



# Leading the Way? State Employers' Engagement with a Disability Employment Policy<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

*In the literature on labor market integration, there is growing recognition of the importance of employers. This article aims to contribute to this stream of research by investigating state employers' engagement with a soft employment quota launched alongside a wider initiative in Norway, named the Inclusion Dugnad. An initial document analysis showed that only 3.1% of state employers fulfill the quota at the early stage. Analysis of 10 state employer interviews revealed that they appeared to be mostly passive and, to some degree, dismissive of the Inclusion Dugnad. They relied on passive measures where disabled job seekers are expected to actively seek out the employer and not the other way around. The main obstacles to achieving employer engagement seemed to be the apparent lack of disabled applicants and the reported conflict between the goals of the Inclusion Dugnad and the cost-cutting and productivity standards governing the state employer sector.*

## KEYWORDS

*Active labor market policies / disability / employer engagement / employment / labor market integration / public sector*

## Introduction

In labor market policies throughout Europe, the integration of disabled people is a topic that has received significant attention. Driving these policies is the persistent and evident employment gap between people with and without disabilities. In OECD countries, the average employment rate of people with disabilities is 44% (OECD 2010). This is a considerably smaller portion than among the general working-age population which is 75%. In the Nordic countries, a relatively large employment gap persists despite a high general employment rate. Although the exact numbers vary according to how disability is defined, Sweden generally has a smaller gap and Norway has a larger gap (Geiger et al. 2017). In Norway, the numbers are similar to the OECD average, with 43.8% of the disabled population being employed, versus 74% of the general population (Statistics Norway 2019). According to Statistics Norway (2018), a quarter of these unemployed disabled people—that is, 85,000 people—say that they wish to work, but finding work relies not only on willingness but also on opportunity.

Whom employers hire and do not hire has a profound impact on the labor market integration of marginalized groups, including disabled people. In the literature on

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active labor market policies (ALMPs), there is a small but growing group of researchers turning their attention to employers and the concept of employer engagement, that is, employer involvement in ALMPs (Bredgaard 2018; Bredgaard and Halkjær 2016; Ingold and Stuart 2015; Martin 2005; van Berkel et al. 2017; van der Aa and van Berkel 2014). This line of research recognizes the fact that any government strategy that aims to include marginalized groups in the labor market ultimately hinges on its ability to engage employers. In the Nordic context, the dominating view of disability is relational and seen to arise from an interaction between the person and their impairment and the barriers they encounter in their environment (Tøssebro 2013). The relational definition recognizes that the disabling effects of the labor market is not only dependent on characteristics of the disabled person but also on how they are evaluated by employers. This is a sentiment echoed in an employer engagement perspective.

This article sets out to contribute to the growing field of employer engagement by investigating how employers relate to disability employment policies, that is, policies aimed at increasing the employment of disabled people. The objective is to look more closely at state employers in Norway and how they engage with the Inclusion Dugnad,<sup>3</sup> a labor market policy launched in Norway in 2018. As earlier research has focused primarily on the private sector or failed to address the differences between sectors, this article sheds light on some of the specific challenges in the public sector. Employer engagement and the typology formulated by Bredgaard (2018) is the guiding framework for the analysis. The research question thus becomes the following: How do state employers in Norway engage with the Inclusion Dugnad at the early policy implementation stage, and what are the potential obstacles to their participation?

## Disability employment policies in Norway

In the last two decades, the integration of disabled people into the labor market has become an issue of increasing importance for governments across Europe. Despite some differences, an OECD report from 2010 points to a considerable convergence of policies (OECD 2010). The report emphasizes a shift from a passive to an active employment-oriented approach, focusing on measures such as antidiscrimination legislation, modified employment quotas, stronger employer incentives, and improved wage subsidies. The Nordic countries are characterized by being generous welfare states providing an important safety net for people with impairments and health issues (Halvorsen et al. 2015). However, there is a solid consensus that maintaining the Nordic model is dependent on active participation from its citizens including work participation for everyone who is capable (Frøyland et al. 2019). Hvinden (2004) points out that there is generally a strong ideal to promote work participation in the Nordic countries, but that there has been a reluctance to enforce formal obligations for employers. Instead, they rely more on voluntary effort and agreements. The Inclusion Dugnad is one of the rarer instances of trying to implement formal obligations, but it

<sup>3</sup> *Inkluderingsdugnaden* in Norwegian. According to the *Dictionary of the Norwegian Academy*, *dugnad*, a Norwegian word that originated from Old Norse, refers to unpaid voluntary community work and can be translated as ‘help’ or ‘support’. Having a *dugnad* means relying on the voluntary participation of the general community to reach common goals.

still builds on the strong Nordic norm of active citizenship through work participation (Frøyland et al. 2019).

The Inclusion Dugnad is an initiative that is related to other disability employment policy trends in Norway targeting employers. In 2008, the first antidiscrimination law for disabled people was implemented, banning discrimination in recruitment. In addition, the government ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2013. In 2001, the government set in motion the Inclusive Working Life Agreement (the IA Agreement), which is a tripartite agreement between the authorities, the major trade union confederations, and employer confederations. Until 2018, one of the subgoals of the IA agreement was to prevent labor market withdrawal and increase employment for people with disabilities (Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs 2014). However, when it comes to increasing the employment rate, the results of this agreement have been disappointing; there have been no results to show for the 17 years since its creation (NAV 2017). In the renegotiation of the agreement in the fall of 2018, the parties agreed to remove the subgoal completely. This left the Inclusion Dugnad as the only national public initiative that encourages employers to commit to including disabled people.

The Inclusion Dugnad initiative was launched in 2018 by the Norwegian government with a key goal of promoting employment for disabled people. In this inclusion initiative, the government wants to instill the *dugnad* spirit in employers and motivate them to contribute to labor market integration by hiring people with disabilities or with CV gaps of at least two years. The Inclusion Dugnad is both a persuasion strategy and a regulation strategy. The persuasion strategy is a motivational campaign urging Norwegian employers to consider the importance of labor market integration for people from marginalized groups while addressing the need for employers to contribute. This soft persuasion approach, which is aimed at every employer in Norway, is paired with a regulatory approach for state employer, that is, a quota. ‘The State shall lead the way in the effort to include more people’ were the words of the Minister of Local Government and Modernization when launching the quota, urging state employers to be role models for all Norwegian employers (Ministry of Local Government and Modernization 2018). The quota commits state employers to ensure that at least 5% of new hires are disabled or have a CV gap of at least two years. In the circular sent out to state employers about the quota, an instance of hiring a disabled person is counted if the applicant ticks the disability box in the job application portal, or if a new hire communicates that they have a disability that will require accommodations. The Inclusion Dugnad is a legislative obligation for state employers, but it is not backed by sanctions. Even though it is a rare instance of a formal obligation or quota in the Nordic setting, the lack of any sanctions is in line with previous trends in Nordic disability employment policies, where there has been a reluctance to enforce regulations with supervision, control, and sanctions, even when applied to the state itself (Hvinden 2004).

## Theoretical background

The angle from which we approach labor market integration issues has consequences for how we construct the problem and therefore the solutions. The concept of employer engagement has arisen as a reaction to an arguably one-sided approach to ALMPs. The

literature describes three main approaches to ALMPs: a supply-side, demand-side, and a matching or support-side approach (Bredgaard and Thomsen 2018; Frøyland et al. 2018). A focus on the supply side means improving the qualifications and employability of the job seeker for the labor market. In addition, it can mean focusing on incentivizing work participation by enforcing stricter eligibility criteria for disability benefits and implementing activation measures backed by sanctions. In contrast, a demand-side approach means focusing on influencing the employer's willingness to train, hire, or guide the unemployed person (van der Aa and van Berkel 2014). The third approach can be described as a combination of the supply and demand sides, as the aim is to match labor supply (job seekers) and labor demand (employers) (Bredgaard 2018). The support-side approach systematically utilizes ordinary workplaces based on the notion of 'place then train', and the most notable programs within this approach are Supported Employment and Individual Placement and Support (Frøyland et al. 2019).

Within ALMPs, there has been a clear emphasis on supply-side policies (Bredgaard and Halkjær 2016; van Berkel et al. 2017) to the degree that some call it supply-side fundamentalism (Peck and Theodore 2000). This can be linked to a trend in Western societies where long-term unemployment is seen as a result of personal shortcomings (Hobbins 2016). One major problem with a one-sided focus on supply is that it is based on a conception of unemployment as a personal responsibility and contributes to the stigma against people who are already in a vulnerable position (Salognon 2007). Furthermore, it has been difficult to produce convincing results of supply-side policies (Kluve 2010). Therefore, the supply-side domination in social policy has been challenged.

A concept that is suited to the task of challenging this is employer engagement. This can be defined as 'the active involvement of employers in addressing the societal challenge of promoting the labor market participation of vulnerable groups' (van Berkel et al. 2017, 503). Van Berkel et al. (2017) point to the paradox that ALMPs have mainly been treated as a social and public policy issue, and they argue that they should also be treated as an Human Resource Management policy issue. Despite employers being the target of many ALMPs, little systematic attention has been paid to their role (Strindlund et al. 2018). Thus, the involvement of employers in ALMPs remains an under-researched and under-theorized issue (Bredgaard and Halkjær 2016). The concept of employer engagement does, however, make an important contribution to the increasing efforts to remedy this deficiency. Ingold and Stuart (2015) state that the concept turns on its head the supply-side ideology underpinning many ALMPs, whereby unemployment is seen as a problem with the individual. Instead of thinking that jobs are available only if people can be persuaded to take them, it can be said that jobs are available only if employers can be persuaded to offer them. There is, however, no unified understanding of employer engagement as of yet, and in the policy literature, terms such as 'employer involvement' and 'employer participation' have been used interchangeably (van Berkel et al. 2017).

Some attempts have been made to separate and categorize employers' engagement on the basis of their participating behavior and attitudes (Bredgaard 2018; Martin 2004, 2005; Nelson 2012) and on their motivation for participating in ALMPs (Bredgaard and Halkjær 2016; Orton et al. 2019; van der Aa and van Berkel 2014). Others use employer engagement to describe the activities of providers (public employment services or external job agents) to get employers involved in ALMPs (Aksnes 2019; Ingold and Stuart 2015). This article is concerned with employers' behavior and attitudes because the aim is to investigate the employer side of both participation and nonparticipation.

Many of the attempts to categorize employers tend to conflate attitudes and behavior, and to counter this, Bredgaard (2018) presents a typology that clearly separates the two dimensions. Based on either nonparticipation or participation and positive or negative attitudes toward ALMPs, Bredgaard creates a typology of four different employers: the committed, the dismissive, the skeptical, and the passive (see Table 1). The committed employer participates and has a positive attitude, and at the other end of the spectrum, the dismissive employer has a negative attitude and does not participate. The passive employer has a positive attitude but does not participate, and the skeptical employer participates but has a negative attitude.

**Table 1** The employer engagement typology by Bredgaard (2018)

	<b>Nonparticipation</b>	<b>Participation</b>
<b>Positive attitudes</b>	The passive employer	The committed employer
<b>Negative attitudes</b>	The dismissive employer	The skeptical employer

This typology is the framework utilized in analyzing this study, and it is done by looking at the dimensions of attitudes and behavior vis-à-vis hiring disabled people.

The potential obstacles for employers' engagement with a disability policy must be understood in relation to conceptions of disability. In disability studies, there is an emphasis on how ableist norms, that is, norms that perpetuate a normative nonimpaired standard body as the fully human state (Campbell 2008), disadvantages the disabled person in the labor market. Foster and Wass (2013) point to the ideals of efficiency and standardization as an obstacle to labor market integration and maintain that modern jobs are organized around ableist assumptions regarding what constitutes an ideal worker. When jobs are designed for people without any impairments, accommodating disabled workers is an unexpected hassle. A study by Mik-Meyer (2017) complements this argument in an interesting way. Mik-Meyer, who studied employers in a Danish context, highlights to how the highly praised values of sameness and equality in Scandinavia reinforce the idea that all employees are the same and, thus, must be treated as such, making it difficult for people who are in need of special accommodation. Jammaers et al. (2016) shed light on the pervasiveness of negative representations of disabled workers, especially around the assumption of lower productivity. They point out the contradictory position of disabled people in the workplace; as disabled, they are defined by what they are not able to do, and at the same time, as employees, they are hired for what they are able to do.

Assumptions about productivity and what disabled people can do is an important aspect to consider in the context of state employer hiring processes. The administrative apparatus in Nordic countries is characterized by merit-based bureaucratic professionalism and by openness and transparency (Greve et al. 2016). This is evident in the strict hiring regulations the public sector is made to follow. A central regulation is the qualification principle. This principle in the Norwegian Civil Service Law states that the highest-qualified applicant must get the job (Civil Service Law § 3). Hiring decisions are made in this context, emphasizing a merit-based norm possibly based around assumptions about competence and productivity. Civil Service Law § 6 does, however, permit moderate affirmative action, whereby a disabled applicant can be favored over another if the former's



qualifications are approximately equal to those of the other best-qualified candidate. In addition, they are obliged to invite applicants who tick the box to an interview in case they find him or her qualified for the job (Civil Service Law § 6).

Traditionally, disabled people have seen the public sector as more attractive than the private sector because the former implicitly challenges the productivity models associated with work controlled by market mechanisms (Roulstone 2012). However, with strong influence from New Public Management (NPM), the public productivity models seem to converge with those in the private sector, emphasizing cost cutting, efficiency, and discipline in resource use (Boston 2011). NPM norms of cost-cutting are present in the Norwegian sample through a recent efficiency reform. In 2015, The Norwegian government implemented a de-bureaucratization and efficiency reform throughout the state enterprises for which the goal was to increase productivity while using fewer financial resources, matching the productivity growth that is seen in the private sector (Ministry of Finance 2019). The goal was set to cut budgets for state enterprises by around 0.5% a year, forcing them to make incremental cuts every year. Cost-cutting reforms influence hiring practices and, therefore, also possibly employer engagement. Another aspect is also an increasing lack of unskilled work tasks in the public sector. Research indicates that there are large disparities in employment between disabled and nondisabled workers and that disabled people tend to be overrepresented in entry-level positions that do not emphasize job skills (Kaye 2009). This could mean that mechanisms that make it harder for disabled people to access skill-demanding positions will be extra potent with state employers primarily seeking high-skilled workers. Earlier research on employer engagement has focused mainly on employers in the private sector or has not highlighted any differences between sectors. For example, contributions such as Aksnes (2019); Ingold and Stuart (2015); Martin (2005) focus on private sector employers, while others, such as Bredgaard (2018) and Simms (2017), include both private and public employers, without differences being specifically addressed. Therefore, this article complements the current body of research by addressing and examining some of the specific challenges state employers in the Nordic public sector face, a sector expected to be particularly inclusive.

## Methods

The main choice of method to explore the state employers' relationship with the Inclusion Dugnad was qualitative and was based on state employer interviews. The interviewees were recruited by searching job advertisements in the major online job databases, nav.no and finn.no. The criteria for participation were that they had recently advertised a vacancy in order to reach employers recently involved in hiring. They were contacted by the e-mail or phone listed in the job ad to request their voluntary participation. In total, 27 state enterprises were contacted. Eventually, 12 people from 10 different state employers agreed to be interviewed; this means that some interviews were done with two people at the same time. Semi-structured interviews were carried out between January and March 2019. The employers were located in the Oslo area. One interviewee was recruited strategically based on their involvement in a specific trainee program targeting disabled job seekers. This was done in order to make sure that employers involved in the actual hiring of disabled people were also represented. The interviewees were either middle-level hiring managers or human resource (HR) personnel working in recruitment

(four HR employees and eight hiring managers). Both HR personnel and hiring managers play important roles in recruitment strategies, but they serve different functions and access different resources. Ensuring that both roles were represented in the interviews provided insights from both points of view. The advertisements were for jobs that demanded a bachelor's degree at a minimum; some demanded a master's degree. The positions were within subjects such as IT, law, policy development, and communications within public administration. All the interviewees came from the central government. Four interviewees were from government ministries, and the remainder were from central agencies or the higher education system. All the enterprises can be described as knowledge-intensive organizations, where the work is of a primarily intellectual nature and the employees are highly educated (Alvesson 2001). Apart from some IT jobs, the positions in question are part of a very competitive labor market, and the interviewees stated that they typically had many qualified candidates from whom to choose.

In the interviews, the participants were asked to describe their recruitment practices and how they related these to the 5% goal, with an emphasis on disabled job seekers. They were also asked about their experience with an impression of disabled people as employees and whether they had any experience using the public employment service. The longest interview lasted 1 hour and 8 minutes and the shortest 35 minutes, with an average of 49 minutes. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Table 2 lists all participants; the names provided are pseudonyms to ensure the interviewees' anonymity.

**Table 2** Overview over participants

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Participant number</b>	<b>Enterprise</b>	<b>Level in public administration</b>	<b>Role</b>	<b>Male/female</b>
<b>Christian</b>	Participant 1	Enterprise 1	Public higher education organization	Manager	M
<b>Monica</b>	Participant 2	Enterprise 2	Central agency	Manager	F
<b>Rune</b>	Participant 3	Enterprise 2	Central agency	HR	M
<b>Marianne</b>	Participant 4	Enterprise 3	Central agency	Manager	F
<b>Eva</b>	Participant 5	Enterprise 4	Central agency	Manager	F
<b>Eric</b>	Participant 6	Enterprise 5	Ministry	HR	M
<b>Roger</b>	Participant 7	Enterprise 6	Ministry	HR	M
<b>Robert</b>	Participant 8	Enterprise 7	Central agency	Manager	M
<b>Astrid</b>	Participant 9	Enterprise 8	Central agency	Manager	F
<b>Thomas</b>	Participant 10	Enterprise 8	Central agency	Manager	M
<b>Anna</b>	Participant 11	Enterprise 9	Ministry	HR	F
<b>Tor</b>	Participant 12	Enterprise 10	Ministry	Manager	M

The method used to guide the analysis was thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). A deductive approach to the material was chosen, using the typology provided by Bredgaard (2018) as a starting point, and the codes and themes that were developed were semantic rather than latent. The framework provided a flexible analysis along the two axes of attitudes and participation. The two dimensions served as a basic set

of codes based on an a priori theoretical understanding of engagement. The interviews were coded in NVivo line by line in each of these dimensions when relevant, and subcategories were identified and eventually themed.

To complement the qualitative interview material with a broader perspective, the quota fulfillment reported by all the state employers was investigated. In order to do this, the state enterprises' annual reports in which they are required to provide information about the quota were analyzed. All state employers are required to publish an annual report concerning the enterprise, where they report on key issues, such as finance, accomplishments, and prospects. These annual reports were published in May 2019 and related to the year 2018, and the full analysis was done after conducting and analyzing the interviews. The Inclusion Dugnad is one issue on which they are obliged to report, and they must describe both what they have done to reach the target of 5% and the number of hires who fit the criteria. A total of 161 annual reports were found and read. Only five reports were unavailable on the enterprises' own webpages. The reports were analyzed by counting frequencies. First, the frequency of mentioning the quota and reporting the quota fulfilled was counted. Second, the reasons given for not fulfilling the quota was listed and eventually categorized in order to calculate frequencies. Table 3 summarizes the data sources. In the following section, findings from the document analysis will be presented first. The annual reports provide a background of the general picture of all state employers before delving deeper into the specific findings based on the interview material.

**Table 3** Summary of data sources

	<b>Total number</b>	<b>Time period</b>	<b>Analysis</b>
<b>Annual reports</b>	161	A report on the year 2018, published May 2019	Frequency counts
<b>Interviews</b>	10	Conducted January-March 2019	Thematic analysis

## Findings

### Annual reports

The reading of the reports revealed that very few of the state enterprises fulfilled the quota goal (see Table 4). Only 3.1% of the enterprises reported that 5% of new hires either had a disability or had a two-year CV gap.

**Table 4** Enterprises mentioning and fulfilling the 5% quota. N = 161

	<b>Number</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Enterprises reporting quota fulfilled</b>	5	3.1
<b>Enterprises mentioning the quota</b>	119	73.9

We must keep in mind that this is based only on the period from July to December 2018 and the early implementation stage. Therefore, it is interesting to look at the reasons given for not reaching the target. Among the 119 enterprises that mentioned the

quota but had not reached it, many gave reasons for not being able to fulfill it. Table 5 lists the most common reasons: (1) They had few or no vacancies, making hiring opportunities scarce; (2) they lacked applicants with a disability or CV gap; and (3) the applicants who disclosed a disability or a CV gap lacked the qualifications to compete with other applicants. Other less common reasons were that they required highly specialized personnel, that personnel needed health approval, or that they had been through organizational restructuring and downsizing.

**Table 5** The three most common reasons given in the annual reports. The percentages reflect the proportion of enterprises that address the quota in the report but were not able to fulfill it. N = 114

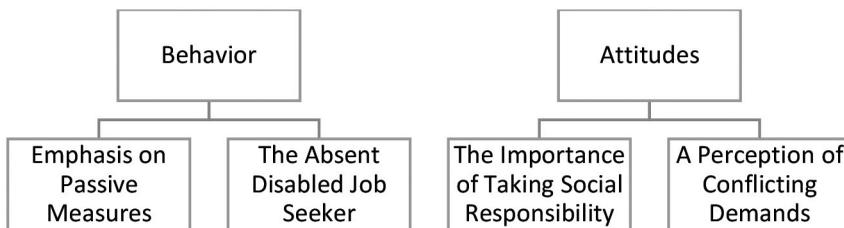
Reasons for not fulfilling the quota	Number	%
Few/no vacancies	31	27.19
Lack of applicants	29	25.4
Lack of qualifications among applicants	26	22.8

### Interviews

Using the Bredgaard (2018) typology to categorize the interviewed employers, it was found that the typical state employer in the sample was the passive type—that is, an employer with a positive general attitude but with little or no actual inclusive hiring behavior. Six of the ten employer representatives fit this type. The dismissive type also fit some of the interviewees, but to a lesser degree; three of the employer representatives matched this particular type. Only one of the 10 employers fit the committed type, having recently hired a disabled person. None fit the skeptical type.

The central analysis for the interviews was, however, the thematic analysis of the interview material, aiming to uncover what was below the surface of the categorization, drawing on the two dimensions in Bredgaard’s (2018) typology—behavior and attitudes. The coding of the data and the careful development and review of possible themes ended in two pairs of themes within each dimension or four themes in total (see Figure 1). Within the behavior dimension the themes, (1) emphasis on passive measures and (2) the absent disabled worker were identified, and within the attitude dimension, the themes (3) the importance of taking social responsibility and (4) a perception of conflicting demands. The themes reflect broad topics represented across the different interviews.

**Figure 1** The four themes linked to the two dimensions of the employer engagement typology.



## Behavior

The coded statements on the behavior dimension are concerned with topics related to concrete actions taken to meet the demands of the Inclusion Dugnad or the lack thereof. The analysis resulted in one theme about the clear focus on measures that are passive, emphasizing the job seeker, and not the employer taking the active role, and one about a recurring problem that arises regarding their main efforts, the absent disabled job seeker.

### Emphasis on passive measures

All the interviewees mentioned passive measures that were implemented in order to hire people with disabilities, and they stood out as the main approach to increase hiring. One of these was putting an inclusion statement in their job ads that encouraged people from multiple underrepresented groups, among them people with disabilities, to apply for the positions. It became clear that they saw these as phrases that they were obliged to put in their ads and that many of the recruiting leaders felt little ownership toward them. As one manager stated:

The fact that we have those mandatory two to three sentences at the bottom of every ad, where we encourage people with a foreign background or a disability to apply, may not be enough. Because it becomes one of those standard phrases that is in every ad because it has to be there. So, I guess we could be more proactive toward that group of job seekers. (Thomas, manager)

The inclusion statements appear to have become a standard component of all job advertisements across different state enterprises, and the HR line was mentioned as a driving force behind the enforcement of this rule. In addition to these statements, a key element of the passive strategy is the opportunity for the disabled job seeker to tick a box asking whether they have any impairment. This is a feature in the job application portal that all state managers use in their recruitment processes. A manager, explained:

We are part of the public system, and the fact that we have provided the opportunity to tick the box ... that you have parameters like this as an opportunity ... I think is a part of what we do to make this group visible and raise awareness in the recruitment process. That is the most specific thing we do, I think. (Eva, manager)

The interviewees pointed to this as an opportunity to consider the disabled applicants more fairly, and many stated that they followed the regulation in the Norwegian Civil Service Law obliging them to always invite qualified applicants who tick the disability box. Some of the interviewees acknowledged the possibility for moderate affirmative action, but none claimed to have actually taken part in an ordinary recruitment process whereby they hired someone who ticked the box. The interviewees also pointed to this box-ticking exercise as a control mechanism, explaining that they were expected to provide a written justification for not calling in a disabled applicant for an interview. Together, the inclusion statements and the disability box represent a strategy whereby the employers expect the disabled job seekers to actively seek out the employer and not

the other way around. Disabled applicants are expected to compete for vacant jobs in the same way as everybody else.

There is one exception to this pattern; one interviewee, an HR representative, was recently actively engaged in the state trainee program for disabled people with higher education. This is a program in which state employers can take part that is exclusively for disabled applicants and lasts for a two-year period. The employer had used this as an active recruitment strategy, and the latest candidate to complete the program had recently applied for and obtained a permanent position in the organization.

### **The absent disabled job seeker**

An issue related to employers expecting disabled applicants to come forward in order to hire more of them is the fact that all the interviewees stated that the number of applicants ticking the disability box was miniscule. One interviewee stated:

Well, how often? I don't know. We do make a note of the numbers—at least a minor review. Shall we see ... The applicants themselves tick the box. Yes, you know, in 2017, out of 1,829 applicants, 13 applicants disclosed a disability. To then find qualified people in such a small group, it is not very easy. (Roger, HR representative)

This seems like a typical experience across the interviews. The interviewees stated that their experiences with disabled job seekers were very limited because they very rarely applied, at least with an openness about their disability. None of the managers had hired someone who was disabled at the hiring point. In addition, there was a general lack of experience with disabled coworkers. When asked about the diversity in their organization, the interviewees responded quickly with concerns about gender and ethnicity, while disability was not mentioned unless asked about specifically. It seems disabled people were not usually at the forefront of their minds. They simply were not present to them, which may contribute to the feeling that efforts to include disabled people do not seem relevant. This issue may be connected to what they perceive a disabled person to be, but the fact remains that they struggle to find them in their stack of applications.

Seen next to each other, the two themes paint an interesting picture. If less than 1% of the applicants tick the disability box, and the main strategy for state employers is the use of the abovementioned passive measures, it is difficult to see how they can ever reach their 5% goal.

### **Attitudes**

The statements coded in the attitude dimension revolve around how the employers feel about and evaluate the Inclusion Dugnad. Are they hopeful about its fruition, or do they find it difficult? Do they believe that the goals are important? The first theme is about how the employers feel about the importance of taking social responsibility by hiring disabled people. The second concerns how they feel that several different demands tug at them, and that this makes it difficult to achieve all the objectives and rules they are required to achieve and follow.

## The importance of taking social responsibility

In all the interviews, the managers and HR representatives pointed to various reasons why it was important to include disabled people in the workforce. They mentioned gains at different levels—for the individual, the organization, and the society. When asked what they thought of the Inclusion Dugnad, they quickly responded by referring to their responsibilities as employers, and they mentioned concerns about the importance of labor market integration for both the economy and for people struggling to gain access. Many expressed sympathies with the plight of the unemployed disabled person:

It's a great thing that they are focusing on this. It's a big challenge that many disabled people want to work, but are still jobless. (Eva, manager)

A consistent finding was that many interviewees regarded their positions as state employers as special. They recognized that they were in a different position from smaller and privately owned companies and that this meant that they had additional responsibilities.

I'm just thinking, it is positive that the state does have the right conditions. We actually do have the opportunity to help people. We do. We can take one, we can spend resources on helping people into the labor market ... we absolutely can. (Robert, manager)

This shows some willingness to see the opportunities as state employers within their organizations as not being too concerned with the bottom line. Many of them also pointed to this initiative being highly marketed by top politicians, including the prime minister, which brings loyalty to the political leadership governing public administration into the mix. There seems to be a clear recognition of the gains at the individual and societal levels, but what is lacking is the recognition of gains at the meso level—that is, for the organization. The meso level does, however, become more apparent in the following theme.

## A perception of conflicting demands

Despite the positive perspectives on the virtues of taking social responsibility, many of the interviewees showed ambivalence when referring to what they perceived as conflicting demands. They stated that although the Inclusion Dugnad looks nice on paper, their realities and practical demands made it difficult to put it into practice. The interviewees raised three major concerns in this regard: the demand for highly qualified people, the demand for an efficient and reliable public administration, and the scarcity of resources. When these concerns were brought up, they were presented as issues that clearly conflicted with the Inclusion Dugnad. An HR representative said:

We do see that the middle managers want the best-qualified people. All other guidelines may be seen as just disturbing elements. The ministry has strict demands on delivering high-quality work, we want the best people, and then we have this additional demand to take particular groups of people into consideration. From a managerial point of view, this may be seen as a conflict. (Roger, HR representative)

When it comes to concerns about qualifications, many of the employers pointed to the qualification principle. They argued that this was in direct conflict with the work inclusion goals:

I think most enterprises will think the way we do. We have a government broadcasting a goal, giving some guidelines, you know. Then they need to adjust this qualification demand I mentioned. It is clearly stated by law that we must hire the best-qualified candidate. If you have said A, you must also say B. I think most enterprises will struggle with this. (Rune, HR representative)

As mentioned earlier, there is some leeway with regard to favoring a disabled candidate if he or she has qualifications that are approximately equal to those of the best-qualified candidate, but the employers say that the qualifications that they see on applications from disabled candidates are far from being approximately equal. The rigid recruitment system seems to have been rigged to find only certain types of candidates. The hiring regulations for state enterprises were described by the interviewees as highly standardized and bureaucratized. This is evident starting from appeals to advertise a vacancy all the way to the actual hiring. All decisions must be thoroughly documented and are subject to review by hiring committees. There is little room for creativity and individualization in defining job roles, and all candidates must be evaluated on what they believe to be objective criteria. At the same time, these state jobs are highly sought after, and almost all the interviewees described a situation in which they could pick and choose from a large group of qualified applicants, making the competition tough.

The second concern—efficiency—was a strong finding across the interviews, and it was raised frequently by the interviewees. They pointed to high demands coming from the top to be productive and efficient, meet deadlines, and deliver on a variety of responsibilities. Trying to integrate candidates who are not efficient was seen as a significant burden, and having a disability was equated with the risk of being unproductive. This point was highlighted by this manager:

We are dependent on highly competent, functional people here to get the job done. In my experience, it's quite a big burden getting people who are not functional at all. Because they use up resources. And even when we are aware of it and do try, it can be quite exhausting. We do have scarce resources here. We have a lot of public projects we must complete, and then I would think, as a leader, that I need someone with a full mental capacity. (Monica, manager)

In this quote, we see an embedded fear that disabled people do not have the same work capabilities or mental capacity as everyone else, and for this manager, this seems irreconcilable with the high productivity demands. In addition, she perceived a scarcity of personnel resources, adding to the experienced conflict.

Many of the more critical employers mentioned a feeling of conflict induced by being asked to cut costs at one end but expand to ensure inclusive hiring at the other. The interviewees pointed to the pressure to make cuts and use fewer resources. They point to the bureaucratization and efficiency reform, and how they feel that the cuts they had to make reduced the opportunity to hire new people, creating a feeling of scarcity. One manager stated:



I do believe that it is the right thing to do, but they may need to manage the funding schemes behind it and not make incremental cuts in all state enterprises with one hand and make you take on this responsibility while cutting even more with the other. But working as a part of the public administration, it is a part of my job to not express my political opinions. I just have to follow the guidelines given to me. (Christian, manager)

For some of the interviewees, this pressure to cut costs was experienced as conflicting with inclusion goals. They stated that they found that the two messages—to cut costs and be inclusive—pulled in opposite directions. An interesting finding is that many did not see wage subsidies as really addressing their concerns about resources. Being state employers, their emphasis was less on concrete salary costs and more on the fact that a great deal of their success hinges on making successful hires. A wrong hire that does not deliver what he or she is supposed to do costs money. However, the most visible cost is that it takes a greater toll on his or her colleagues, who have to do more on top of their already busy workloads, as well as on the managers, who have to spend time supervising and attempting to find solutions to enable them to achieve their goals with less manpower than expected. Being managers in a country with high job security, the interviewees stated that they wanted to avoid the risk of being stuck for years with someone who could not reliably do his or her job, and a temporary wage subsidy did not do much to lessen this concern.

## Discussion

The point of departure for this study was the research question: How do state employers in Norway engage with the Inclusion Dugnad in an early policy implementation stage, and what are the potential obstacles to their participation? Looking at the numbers from the annual reports, paired with the interviews, we can see that the employers typically took a passive stance. The big picture is that in this early stage of policy implementation, very few active measures are being implemented, and the attitudes toward the Inclusion Dugnad are mixed. Looking below the surface of categorization, the findings indicate that classifying employers as having positive or negative attitudes can be challenging because they often display both. Within the passive category, there seem to be at least two different types of employers. The first is characterized primarily by a lack of knowledge of both the policy itself and of the possible measures that are available to them. This can be called the ‘passive/unknowing’ type. The other type is characterized primarily by ambivalence. This employer would like to contribute but feels that this is impossible, given the conflicting demands. This type of employer can be called the ‘passive/ambivalent’ type. Converting the passive employer into a committed one is a central goal of demand-side ALMPs. For these two types of passive employers, the methods of achieving this may differ. For the unknowing, concrete information is key, while for the ambivalent, measures that take other demands into consideration must be implemented in order for them to feel that they are relevant.

The four identified themes highlight some of the important challenges in the effort to improve labor market integration for people with disabilities. One clear obstacle is problems connected to finding suitable candidates in the labor market and the issues

regarding the strategy of disability box ticking. Even when there are applicants reporting a disability in keeping with the intention of this inclusion measure, will employers judge them fairly? A number of field experiments in which fictitious applications are sent out to real jobs for which a disabled applicant is compared to an equally qualified nondisabled applicant demonstrate that this may not be the case. The overview by Baert (2018) points to eight studies showing that signaling a disability on the application reduces the likelihood of receiving a callback. Studies such as these even make the strategy seem counterproductive. However, there is research to indicate that the formalized recruitment procedures in the public sector seem to work against direct discrimination of minorities (Midtbøen 2015). Setting aside the pitfalls of identification in terms of discrimination, there is also the important issue that people with a disability may not identify as such and may be reluctant to signal it. In 2003, a UK government-funded research project revealed that only half of the respondents who qualified as disabled according to the Disability Discrimination Act considered themselves disabled (Grewal et al. 2003). Ticking a box means being comfortable with assigning a label to themselves and making this a part of their often already vulnerable position of a job seeker. The refusal to tick the box can be a refusal to allow their health condition to dominate their lives and define them, and they choose to view themselves as inherently normal instead (Shakespeare 2014). Thus, with a lack of disclosing candidates, the advantages the formalized recruitment procedures could give become less significant.

Another major obstacle seems to be the strong norm of efficiency and productivity that seems to threaten inclusion efforts. The interviewees saw this as a concern that overpowered others, and they were preoccupied with getting the job done, working fast, and delivering high-quality work, all while being asked to cut down on the total number of employees. The findings demonstrate the influence of NPM, managerialism, and neoliberal reforms, echoing the argument of Foster and Wass (2013) about how of ableism combined with productivist theories in the labor market threaten disabled people's opportunities. Norway is in second place among the OECD countries when it comes to GDP per hour worked (OECD 2019), making Norwegian working life one that highlights efficiency in general. Interestingly, the findings of the present study suggest that the difference between the public and the private sector in terms of productivity focus is becoming difficult to discern. NPM ideas have intensified an emphasis on eliminating slack in the Norwegian public sector, demonstrated by the mentioned de-bureaucratization and efficiency reform. With reforms such as these, the difference between private and public sectors is downplayed and the productivist theories often associated more strongly with the private sector becomes influential. State employers may not focus on the bottom line in the same way as private employers, but there are clear expectations in terms of maximizing productivity.

Inclusion efforts may thus be translated into prioritizing their own employees because it makes more sense to them to spend resources on people in whom they have already invested. Giving a high priority to existing employees who acquire impairments or health issues and not focusing on recruitment is echoed by the interviewees in the present study and has been found in other studies (Ingebrigtsen and Moe 2015; Kuznetsova and Yalcin 2017). It is possible that the highly efficient and competence-demanding working life in the Nordic public sector comes with a price, making less room for people who do not immediately coincide with the managers' concepts of the

ideal worker. In a working life with a high focus on productivity and standardization, making room for the nonstandard worker may represent an unexpected and undesirable effort. Thus, ableist assumptions about productivity become especially potent in an environment that strongly highlights efficiency. Paradoxically, the productivity norm that demands that disabled people seek employment and do not rely on welfare transfers becomes a double-edged sword. This is because it also acts as a barrier when the disabled person meets the rational logic in the organization that makes employers avoid assumed threats to productivity.

This article is concerned with employer engagement in the implementation stage of the disability employment policy. However, a limitation to the study is that there was a short amount of time from when the policy was set in action to conducting the interviews and the analysis of the annual reports. This study is therefore not suited to evaluate the effectiveness of the policy. Instead, it points to potential problems that should be addressed in order to reach the 5% goal. First, the matching issues, or the lack of relevant applicants, must be dealt with. Disabled people should be more easily linked to potential employers, making it easier for them to seek inclusive organizations and for organizations to find disabled candidates. Targeted programs, such as the aforementioned trainee program for state employers, is one example of a relevant measure. An approach like this may alleviate some of the matching problems by making it safe to disclose a disability. This would constitute what Osman and Thunborg (2019) calls a strategic recruitment practice, whereby the employer steps aside from the standard recruitment practices in order to enhance diversity. Furthermore, to provide employers with financial and practical support and reduce the perception of risk, a support-side approach may be promising (Frøyland et al. 2019). This approach has demonstrated that it is possible to challenge the demand-driven labor market as a given premise and intervene in the organization, altering and reshaping employer attitudes toward marginalized groups (Frøyland et al. 2018). Inclusion initiatives must accomplish the balancing act of making it feel safe to disclose a disability in addition to making it seem safe for the employer to hire a disabled person.

## Conclusion

In the present study, the Norwegian state employers demonstrated a clear passiveness toward the Inclusion Dugnad and did not display high levels of employer engagement toward this policy. Although many of the interviewed employers talked about the importance of an inclusive working life into which marginalized groups are given an opportunity to enter, they found it difficult to make this discourse a practical reality for disabled people. The two main obstacles were the apparent lack of disabled applicants and the reported conflict between the goals of the Inclusion Dugnad and the cost-cutting and productivity standards governing the state employer sector. These NPM-inspired productivist norms act as a barrier to employment entry for disabled people because employers are forced to question disabled peoples' productivity. Thus, the Inclusion Dugnad and the prevalent productivist norms represent competing discourses the managers find hard to resolve, making it difficult for state employers to lead the way in this disability employment policy.

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