A framework for developing employer's disability confidence

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Version Post-print/accepted manuscript

Citation (published version) Sally Lindsay, Joanne Leck, Winny Shen, Elaine Cagliostro, Jennifer Stinson, (2019) "'A framework for developing employer's disability confidence'", Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal, Vol. 38 Issue: 1, pp.40-55, <https://doi.org/10.1108/EDI-05-2018-0085>.

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Citation: Lindsay, S., Leck, J., Shen, W., Cagliostro, E., & Stinson, J. (2019). A framework for developing employer's disability confidence. *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal*.

Link: <https://www.emeraldinsight.com/doi/abs/10.1108/EDI-05-2018-0085>

JOURNAL: Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal

VOL/ISSUE NO: 00/00

ARTICLE NO: 620965

ARTICLE TITLE: A framework for developing employer's disability confidence

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Abstract

Purpose: Many employers lack disability confidence regarding how to include people with disabilities in the workforce, which can lead to stigma and discrimination. The purpose of this study was to explore the concept of disability confidence from two perspectives, employers who hire people with a disability and employees with a disability.

Design: A qualitative thematic analysis was conducted using 35 semi-structured interviews (18 employers who hire people with disabilities; 17 employees with a disability).

Findings: Themes included the following categories: disability discomfort (i.e., lack of experience, stigma and discrimination); reaching beyond comfort zone (i.e., disability awareness training, business case, shared lived experiences); broadened perspectives (i.e., challenging stigma and stereotypes, minimizing bias and focusing on abilities); and disability confidence (i.e., supportive and inclusive culture and leading and modelling social change). Our results highlight that disability confidence among employers is critical for enhancing the social inclusion of people with disabilities.

Originality/Value: Our study addresses an important gap in the literature by developing a better understanding of the concept of disability from the perspectives of employers who hire people with disabilities and also employees with a disability.

Keywords: discrimination, diversity, employer, social inclusion, youth

Paper Type: Research Paper

Introduction

Although people with disabilities are often willing and capable of working they continue to experience low employment rates, which can negatively impact their health and quality of life (Barnes and Mercer, 2005; Lindsay, 2011b; Ruhindwa *et al.*, 2016). Common barriers to finding meaningful employment for people with disabilities are linked to stigma, discrimination and inaccessible environments (Edwards and Imrie, 2003; Fevre *et al.*, 2013; Lindsay, 2011a; Lindsay and Yantzi, 2014). It is often challenging for people with disabilities to find employment because many jobs are often designed around an ideal abled-bodied worker, creating further disadvantages to those with disabilities who do not fit the image sought by employers (Edwards and Imrie, 2003; Foster and Wass, 2013; Lindsay *et al.*, 2014).

Recently there has been a movement towards employers embracing the advantages of a diverse workforce, including hiring people with disabilities (Dagan *et al.*, 2015; Hoque *et al.*, 2014; Rae *et al.*, 2011; Waterhouse *et al.*, 2011). This movement is partly informed by the social model of disability, which focuses on social oppression, environmental barriers and challenges the notion of the medicalization and individualistic accounts of disability (Shakespeare, 2016). Furthermore, approaches to human rights that are emphasized by international legal policy such as the United Nations Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2016), Sustainable Development Goals (2018), and the International Labour Organization (2015) arguably shape society's thinking around inclusion of people with disabilities and their disability confidence in working with them.

Many governments are now working on improving the employment rates of people with disabilities. One approach to doing so is by increasing employer's disability confidence (i.e., knowledge and understanding on how to include people with disabilities) (Henry *et al.*, 2014;

Lindsay and Cancelliere, 2017; Mik-Meyer, 2016; Unger, 2007). For example, the UK recently started a “disability confident” campaign in 2013 to focus on employers enhancing their understanding of disability, removing barriers and emphasizing the business case for hiring people with disabilities (Gluck, 2014). Similarly, the Australian Employers Network on Disability (2008) emphasizes the importance of employers having disability confidence. Not only will such campaigns help people with disabilities to potentially improve their employment rates, but they will also highlight the many benefits of hiring people with disabilities (Graffam *et al.*, 2002; Lindsay *et al.*, 2017a).

Within the current literature the concept of disability confidence is defined as creating a culture of inclusion for employees and delivering accessible customer service to those with disabilities (McConkey, 2015; Riches and Green, 2003; Suter *et al.*, 2007). The conception of disability confidence originated from the human resources field, mostly out of employers’ desire to move away from the notion of perceived disadvantage that is commonly (and stereotypically) linked with disability (Dagan *et al.*, 2015; Rae *et al.*, 2011; Waterhouse *et al.*, 2011). Currently, there is uncertainty about what the concept means regarding the actions employers need to take in how to become disability confident employers (Gluck, 2014). Exploring this concept in further depth is important because although the term disability confidence is becoming more frequent in use, it lacks empirical evidence and is based mainly on anecdotes and non-peer reviewed literature (Lindsay and Cancelliere, 2017). It is critical to establish peer-reviewed evidence for this concept because the quality and rigor of grey literature may be uncertain and also susceptible to bias and potential conflicts of interests. Of the few studies that exist on disability confidence, they are mostly quantitative or non-peer-reviewed (Gluck, 2014; Suter *et al.*, 2007; Waterhouse *et al.*, 2011), or they do not focus on employers (Dagan *et al.*, 2015; Fichten *et al.*, 2005; Lindsay

and Cancelliere, 2017; Rae *et al.*, 2011). Therefore, a more in-depth, qualitative approach is needed to understand the concept and experiences among employers, which is the aim of this current study.

Lacking disability confidence can create discomfort when interacting or working with someone who has a disability (Waterhouse *et al.*, 2011), which can lead to potential disengagement among employers (Ruhindwa *et al.*, 2016). Research consistently shows that others' lack of knowledge about people with disabilities (or disability confidence) can have adverse implications for people with disabilities such as stigma, discrimination, and social exclusion (Fevre *et al.*, 2013; Lindsay *et al.*, 2018; Lindsay and Edwards, 2013; Mik-Meyer, 2016; Morgan and Alexander, 2005; Yuker, 1994).

Developing disability knowledge and confidence can improve over time as people gain more exposure to, and experience with, people who have a disability (McConkey, 2015). For example, being in contact with a person who has a disability can help to improve positive attitudes, social inclusion and empathy, while reducing stigma and stereotypes (Barr and Bracchitta, 2008; Bialka *et al.*, 2017; Campbell and Gilmore, 2003; Findler *et al.*, 2007; Lindsay and Cancelliere, 2017; Morgan and Alexander, 2005; Petticrew and Tropp, 2008; Scior, 2011; Yuker, 1994). Fichten *et al.* (2005) found that people who volunteered with those who have a disability had improved their comfort and attitudes towards this population. Research indicates that employers who have previous experience with hiring people with disabilities often develop good working relationships with them and a strong commitment in employing this population in the future (Morgan and Alexander, 2005). Therefore, developing employers' disability confidence may help to improve employment opportunities for people with disabilities (Geisen,

2011; Ruhindwa *et al.*, 2016) while also addressing labour shortages (Buckup, 2009; Lindsay *et al.*, 2017a; Lindsay *et al.*, 2017b; Ruhindwa *et al.*, 2016) .

This current study aims to address an important gap in the literature by developing a better understanding of the concept of disability confidence from the perspectives of employers who hire people with disabilities and also employees with a disability (Lindsay and Cancelliere, 2017). Few studies have empirically assessed the concept of disability confidence among employers who hire people with disabilities.

Methods

Our objective was to explore the concept of disability confidence from the perspectives of employers who hire young people with a disability and employees with a disability. Specifically, a qualitative design was used that involved in-depth, semi-structured interviews with youth who have disabilities and employers who hire youth with disabilities. Ethical approval was received from a rehabilitation hospital and a local university. All participants provided written consent prior to conducting the interviews.

Sample and recruitment

This article purposively sampled employers who intentionally hire people with disabilities and included a range of those who are, and are not, required to comply with the Employment Equity Act (i.e., organizations subject to the act include federally regulated private-sector employers, Crown corporations and other federal organizations with more than 100 employees) (Government of Canada, 2015). Inclusion criteria for employers involved the following: currently an employer, manager and/or work in human resources with experience in recruiting and hiring people with disabilities. A purposive sampling strategy was used of youth who were currently employed or looking for employment, aged 15-35 and who had a disability (i.e.,

defined as an impairment in body function or structure involving activity limitations or participation restrictions) (World Health Organization, 2015).

Our recruitment strategy involved collaborating with community disability agencies who help young people with disabilities and employers (see Tables 1 and 2 for overview). Flyers and information letters were mailed and emailed to eligible participants. A research assistant screened all participants for inclusion and arranged a time to interview them. The sample included 35 participants (17 youth: 11 females, six males), aged 15-34 years (mean age 26), and 18 employers who hire youth with disabilities. Our sample size is considered appropriate for an exploratory study of this nature (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

TABLES 1 and 2 here

Data collection

Our interviews followed a semi-structured format and were conducted from October 2016 to June 2017 by a researcher with training in qualitative methods and the field of disability inclusion and rehabilitation. Questions for youth asked about strategies for maintaining employment, experiences of social inclusion within the workplace and advice they had for others (see supplemental table). Questions for employers asked about current practices for employing youth with disabilities; whether and how employers create an inclusive environment; and how employers retain people with disabilities (see supplemental table). The interview guides were pilot tested with a youth who has a disability and an employer who hires people with disabilities to ensure comprehensiveness. Interviews lasted between 14 and 57 minutes (average of 42 minutes for employers and 29 minutes for youth employees).

Data analysis

All of the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by a member of the research team. An open coding, thematic approach was used, along with our research question and Lindsay and Cancelliere's disability confidence model (Lindsay and Cancelliere, 2017) to guide the analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Two researchers who have backgrounds in occupational rehabilitation read through all interviews independently before comparing and contrasting themes and codes (i.e., meaning units) regarding disability confidence. Two additional researchers with expertise in management and industrial /organizational psychology read and discussed a sample of the transcripts with the team and the emerging themes. Themes were then compared and contrasted until the coding scheme was agreed upon (Corbin *et al.*, 2014). A research assistant applied the coding framework to all of the transcripts and entered it into NVivo. Relevant quotes reflecting each theme were then extracted, while also considering the whole context of the interview (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

The strategies used to enhance the trustworthiness and rigor of the findings included using rich, descriptive accounts with quotes reflective of the range of participant experiences (Krefting, 1991). The first author verified the application of the themes to the transcripts and the accuracy of the extracted quotes, which helps to ensure the reliability of the coding framework (Krefting, 1991). Peer debriefing was used, which involved having discussions after each interview, along with formal team discussions after the completion of all the interviews. Doing this helps to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings (Braun and Clarke, 2006). A journal was kept with all of the decisions made throughout the data analysis.

Results

The demographic characteristics of the sample are outlined, then each of the main themes related to disability confidence are described (see Figure 1). First, this article explains how disability

discomfort involves stigma and discrimination. Second, ‘reaching beyond your comfort zone’ involves disability awareness training and gaining knowledge, shared lived experiences, and the business case for hiring people with disabilities. Third, the article discusses how employers ‘broadened perspectives’, which involved challenging stereotypes, minimizing bias and focusing on abilities. In the final stage, disability confidence comprised a supportive and inclusive work culture, where employers are leading and modeling social change. Although each of the stages are described sequentially, the development of disability confidence is an ongoing process.

Figure 1 here

Participant characteristics

The youth employee participants had various types of disabilities (see Table 2 for overview) and were employed in the following industries: banking, research, government, sales, teaching, healthcare, law, media, retail, recreation and web design. The employer participants included technical services, retail, public service, financial institutions, professional services, recreation, food services, publishing, employment services and transportation and warehousing (see Table 1) (Statistics Canada, 2017). The size of the companies ranged from less than 10 to 500,000+ employees. Eight employers were required to comply to the Employment Equity Act (i.e., Canadian legislation aiming to provide equal employment opportunities to disadvantaged groups)(Government of Canada, 2015) while the remaining 10 participants were not. All employers within our sample had experience employing people with disabilities. Six employers had personal experience with disabilities. Three employers hired people with disabilities exclusively as part of their business model.

Disability discomfort

Four employers and five youth reported examples of disability discomfort within their work environment. Employers described how discomfort often stemmed from a lack of experience in working with people with disabilities. For example, one employer said, ‘there’s a bit of stigma and unawareness of people with invisible disabilities, whether it’s learning, or mental health’ (employer #16). Another employer explained how having unconscious biases can lead to stigma and discrimination among their employees. To illustrate:

‘It’s helping people become aware that we all have biases. It’s only once we start to uncover our biases that we can be comfortable with the notion of differences. We gravitate more towards people who are like ourselves and we tend to be uncomfortable with people who are different... A disability is a difference just like a gender is a difference....the only way we are going to build inclusive workplaces and societies as a whole.’ (employer #17)

Some employers mentioned instances of disability discomfort among their customers. For example, one employer explained, ‘as we’ve grown our business, sometimes customers will be a bit surprised and call us and say, the person that picked up my order had a cane and a stutter. I’m like, we’re a service that employs people with disabilities’ (employer #6). Other employers mentioned how some of their customers treat their employees with disabilities differently than those without a disability. For example, he said, ‘our whole business model is about trying to break down stereotypes about what people with disabilities can accomplish and there’s still a lot of stigma....The sad thing is, I’ve never had anyone complain about people *without* disabilities. The only ones that had complaints are people with disabilities’ (employer #10).

The employed youth with disabilities in our sample reported experiencing disability discomfort in the workplace in the form of stigma and discrimination. For instance, one youth explained how they were called out for making mistakes more often than other employees

without disabilities. One said, ‘There's no question that people judge much more quickly and harshly based on the fact that I have a physical disability’ (youth #15). Two other youth mentioned how their employer was more focused on making profits than creating an inclusive environment. For example, ‘People don't even realize it's discrimination. They just think it's doing what's best for their business’ (youth #14). Another youth similarly mentioned, ‘they're more worried about filling their quotas [diversity hiring] rather than assisting you in accomplishing your inclusion’ (youth #12).

Meanwhile, other youth were somewhat discouraged that their employer and co-workers focused on their disability rather than their actual skills and abilities. For instance, one youth said, ‘don't stereotype against us just because we have a disability... We're just as capable, if not more motivated. You want to be known for your skills and your talents’ (youth #13). Another youth shared: ‘don't pre-judge a candidate's capacity’ (youth #4).

Reach beyond comfort zone

The second theme in developing disability confidence involved ‘reaching beyond your comfort zone’. This stage included providing training to employees to help them gain knowledge in how to work with people with disabilities, emphasizing the business case for hiring them and shared lived experiences. All 18 employers in our study provided examples of reaching beyond their comfort zone.

Disability awareness training. An aspect of broadening perspectives involved providing training to employees to help them to develop their comfort in working with people with disabilities. For instance, an employer described, ‘There's the disability awareness training that all employees go through, making sure they understand’ (employer #7). Others shared, ‘We have diversity training, inclusion training. There's so many ways we're encouraging people to look at the whole

person and try to have diversity in the workplace' (employer #15). Another employer similarly described, 'we provide some training to current staff and managers so they have a bit of understanding, about diversity and working with people that are different... Our training isn't meant to turn people into experts in areas of disability, but it is meant to bring awareness' (employer #13).

Employers described how providing disability-related training helped to improve their workplace culture. To illustrate, one said, 'we're creating a culture where people feel like disability isn't something to be scared to talk about. It's normal; it's who we are as a company... A lot of times, people are scared to talk about things like that; but the environment has shifted dramatically because we have community events and we talk about these things on a daily basis' (employer #18). Many employers agreed that training and education about people with disabilities was important for enhancing inclusion. For example, 'It's about education and changing the mindset' (employer #9).

Meanwhile, the participants with a disability had a somewhat different perspective regarding diversity training whereby it did not necessarily equate with inclusion. For example, they shared,

'It's not sensitivity training so much because you can always be nice to somebody but that doesn't mean they're included... It's more about learning that people with disabilities are not going to be an automatic hindrance to your workforce; they have skills. It's a matter of dispelling the notion that people with disabilities are automatically less skilled that should really take place.' (youth #14)

Business case. Another component of broadening perspectives involved emphasizing the business case for hiring people with disabilities, particularly that they are innovative, problem-

solvers, who are productive and have a good work ethic. Several employers explained how hiring people with disabilities can help to enhance their business, along with an inclusive workplace culture. To illustrate, one employer said, ‘By being a little bit more open-minded and a little more sensitive, you can attract and retain qualified candidates that you may never have thought about hiring before but will transform your workforce and your company culture’ (employer #18). Another employer described, ‘We had an individual on one of our teams with autism and he was incredibly motivated and worked hard, but differently, from what they had seen before. It feeds innovation’ (employer #13). Other employers agreed that people with disabilities ‘they’re born innovators; they’re problem solvers. They bring different perspectives to the business and they bring different business solutions’ (employer #10). A youth with a disability similarly agreed, ‘the ability to problem solve things; just because you have to look at life in a different way. So, I’m really good at solving problems when it comes to discussing with other staff members about potential things we can do’ (youth #5). Other employers emphasized the importance of having a diverse workforce. For instance, one said, ‘It makes good business sense, and we want to reflect the community we serve. The more diversity you have, the more diverse thoughts and ideas you’re going to have. We can’t all have the same people who think only one way. People from different backgrounds, different places who are sharing their experiences. You have a much better workplace’ (employer #16).

Another important aspect of the business case related to hiring people with disabilities is that they reportedly have a strong work ethic. For example, an employer explains, ‘they bring with them often a good work ethic and are happy and positive and sometimes it can kind of have that ripple effect’ (employer #5). Others agreed, ‘A lot of our staff are hard-working...They’re

good at paying close attention to detail which is great for our team... We definitely noticed an impact on our staff" (employer #6).

One employer noticed the difference that including people with disabilities was having on their other employees. That is, 'when people started to work with people with disabilities; they started to have more patience. I've only seen positive effects from it' (employer #8). Others noted how employees with disabilities have lower turnover and encourage other employers to be more productive. For instance, an employer explained:

'we recently hired a person with a vision impairment and it really changed the team morale because people were thinking if this person can do the job, then I don't have any excuse not to perform better. It actually encouraged the team to work harder... That shows company value and adds to the morale.... If companies build their reputation as an inclusive employer that's going to help them benefit... Less turnover and training costs. People just need to open their mind.' (employer #9)

Another employer shared, 'My experience in working with people with disabilities has shown me they're great workers, great attitude, want to show up for work and work hard, want to prove themselves' (employer #14).

Shared lived experiences. Another component of broadening perspectives involved shared lived experiences, which helped to break down stereotypes. Some employers had a disability themselves or a close relative with a disability, and openly shared their experiences. To illustrate, 'I'm often asked to disclose that I have a disability. So, I often share my personal stories with others and they feel comfortable with me. I'm pretty casual and forthright when I'm talking and transparent. So, I often have people with disabilities emailing me afterwards on wanting to disclose' (employer #16). Another employer who had a disability described how they help to

challenge stereotypes by sharing their experiences with others within their workplace. For example, they said, ‘I share my stories. The stigmas that general employers view people with disabilities as not being able to perform at 100% when we know that’s a myth... There’s a lot more people who are identifying as having a disability. I’m finding the stigma is reduced here [at company]’ (employer #16).

Others explained how they easily overcame any disability discomfort because a close family member had a disability. For instance, one employer said, ‘I have a disabled sister; so, I have a lot of experience with disability... Once people have experiences, and really positive experiences with things, it makes them more open in a general sense’ (employer #3).

Another employer who exclusively hires people with disabilities shared:

There’s a lot of folks in this country with a disability, the largest and fastest growing minority group, and there’s people like me who have a family member in the population. You have a large part of the population who are touched by this. You can connect with people in a real way because disability cuts across race, gender, class and so on. It’s everywhere. It’s one of those things that can bring us together.’ (employer #10)

Broadening perspectives

A third theme in moving towards disability confidence involved broadening perspectives, which involved challenging stigma and stereotypes, minimizing bias and focusing on abilities. Eight employers and 13 youth provided examples of employers, co-workers and/or customers broadening perspectives.

Challenging stigma and stereotypes. An aspect of broadening perspectives involved challenging stigma and stereotypes. For instance, an employer told us about their incorrect assumptions regarding the abilities of one of their employees with a vision impairment. He explained, ‘How in

the world can she handle all this accounting work and numbers? I quickly learned this young lady had spent her entire life overcoming barriers of being visually impaired...Our assumptions that her visual impairment would limit her in anyway was totally overcome. We've had so many of those stories' (employer #18). Other employers shared similar examples: 'I have a better understanding and passion; and it's more normalized; too much difference from treating other people, learning their talents. They are human beings. I'm really proud and appreciative of them' (employer #11). One employer described the change in attitude toward people with disabilities after they were included within their workforce. For instance, 'people who haven't worked with people with disabilities prior to coming to [company], tend to feel sorry for them. They'd look away and feel bad for them...I just don't see disabilities anymore' (employer #4). Another employer told us about his staff's reaction to hiring people with disabilities: 'staff have very been welcoming and understanding and know how important it is' (employer #8).

Several employers noticed how their customers were broadening their perspectives about people with disabilities. For example, an employer described, 'customers seeing the person with a disability helps to shape their attitudes and encourages them to think about hiring someone with a disability. I've gotten feedback that our staff brighten their days...Just breaking down a lot of the stigmas and stereotypes that come with hiring people with disabilities' (employer #6). Others commented, 'Many customers are happily surprised being served by a blind person. It's an added benefit and value, a different experience to both the server and the guest' (employer #11).

Meanwhile, fifteen youth employees that were interviewed provided examples of broadening perspectives, and similarly expressed concerns about challenging stereotypes within the workplace. For instance, one youth said, 'it comes down to awareness, about just generally

people with disabilities and the stereotypes, and stigmas associated with disabilities; but a lot of it is just don't assume anything about whether they can or can't do a role' (youth #6).

Minimizing bias and focusing on abilities. Employers worked to address and minimize bias and stigma while focusing on people's abilities. For instance, 'it's opened people up more than they would have been before. Once people have positive experiences with things, it makes them more open in general' (employer #3). One employer mentioned how their workers (without disabilities) opened up more with the inclusion of people with disabilities. Another employer described how their employees began to move out of their comfort zone by embracing an employee with a disability within their team. To illustrate:

'We had an individual in one of our mail rooms with autism and he interacted differently than anyone had ever interacted within a team at work... When you bring someone into a team that thinks differently than everyone else, that's always a good thing. The first time someone with autism joins their team you may have resistance. How are we going to make this work? Well, you have to figure it out, and that's always good for a team.' (employer #13)

Another employer described how he encouraged his employees to focus on supporting people with disabilities and their inclusion within the workplace. For example, they said, 'It really comes down to attitude... I will support them no matter what because they deserve to be a part of this team and valued and respected... we have a long way to go' (employer #2).

Another component of broadened perspectives includes focusing on abilities. For example, an employer described the importance of valuing the talents and potential of people with disabilities and encouraged other employers not to hire them solely for the business case or improving their company image. For instance, 'If, as an employer you are just going out to hire

people with disabilities because you want to make sure your numbers look good— that is a guaranteed formula for failure. Employers should genuinely see the value that all people bring...that's the only way we are going to truly build inclusive workplaces' (employer #17).

Several employers described how although they felt disability confident, many of their customers were not. Therefore, they had to help their customers to step out of their comfort zone and embrace this diverse group of workers. For example, an employer explains:

‘A lot of times it’s stepping out of their comfort zone and we try to raise that awareness and make them realize that disability is not far away from all of us... You can imagine some of the things people say and do to people with disabilities, which is mind boggling to me...Some people just don’t know how to interact with people with disabilities. They’re just like everybody else.’ (employer #10)

Some youth described the importance of employers focusing on their abilities rather than nature of their condition. For example, one youth said, ‘Once people see you can do it, then they have the confidence in you and they're more likely to hire you’ (youth #5). Another youth similarly mentioned, ‘you have to push recruiters, and push hiring managers to really look at your skills differently’ (youth #6).

Disability confidence

Our findings showed that disability confidence comprised having a supportive and inclusive work culture, while also leading and modeling social change. The majority of the employers interviewed (12) reported elements of disability confidence. Meanwhile, only three youth said that employers were disability confident. For example, they described disability confident employers as treating them with respect and ensuring they were included. For example, one

youth said, ‘I feel included and part of the team’ (youth #4). Another youth similarly mentioned, ‘My co-workers are very respectful, helpful. If I need any assistance, people are willing to help’ (youth #12). Others appreciated the inclusive feel: ‘I like that it’s an inclusive environment. They hire other people with disabilities as well. They understand you. They’re very nice and they don’t judge you’ (youth #1).

Employers described how disability confidence included having a supportive environment. To illustrate: ‘It’s a warm environment and we want to help people be successful...people know they’re going to be supported in this environment...We’re actively engaged with the population we’re trying to serve’ (employer #10). Employers who displayed disability confidence reported emphasizing equity and diversity as a core value, along with senior-leadership buy-in and many were also leaders in modeling and advocating for social change regarding the inclusion of people with disabilities. For instance, an employer mentioned, ‘We are an organization that values our principles of equity and diversity and that’s reflected in our team and our hiring practices’ (employer #6). Others shared similar examples: ‘We value diversity and inclusion and see it as an important part of our organizational values...Our [organization] is a big company and we use a lot of suppliers for different initiatives. It’s our ask of all our vendors be inclusive and diverse’ (employer #9). Other employers highlighted the importance of commitment from senior leadership. They explained, ‘We have a commitment from our CEO to be the most inclusive employer in the [region]. Diversity and inclusion are one of our pillars...I believe we’re creating a more passionate, more open, more inclusive environment’ (employer #18).

Leading and modeling social change is a critical component of an employer's disability confidence. For some employers, they were personally touched by disability through a close family member and wanted to ensure a brighter future for them. One employer explained,

‘Having a son in this population I saw a lot of our friends were really struggling with what do we do. So many young adults were sitting in the basement doing nothing and it felt like it was heartbreaking. All of these youths had really interesting skills and they could be productive but they weren't using their skills at all. I knew if I could develop something that had an earned income model behind it, it was all about employment creation. I thought if I have a really good product that started the conversation around this in a positive and uplifting way not social justice and discrimination.’ (employer #10).

Another employer explained they were in a similar situation. For example, ‘my two boys have disabilities. They're only young so they're not working, but I'm invested there and want to make a difference for when they are old enough to work...The largest advocates are usually the people who have a personal experience, and usually within their family.’ (employer #14)

Discussion

This study addressed an important gap in the literature by exploring the concept of disability confidence from the perspectives of employers who hire people with disabilities and employees with a disability. Unraveling how employer's disability confidence develops can help to better promote the meaningful inclusion of people with disabilities in the workplace. Many people without disabilities, including employers, are often uncomfortable around those who have a disability (Fichten *et al.*, 2005; Lindsay and Cancelliere, 2017). Finding ways to minimize disability discomfort is critical because having discomfort can lead to stigma and discrimination towards people with disabilities (Fichten *et al.*, 2005; Lindsay, 2011a; Lindsay and Cancelliere,

2017). Negative attitudes towards people with disabilities are often a significant barrier to successful social inclusion and rehabilitation (Morgan and Alexander, 2005). Therefore, understanding the components of disability confidence and how it develops among employers who hire people with disabilities is important for enhancing attitudes and behaviors towards people with disabilities in the workplace (Lindsay and Cancelliere, 2017). Persistent negative attitudes and behaviours towards people with disabilities is a barrier to successfully integrating into the workplace and the community (Morgan and Alexander, 2005). By developing an understanding of how disability confidence develops within the workplace, we can aim to improve attitudes and ultimately, the social inclusion of people with disabilities (Lindsay and Cancelliere, 2017).

Our results highlight four main themes in the development of disability confidence among employers who hire people with disabilities. The first theme involved disability discomfort—involving a lack of experience and/or knowledge in working with people who have a disability, stigma and discrimination. This lack of knowledge stemmed from some employers, co-workers and customers. These findings are consistent with other research showing that lacking knowledge about, or experience with, disability can negatively impact attitudes and behaviours towards people with disabilities, perpetuating stigma, discrimination and social exclusion (Berry and Meyer, 1995; Lindsay and Cancelliere, 2017; Lindsay and Edwards, 2013). Of the few employers who reported disability discomfort, they were not required to comply with the Employment Equity Act—and therefore, possibly influencing their knowledge and experience with people who have a disability.

Our findings showed that a second theme in employers developing disability confidence involved reaching beyond your comfort zone, which included providing training to employees on

how to work with people who have a disability and shared lived experiences, while also emphasizing the business case for hiring them. Our findings are similar to other research showing that disability awareness training has the potential to improve attitudes towards people with disabilities (Lindsay and Edwards, 2013). The results from the employees with a disability that were interviewed contrasted somewhat with employers in that diversity training did not necessarily lead to inclusion. This may be a result of training focusing mainly on how to provide accommodations rather than behaviours towards people with disabilities. Other research shows that mere physical integration of people with disabilities may be insufficient for changing attitudes (Allport, 1954; May, 2012). These findings relate to Allport's (1954) intergroup contact theory which outlines that people tend to be more comfortable around those who are similar to ourselves, and uneasy around those who are different from us. The difficulty is that when people behave in this manner, it can lead to social exclusion and discrimination (Dovidio *et al.*, 2011).

Another component of broadening perspectives involved shared lived experiences, which helped to break down stereotypes. This finding is consistent with Allport's (1954) intergroup contact theory which highlights that personal contact with members of a negatively stereotyped group generally improve attitudes and reduce negative biases and discriminatory behaviours. Having more social contact that dispels stereotypes about people with disabilities (e.g., shared lived experiences) is particularly valuable (Barr and Bracchitta, 2008; Lindsay and Cancelliere, 2017). Similar to Dagan's (2015) measure of therapy confidence scale for clinicians delivering care to people with disabilities, key components of disability confidence involved listening, communication, empathy and understanding their perspective. Our findings are consistent with other research showing that effective communication among people with disabilities involves

mutual understanding and being thoughtful of their lived experiences (King *et al.*; Lindsay and Cancelliere, 2017).

Our results showed that employers highlighted many examples of the business case for hiring people with disabilities, which was a component of our theme on broadening perspectives. Employers' realization that people with disabilities are often innovative, productive and have a good work ethic helped them to broaden their perspective about including this under-represented group in the workforce. Our findings are aligned with a recent systematic review on the benefits of hiring people with disabilities which found that having them in your workforce can help to improve profitability, competitive advantage and an inclusive work culture (Lindsay *et al.*, 2017a).

Our results highlighted a third theme on broadened perspectives whereby employers challenged stigma and stereotypes, addressed and minimized bias and stigma, while focusing on people's abilities and talents. Employers and employees both provided examples of co-workers and/or customers reaching beyond their comfort zone which helped to enhance their attitudes and inclusion of people with disabilities in the workforce. Our findings are consistent with other research highlighting that having social contact with a person who has a disability can help to increase disability awareness and sensitivity, (Lindsay and Edwards, 2013; Tervo *et al.*, 2002) shaping attitudes from indifference to an enhanced understanding of their lived experience (Fichten *et al.*, 1991; Lindsay and Cancelliere, 2017; McLean, 2011).

A final theme emerging involved disability confidence which was comprised of a supportive and inclusive work culture, while also leading and modelling social change. A recent systematic review highlighted that one of the benefits of hiring people with disabilities involves an inclusive and diverse workplace culture (Lindsay *et al.*, 2017a). Other research on the

inclusion of people with disabilities in the workforce (Lindsay *et al.*, 2017c) similarly highlights the importance of having senior leadership support to having a diverse workforce, along with supporting and advocating for their needs.

Limitations and future directions

A strength of this study is that it included two perspectives, employers who hire people with disabilities and employees with a disability. A limitation is that it included various different types of disability and employers (industry types) and it was difficult to discern how the type of disability or employer might have affected their development of disability confidence. A second limitation includes an over-representation of females with disabilities within our sample. Third, due to the exploratory nature of our study, it was a relatively small qualitative sample and the findings should be interpreted with caution.

In further developing the concept of disability confidence, future research should consider what characteristics are associated with various stages of disability confidence (i.e., amount of time, number of employees with a disability, amount of employer's experience with disability etc.). Second, more work is needed to test the framework and explore whether there is an association between employers who report being disability confident and the extent of workplace inclusion among employees with disabilities. Third, further studies could explore how disability confidence varies by disability type, job role, industry type and employee socio-demographics. Finally, it is important not to assume that just because an employer feels disability confident does not mean their employees with disabilities feel included within the workplace. A more comprehensive measurement of their assessment of inclusion and a more of a movement towards inclusive workplaces is needed.

Conclusion

Our results highlight that the development of disability confidence among employers is critical for enhancing the social inclusion of people with disabilities in the workforce. Our study found four main themes in the development of disability confidence among employers. First, disability discomfort included a lack of experience and knowledge in working with people with disabilities, resulting in stigma and discrimination. The second theme involved 'reaching beyond comfort zone' which referred to disability awareness training, the business case for hiring people with disabilities and shared lived experiences. Third, broadened perspectives included challenging stigma and stereotypes, minimizing bias and focusing on abilities. The fourth theme, disability confidence referred to having a supportive and inclusive work culture, leading and modelling social change.

Conflicts of interest

None to report

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Figure 1. Stages of disability confidence

Table 1. Overview of employer characteristics

Employers							
ID #	Industry Type	Employment Equity	Size of Company	Disability discomfort	Reaching beyond comfort zone	Broadening perspectives	Disability confidence
1	Technical services	No	Small		√	√	√
2	Retail	No	Small		√	√	
3	Publishing	No	Large		√	√	
4	Recreation	No	Large	√	√	√	
5	Recreation	No	Large			√	√
6	Transportation and warehousing	No	Small			√	√
7	Food Services	Yes	Large		√	√	
8	Information	Yes	Small			√	√

	services						
9	Finance	Yes	Large			√	√
10	Non-profit	No	Small	√	√	√	√
	organization						
11	Food services	No	Small		√	√	√
12	Employment	No	Large			√	√
	services						
13	Professional	Yes	Large			√	√
	services						
14	Retail	No	Medium		√	√	
15	Public Service	Yes	Large			√	√
16	Finance	Yes	Large			√	√
17	Professional	Yes	Large			√	
	services						
18	Finance	Yes	Large			√	√

Table 2. Overview of youth characteristics

	Disability type	Gender	Age	Disability comfort	Reaching beyond comfort zone	Broadening perspectives	Disability confidence
1	Brain injury	F	27		√	√	
2	Narcolepsy	M	27			√	√
3	Visual and hearing	M	24			√	
4	Cerebral palsy	M	26	√	√	√	
5	Hearing impairment	F	28			√	√
6	Muscular dystrophy	F	26	√	√	√	
7	Lupus	F	24	√	√	√	
8	Vision impairment	F	32	√	√		
9	Vision impairment	F	27	√	√	√	
10	Vision impairment	F	34	√	√		
11	Vision impairment	F	29	√	√	√	

12	Vision impairment	M	30		√	√	
13	Cerebral palsy	F	24	√	√	√	
14	Cerebral palsy	F	18	√	√	√	
15	Charcot-marie tooth disease	M	22		√	√	
16	Muscular dystrophy	F	19		√	√	
17	Cerebral palsy	M	19			√	√