disability, with disability being something that is unknown and portrayed in a negative manner. For example, it was found that when people were more fearful of illness, they were more likely to have negative biases towards disability (Park, Faulkner, & Schaller, 2003). It may be that people who have strong emotions towards disability hold a fear linked to stereotypes and negative portrayals of people with disability. This fear continues into the workplace and affects decision making, which may underpin assumptions that people with disability are less competent and cannot fulfil work obligations. Therefore, it is important for people to acknowledge and address such emotions as they can have negative impacts for people with disability, such as lower employment rates.

Strong negative emotions were also related to practical concerns, such as whether the team would accept the person, what adjustments might be needed, and the cost of these, as well as the fear that people with disability are at a higher risk of worker's compensation claims. This is in line with previous research finding employers overestimated costs of employing people with disability, including insurance costs, which were not higher than any other employee (Graffam, Smith, Shinkfield, & Polzin, 2002). Again, participants who expressed these emotions were those who had not hired people with disability previously, did not have a disability themselves, or did not work in community and health fields. Those in health and community fields tended to have a broader understanding of disability, as they had either worked alongside colleagues with disability or provided services to people with disability.

Participants tended to be aware of their concerns and did not want to negatively impact people with disability by placing them in a difficult or uncomfortable position. For example:

> So for me it's really awkward, because it's like, I never want to discriminate, but I also don't want to put these poor people in the awful situations, if they were to apply, of going, oh, how would you do this? Because that's not nice either....it's bound to happen, and the fact is I've got no, I've got really no

idea how to handle that situation, how the company would either, so that's a massive red flag, and that's what I mean by feeling bad, it's almost like, wow, like, this is really something, especially being a manager, I'm doing all that, I really should have a bit of an idea about, —Lara.

This illustrates that employers may be unaware of best practice in hiring people with disability and do not intend to discriminate. They may be unsure of how to discuss disability and feel uncomfortable in such situations. This may point to a wider community issue of discussion relating to disability. Given the emotions and internal responses disability can evoke in people, and how people respond to such emotions, further discussions are required to ensure that actions and behaviours are equitable and non-discriminatory.

Alongside participants' personal feelings towards disability, there was also discussion of how other staff members may feel if people with disability were hired. It appeared that these feelings were not only felt by those making hiring decision but also other staff members. Examples were provided of resistance towards staff with disability, confrontation between staff members, and resistance towards inclusive hiring practices:

But for people who do not have... who do not come from a specific background, or a specific frame of reference through to a disability, um, they are finding it quite, um, off-putting that we're putting it on top of ads, trying to increase our demographic of those people. —Daniel.

This suggests that feelings towards people with disability are not only important in relation to those who make hiring decision, but also in the wider organisation and community. A possible solution for minimising strong negative emotions, and in turn improving attitudes, is through genuine and meaningful interactions and inclusion. In this research, participants with disability, had a family member or friend with disability, or who had hired or had a work colleague with disability did not express awkwardness or fear towards disability. Previous research supports meaningful interactions reducing negative biases. For example, children who played on sporting teams with other children who had disability had fewer negative biases than their peers who did not have these interactions (Ottoboni et al., 2017). Similarly, university students who participated in a mentoring program with students with intellectual disability reported positive experiences, increased knowledge, and less negative attitudes (Athamanah, Fisher, Sung, & Han, 2020). The key to limiting uncomfortable and strong negative emotions towards disability may lie in meaningful interactions whereby people with and without disability take part in activities and share experiences.

3.5 | Theme analysis relating to disability models

The four themes identified by this research encompass personal qualities of hiring decision makers, such as motivations, values, and beliefs, as well as perceived barriers to employing people with disability, such as organisational culture. There appeared to be two distinct perspectives. For example, people who had not hired people with disability tended to encourage a person to share their disability in the early stages of recruitment, believed the hiring manager would make a decision about the capabilities of people with disability to fulfil a job role, and noted they experienced negative emotions such as feeling uncomfortable around people with disability. Alternatively, participants who had hired or had a disability themselves encouraged sharing of disability at the later stages of recruitment or not at all and did not share they experienced negative emotions towards disability. These two perspectives align within the medical, social, and human rights models of disability. The medical model asserts that disability is a person's impairment that affects and limits their functioning (Bunbury, 2019; Haegele & Hodge, 2016). This leads to the person being viewed as having deficiencies or deficits. Thus, the medical model links disability and people as being 'sick' and that a person then needs to be fixed or cured so that they can participate in society (Bunbury, 2019; Haegele & Hodge, 2016). If a person's disability cannot be treated, the medical model then asserts that people with disability need to be 'helped' (Haegele & Hodge, 2016). Themes relating to *the right thing to do* could be explained by medical

model thinking, as participants held the view that people with disability need to be helped and granted the opportunity to be employed by those making hiring decisions. Furthermore, the medical model has utilised health professionals as authorities on the capabilities of people with disability, for example, by using diagnoses and labels which then determine service provision (Haegele & Hodge, 2016). With this understanding, medical model perceptions may have underpinned some participants' views. For example, for those who had not hired people with disability, often they suggested a person share the nature of their disability at the early stages of recruitment. The reasons provided were based on determining whether people with disability could fulfil job responsibilities. This could be linked to medical model assertions that those making decisions know best and act as gatekeepers to employing people with disability, decreasing a person's autonomy and value of their lived experience. Therefore, participants who had little to no experience hiring or working with people with disability tended to have more negative views of disability that could be linked to medical model conceptualisation of disability.

Current social policy uses a social model of disability, and more recently a human rights model to tackle discrimination, improve inclusion, and increase autonomy of people with disability in decision making. The social model of disability believes that society limits a person, rather than the way their body functions. Therefore, an impairment in itself is not disabling; it is the environment and society that fosters exclusion (Haegele & Hodge, 2016; Lawson & Beckett, 2021). The focus of change in the social model is the community, societal, and political landscape, rather than changing the person themselves (Haegele & Hodge, 2016). This aligns with many participants' perceptions and themes in this research. For example, participants who had hired people with disability often stated that organisational culture and community attitudes needed to change to improve employment outcomes. Participants who held this view did not cite people with disability as needing to change to obtain employment, rather the environment (e.g., organisational culture, attitudes of staff and community) were barriers to overcome. A criticism of the social model is that it separates a person from their impairment, which does not encapsulate a person's true lived experience (Berghs, Atkin, Hatton, & Thomas, 2019; Haegele & Hodge, 2016). The social model also does not consider different identities and forms of oppression (e.g., gender, sexuality, ethnicity, age) and how these identities intersect (Berghs et al., 2019; Haegele & Hodge, 2016).

A human rights model of disability tends to take a more intersectional approach, which was highlighted as an important consideration to changing attitudes and improving hiring rates of people with disability in this research. The human rights model of disability posits that people are not refused legal capacity and includes 'first and second generation' human rights (Degner, 2017). The model takes into consideration impairment and how this affects a person's experience. A human rights model adopts an intersectional approach, that a person's identity can be shaped by their disability, alongside their culture, age, gender, sexuality, or religion (Degner, 2017). This can be linked to the theme *inclusive means inclusive* as participants who had hired people with disability shared that when other aspects of a person's identity were being prioritised (e.g., sexual orientation, Indigenous people), this led to a more inclusive work culture. Furthermore, a human rights model focuses on dignity and centres the person in decisions that affect them (Lawson & Beckett, 2021). Participants with disability or experience with disability appeared to adopt a human rights approach in their thinking and perspectives. For example, they did not expect a person to share their disability and believed it was up to people with disability to make the decision when or if to share. The importance of intersectionality was highlighted in this research as participants often cited that organisations who prioritised inclusion of other marginalised groups tended to be more inclusive and welcoming to people with disability. Therefore, the themes found in this research can potentially be explained by influences of medical, social, and human rights models of disability, with more inclusive and empowering views of hiring people with disability linked to social and human rights model thinking.

4 | CONCLUSIONS

This research has investigated the perceptions of hiring people with disability expressed by Australian employers. Four key themes were identified including motivations to hire based in altruism and social consciousness, the

impacts of organisational culture, whether a person should share their disability, and strong negative emotions as barriers to hiring. Themes tended to be defined by a participant's experience with disability. For example, when a participant had experience with disability, they would express inclusive workplace cultures, be neutral or encourage people with disability not to share their disability if they chose not to and encouraged autonomy for people with disability. Whereas participants who had not hired people with disability or had limited experience with disability tended to encourage sharing of disability so they could determine a person's competency and capabilities, reported less inclusive and more resistant organisation cultures, and shared strong negative emotions towards disability such as awkwardness and fear. Past research has found that contact and engagement with people with disability can lead to positive attitudes, decrease in social distance, and influence prejudicial views (Armstrong, Morris, Abraham, & Tarrant, 2017; Blundell, Das, Potts, & Scior, 2016; Huskin, Reiser-Robbins, & Kwon, 2017). This research provides a perspective on the influences of contact and experience with disability in a workplace context. Despite the differences between experiences, most participants expressed motivations centred around 'the right thing to do', which may be based in altruistic values and a sense of social consciousness. Recent literature has begun to investigate the impacts on business of social responsiveness in hiring people with disability, finding it increases people's intentions to use services and the perception of the company's social responsiveness (Hwang, Kim, & Lee, 2020; Dwertmann, 2023). However, companies may be using hiring of people with disability to increase company image rather than for genuine inclusion practices (Segovia-San-Juan, Saavedra, & Fernandez-de-Tejada, 2017). This may be contributing to continued stereotypes and power dynamics of exclusion, despite there being good intentions (Stibbald & Beagan, 2022). This research has found that altruistic and social consciousness underpins motivations from participants with and without experience of disability, and future research could explore how these motivations may be impacting people with disability. Within all four themes, there was potential implicit attitudes, stereotypes, and biases underpinning participants motivations and perceptions. For example, participants who believed people with disability should share their disability on application to assess their capabilities may hold implicit stereotypes of people with disability as incompetent. Stereotyping of people with disability as incompetent and cold, as opposed to competent and warm, has been found in past research (Antonopoulos et al., 2023; Rohmer & Louvet, 2016). This research has provided an insight into potential examples of how implicit biases may be present in employer's perceptions of hiring people with disability, which could be explored in future research.

Although this research has uncovered barriers and strengths of people and organisations in hiring people with disability, there are several areas for future research. First, only Australian employers were included in this research and the findings may not be applicable to all countries and cultural contexts. Further, while participants were from varied locations (including metropolitan and regional areas), states, organisational sizes, ages, and industries, larger studies using the themes found to quantify and assess links between motivations, experiences, and emotions to implicit biases may be useful. A further limitation of this study is that while implicit attitudes and stereotypes are suggested by the findings, this has not been objectively measured. Future research using quantitative methods to further support these findings may be beneficial.

Strengths of this research include the reflexive analysis approach adopted, and that the research was conducted and analysed by researchers with lived experience of disability. This provided a unique perspective and lens on a topic that has a direct impact on their lives and community. In recent years, co-design of research has been prioritised and the present study supports this approach (Javanparast, Robinson, Kitson, & Arciuli, 2022; Moll et al., 2020). Another strength of this research is the psychological and behavioural approach to investigating perceptions of hiring people with disability, expanding on previous research that focused on social policy and economic perspectives. This research has enhanced our understanding of the behaviours and underlying motivations of those making hiring decisions. Using these findings to directly implement strategies to target people's behaviours may play a crucial role in changing the experiences of people with disability in the workplace when considering current strategies have not led to change in the unemployment rate and low rates of maintaining employment for people with disability (Baert, 2016; Devine, Shields, et al., 2021; Hemphill & Kulik, 2016).

Improving the rate and quality of meaningful employment for people with disability remains a challenge and priority for Australians. This research has highlighted areas that can be targeted for future research. This includes avenues for testing strategies to change behaviours, attitudes, and stereotypes that are limiting people with disability from achieving their career goals. Open conversations and reflections about underlying altruistic motivations for hiring people with disability, and whether this is truly creating an inclusive environment, should be a priority. Organisations could use an intersectional approach in creating positive workplace cultures as there appears to be a flow-on effect of targeting different marginalised groups. Education and awareness about disability and promoting autonomy and choice in whether people share they have a disability in the workplace should be prioritised. Finally, creating meaningful interactions and normalising the participation of people with disability in all aspects of the community may lead to less negative emotions, reduce implicit biases and stereotypes, and improve confidence in hiring people with disability.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There are no conflicts of interest of any author.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This research was approved by the Charles Sturt University Human Research Ethics Committee.

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