

4 The exclusionary potential of work inclusion policies

Employers addressing their responsibilities towards disabled people

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Introduction

There is a large and enduring disability employment gap between disabled people and the general population (Geiger et al., 2017; van der Zwan & de Beer, 2021). This marginalisation in the labour market has been a key marker of social exclusion for disabled people, underpinning their status as a vulnerable group in society (Barnes & Mercer, 2005). Therefore, challenging exclusion in employment is pivotal for fostering social inclusion for disabled citizens. The increased influence of a rights-based narrative concerning employment and considerable legislative efforts of supranational bodies has put the right to participate in work on the agenda (Chhabra, 2021; Waldschmidt, 2009). For example, the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) has recognised "the right of persons with disabilities to work, on an equal basis with others; this includes the right to the opportunity to gain a living by work freely chosen or accepted in a labour market and work environment that is open, inclusive and accessible to persons with disabilities" (Article 27). The key actors in realising such rights are employers. This creates a need for effective policy targeting the employer side.

In this chapter, we investigate a Norwegian work inclusion initiative – the Inclusion Dugnad (implemented in the period of 2018–2022) – and an accompanying trainee programme. With the Inclusion Dugnad, the Norwegian government attempted to facilitate the hiring of disabled people, primarily among state employers. However, an evaluation of the Inclusion Dugnad has shown little impact on the hiring rates (The Norwegian Agency for Public and Financial Management, 2021). This is in line with the general finding that work inclusion policies generally have little impact on the employment rate among disabled people (Geiger et al., 2017; Holland et al., 2011). Thus, this chapter contributes to the literature on why disability employment policies often fail to improve labour market integration and foster social inclusion, a topic also discussed in Chapter 5 by Kohli and Vedeler.

We ask the following: How did state employers targeted by the Inclusion Dugnad understand disability and address their responsibilities towards disabled people? To approach this question, we examine the Inclusion Dugnad initiative and

utilise key findings from two studies concerning state employers' inclusive practices. We use data from an interview-based study with state employers (Østerud, 2020) and observation data from a study on state employers' implementation of a trainee programme targeting disabled job applicants (Framstad et al., 2022). We argue that the Inclusion Dugnad, in how it was communicated and practiced, ended up reproducing the idea that disabled people do not live up to the images of the ideal worker (Foster & Wass, 2013) and that they, because of this, are second-rate workers who we should hire primarily to protect the financial sustainability of the welfare state.

The Inclusion Dugnad – taking one for the team?

There is a hegemonic idea that paid work is central to social citizenship in the Nordic countries (Tarvainen & Hänninen, 2022). Employment is understood as a central way of taking part in society, both socially and economically. In Norway, there has long been an emphasis on the importance of labour market participation of all who are capable, see also Chapter 3 by Heggebø and West Pedersen. In part, this is because Norway, like most advanced economies, is an ageing society expecting a future labour supply shortage and strain on the financial sustainability of the future welfare state. Concerns about sustainability have also been raised in relation to an increase in the number of disability benefits recipients (Terum & Hatland, 2014). The work exclusion of disabled people has been depicted as costly, in terms of both lost tax revenue and social expenditure. This type of discourse is what Hvinden (2003) calls the discourse of societal costs of disability, which he contrasts with a discourse of equal rights and opportunities that has been recognised in the UN-CRPD. Thus, the enduring disability employment gap becomes a cause for concern for the welfare state. In Norway, 78% of the general population is employed, while the same is true for only 37% of the disabled population (Statistics Norway, 2022). In response to worries about societal costs, labour market initiatives have been based on the strong ideal of active participation of all capable citizens found in the Nordic welfare state model (Frøyland et al., 2018). With this ideal in mind, disabled people are considered an underused labour market resource because of the persistent employment gap between disabled and non-disabled people (Geiger et al., 2017). The idea that increased participation in paid work is central to the future of the welfare state, especially when it comes to underrepresented groups like disabled people, was a crucial backdrop for the implementation of the Inclusion Dugnad.

When the Inclusion Dugnad was launched in 2018, the government published a circular explaining its rationale and the obligations for state employers. The Inclusion Dugnad highlighted how labour market participation is a priority for the government and that the government was concerned about the share of people not participating in working life. The circular claimed that “work inclusion and high rates of work participation are important for our creation of wealth” and that a high employment rate is “a prerequisite for ensuring our welfare state and upholding our pension obligations” (Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation, 2018b, p. 2). Although the Inclusion Dugnad was launched as a national motivational campaign targeting all employers, state employers were especially targeted with a

soft hiring quota. The quota demanded that at least 5% of all hires had to be disabled or have a two-year CV gap. The circular also stated that another important intention was to signal the value that disabled workers represent. However, the societal cost of disability was the dominating discourse. A speech from 2018 in which the Minister of Labour and Social Affairs sought to engage Norwegian employers in the Inclusion Dugnad exemplifies this. The Minister asked Norwegian employers to “take one for the team” and give back to the community by hiring someone who struggles to enter the labour market, highlighting the moral duty of employers to contribute to society (Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2018). The use of the Norwegian word “dugnad,” which refers to unpaid voluntary community work, further strengthened the impression of doing it for the greater good. The quota obliged state employers to increase their hiring rates and report annually on their hiring numbers. However, there were no sanctions on enterprises unable to reach the quota target.

As the Inclusion Dugnad was launched, a renewed effort was put into the state trainee programme for disabled people. The programme was first launched in 2006 as a part of the tripartite inclusive working-life agreement. Starting in 2018, the programme was highlighted as one of the key tools state employers could employ to meet their quota target. The participants in the trainee programme were hired as ordinary employees in temporary positions. The trainee was then considered a junior member of the regular staff, filling a position that would otherwise be advertised in an ordinary manner. When applying for a trainee position, disabled candidates must declare that they have an impairment and that they are in need of a workplace accommodation. Employers are legally forbidden to ask directly about the nature of the impairment (according to the Equality and Anti-Discrimination Act), but they can ask about accommodation needs and questions relating to the capacity to perform central work tasks.

State employers struggled to meet the quota targets from the start (Østerud, 2020). The efforts introduced with the Inclusion Dugnad have only been able to show a small increase of hires in the targeted group (The Norwegian Agency for Public and Financial Management, 2021). In 2020, only two out of 16 departmental areas could report that they reached the 5% target goal. When the Inclusion Dugnad was quietly put to rest in 2022, the intended results had not materialised.

Notions of the ideal worker and ableism

In this chapter, we argue that part of the answer to why the Inclusion Dugnad was ineffective in bolstering inclusion is that, by strongly promoting a discourse of societal costs of disability, it effectively suggests that disabled people are a less desirable group from which to hire. A theoretical concept that sheds light on working-life norms that impede labour market integration for disabled people is the ideal worker. The notion of the ideal worker originates from feminist sociology and is used to describe practices that create structural and enduring gender inequalities (Acker, 1990). The ideal worker refers to an abstract person who bears the social characteristics of a man (Acker, 1992). This individual is a devoted and committed

employee, “always ready, willing and able to work” (Cooper, 2000, p. 395). In disability research, the notion of the ideal worker has been applied to describe how it is not just a gendered norm but also a non-disabled norm, showing how jobs are created around an able-bodied ideal that marginalises disabled workers (Foster & Wass, 2013; Jammaers & Zanoni, 2020; Jammaers et al., 2016; Østerud, 2022).

Ableism is a related theoretical concept that refers to the conscious or unconscious assumptions and actions that support the notion of ableness as the human standard and disability as a diminished and substandard way of being (Campbell, 2001). Employment policy that fails to challenge ableist perceptions of disabled people may create a “double bind of ableism” (Campbell, 2009), that is, ableist discursive practices that run counter to the mission of inclusion. The double bind of ableism, Campbell (2009) claims, is created when inclusion initiatives are implemented at the same time as ableist discourses prevail, proclaiming disability as “inherently negative, ontologically intolerable,” which makes a positive significance of disability unspeakable.

The literature has demonstrated how ableism and ideal worker notions contribute to images of disabled people as falling short of prevailing working-life standards. Scholz and Ingold (2020) demonstrate how the notion of the ideal worker is even embedded in active labour market programmes, favouring skills like being adaptive, stable and having few outside responsibilities. Lundberg (2022) shows how ableist norms of normality are found in the public employment service frontline workers’ own narratives of work inclusion success stories, pointing out how disabled people are often presented in a paradoxical way: weak yet strong, deficient yet resilient. In the effort to “redress disabled people’s subordinated position,” frontline workers still reinforce the idea that disabled people fall short of what an ideal worker should look like (Lundberg, 2022, p. 1). Similarly, Tarvainen and Hänninen (2022) point out how the ideals surrounding work participation become yardsticks against which disabled people measure themselves to become either heroes who overcome obstacles or tragedies who fail and remain excluded from full participation in society.

Methods

To investigate how the Inclusion Dugnad was implemented in practice towards disabled people, we draw on two qualitative data sets. Both sets investigate the accounts and hiring practices of Norwegian state employers subjected to the 5% quota. In addition, the second data set allows for an investigation of the interaction between employers and jobseekers. Both data sets were part of studies that were reviewed by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data to ensure compliance with research ethics guidelines.

The first data set was ten semistructured qualitative employer interviews with eight middle managers and four HR representatives (two of the interviews had two participants). The aim of the study was to uncover employer accounts of hiring practices and attitudes regarding the Inclusion Dugnad and disabled people. The interviewees were recruited based on recent job advertisements, ensuring that they had recently carried out a recruitment process. The interviewees were from

different levels in the state sector, from ministries to underlying agencies and enterprises. They were either managers or HR representatives and were all involved in the recruitment processes. The interviews were conducted between January and March 2019, approximately six to nine months after the Inclusion Dugnad was launched in June 2018.

The second data set is a series of observations in a recruitment process to a trainee programme for disabled candidates. The data consist of observations of six job interviews with four women and two men in an adviser position in a state agency. All of the candidates had impairments that they disclosed in a letter before the interview took place. The job interviews were carried out by a section manager and HR adviser. A union representative was also present. A follow-up research interview with the section manager was done after the hire was made, as well as with four of the candidates, to tap into their experiences of taking part in this kind of job interview. Through the observation, we aimed to investigate how disability is addressed in job interviews between a non-disabled employer and disabled job candidates. Observations and interviews were conducted in the fall of 2019.

The data were thoroughly read in light of the research question, searching for overarching themes that could help describe how employers responded to the Inclusion Dugnad in their hiring practice and explain why employers struggle to increase hiring rates of disabled people. The themes were discussed and refined through an iterative process of reading, discussion and writing. In the following findings section, we first consider a central theme found in the first data set and then another theme in the second.

Findings

Inclusion as a charitable act

The interviews yielded rich accounts of how the employers related to the initiative and how they evaluated the feasibility of reaching the 5% goal. When talking about their recruitment practices, the overwhelming majority could not point to much experience with hiring disabled people. Even though the Inclusion Dugnad had not been in effect for a long time, the intended purpose of the quota was for state employers to “lead the way” (Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation, 2018a). This did not turn out to be the case. The recruitment processes conducted in this time period should have been regarded as important opportunities in trying to reach the 5% goal. Only one of the interviewees could refer to a recent hire of a disabled person. Generally, experience with disabled candidates was minimal. This finding was also reflected in a document analysis investigating 161 annual state employer reports, showing that only 3.1% of the state employers reported that they fulfilled the quota in the first year (Østerud, 2020).

The notions of an ideal worker influencing recruitment were evident in the employer accounts because the interviewees talked about how the pressure to be productive led them to want to make the most out of each position for which they hired. They referred to the high standards demanded of their employees and to how

each employee had to deliver an abstracted notion of 100% productivity if they were to fill a full-time, 100% position. The employers typically described getting assigned vacancies to advertise as a scarce coveted resource. The abstracted candidate they had in mind would have to be able to fill a 100% position, as illustrated by the following statements by the managers of three different enterprises:

We are a government agency where we need highly competent employees. The pressure is high when it comes to expected contributions and deliverables, many work trips, big international and national projects and so on, and then, it's clear, it takes something special to be admitted.

(Interviewee 2)

I could have a lot of people with impairments, but then, I want to be compensated, right? If 40% of the time or whatever that, they don't work. Is that kind of reasoning. If I base my consideration on a 100% position, that is not what I get from that person. So that is the challenge from the employer's perspective.

(Interviewee 5)

Potentially to be stuck with an employee that does not function well, that I need to pay a salary and that blocks other resources out, that is a situation I absolutely do not want.

(Interviewee 8)

The employers in these excerpts exemplify how vacancies are abstracted and constructed as made for someone highly productive. Their impressions of disabled people became equated with someone falling short of this ideal, which was irreconcilable with the abstracted candidate they imagined they would need.

Although many referred to this notion of getting the most productivity possible out of each position, several interviewees expressed positive attitudes towards the Inclusion Dugnad. The positive employers seemed more open to negotiating the terms with a suitable disabled candidate and wanted to give disabled applicants a greater chance of demonstrating that they fit into the job. They described themselves as having an "attitude of generosity," "a veil of positivity" and "giving an extra chance." The employers mentioned two important reasons why they wanted to express such an attitude. The first was the need to provide help for disabled people who struggled to enter the labour market. In addition, the welfare state sustainability narrative was mentioned as an important reason why inclusion was important:

The calculation for the Norwegian government is easy. It costs so and so much to have someone dependent on welfare benefits for their whole life instead of the person being productive and generating tax revenue that can finance others.

(Interviewee 1)

The narrative of inclusion as something done for the greater good often appeared in the conversation. Although the influence of the notion of an ideal worker was present throughout the interviews, the interviewees varied in how they positioned themselves against it. Some, like interviewees 2 and 8 mentioned earlier, displayed disinterest in disabled job seekers on the basis that they did not see them fitting with their image of an ideal worker. The employers embracing the importance of taking social responsibility and doing it for the greater good, most often the HR representatives, seemed more open to adjusting their expectations slightly:

I think managers are willing to exert extra effort, and many of them are willing. And everyone could expand this, not exactly affirmative action, but under otherwise equal circumstances can be interpreted in many ways. They want someone who can contribute. If you can't contribute 100% because of something you struggle with, then you can contribute 85% and 80%, and that is enough. I think I don't know every leader in the state or in the municipalities, but I know quite a lot of them, and I think there are many who are positive and willing and want to contribute.

(Interviewee 6)

The ideal worker notions and inclusion rationales could thus create a certain image of what disability and inclusion are. Disabled people's marginalised position in the labour market was understood mainly in terms of their shortcomings, here as related to competence and productivity. To hire disabled people, employers seemed to interpret a need to at least slightly disregard qualifications and productivity potential. Inclusion efforts were seen as a way of helping them, despite their shortcomings, to support a sustainable welfare state. Disability becomes something inherently negative, and inclusion becomes something of a generous practice. The act of calling the inclusion effort a "dugnad" further strengthens the charitable image. Hiring disabled people is then an uncompensated task that employers take on to serve the greater good. Thus, inclusion becomes a charitable act, and in competition with productivity ideals, charity was seen as something falling outside of the managers' core responsibilities.

Difficulties in addressing disability as an asset

The interview observations provided a demonstration of state employers' hiring practices towards disabled jobseekers and how this impacts job interview conversations between the employer and jobseeker. We found that the employers divided the trainee position job interviews into three parts. In the first part, the employer introduced the trainee programme; in the second, the qualifications and competence of the candidate were addressed; and in the third, the employer and candidate engaged in a conversation about the need for accommodation. Here, we focus on the second phase to show how the employer addressed and answered the phenomenon of disability when introduced in this part of the job interview about qualifications and competence. After the first introductory part, the employer marked

a shift by saying that the actual interview began: “Let’s just start, can you tell us a little bit about yourself, who are you?” In the follow-up research interview with the section manager, the employer said that this phase followed the same procedure as in an ordinary job interview where questions are asked about motivation for the announced position; oral, written and analytical skills; ability to collaborate; and the candidate’s views on interdisciplinary work. The observations reveal that uncertainty about the status of disability permeated this part of the interview – both from the perspective of the candidate when introducing themselves and on the part of the employer in the follow-up of the candidate’s presentation. Candidate A, for example, seemed to perceive the question about who she was as vague:

Ehm, well, I do not know if I should explain why I am here or why I am applying for this position. I did write a bit about that [referring to a letter regarding accommodation needs that the applicants were asked to submit], but I got . . . ehm . . . a chronic [disease]. It took a while before it became chronic, so I may not have fully understood . . . uh . . . the seriousness of it. Ehm . . . and [I just] kept on . . . ehm . . . and then, well, eventually, it did not go very well. So I ended up on sick leave and eventually also had to take a break from my studies, had to take a proper break and began receiving intensive treatment.

The excerpt shows that the candidate started out by first relating how she got the chronic illness. Later in the dialogue, she reflected on the choice of education and her motivation for why she applied for this adviser position. The other candidates also addressed disability when introducing themselves, such as candidate C:

Section Leader: Can you first start by telling a little about yourself, who are you?

Candidate C: Well, yes, my name is [name of candidate], I have a degree [name of profession] from the university in [name of city]. I have a partial disability pension, which I’ve had for two years.

The way the candidates replied to the employer’s questions suggests that they perceived themselves more as job applicants with a disability than as job applicants with suitable qualifications. The same thing happened when we examined the candidates’ motivation for applying for the position, as illustrated in the dialogue between the section leader and job candidate B:

Section leader: You did write a little bit about it, but if you could say a little bit about the motivation for applying for this position?

Candidate B: Yes . . . when I first read about this [kind of position], I thought it was very good . . . very good like with the Inclusion Dugnad and that kind of thing . . . I, I have been to a few earlier interviews that were quite conventional, and I, I dare not write in the application that I use hearing aids, I am afraid that I will be discriminated against, for example. For this position, it is very, in a way,

very reassuring, where you already know that I am applying because I have a disab- . . . well, yes . . . I think it's great, and I do need work experience.

Whereas the candidates addressed the issue of disability when responding to interview questions, the employer appeared passive when the subject was raised. The employer just confirmed the information with nods and continued down the list of questions listed in the interview guide. The conversation with candidate A shows the unease the employer displayed. The topic was on progress with work tasks:

Section leader: But if you could reflect on . . . ehm . . . whether you would have any tips or tricks to make progress also on work tasks that are not yet urgent?

Candidate A: I think as a starting point if you set up your calendar with, the first thing you do when you come in the morning, that is . . . then you set aside maybe 15 minutes to look through your email. Is there anything urgent? No, not right now. And perhaps it is early in the morning that you are more awake. Of course, people may be quite different. But that you separate the day into different parts.

Section leader: Mhm . . . that sounds like good ideas. We need to save those tips (mild laughter).

HR adviser: Yes, I thought about it, too, have to write some notes (humming).

Section leader: No, I'm thinking that this is something you do in fact have some experience with, based on what you have been thro-, through both studies that are long-term towards an exam, but also with children that have to be taken to nursery.

In this dialogue, A's advice on how to organise one's work tasks was acknowledged actively by both the leader and HR adviser (they are taking notes while A talks). Then, we see that, in the last utterance, the section leader was about to comment that this effective way of organising one's workday can probably be related to A's experience of living a life with a disability, but she stopped herself in the middle of the sentence ("have some experience with, based on what you have been thro-"). She moved quickly on to relate this effectiveness to A's status as a mother and her previous student life. The excerpt indicates difficulty and discomfort in addressing the experience of being disabled as an asset. This difficulty was also apparent in another interview in which the candidate tried to talk about their experience with a disability as an asset (candidate F). He said in his interview that he was the first person in Norway with an impairment to complete the university degree he had. Yet this was something the interviewer did not respond to or ask follow-up questions about. Instead, a substantial portion of the interview was directed towards a discussion of accommodation needs.

It is important to note that a stated prerequisite for participating in the trainee programme was that the candidate had accommodation needs. This need was defined generally and not in relation to a specific position. In the observed interviews,

the interviewers also had not decided to which specific department the candidate would belong. Thus, needing accommodation is decontextualised and individualised. This contributed to a view of disability as a personal attribute, detaching disability from its contextual aspects. This prerequisite could contribute to the employers being motivated to uncover the specific accommodation needs early to control whether the candidate fulfilled requirements for participation or not and, thus, be more attuned to needs rather than assets in their evaluation. As one employer stated in the interview with candidate C, “We do have to evaluate whether you are eligible for the trainee programme, basically.”

Concluding discussion

The findings demonstrate how the employers commonly adopt an understanding of disability as an individual attribute that is inherently negative. This understanding is hard for employers to reconcile with their images of the ideal worker. Disability was seen by the participants as a condition that in and of itself triggers a need for accommodation or a lower work capacity, regardless of context. This individualised and deficiency-oriented understanding made it difficult for employers to identify potentially positive assets tied to a disability identity. Many of the employers sympathised with disabled people struggling to gain access to work, but they largely attributed this marginalisation to disabled people’s shortcomings and not to discriminatory mechanisms or inflexible work arrangements, despite the reality of discrimination that has been demonstrated in multiple field experiments (Ameri et al., 2018; Baert et al., 2016; Bellemare et al., 2018; Bjørnshagen, 2021; Bjørnshagen & Ugreninov, 2021). This deficiency-oriented sentiment is an echo of the framing of inclusion as a *dugnad*, a charitable voluntary act. Labelling the inclusion effort as a “*dugnad*” and anchoring it in the welfare state sustainability narrative and “taking one for the team” portray inclusive hiring as acts of voluntary and selfless sacrifice needed for upholding the future of the welfare state. The Inclusion *Dugnad*, thus, rests on an individualised approach to disability inclusion and a vision of citizenship that fails to sufficiently address structural barriers. Thus, by bolstering a discourse of the societal costs of disability, the Inclusion *Dugnad* can be argued to have contributed to the legitimatisation of disabled people’s marginalised position in the labour market rather than challenging and contextualising it.

The fact that disabled people are excluded from the labour market and face significant barriers in exercising the right to work is a significant societal problem. Unemployment creates higher rates of poverty (Grammenos, 2019) and precludes access to an important arena of life that can provide purpose, status, activity and social contact (Jahoda, 1981; Paul & Batinic, 2010). Historically, the notion of citizenship has been associated with the exclusionary potential for disabled people by espousing ideals of productivity, independence and rationality that limit the potential for disabled people to act as autonomous individuals (Altermark, 2017; Snyder & Mitchell, 2010). As a response to such concerns, Waldschmidt and Sépulchre (2019) propose that a nuanced approach to citizenship that combines a human rights approach can

be beneficial for disabled people because of its principles of participation, autonomy and solidarity. What this could mean for work inclusion efforts is the recognition of disabled people as an underrepresented minority facing significant societal barriers in exercising their right to work, in which society has a duty to help diminish. We suggest that in order to have a better potential to muster employer effort, future work inclusion policies need to build on a notion of citizenship that incorporates a rights-based perspective. This means highlighting a discourse of equal rights and opportunities and focusing less on the discourse of societal costs of disability (Hvinden, 2003). This perspective rests on a disability human rights paradigm that acknowledges the nuanced nature of disability (Harpur, 2019). By incorporating imperatives from a rights-based perspective, inclusion efforts could better address the social and structural barriers that stand in the way of labour market participation.

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