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Employment equity targets: How a state-owned enterprise recruits people with disabilities

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Orientation: There remains a gap in the employment of people with disabilities globally. With its well-defined legislative framework, South Africa's compliance with legislation still appears to have failed to ensure that employment targets are met across sectors.

Research purpose: The aim of this study was to identify and explore factors which enabled a state-owned enterprise (SOE) in the Western Cape to meet their employment equity targets for recruiting persons with disabilities.

Motivation for the study: We are of the view that there is much to learn from such inclusive companies to inform the challenges experienced by other companies that have not met their employment equity targets.

Research approach/design and method: This was a qualitative single-embedded case study of an SOE in the Western Cape province of South Africa. Two sources of data used in this study included interviews with human resource employees (HREs) and employees with disabilities as well as document review of selected company policies.

Main findings: Findings show factors which helped this SOE to meet its employment equity targets. These include specific recruitment and orientation practices as well as involvement of employees with disabilities in shaping the various processes of ensuring an inclusive environment.

Practical/managerial implications: These factors may help other organisations in ensuring a more diverse workforce and ultimately meeting their employment equity targets.

Contribution/value-add: The study provides practical strategies, which other employers could learn and benefit from implementing in order to improve disability representation in the workplace.

Keywords: people with disabilities; employment; state-owned enterprise; disability; workplace; inclusion; equity.

Introduction

The need for disability inclusive employment has received growing attention in response to the underrepresentation of people with disabilities in paid, formal employment. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD Article 27) (UN 2006) has affirmed the right of all people with disabilities to access open, inclusive, and accessible workplaces. South Africa has signed and ratified the Convention, and the South African government has also committed to upholding disability rights in its local policies; yet this right is not a reality for many people with disabilities.

The *Employment Equity Act 55 of 1998* (Department of Labour [DOL] 1998) has set specific targets for companies to employ groups that have been previously discriminated against based on race, gender, and disability. With reference to disability, the target for employment of persons with disabilities in companies is set at 2% of the total workforce. The *Employment Equity Act* was legislated 22 years ago; however, limited improvement in implementation has been recorded since then. A recent annual report from the Department of Labour (DOL) for Employment Equity (2022) shows that the total national workforce representation of people with disabilities is at 1.29%, despite targets being set within companies at 2% of the total workforce.

While transformation has been noted in relation to meeting targets for gender and race groups, progress has been generally low for the employment of people with disabilities. The DOL (2007)

has issued Technical Assistance Guidelines (TAG) on the employment of people with disabilities, including guidelines on reasonable accommodation (RA) and fair recruitment procedures, among others. The recruitment guidelines focus on fair practices for advertisements, application forms, interviews, selection, medical and psychometric testing as well as disclosure of disability. Amid these improved governmental guidelines and policies, companies still do not meet the set employment equity targets. Despite the systemic exclusion and other barriers facing people with disabilities, there is also a reality that many companies may not know how to facilitate disability inclusive employment. Enabling factors such as fostering supporting and inclusive attitudes (Balasooriya-Smeekens, Bateman & Mant, 2016; Pillay et al., 2015), changing organisational culture, and creating an inclusive vision as well as targeted disability awareness training are important (Ndzwayiba & Ned, 2017; Waxman, 2017), yet still missing in many organisations. These factors enable the acknowledgment of people with disabilities based on their contributions, instead of perceptions about their capabilities (Wärnich et al., 2014).

Shakespeare (2018) describes disability as a multi-faceted, diverse and often complex phenomenon. Disability includes many different types of impairments with varying degrees of severity. For recruitment and employment to be fair, RA needs to be made for people with disabilities to enter the job market on an equal basis. There are many different jobs, each requiring differing levels of education and skills.

All these complexities and interfaces are difficult to encapsulate into policy documents and guidelines. The use of the 2% target acts as a benchmark within a company to indicate a measure of success in the recruitment and employment of people with disabilities. The poor employment statistics for persons with disabilities in South Africa indicate that there is still much needed to firstly, ensure that people with disabilities have equal opportunities for employment in the open labour market and secondly, to assist employers with implementing inclusivity in their recruitment and employment strategies.

Recent scoping reviews on hiring people with disabilities concluded that there remains a paucity of literature examining and evaluating strategies to improve hiring practices and employment opportunities for people with disabilities (Gewurtz et al., 2016; Iwanaga et al., 2021). Iwanaga et al. (2021) reported that many diversity and inclusion policies in organisations include races, ethnicities, genders, ages, religions, and sexual orientations components but not disability. A recent systematic review revealed seven gaps and limitations in extant research on the treatment of people with disabilities in the workplace by human resource practitioners (HRPs) (Beatty et al., 2019). These gaps and limitations include: (1) implicit definitions of workplace treatment; (2) neglect of national context variation; (3) missing differentiation between disability populations; (4) overreliance on available data sets; (5) predominance of single-source, cross-sectional data; (6) neglect of individual differences and identities in the presence of disability; and (7) lack of specificity on underlying stigma processes (Beatty et al., 2019). These studies show that recruitment and employment of people with disabilities could be better improved to facilitate inclusion, and that there is a need to support HRPs and employers to develop more inclusive workplaces.

Vast available literature reports on barriers experienced by people with disabilities in the employment sector (Ebuenyi et al., 2018; Harmuth et al., 2018; Khayatzadeh-Mahani et al., 2020; Morwane et al., 2021; Tripney et al., 2019; Visagie et al., 2017; Vornholt et al., 2018), inclusion experiences as well as experiences of employers on hiring people with disabilities (Bam & Ronnie, 2020; Maja et al., 2011; Mckinney & Swartz, 2021). These documented experiences show challenges which point to a distinct lack of disability inclusion in HR practices (ibid) which includes aspects such as attitudinal barriers which influence hiring practices, inaccessible working environments, lack of RA, and poor implementation of policies that support participation of people with disabilities in the workplace.

Literature focussing on companies which have met their equity targets to understand how they overcome the challenges as well as what helped them succeed in meeting targets remains scant. To our knowledge, there is only one paper which describes this in South Africa (Ndzwayiba & Ned, 2017). It is for this reason that we aimed to identify and explore factors which enabled a state-owned enterprise (SOE) in the Western Cape to meet their employment equity targets for recruiting persons with disabilities. The objectives were to identify and describe the facilitating factors which enabled the company to effectively recruit persons with disabilities for employment as well as explore barriers that have been overcome in the company to facilitate the recruitment of persons with disabilities.

We are of the view that there is much to learn from such inclusive companies to inform the challenges experienced by other companies that have not met their employment equity targets. Ultimately, such studies could contribute to informing employers about options to consider in their quest to improve employment for people with disabilities, and inform other rehabilitation practitioners on how to best prepare people with disabilities to enter and/or return to the workplace.

Research design

This study followed a qualitative approach. The intent of this research was to understand and gain insight of a broader phenomenon, for example, how organisations manage to hire and recruit people with disabilities in order to meet their employment equity targets. The chosen study design was a single embedded case of a process. Stake (2008) views case study as 'both a process of inquiry about the case and the product of that inquiry' (p. 121). The context of the SOE and its processes helped define and offer an explanation of

what the case was about. The study was more than just understanding the organisation but rather how the processes followed by the organisation inform how to hire and recruit people with disabilities. It is important to note that the case tells its own story. This needed an in-depth scrutiny of the case's context as well as detailing its ordinary activities (i.e. the hiring and recruitment practices) to facilitate the understanding of the factors which enable the SOE to recruit and meet its equity targets.

The strength of the case study design lies in enabling the use of multiple methods of data collection strategies while gathering data from different sources. Through doing a qualitative case study, rich, concrete, in-depth insights from a variety of persons and sources were obtained about the recruitment of people with disabilities into the SOE.

Two sources of data used in this study included interviews with human resources employees (HREs) and employees with disabilities as well as document review of selected company policies. Through analysing data from each group, we obtained information about the recruitment processes, inclusion practices, barriers encountered and how they were overcome, as sub-units of analysis – making up the embedded nature of the case. This enabled the researchers to generate a fundamental understanding of the case through in-depth descriptions of what happened, how and why (Creswell, 2013; Rule & John, 2011).

Study setting

The research setting was an SOE situated within the Western Cape province. The SOE was chosen because it is majority owned by the South African government but operates legally and financially as a commercial company. It is a multinational company, and this research took place at the regional branch within the Western Cape. Employment Equity is a government initiative and, for this reason, initiatives and targets would be given priority at an SOE.

The regional branch of this SOE employs approximately 570 employees with occupations including, among others, top management, senior management, middle management, professional qualified (engineers, accountants, safety practitioners), skilled technically (security surveillance officers, security guards, emergency responders, electricians), semi-skilled (customer service agents), and unskilled (general workers, porters, cleaners).

Study population and sampling

The study population for this study included HR Managers, HREs, and employees with disabilities who are permanently employed at the SOE in the Western Cape. Human resource practitioners are employees responsible for the recruitment and placement of employees. Preliminary research for the feasibility of the study population was done from annual integrated reports and this was confirmed once formal institutional permission had been granted.

The study population had to meet the criteria as detailed in Table 1 to be purposefully sampled for this study and be willing to participate in an interview autonomously.

We excluded temporarily employed people with disabilities because they do not add to the employment equity targets, and do not typically enjoy the benefits associated with being permanently employed at a company. They would not have had the full recruitment experience because they may be employed by labour brokers and on short assignments. According to Tongco (2007), purposive sampling methods place a primary importance on saturation. Data saturation was reached at the sample size of seven participants (three HREs and four employees with disabilities), which was sufficient for a qualitative case study (Malterud et al., 2016). This sample size allowed the researcher to gain an in-depth description of the case. Table 2 presents the demographic details of the sampled participants.

The targeted documents included the organisation's Employment Equity plans, the RA policy, and other internal policies related to the recruitment of people with disabilities. These documents became more relevant on the basis of knowledge. While some documents were accessed via the organisation's website, others were requested from HR participants to enable access to documents which were not

TABLE 1: Criteria used to select participants.

Selection criteria	Human resource employees (HREs)	Employees with disabilities
Inclusion criteria	• Permanent HREs at the SOE. • HRE department with prior experience in recruiting people with disabilities. • HREs between the ages of 18 and 60 years.	• Permanent employees with disabilities at the SOE. • People with disabilities who have been recruited into the SOE. • Employees with disabilities between the ages of 18 and 60 years.
Exclusion criteria	-	• Temporarily employed people with disabilities.

SOE, state owned enterprise; HRE, human resource employee.

TABLE 2: Demographic details of sampled participants.

Participant name	HREs and/or employees with disabilities	Impairment and/or type	Gender	Age (in years)	Date of interview
Sandy	HRE	No	Female	59	15 August 2020
Mary	HRE	No	Female	37	31 August 2020
Maurice	HRE	No	Male	45	25 September 2020
Maxwell	Employee with disability	Physical	Male	34	23 September 2020
Samuel	Employee with disability	Sensory	Male	48	15 September 2020
Nadine	Employee with disability	Sensory	Female	50	17 September 2020
Mason	Employee with disability	Physical	Male	37	18 September 2020

HRE, human resource employee.

publicly available. We specifically looked for, and selected documents which demonstrated or informed their practice. These documents were relevant to this study because they provide overarching policies and processes that inform practice of inclusion of people with disabilities. This data also contributed to understanding the context of the case (Bowen, 2009).

Recruitment process followed and consideration of ethics

The first author applied for organisational permission from the study site. This was done by first introducing the research project and explaining the purpose thereof in an e-mailed letter to the General Manager. In this letter, permission request to access organisational information and/or documents that were not available in the public domain was included. Measures to ensure the confidentiality of institutional information and individuals were outlined, including collecting all data without involvement of assistants. The first author outlined that all information gathered (audio and written) would be treated as confidential and protected.

For instance, pseudonyms were assigned to all participants instead of using real names; the SOE was not mentioned by name in the research report, and data collected were kept and locked away in a filing cabinet at a physiotherapy practice to which the first author was affiliated to. The email was concluded by leaving the first author's contact details, telephone number and e-mail address, as well as that of the last author (main supervisor) to respond to any queries. Upon receipt of the institutional permission, the first author was put into contact with the HR manager of the SOE. This was facilitated by the general manager of the company.

The HR manager identified a key informant who helped the first author to identify study participants according to the outlined criteria of the study sample. According to O'Leary (2017), key informants are reflective and observant members of the community being researched. They are knowledgeable about the culture of the community and are willing and able to share this knowledge. We requested a person who has been working at the SOE for at least 2 years and who had the necessary insight and knowledge to help us identify study participants according to the stipulated criteria. A key informant was then assigned. The HR manager introduced the study to the whole HR team during their staff meeting.

The key informant forwarded letters of invitation, which described the nature and purpose of the research, to the employees. Each prospective participant was made aware that participation was voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time, without any negative consequences for them. The letter also expressed that confidentiality would be assured. Prospective participants were informed of the use of recordings as well as about data storage procedures. The key informant obtained permission from prospective participants to share their contact details with the first author.

This allowed the first author to introduce herself and the research study, as well as to answer any preliminary questions that prospective participants had. Once commitment to participate in the study was received, letter of consent was signed and the first author scheduled appointments to perform telephonic interviews (to accommodate COVID-19 regulations) at a suitable time. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, most participants were working remotely at the time of data collection, or were not working at all. Some participants did not have access to their work e-mails and this could have impacted on the low response of participation. For those who participated, information was forwarded to them electronically via WhatsApp or to a personal e-mail address, and data collection was completed virtually.

Data collection

Data collection took place between May and September 2020 through semi-structured interviews and by conducting document reviews (see Table 3 for a summary of data collection).

According to Galletta (2012), semi-structured interviews allow for interaction and responsiveness between the interviewer and participant. They also provide a focussed structure to conduct the interviews but allow for flexibility in the discussion and for a natural progression of the discussion. The interviews in this study lasted between 30 min and 60 min, as recommended by Reid and Marsh (2014). The date and time were scheduled in advance with each participant. Interviews took place telephonically because of COVID-19-related restrictions. All interviews were conducted in English, which was the standard business language at this SOE. No RA measures or translator was necessary while performing interviews.

Secondary data which came from the organisational documents is data that already exists. A review of employment equity plans and policy as well as the RA policy was performed. Publicly available annual integrated reports and company websites were also reviewed. This data was used as a means of triangulating data obtained through interviews. This provided a method of verifying and confirming some of the information that was obtained through the primary data collection process.

This information, combined, allowed for provision of a thick description of the context in which the study took place.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis followed the six steps as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), and was done manually. Thematic analysis is a process that actively creates meaning from data. According to Braun and Clarke (2019), shared patterns of

TABLE 3: Summary of data collection.

Research methods	Semi-structured interviews Human resource employees (three participants)	Semi-structured interviews Employees with disabilities (four participants)	Document review
Nature of data	Primary Data	Primary Data	Secondary Data
	Narrated experiences of:	Narrated experiences of:	• Information gathered by researcher that is relevant to the case and its context.
	• Practices that they have implemented to facilitate the recruitment of people with disabilities.	• The process of being recruited into the company.	
	• Changes and progression that have occurred while working in the company to facilitate the recruitment of people with disabilities.	• Factors attracting people with disabilities to being employed at this company.	
		• Challenges (observed or experienced) that have been overcome in the workplace that have improved the recruitment of people with disabilities.	
Data collection method	Semi-structured interviews	Semi-structured interviews	• Desktop search
			• Document review
Data analysis	Thematic analysis	Thematic analysis	Thematic analysis
Data collection tools	Interview guide for HREs	Interview guide for employees with disabilities	Internet – a search of the company website to download policy documents:
			• Employment Equity policy
			• Reasonable Accommodation policy

HRE, human resource employee.

meaning get created around central themes. Applied to the study, themes revealed interpretive stories about data that was revealed in a rigorous and systematic manner. It required prolonged, deep data immersion, reflection, application of theoretical knowledge, and transparency from the researcher. Prolonged engagement referred to the amount of time spent engaged with data from various sources. It allowed for a complex, rich and detailed description of data.

All the different data sets were brought together, and the first author took time immersing and becoming familiar with the data. This included reading data repeatedly and actively searching for patterns. The second step involved generating initial codes. Different colours were used for different codes, with the research question in mind. Following this was a search for themes present in each data set (HREs, employees with disabilities and individual documents) and across all data sets. Different codes were combined to form overarching themes. These themes were reviewed to be able to get a good idea about the different themes and how they fitted together to make sense of the case. These themes were named and defined. Any overlap between themes was addressed and identification of sub-themes provided structure to large and complex themes. After this process, common themes present across all data sets were identified. A report that aimed to be concise, logical, non-repetitive and interesting, to represent the story that the data told within and across themes as it related to the research topic was produced.

Trustworthiness

Guba and Lincoln (1989) guided the process of ensuring trustworthiness for this study. The following strategies were used to ensure trustworthiness of data: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Member checking (which involved summarising data and giving participants an opportunity to check the accuracy of findings) as well as the use of external peer debriefing through consultation with the main supervisor (third author) throughout the processes of data collection, data analysis and reporting of data, ensured credibility. We provided rich contextual description and detailed, thick descriptions of the methodological steps taken to enable the readers to decide whether the findings are transferable. For dependability, an audit trail of all research processes and activities were documented as well as any decision-making processes influencing data collection and analysis. For confirmability, records of raw data, field notes, transcripts, and a reflective journal were kept throughout data collection. A description of how codes and themes were developed and how conclusions were reached was documented. Both methodological and theoretical triangulation through the multiple sources of data used and diverse participants contributed to establishing credibility.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Stellenbosch University (reference No. S19/10/233).

Results

Document and desktop review

Table 4 presents the documents that were analysed and the key results as they relate to research objectives.

The report has a key focus area which is aimed at advancement of people with disabilities as a previously disadvantaged group. According to the annual integrated report for 2019–2020 on employment of persons with disabilities, the representation of people with disabilities increased from 2.4% to 2.5% of the total workforce, nationally. The facilitating factors which led to improvement in employment of people with disabilities were attributed to the following:

• 'Creation of awareness about inclusion of people with disabilities according to people with disabilities employment strategy;
• Dedicated task team devoted to accessibility, inclusion and reasonable accommodation;
• Annual declaration campaigns are run, and sensitisation initiatives are held regarding disability matters;
• Recommendations are made regarding reasonable accommodation requirements nationally by people with disabilities;

TABLE 4: Overview of document review.

Document type	Organisational and/or national policy	Policy, procedure and/or report	Key concepts	Relation to research objective
Company Website Information	National and provincial	No	• The company embraces diversity as a core value. • Commitment to socio-economic transformation of the country to be representative of demographics. • Prioritisation of ensuring that services and facilities are accessible to customers. • Recipient of National Disability Champion Award because of sponsorship of community disability initiatives.	To identify and describe the facilitating factors which enabled the company to effectively recruit persons with disabilities for employment
Annual integrated report document analysis for 2019–2020	National	Report	• Increase in total workforce of people with disabilities during the year 2019–2020 because of: • disability awareness programmes • dedicated task team for accessibility, disability inclusion and RA • recommendations made nationally, about RA by people with disabilities • quarterly support group sessions • engagement with DPOs, keeping abreast of disability developments • policies aligned to requirements recommended by people with disabilities.	To identify and describe the facilitating factors which enabled the company to effectively recruit persons with disabilities for employment
Policy to ensure procedures are followed to comply with the *Employment Equity Act*	National	Policy	• Clear definition of disability and outlining of different impairments. • Fairness in recruitment and selection processes are prescribed. • Training and development prescribed to be equitable. • Action plans prescribed to be drawn up to monitor and evaluate progress to achieving EE targets. • Mandates quarterly meetings with representation from leadership and equity groups. • Individuals accountable for achieving EE targets regionally and nationally. • Achievement of targets gets linked to performance of individuals and departments.	-
Policy to ensure the provision of RA	National	Policy	• Special budget provided for RA • Provision of RA void of stigmatisation or discrimination • People with disabilities to be involved in decision making around RA • Dispute resolution to be put in place. • Review of policy to take place according to changes in regulations and environment. • Audits conducted to ensure compliance in provision of RA. • Responsible persons appointed regionally and nationally to be held accountable for RA.	To identify and describe the facilitating factors which enabled the company to effectively recruit persons with disabilities for employment

RA, reasonable accommodation; DPO, Disabled People's Organisations; EE, employment equity.

• People with disabilities network support group sessions which are held quarterly focus on issues affecting people with disabilities and offers a platform to determine best practice strategies and solutions;
• Engagement with disability sector organisations to stay abreast of disability developments and implementing best practice for employment of people with disabilities; and
• Disclosure and reasonable accommodation policies have been aligned to address requirements as recommended by people with disabilities' (Maclean, 2021, p. 37).

To provide RA for persons with disabilities, an internal policy outlines procedures and processes to ensure the respectful and equitable treatment of persons with disabilities throughout the company. This policy outlines processes for disclosure of disability and the accompanying protection of confidentiality and personal information. It specifies that a special budget is to be made available for the provision of RA, monitoring compliance, and ensuring a non-discriminatory workplace.

The provision of RA is prescribed to be done in a manner that will not stigmatise or disempower people with disabilities. The policy encourages people with disabilities to be involved in decision-making around RA and prescribes that dispute resolution processes should be put in place. All procedures regarding provision of RA are drawn up according to this policy. This policy gets reviewed according to changes in the environment and regulations. Audits are similarly conducted to determine compliance and implementation of RA. Responsible persons are appointed and held accountable for RA both regionally and nationally.

Another internal policy is one that ensures compliance of the *Employment Equity Act* within the organisation. Organisational strategic objectives are set according to an analysis of workforce demographics to ensure progress towards reflecting the South African demographic profile within all categories of employment within the company. Within the policy document, disability is given a clear definition and various impairments are outlined. Recruitment and selection processes are prescribed to be fair and to avoid discrimination. Training and development were outlined to be prescribed in an equitable manner.

The policy document enforces action plans to monitor and evaluate progress made to achieve employment equity targets. The document mandates quarterly meetings with representation from designated equity groups and leadership of the organisation. Individuals are held responsible and accountable for achieving Employment Equity targets both regionally and nationally. Achievement of these targets is linked to performance of individuals and departments.

Findings from the interviews

Table 5 presents an overview of the main findings from semi-structured interviews, broken down into themes and sub-themes as they relate to the relevant research objectives.

Theme 1: Designing for inclusion

This theme speaks to processes and ways in which the company embraces diversity as one of its core values and has included disability inclusion in their diversity definition. The importance of disability inclusion and diversity policies was further supported by staff who have to implement these policies as evidenced by the leadership buy-in. Disability is emphasised as a priority during recruitment and employment to ensure that all processes are accessible and RA is planned for. Inclusivity is also promoted through disability awareness and sensitivity trainings. These trainings have been instrumental in creating an inclusive culture in the company. This inclusion work has led the organisation to receiving various awards including 'top employers award', 'National Disability Champion Award', as reported on their website. This shows how companies who embrace inclusion usually outperform and may be the reason why they have been successful in meeting their equity targets.

Sub-theme 1.1: Embracing diversity through creating inclusion

Participants described how the work environment has been designed to facilitate inclusion for people with disabilities. This was evident in how diversity was embraced through creating inclusion. For instance, the participants described the company as one that markets itself as an employer that is inclusive of people with disabilities. Owing to challenges of equity, the focus on diversity was redirected to creating inclusion for all persons working in the company, as described by HR employees:

'Employment equity was quite difficult to implement because, um, because a lot of people felt excluded after that. So now we do

a lot more work about people feeling that they are at home and have a place in the organisation.' (Sandy, HR employee, 15 August 2020)

The participants explained how this was done through workshops which focussed on learning about each other's cultures but highlighting how much more similarities people have than differences:

'You can't talk about diversity without talking about inclusivity. Understanding each other's cultures and what we found that in doing that is that we make people realise more about how similar they are than about how different they are. So, a lot of the workshops that we've done now are a lot more about inclusivity than diversity.' (Sandy, HR employee, 15 August 2020)

'I work with people from diverse cultures, people with different abilities. I would say that it's actually the first company that I've worked for where I have on a regular basis been in contact with persons with disabilities, so that definitely shows that the company has taken a step in the right direction.' (Maxwell, employees with disabilities, 23 September 2020)

In terms of ensuring that equal opportunities and inclusion are provided to people with disabilities, HR participants described the mainstreaming of skills development within the organisation:

'So we have training and development um, the B-EE requires you to show that you have been training your people with disability, but we don't send them on special programmes we just make sure that in the workplace plan they are adequately covered, with training and they would be part of our performance management like anyone else, they would be part of our talent management like everyone else functions, we need to make sure that we get them there, we have to make sure that the function rooms will cater for them as well.' (Sandy, HR Employee, 15 August 2020)

The presence of employees with disabilities already employed and active within the company was seen as facilitating a sense of belonging for new employees with disabilities entering the company:

'She was certainly there to guide the way and that certainly made it easier. Because you will be dealing with someone who speaks from experience and I think that that makes it easier for someone with a disability. It actually puts one at ease quite a bit.' (Maxwell, employees with disabilities, 23 September 2020)

Sub-theme 1.2: Disability awareness and sensitivity training

Disability awareness and sensitivity training was highlighted as important for creating inclusion. Annual

TABLE 5: Overview of main findings.

Research aim	Related themes	Related sub-themes
To identify and describe the facilitating factors which enabled the company to effectively recruit persons with disabilities for employment	1. Design for inclusion	Sub-theme 1.1: Embracing diversity through creating inclusion
		Sub-theme 1.2: Disability awareness and sensitivity training
		Sub-theme 1.3: Creating a safe space to disclose disability
		Sub-theme 1.4: Provision of reasonable accommodation
	2. Talent acquisition	Sub-theme 2.1: Advertisements and company brand attractive to persons with disabilities
		Sub-theme 2.2: Forming alliances with DPOs and specialised recruitment agencies
		Sub-theme 2.3: Targeted recruitment
	3. Support structures available for persons with disabilities	Sub-theme 3.1: Support groups for people with disabilities
		Sub-theme 3.2: ICAS

DPO, Disabled People's Organisations; ICAS, Independent Counselling and Advisory Services.

workshops and awareness sessions are held at the company to ensure that the colleagues of people with disabilities understand how different types of impairments can affect individuals daily and why RA is necessary. Awareness is also raised through electronic processes, such as news flashes that come through automatically on computers. Human resource participants indicated that a key focus in these awareness sessions is highlighting how all people have core similarities in the workplace, but that some differences are acknowledged:

> 'So, we've been very specific and mindful in regards to creating awareness within the organisation of people with disabilities and how we are all the same, but we have some difference.' (Miranda, HR Employee, 31 August 2020)

Participants acknowledged that disability awareness is necessary to allow colleagues to be more sensitive towards people with disabilities, both in understanding and in how to relate with disability in a respectful manner:

> 'It's really just about your colleagues being more sensitive towards people with disabilities and trying to accommodate them.' (Samuel, employees with disabilities, 15 September 2020)

> 'Just that people be sensitised how do you call do you say like a disability because sometimes our language can be very offensive.' (Miranda, HRE, 31 August 2020)

According to participants, another role that disability awareness plays is to create an understanding of the challenges that people with disabilities face daily. Nadine explained the role that disability awareness had on her colleagues in understanding the challenges that she faces daily as a person with a hearing impairment:

> 'They don't understand the actual disability and how it impacts on you as an individual. It [*disability awareness programmes*] really plays a huge role, because people didn't really understand what we go through on a daily basis and they think when you hear them it's kind of easy to hear the devices. The hearing devices come with a very huge negative on the individual and it irritates you it gives you headaches, it's a lot of things that you tolerate because of something that you cannot change in you.' (Nadine, employees with disabilities, 17 September 2020)

This above understanding facilitates another level of understanding about the purpose of RA. It is intended for colleagues to understand that RA is not preferential treatment, but necessary for people with disabilities to perform a job efficiently:

> 'I think when it comes to colleagues; we had a lot of colleagues saying that it's not fair that my colleague doesn't do this task, yet I have to do this task. So it's just that it creates awareness and ensuring that people know in regards to what does this accommodation mean.' (Miranda, HRE, 31 August 2020)

Creating an inclusive work environment required education and awareness training about disability, especially for line managers who are directly involved with recruiting and managing people with disabilities within their operational spaces:

> 'We do workshops so that the line managers can make decisions to ensure that they are inclusive in their hiring practice as well, so we do run different workshops with different line managers to ensure that they are aware.' (Miranda, HRE, 31 August 2020)

Sub-theme 1.3: Creating a safe space to disclose disability

Human resource participants explained how the company did a lot of work to create a safe space for the disclosure of disability. The company continuously provides existing employees with various opportunities to declare invisible disabilities. Employees can disclose disability in a manner where they feel comfortable to disclose, either in person or through completing a form. It was deemed important for employees to not feel targeted or singled out, and for this reason the topic of disclosure gets brought up in a variety of different contexts including electronic processes, during meetings within divisions or one-on-one, depending on the situation. Miranda explained the following about disclosure:

> 'There was a lot of hard work that happened, we spoke to line managers to not to force, just to bring it up in safe platforms. For people so that people are not being singled out, so that just ensuring that you bring it up in a forum that you have in your division, in department meetings, sometimes on a one-on-one basis just to ensure that people don't feel, that they are either being side-lined or that they are targeted because it can get very tricky. This is to help any person that might need any help along the way now and in future.' (Miranda, HRE, 31 August 2020)

It was reported by participants that employees are often reluctant to disclose a disability because of their own personal reasons. These reasons were described as possibly fearing marginalisation, or not wanting to identify as being disabled. Human resource participants therefore educate employees about RA, and how they can be supported to perform their jobs more efficiently. They make employees aware that they can benefit from RA by disclosing disability either presently or in future:

> 'A lot of people don't even consider their circumstances as being disabled. They made a plan to live in the world and they don't even consider themselves disabled. Once you get to a stage where they need some kind of accommodation … then it becomes more, more necessary for them as individuals then to declare.' (Sandy, HR Employee, 15 August 2020)

Miranda added:

> 'People were more to come forward and disclose knowing that there won't be any discrimination towards them.' (Miranda, HR Employee, 31 August 2020)

It was reported that as disability gets encountered more frequently in the workplace, people are more willing and comfortable in disclosing disability. The HR department features success stories involving people with disabilities in magazines and in electronic media to highlight the positive image that the company has of people with disabilities succeeding in the company. This also helps to dispel the notion that marginalisation will happen because of disclosing disability.

'We feature people every now and then in the magazine and those sort of things about what people are busy doing, special projects or something like that. You see now then as people see that there is no harm coming to people, people are feeling more and more comfortable.' (Sandy, HR Employee, 15 August 2020)

Sub-theme 1.4: Provision of reasonable accommodation

As an introduction for RA, a statement that Samuel made conveys the essence of RA, which is in effect the removal of barriers for people with disabilities in the workplace:

'I don't think that disabled people should really feel that they are disabled.' (Samuel, employees with disabilities, 15 September 2020)

This statement was supported:

'The last thing that you want is someone coming to work and feeling I can't access the door, or I can't, so they almost feel like they have double barriers to overcome.' (Miranda, HRE, 31 August 2020)

Reasonable accommodation is deemed important by HR for both talent acquisition and job retention for people with disabilities, as explained by Maurice:

'It's an ongoing process, so it's not just about the talent acquisition, it's also about how the current people are performing or functioning in their role.' (Maurice, HRE, 25 September 2020)

The HR department consults people with disabilities on a frequent basis to find out ways in which they can be accommodated or further supported, as explained by Samuel below:

'A lot of activity in the last few years with HR engaging me and these sort of things becoming more commonplace these discussions, so I've had people phoning me and asking me do I feel like I need a little bit more assistance or not I think in last year I had somebody to meet me from HR, a consultant that has been appointed by HR asking me if there is more that [*the company*] can do.' (Samuel, employees with disabilities, 15 September 2020)

According to participants, RA gets provided to accommodate individuals in different ways. This involves not only the physical adjustment of surroundings or the provision of assistive technologies, but also adjusting a person's roles or schedule to allow the person to perform their job to the best of their ability:

'What they were able to do is to for the first 3 hours of the day, I would assist on the floor I'm standing on my feet, but the other part of the day, I can work in the call centre, where I would be off my feet. It allows you to do your job to the best of your ability without you feeling as if you are a burden or as if you are not contributing.' (Maxwell, employees with disabilities, 23 September 2020)

Reasonable accommodation, although it may seem extensive for a few employees, once provided, paves the way to accommodate more persons with similar impairments in the future. Samuel observed the following:

'We've done some of those things in our main boardroom, but you know there's only 3 or 4 people that have hearing issues.' (Samuel, employees with disabilities, 15 September 2020)

Subsequent to Samuel's observation, Nadine had a positive experience to share about her initial impression of the company and the accommodations that were made for previous employees with similar impairment:

'When I looked at that boardroom, I saw that they had all that sound blocker around the wall and I knew that they were really uhm in that level of accommodating people like myself where they would have meeting rooms of that nature.' (Nadine, employees with disabilities, 17 September 2020)

Participants shared that various structural changes are in place to ensure accessibility for people with disabilities. Design ensures that inclusion takes place through employees with disabilities completing surveys to assist in making further recommendations for RA. Upon approval of these recommendations, people with disabilities are approached to give their input into the design and planning of these projects:

'We had a tour, fortunately I was also in that meeting with employment equity, there was a tour where we were at some time touring around the [*company*] to check and see if the physical, the building, the bathrooms the places are compatible for any disability. Where we identified all the stumbling blocks or the factors and everything was noted and discussed on a senior level of the national employment equity and I am hoping that there will be results thereafter. We went to a renovation of our uhm, administrative building a couple of years ago and they retrofitted the meeting room to allow for better hearing, for better design, and during that process, there was consultation with those that were disabled, saying that we'd appreciate your input into the design. So at least there was consultation and that's to be applauded.' (Samuel, employees with disabilities, 15 September 2020)

Reasonable accommodation takes place from the initial advertisement being accessible to persons with different impairments to the interview venue and processes, as well as the recruitment and selection processes which accommodate people with disabilities in a manner that provides equal employment opportunities for all candidates. Participants found that accessibility for people with disabilities is improved during advertisement and interviewing processes through consultation with disability orientated organisations. Guidance gets offered from these organisations about RA required during the interview process:

'So we advertise on our website, that's our main central that you can get the ad and then depending on the response levels if needs be we will then either go external to engage with associations or NGOs also if we require a recruitment agent to source, or more specifically target persons with disabilities. They do give us guidance in terms of what is required, uh if the individual needs specific requirements, they will guide us on that in terms of the interview process.' (Maurice, HRE, 25 September 2020)

Human resource participants described that all candidates are treated equally during the interviewing and selection

processes through taking focus off disability, and rather focussing on the ability of a candidate to perform a role:

'So, I would like to think that one could be able to have anyone walk in MAYBE be on crutches, maybe not crutches, maybe in a wheelchair, maybe not in a wheelchair. And that possibly one would even do the interview without being able to see the person if I were to try to describe it in that way and you describe the job to them, and they must be able to indicate that they wouldn't have any issues to be able to do that position.' (Sandy, HRE, 15 August 2020)

Theme 2: Talent acquisition

This theme highlights strategies used by the organisation to enable them to recruit and attract employees with disabilities. One is a targeted approach where they specifically work with specialised recruitment agencies as well as Disabled People's Organisations (DPOs) to actively recruit people with disabilities. This allows the disability employment recruiters to match job seekers with available vacancies. The other approach is mainstreaming disability inclusion in their marketing division to ensure that all advertisements and other communication are written in an accessible manner.

Sub-theme 2.1: Advertisement and company brand attractive to persons with disabilities

The participants shared that the company brands itself as being attractive to people with disabilities:

'We advertise, we indicate a wheelchair type icon on there and we say we welcome applications from people with disabilities. Newspaper adverts, website. Both internally and externally. So, you can market your organisation as an employer brand that you are successful in that way. And then good news stories, you know very often the press look for good stories.' (Sandy, HRE, 15 August 2020)

At the same time, it is important to find the right person for the job, both in terms of skill, experience and being part of a team. Miranda described the criteria for appointment in any position:

'… [T]he same criteria will be in place in regard to the person must have certain qualifications, or a certain amount of experience as associated with the same job.' (Miranda, HRE, 31 August 2020)

Nadine confirmed this by stating the following:

'… [A]nd not only for statistical reasons, when you are already part of the team you feel you are recognised, you are respected.' (Nadine, employees with disabilities, 17 September 2020)

Mason voiced his need for job stability and growth, which is offered at this company:

'I don't recognise my disability at that time, I only recognise I have a need to work and I need to provide for my family … I needed to upgrade my level of work experience.' (Mason, employees with disabilities, 18 September 2020)

Sub-theme 2.2: Forming alliances with disability organisations and specialised recruitment agencies

Participants indicated the importance of forming alliances with various DPOs representing persons with different impairment types. They also make use of a specialised recruitment agency. When positions become available, they inform these organisations, and lists of suitable candidates are then put forward. This allows accessibility to persons with different types of impairments if they are registered with these organisations.

These alliances provide support in establishing what types of accommodation are needed for candidates with different impairment types, both for the interview and for employment afterwards. This was described by Miranda:

'We normally before even an interview, ask either the candidate or the agency or the organisation what kind of accommodation does this person need in order one, to come to the interview and also then for them to work successfully with us. So we do give a very detailed description of this is what this role is going to bring on a daily basis, what kind of reasonable accommodation do we need?' (Miranda, HRE, 31 August 2020)

Assistance is also given by DPOs in presenting disability awareness workshops and disability sensitisation sessions at the company.

Employees with disabilities who gain employment at a company through a recruitment agency that specialises in recruiting people with disabilities have the added assurance that employment equity is taken seriously. As a result, they know that they will not be discriminated against based on disability and would have equal opportunities for growth. The following was described by Nadine:

'I was coming from an employment agency that specifically looks after people like myself stability and there is growth the growth is there; the development and they are not discriminating against people with disabilities. They will consider the employment equity of the time in their recruitment.' (Nadine, employees with disabilities, 17 September 2020)

Sub-theme 2.3: Targeted recruitment

The company, together with DPOs have targeted specific jobs and roles for people with disabilities. This does not exclude people with disabilities from applying for other jobs, but certain roles have been specifically allocated for people with disabilities. Samuel described that the camera surveillance room was identified as a space where employees are seated, monitoring cameras for most of the time. This was identified as a space in the company where persons with mobility impairments could be targeted for employment:

'Our camera room for instance is an ideal environment for people that are wheelchair bound.' (Samuel, employees with disabilities, 15 September 2020)

Sandy added about the targeted recruitment project that was successful in recruiting people with disabilities within a particular space in the company:

'We partnered with False Bay College at the time of work readiness programme was that they helped to check to make

sure that the work environment was ready, and we made various adjustments.' (Sandy, HRE, 15 August 2020)

'When a position becomes available, we try and facilitate and just speak to line managers with regards to where they can include persons living with disability into their environment.' (Miranda, HRE, 31 August 2020)

Theme 3: Support structures available for persons with disabilities

This theme highlights the significant role played by support offered to employees with disabilities in enabling inclusion in the workplace.

Other than the support obtained from managers and HR, support structures are available to provide people with disabilities with additional support. A national support group was established with monthly meetings to discuss challenges and various disability related issues. This allows people with disabilities to feel supported. Nadine explained:

'There are other platforms like support groups which is a national people where we meet, and we discuss our challenges … In that support group, we meet monthly.' (Nadine, employees with disabilities, 17 September 2020)

Maurice added:

'We've created a support group for them as well, where they do meet. They just had one last week as well on the online portal, where they meet and talk as, as individuals and just to see what kind of support it is that they require. So, we are trying to ensure that we are supporting the people with disabilities as much we possibly can across our environment.' (Maurice, HRE, 25 September 2020)

ICAS is a support programme available to all employees that can aid people with disabilities when dealing with different issues that may impact their lives. It encompasses the holistic wellbeing of a person and includes personal, relationship, psychological and financial guidance. This is a valuable resource that is available for all employees:

'We bring in there counsellors, that are ICAS counsellors in place that ensures that they can call in at any stage because sometimes you can be overwhelmed if you don't know how to go. So, it's very important for us to ensure that your wellbeing as an individual, not only as an organisation, but especially that the individual is looked after.' (Miranda, HRE, 31 August 2020)

Discussion

The discussion is structured according to the three broad themes of this study to showcase facilitating factors which enabled this company to effectively recruit people with disabilities and barriers experienced.

Designing for inclusion

Findings from both data sources (interviews and document review) highlight that this SOE is committed to making a meaningful contribution towards the workplace experiences of people with disabilities. According to Nxumalo (2019),

transformational leadership is required to effect meaningful change in a business. The adoption of the shared value of diversity, as one of its core values, is included in the performance contracts of senior managers to embed value-based leadership. As such, managers prioritise the implementation of and adherence to the *Employment Equity Act*. This contributes to an enacted culture of embracing diversity to drive organisational change. The same strategy was seen impactful in the Netcare case study where both transformation and diversity targets were linked to performance cards and even incentives of managers (Ndzwayiba & Ned, 2017).

Internal policies were developed to ensure that equity was achieved in terms of race, gender and disability. The internal employment equity policy is supported by an internal RA policy. Habeck et al. (2010) have acknowledged the need for policies to retain people with disabilities to coincide with policies for recruitment of people with disabilities. The annual integrated report of this organisation shows that internal policies are modified and aligned to the needs of people with disabilities. People with disabilities who are employed by the company similarly express these needs during audits and through surveys. This brings to mind the well-known slogan 'Nothing about us without us' which is commonly used to uphold the representation and human rights of people with disabilities. The processes taken by this company clearly illustrated this slogan in practice such as where people with disabilities are involved in problem identification, problem solving and project planning to ensure RA designs which are inclusive and practical. Additionally, people with disabilities and senior management are also well represented in employment equity meetings.

Companies cannot sustainably achieve their employment equity targets unless they acknowledge the skills and benefits that employing people with disabilities bring to the business. The focus of equity is to support employees in the work environment to meet individual needs. According to Wright et al. (2020), the creation of equity is grounded in acknowledging how differences in social, economic, cultural and historic factors impact the opportunities available to employees. When creating equity, value is placed on the specialised contributions made by employees, irrespective of whether accommodations are needed.

The provision of RA allows employees to make these contributions to the best of their ability. Hartnett et al. (2011) affirmed that providing RA fosters a feeling among employees that they are valued as individual human beings by their employer. Wright et al. (2020) suggest that when people feel respected, liked and accepted at work, their performance improves and they are more successful. Fisher (2010) further states that the generation of positive emotions and high self-esteem in the workplace leads to increased motivation, higher levels of creativity and productivity which contribute to the increased success of the company. This SOE embraces the inherent benefits of a diverse workforce and inclusive practices. As such, it markets itself in this way.

Reasonable accommodation in the form of physical adaptations is budgeted for, but once the expense has been covered, it acts an investment to the future hiring of candidates with disabilities as well as providing accessibility to customers and stakeholders with disabilities. Reasonable accommodation gets provided as is required by an employee and approved by management. All requests cannot always be accommodated immediately and may be constrained by financial budgets and project planning. The important thing is that employees are given a platform to raise concerns within a supportive environment and needs are taken seriously. If not addressed immediately, they get addressed within the foreseeable future.

One of the key findings spoke to the notion of shifting mindsets – a necessary step towards inclusion. The shift in mindsets of colleagues towards embracing diversity and towards more supportive practices was facilitated through various workshops, disability sensitisation campaigns and through marketing via electronic media. An important factor mentioned by people with disabilities in this study was that of not wanting to be treated differently. Human resource participants confirmed that they did not single out groups of people but rather ensured that the individual needs of employees were being met equitably. Transformational leaders acknowledge the differences in the abilities and needs of their employees and consider meeting these individual needs to be an integral part of the transformation of the workplace. The aim of this approach was to ensure a culture of greater inclusivity by focussing on similarities rather than differences and on abilities rather than disabilities. Bainbridge and Fujimoto (2018) described this as 'inherent incorporation' and our findings show how it created an inclusive culture that is open to RA as an important enabling factor towards employment of people with disabilities.

Sheshi and Kercini (2017) described that transformational leadership not only focusses on workplace requirements, but also cares for the future aspirations of an employee. Bainbridge and Fujimoto (2018) found that the introduction and subsequent adaptation to a new working environment are largely influenced by the initial encounter during which people with disabilities evaluate the environment and the attitudes of others towards people with disabilities. Our findings highlight that people with disabilities had a positive experience during their initial engagement with the company. They observed the physical adaptations that had been implemented, as well as observed other people with disabilities who were visibly active in the workplace, performing their duties. Initial interactions which people with disabilities had with colleagues and managers portrayed a positive initial impression about the inclusion of disability into this company. This paved the way for a positive engagement about their roles and an enthusiasm to become and remain part of this company.

Adapting the physical environment to design an inclusive workplace infrastructure for people with disabilities is a continuous process. These findings have illustrated that, initially, the minimum building standards for universal design were not adhered to. As a result, various alterations and adaptations have been and continue to be implemented over time to accommodate people with disabilities. These alterations need to be continuously done as improvements and maintenance to the building take place. Changes also take place as new assistive technologies become available. All these changes are planned and take place in consultation with people with disabilities. This ensures that the actual needs of people with disabilities are considered and ensures practicality in design changes.

Support structures available for persons with disabilities

Many studies have pointed out that a manager's past experience of working with people with disabilities created a greater likelihood of that manager hiring people with disabilities in the future (Andersson et al., 2015; Hartnett et al., 2011; Lindsay et al., 2019). An initial barrier experienced in this company was the unwillingness of operational line managers to employ people with disabilities. An added contributing factor was the lack of knowledge about how different disability types could be accommodated within the various operational environments (Strindlund et al., 2019). In this SOE, we see how networking and making alliances with DPOs for support brought about a change in the willingness of line managers to employ people with disabilities.

Human resource practitioners acted as facilitators to point out vacancies and how people with disabilities could be accommodated within those spaces. This process was also facilitated by alliances held with DPOs which continue to provide support to ensure that the work environment is conducive to persons with different types of disabilities. The change in willingness of line managers to employ people with disabilities acts as a facilitator and will continue to be a facilitator in the future, because they now have the knowledge, positive attitude and positive experience of employing people with disabilities. According to Padkapayeva et al. (2017), effective accommodation can be provided to people with disabilities simply by having a positive attitude and offering emotional support and/or empathy when it is needed. Managers who encourage equal opportunities and fair treatment for all staff, including people with disabilities, facilitate inclusion in the workplace and minimise negative attitudes.

Another facilitating factor which was identified by employees with disabilities and HREs was the self-efficacy needed for people with disabilities to operate within the work environment. Employees with disabilities have identified the freedom to confidently express their needs for RA, as well as guiding interactions with colleagues in a favourable manner as essential in the workplace. Lyons et al. (2016) have suggested that discussing disability openly within the workplace has greater advantages than just gaining access to RA. It builds more supportive relationships with colleagues

and supervisors, and employees with disabilities are also perceived as being more competent and confident.

An HR participant highlighted how some employees with disabilities struggled with handling themselves during challenging work situations. In these cases, further support was provided from HR to help line managers cope with this. Job coaching was also provided to employees with disabilities who needed this support. The company has broadly managed to provide the necessary support, but here one should also look externally at how people with disabilities can be better prepared to enter the work environment. This should be an area of focus for recruitment specialists and rehabilitation practitioners in preparing people with disabilities to enter the workplace (Martins, 2015). A recent study done by Abbas and Soeker (2020), which focussed on return to work for individuals with schizophrenia, acknowledged that therapeutic support which equips workers with the skills to face challenges in the workplace confidently enhances self-efficacy in the workplace.

Talent acquisition

The study confirms how various barriers can be overcome through the alliances with specialised recruitment agencies and DPOs. These alliances ensure that requirements of the job are suitably matched to a candidate. This company operates in a specialised industry and requires specific skills at various levels of the company. Findings were that people with disabilities did not necessarily apply for these jobs. Specialised recruitment agencies played a role in matching a candidate with a specific skillset to a specific job or role. There is no limitation on the level where an individual can find a position for which they are qualified within the company. This arrangement helps the candidate in accessing the job opportunity and application forms as well as preparing for the interview. The company is assisted in making sure that RA is provided at the interview venue, during the interviews and during employment. This continued support is a valuable facilitator to recruit people with disabilities. Working with specialised companies also helped this SOE to design recruitment strategies which were accessible to people with disabilities, for example, accessible advertisement notices. Similarly, they used the DPOs for targeted recruitment.

While this study looked at factors that facilitate the recruitment and employment of people with disabilities at an SOE in the Western Cape, one cannot separate the functioning of an individual within the company from the socio-political context within which the company and the individual operate. It is with this in mind that we call for the same transformational leadership that ensures the implementation of disability policy into practice, as demonstrated in this company, to be practised at higher levels within government. This will ensure that disability policies are implemented and people with disabilities are afforded the rights that these policies are designed to uphold (Nxumalo, 2019).

Conclusion and recommendations

The aim of this study was to uncover how this SOE managed to meet employment equity targets for recruiting people with disabilities. The following factors were uncovered:

- Transformational leadership was demonstrated in translating policy into practice. This happened through the company embracing diversity as a strength and acknowledging the benefits that having a diverse workforce brings to the company.
- Designing for inclusivity acknowledged the different and individual needs of employees. Support was provided to employees and to company leadership through alliances with DPOs. These alliances assisted in fostering an inclusive environment through the shifting of mindsets about disability (disability awareness and sensitivity programmes) and in the provision of RA to attract and retain people with disabilities as employees.
- While accommodating differences, the focus was placed on strengths rather than weaknesses, and on how individuals function to the best of their ability with the necessary supports in place. This was communicated throughout the company to create awareness and sensitivity towards the process of removing barriers to the optimal functioning of individuals within the workplace.
- Alliances with DPOs and specialised recruitment agencies was crucial in creating inclusivity.
- Employees are supported to make their own individual needs for RA known by creating a safe space for disclosure of disability.
- The self-efficacy of people with disabilities was an important contributor to the successful functioning of people with disabilities in this SOE.

As a recommendation, it would be beneficial for the leadership of this SOE (e.g., human resource managers) to continue disability awareness and sensitivity training to accommodate shift workers and new employees. These trainings should encompass all different types of disabilities, even those not currently employed at the SOE, to pave the way for employees with disabilities entering employment in the near future. Other employers could similarly learn from these strategies.

We recommend that Government ministries particularly make use of these strategies to improve disability representation in government institutions as a best model of practice. If government could get this right, monitoring and evaluating the private sectors will be even easier.

The scope of this study was small, because it was conducted in partial fulfilment of a master's degree, and limited by time, budget and scope. We recommend that similar studies are done cross-sectionally to consider comparing different SOEs across provinces to reveal common models of best practice.

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Authors' contributions

N.M. conducted data collection and data analysis for master's degree purposes. N.M. and L.N. drafted the first draft of the article. L.N. and M.G. supervised N.M. during her master's studies. All authors made conceptual contributions to the article.

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Data availability

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.

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