



Vaasan yliopisto
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**Working Life Experiences of People With Physical
Disabilities in SMEs in the EU**

School of Management
Master's thesis in
International Business

Vaasa 2025

UNIVERSITY OF VAASA**School of Management**

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Title of the thesis:	Working Life Experiences of People With Physical Disabilities in SMEs in the EU		
Degree:	Master of Science in Economics and Business Administration		
Discipline:	International Business		
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Year:	2025	Pages:	119

ABSTRACT:

It is known that people with disabilities (PWDs) are considered a marginalized group of people around the world, including Western societies. Considering the population in the countries of the European Union (EU), approximately one in every four people has a disability of some form, and due to population aging and chronic illnesses becoming increasingly more common, the population in similar positions is growing. However, despite the existence of supportive frameworks, problems seem to persist. As exemplified, roughly half of the working-aged population of PWDs in the EU is unemployed, and even this group is an emerging workforce resource in contexts where working-age populations are declining; unemployment among PWDs is still a problem that is not dissipating. Accordingly, this thesis aimed to find the reasons why PWDs are still facing challenges in employment by studying their employment experiences, to examine how and why these experiences may differ across countries in the EU, and to explore how diversity management could influence the employment situation of PWDs. In this study, the target countries were delimited to four: Austria, Finland, Germany, and Lithuania, and the focus group was delimited to people with physical disabilities.

The theoretical framework of the study built a base understanding of physical disabilities and the societal situation of PWDs in the EU, continuing with the establishment of the situation of PWDs in the employment landscape. Also, the structures supporting PWDs were outlined, their effects on SMEs' views on PWDs were analysed, and the currently identified problems regarding the employment of PWDs were explored from both PWDs and employers' points of view. Although what was already evident from the aims of the study, the theoretical framework could not explain the reasons why the PWDs continue to face issues in employment. For this reason, the empirical part of the study was conducted using qualitative methods, guided by a critical realist perspective to get a deeper understanding of the underlying issues that affect the employment of PWDs. The research method used was qualitative interviews, which were conducted to gather experiences from both PWDs' and SMEs' perspectives.

The results of the research show that there is a lack of understanding about (physical) disabilities, which could be identified being a root cause of multiple challenges that PWDs face when it comes to employment. Also, the institutional effects on SMEs' perspectives on PWDs are dependent on societal and cultural contexts. Lastly, SMEs have a limited understanding of disabilities, diversity, and diversity management, even though diversity needs to be genuinely embraced before attempting to manage it. These results are tied to theoretical implications by providing insights regarding disability, employment, and management studies, and practical implications come in the form of recommendations on how SMEs should move towards including diversity management into their strategies.

KEYWORDS: Disability, employment, diversity, cross-cultural research, critical realism

VAASAN YLIOPISTO**School of Management**

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Tutkielman nimi:	Working Life Experiences of People With Physical Disabilities in SMEs in the EU		
Tutkinto:	Kauppateiden maisteri		
Oppiaine:	Kansainvälinen liiketoiminta		
Työn ohjaaja:	Aušrine Šilenskyte		
Valmistumisvuosi:	2025	Sivumäärä:	119

TIIVISTELMÄ:

Vammaisia henkilöitä pidetään marginalisoituna ihmisryhmänä niin länsimaisissa yhteiskunnissa kuin maailmanlaajuisestikin. Kun katsotaan Euroopan unionin (EU) maiden väestöä, noin jopa joka neljännellä ihmisellä on jonkinasteinen vamma ja samankaltaisessa asemassa olevien ihmisten määrä on vain kasvamaan päin, koska väestö ikääntyy sekä krooniset sairaudet yleistyvät. On myös nähtävissä, että erinäisistä tukirakenteista huolimatta ongelmat jatkuvat. Esimerkiksi vallitsevassa osaaaja- sekä työvoimapulan ajassa vammaiset henkilöt ovat nousseet potentiaaliseksi resurssiksi, mutta silti kokonaisuudessaan noin puolet työikäisestä vammaisväestöstä EU maissa ovat työttömiä. On siis selvää, että vammaisten henkilöiden työttömyys on ongelma, jota ei ole saatu hälvenemään. Tässä tutkielmassa pyrittiinkin selvittämään vammaisten henkilöiden kokemuksiin pohjaten, miksi he kohtaavat edelleen haasteita työelämässä. Kokemuksia myös verrattiin keskenään eri maiden välillä mahdollisten eroavaisuuksien varalta. Lopuksi selvitettiin myös mahdollisuuksia lievittää vammaisten henkilöiden työttömyystilannetta monimuotoisuuden johtamisen työkalujen avulla. Tutkimukseen tehtiin rajauksia, joilla varmistettiin sen toteuttamiskelpoisuus. Tässä tutkimuksessa kohdemaiksi rajattiin Itävalta, Liettua, Suomi ja Saksa sekä kohderyhmän osalta tehtiin rajaus fyysisesti vammaisiin henkilöihin.

Tutkimuksen teoreettisessa viitekehyksessä luotiin perusymmärrys fyysisistä vammoista, vammaisten henkilöiden yhteiskunnallisesta asemasta EU:ssa sekä vammaisten henkilöiden työllisyystilanteesta. Näiden lisäksi, viitekehyksessä hahmoteltiin niin yhteiskunnan sekä lakien että muiden, kuten yritysten tarjoamia tukirakenteita vammaisille henkilöille. Lopuksi perehdyttiin myös vammaisten henkilöiden työelämän ongelmiin sekä työnantajan että työntekijän näkökulmista. Teoreettisesta viitekehyksestä kävi ilmi, ettei se kyennyt itsellään selittämään syitä sille, miksi vammaiset henkilöt kokevat edelleen ongelmia työelämässä huolimatta siitä, että on olemassa myös tukirakenteita joiden tulisi auttaa asiassa. Tästä syystä tutkimuksen empiirisessä osassa käytettiin kvalitatiivisia tutkimusmenetelmiä, joita ohjasi kriittisen realismin näkökulma. Tällä tavalla oli mahdollista saada mahdollisimman syvälinen käsitys siitä, mitkä ovat ongelmien taustalla olevat piilevät syyt, joita ei nykyisellään ole mahdollista nähdä teoreettisesta viitekehyksestä. Aineistonhankintavälineenä käytettiin kvalitatiivisia haastatteluita, joiden avulla kerättiin kokemuksia aiheesta sekä vammaisten henkilöiden että työnantajien näkökulmista.

Tutkimustulokset osoittavat, että (fyysisesti) vammaisten henkilöiden työelämän sekä muidenkin kontekstien ongelmien taustalla on perimmäisesti se, että vammoja sekä vammaisuutta ei ymmärretä riittävästi. Kävi myös ilmi, että esimerkiksi instituutioiden vaikutukset siihen, miten PK-yritykset toimivat vammaisten henkilöiden kanssa riippuu myös yhteiskunnallisten ja kulttuuristen kontekstien vaikutuksista. Lisäksi, pk-yrityksillä osoittui olevan rajallinen käsitys (fyysisitä) vammoista, vammaisuudesta, monimuotoisuudesta sekä sen johtamisesta. Tutkimus tarjosi teoreettisia näkökulmia vammais-, työllisyys-, sekä johtamistutkimuksille, mutta myös käytännön näkökulmia pk-yritysten monimuotoisuuden johtamiseen liittyen.

AVAINSANAT: Disability, employment, diversity, cross-cultural research, critical realism

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1 Introduction

According to the United Nations (n.d.a) Convention On The Rights Of Persons With Disabilities (CRPD) article 27, the States Parties recognize, safeguard, and commit to the rights of disabled individuals to have a livelihood through freely chosen or taken work in environments that are accessible, inclusive, and welcoming to persons with disabilities, which include people who have become disabled during employment. Correspondingly, the States Parties are required to make progress to: Proscribe all forms of disability-based discrimination regarding employment; Protect the right of people with disabilities (PWDs) to have equal and just opportunities, working conditions, and compensation for work; Ensure equal labor and trade union rights for PWDs; Facilitate effective access for PWDs to vocational guidance, placement services, and ongoing training programs; Promote career opportunities and support for PWDs in employment; Promote entrepreneurship and self-employment for PWDs; Hire PWDs in the government sector; Promote private sector employment for PWDs through policies, including affirmative action programs and incentives; Make sure PWDs have access to appropriate workplace accommodations; Promote work experience acquisition for PWDs; Encourage rehabilitation, job retention, and return-to-work programs for PWDs.

According to Felix (2023), only 51.3 percent of working-age PWDs are in paid employment in the EU area despite all the aforementioned measures that the United Nations CRPD Article 27 has guided the States Parties to progress towards. From all EU member states, Greece and Ireland share the lowest employment rate of PWDs, which is 32.6%, while Estonia has the highest percentage of its PWD population employed, with 64.9%. Also, on average in the EU, the gap between employment rates of PWDs compared to the employment rate of people without disabilities is 24,4 percentage points (Buchanan & Hammersley, 2023, p. 32). Further looking into the statistics, women and younger people with disabilities are at an even further disadvantage, because 49% of women PWDs and 47.4% of young PWDs on average are in paid employment (Felix, 2023).

These two paragraphs were a demonstration of the contradiction PWDs face in employment. As it was exemplified, even though there are standards from the level of the United Nations that legally bind member countries, statistics such as one from Felix (2023) show that unemployment continues to be a major issue among PWDs. Not only that, but Vornholt et al. (2018, p. 1) also state that as the working-age population is declining, disabled people are starting to be held as an emerging and diverse resource in the workforce. Still, it does not show in the statistics presented before, meaning there are persistent issues in the employment of PWDs. The only way to get a solution is by looking into and addressing the issue of PWD employment.

1.1 Research Question and Objectives

This thesis studied the reasons why people with (physical) disabilities in the EU are still facing challenges in employment despite there being laws and other similar support that should mitigate the issue. This was done by exploring the array of experiences regarding the employment of people with disabilities in SMEs. Additional points to study were whether the found experiences could have similarities or differences between countries in the EU, and if introducing diversity management to SMEs could influence these experiences, hence affecting the employment situation of people with physical disabilities. Thus, these reasons justify the following research questions:

1. Why do PWDs continue to face employment challenges across the EU despite the presence of supportive frameworks?
 - a. What kind of employment experiences do people with physical disabilities have in SMEs?
 - b. Are these experiences similar, or do they differ across countries in the EU, and why
 - c. How could diversity management be used in SMEs to influence the employment situation of people with physical disabilities?

Basically, the purpose of this thesis was to study and compare the experiences of PWDs considering their employment in SMEs in Europe to find out why their employment situations remain challenging. Furthermore, it was to be explored how diversity management could be introduced to SMEs in a way that would influence the employment situation of PWDs in Europe. Thus, the research objectives are as follows:

1. To find the reasons why PWDs are still facing challenges in employment by studying their employment experiences.
2. To examine how and why these experiences may differ across countries in the EU.
3. To determine how diversity management could influence the employment situation of PWDs.

1.2 Delimitations of the Study

This study focused on finding out why PWDs continue to face challenges in their employment despite there being laws and other similar helpful structures that exist to protect them. This was done by gathering experiences from PWDs about their employment, but it was also examined how and why these experiences differ between countries in the EU. Thus, as the focus was on gathering detailed and descriptive information from people from EU countries, it was seen necessary to limit the number of focus countries, mainly to keep the scale and scope of the study under control and to ensure that the research stayed feasible. The number of countries to be considered in the study was limited to four, but the choice of countries was made regarding the disability employment gap percentage points (pp) for variation in the PWDs' situations regardless of the countries' general employment rate (Buchanan & Hammersley, 2023, pp. 32-34). The countries chosen as targets were the following: Germany with 36.3 pp, Lithuania with 22.7 pp, Austria with 20.5 pp, and Finland with 19.9 pp (p. 33).

What is also to be remembered is that disability is a broad concept that includes many types, from physical to sensory and mental disabilities (Centers for Disease Control and

Prevention, 2020), not forgetting the combinations of the three. Thus, the study was limited to include only people with physical disabilities, best to serve the purpose and objectives of the study. Furthermore, this is to keep the scope of the study under control and the study itself feasible.

1.3 Research Structure

This thesis is structured into six separate chapters. The first chapter of the paper consists of the introduction for the study, addressing topics like the background and motivation, the research questions and objectives, and the delimitations of the study. The second and third chapters of the paper act as the theoretical framework or literature review for the study, containing relevant theories in a logical thematic order, as in a chain of effects that the theories have on each other by the author's interpretation. The fourth chapter of the paper clarifies the methodological choices utilized in the research, starting from research philosophy and approach, continuing with the research method, moving to the disclosure of data collection and analysis methods, and ending with the considerations about the reliability and validity of the study. The fifth chapter of the paper presents the empirical findings of the study accordingly to the themes of the theoretical framework. Lastly, the sixth chapter, discussion, provides the analysis for the data from the findings, concludes the study by providing answers to the research questions while discussing the contributions of the thesis, and considers the limitations of the study as well as possibilities for future research

2 Understanding Physical Disabilities

Understanding what physical disabilities are and how they stand out from the rest of the disabilities spectrum is important, as the core of the study is specifically people with physical disabilities. Also, getting introduced to the facts and figures on disabilities in the EU helps to grasp the scope of the thesis. Thus, this chapter handles the definition of physical disabilities and the introduction to the situation and position of physically disabled people in Europe.

2.1 Defining Physical Disability

The concept of disability is broad and includes many types, from physical to sensory and mental disabilities on a structural and/or functional level (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). According to WHO (2011), a disability consists of persistent challenges and/or difficulties that can be experienced in any area of human functioning, and it can be affected by three different but interconnected disability areas, which are impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions. First, impairments can affect body structures, physiological functions, and mental functions as a “deviation from a population mean within measured standard norms” (WHO, 2010, p 80). Second, activity limitations refer to difficulties in executing activities pain-free, quickly or slowly enough, at the right pace, or better, in any manner that should be expected (p 79). Last, participation restrictions refer to the difficulties a person could have simply living their day-to-day life (p.80).

Physical disability is just as difficult to define as any other disability, but it would be rational to relate it to at least body structures and mobility. If we look at the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health by WHO (n.d.b), they list body structures followingly: structures of the nervous system; the eye, ear, and related structures; structures involved in voice and speech; structures of cardiovascular, immunological and respiratory systems; structures related to the digestive, metabolic and endocrine

systems; structures related to the genitourinary and reproductive systems; structures related to movement, and skin and related structures. Also, they define mobility followingly: changing and maintaining body position; carrying, moving, and handling objects; walking and moving; and moving around using transportation (WHO, n.d.b). Also, Kuvalekar et al. (2015, p. 70) in a study that assessed the quality of life of physically disabled people in India formed their own definition for physical disabilities:

(a) Persons having locomotor disability (b) loss or absence or inactivity of whole or part of hand or leg or both due to amputation, paralysis, deformity or dysfunction of joints which affected his/her "normal ability to move self or objects" (c) those with physical deformities in the body other than limbs such as, hunch back, deformed spine. Dwarfs and persons with stiff neck of permanent nature who generally did not have difficulty in the normal movement of body and limbs were also treated as disabled.

Although the description of a person with physical disabilities by Kuvalekar et al. (2015) is detailed, it provides a quite one-sided view of a person with physical disabilities. Mainly, because it focuses on impairments and activity limitations on the body's structural side, and overall, mainly on areas of disability that are visible to the observer. As stated before, the concept of disability is broad, and let alone physical disability along with other types of disabilities are difficult to define, but what is to be taken in is that physical disabilities are diverse and the effects can be just as visible as well as invisible for the observer's eye (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020; WHO, n.d.b).

2.2 People with Disabilities in the European Union

European Union (n.d.) states that 448 million people are living in the EU, and the European Council of the European Union (2024) states that approximately 101 million people of the total population have some form of disability, which translates roughly to one in four people. Still, despite the average amount, there are also regional differences in the number of PWDs; for example, Bulgaria has the lowest number of PWDs at 14.6% of the population, whereas Latvia has the highest number of PWDs at 38.5% (European Council

of the European Union, 2024). Furthermore, in total and also regionally, there are more women with disabilities than men with disabilities in the EU, as on the EU average 29.5% of women live with a disability whereas 24.4% of men live with a disability, although, age of an individual affects the prevalence of disability, as older people become, they become more susceptible in attaining disabilities.

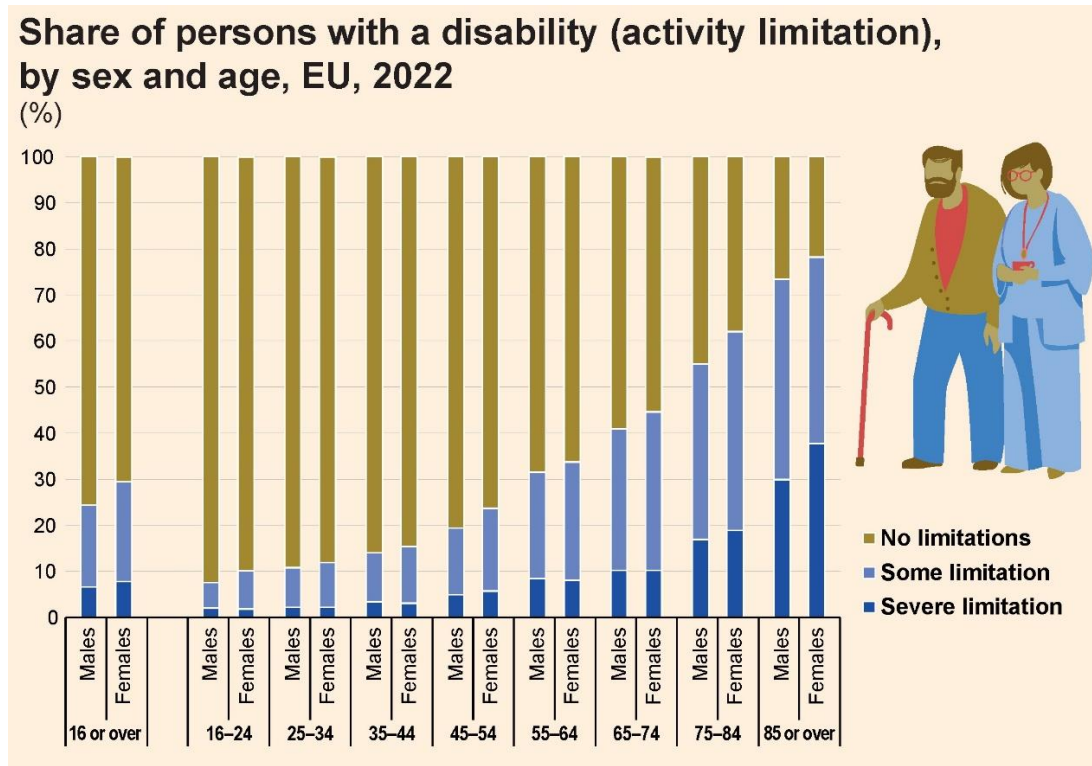


Figure 1. Share of persons with a disability by sex and age, EU, 2022 (Eurostat, 2023).

Disability types range from physical to sensory and mental disabilities (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020), but overall, physical disabilities are the most common type of disability worldwide. Notably, Statista (2023b) and United Nations (n.d.b) have found that disabilities affecting one's mobility and dexterity, hearing, seeing, and different internal conditions are the most prevalent types of disabilities in Europe. For example, just in the UK alone, mobility-related disabilities account for 48% of all disability types (Statista, 2023b), and in Austria, Croatia, Czechia, Hungary, Lithuania, Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Spain, and Sweden, disabilities in general, affecting mobility and dexterity, hearing, seeing, and different internal conditions, account for

majority of disabilities in country-specific data produced by surveys made in each of the countries (United Nations, n.d.b).

Population aging and chronic illnesses becoming increasingly more common are the leading reasons for the growing population of PWDs in the EU (WHO, n.d.a). Thus, this also means an increase in the population with disadvantageous positions in many aspects of life, as the European Council of the European Union (2024) states that currently: Over half of people with disabilities in the EU feel like they are being discriminated against; Unemployment rates among younger PWDs (20–26-year-olds) are high at 17.7% whereas 8.6% among people without disabilities; The risk of poverty or social exclusion among PWDs is high, at 28.8% in 2022; Leaving school early is twice as common among PWDs as among people without disabilities. PWDs face difficulties accessing mainstream schooling and less than 30% obtain a post-secondary education; PWDs altogether have 4 times more often health issues that have been unmet than people without disabilities; Up to 17% of PWDs are victims of violence, and especially women and elders with disabilities are at higher risk of suffering from it. Also, according to Buchanan & Hammersley (2023, p. 30), the total unemployment rate among PWDs is 48.7 %



Figure 2. Issues faced by PWDs in the EU based on the European Council of the European Union (2024) and Buchanan & Hammersley (2023, p. 30).

Due to the issues and arguably difficult starting points PWDs face in their lives, in Europe, there have been and are ongoing many different attempts to mitigate the aforementioned issues, for example, those mentioned in Figure 2. First, the European Commission (2021) has presented a strategy for the rights of PWDs that is being implemented between the years 2021 and 2030. Mainly, the focus on the disability strategy with its key initiatives falls on categories such as accessibility, autonomy, and independent living of PWDs, equal possibilities for PWDs to enjoy EU rights, and anti-discrimination and equal opportunities. Second, there are multiple Europe-wide non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that act as umbrella organizations that lead work towards improving the societal position of PWDs through, for example, promoting inclusion (European Disability Forum, n.d.; Inclusion Europe, n.d.).

3 Employment of PWDs in the European Union

This chapter lays the foundation for all issues that impact the employment of people with disabilities. Correspondingly, themes that are covered by this chapter are the overall employment landscape of PWDs, the legal environment in the EU, and the thesis' target countries, SMEs' managerial perspectives, diversity management, and the current problems affecting PWDs' employment from both employer and employee views. The aforementioned themes are important because understanding the different dimensions of issues affecting PWDs' employment is necessary for comprehending the employment experiences that this thesis seeks to explore.

3.1 The Employment Landscape of People With Disabilities

According to the United Nations (2007), in industrialized countries, the unemployment rate of disabled people ranges from 50% to 70%, while in developing nations, even up to 90% of the working-age population with disabilities are unemployed. On average, 51.3% of working-age PWDs in the EU are employed, with the lowest employment rates seen in Ireland and Greece at 32.6% and the highest in Estonia at 64.9% (Felix, 2023). Figure 3 illustrates the arguably noticeable gap in PWDs' employment rates between EU member states and further reinforces the need to investigate the problem at hand.

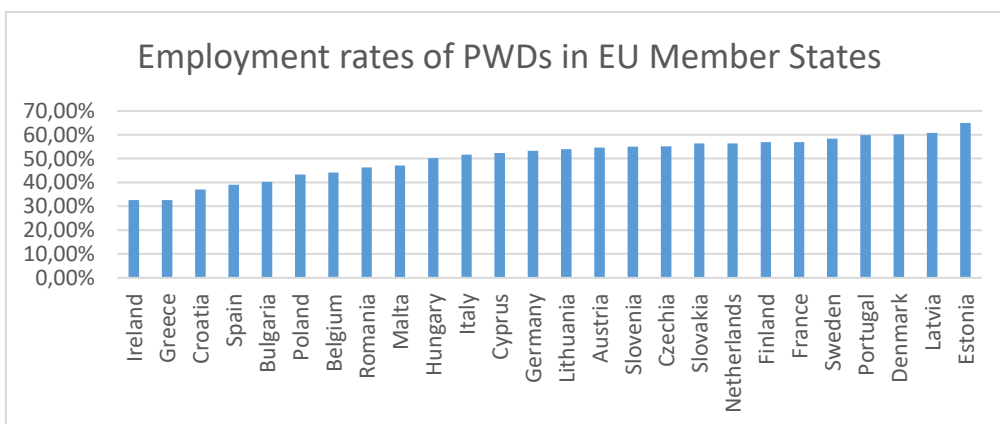


Figure 3. Employment rates of PWDs in EU Member States (Felix, 2023).

Furthermore, the disability employment gap, representing the difference in employment rates between those with disabilities and those without, averages 24.4 pp across the EU (Buchanan & Hammersley, 2023, p. 32). Additionally, PWDs face a two to three times higher likelihood of unemployment than individuals without disabilities (United Nations, 2007), which serves as evidence that illustrates, as also stated in the background section, that unemployment among PWDs is an issue that needs to be addressed and looked into. To mitigate the employment-related issues among PWDs in the EU, there are articles, directives, laws, regulations, and strategies/policies that range all the way from EU-level to individual country level, which then affect SMEs' management and thus the individual (PWD). But before going further into the relationships of said entities, it is relevant to reason why SMEs were chosen as a target for the study.

The reason why specifically SMEs are targeted in this paper is that globally, SMEs play an important role in the economy, as they account for 40% of the world's GDP in addition to making 90% of all businesses and 50% of the total employment possibilities (Keating & Worsteling, 2023, p. 2). Also, it has been recognized that SMEs make hiring decisions on different grounds than large enterprises and multinationals (Keating & Worsteling, 2023, p. 2), and a UK-based study by Dex and Scheibl (2001, p. 419) about flexible and family-friendly working arrangements in UK-Based SMEs found SMEs being somewhat more common enablers of more flexible working arrangements.

Continuing with the relationships of directives, laws, SMEs, and PWDs. As exemplified, EU-directives set out binding goals that member states of the EU need to achieve through legislative means (Euroopan Komissio, n.d.). Correspondingly, the Directive 2000/78/EC has served as one of the guidelines, for example, for the Finnish Non-Discrimination Act, the purpose of which is to promote equality and prevent discrimination and to enhance the legal protection of those who have been discriminated against (Yhdenvertaisuuslaki 1325/2014, 1 §; Leppänen, 2015, p. 2-8). In fact, promoting equality, or better, equity for PWDs has been taken seriously, for example in EY Finland, where a person suffering from narcolepsy and cataplexy was employed as a part-time employee

by her wish, as she in her own words would be very exhausted from a full eight-hour workday (Matilainen, 2023). Despite the employee working part-time, EY provided her with an opportunity to rest during the workday as needed to cover her increased need to sleep due to narcolepsy. Corresponding to the example, this layer-like relationship of the entities is demonstrated in Figure 4.

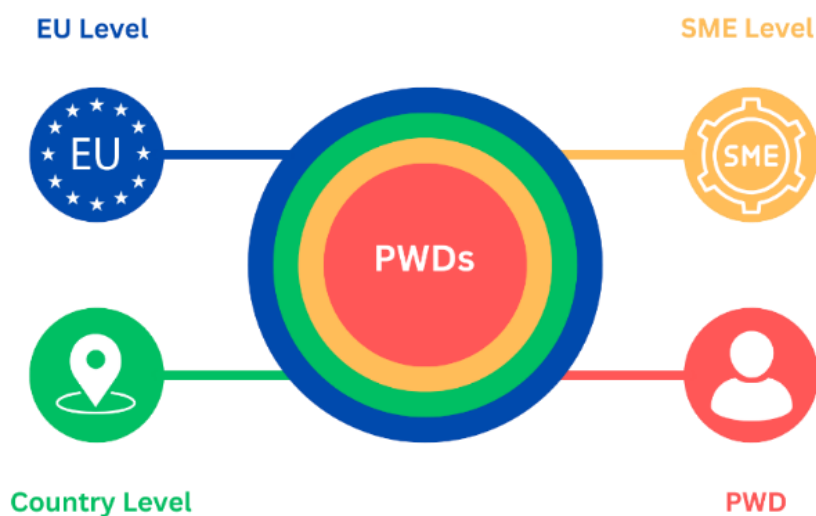


Figure 4. Levels of laws, regulations, and management in relation to PWDs' employment (Author's interpretation).

In conclusion, high unemployment levels of PWDs paired with relatively high disability-employment gaps are prevalent issues within the European Union. For this reason, attempts to address employment and equality issues for PWDs have progressed like the layers presented in Figure 4. Meaning that the measures flow from the top layer as EU directives down to the layer of national laws and regulations, which affect the layer of SMEs' way of management, and lastly, PWDs.

3.2 Legal Environments' Effect on PWD Employment

This section explores the laws and regulations that are affecting the employment of PWDs in the EU and the thesis's target countries with a "top-down" approach. This means that first, what is being looked at is the EU level, as it has its effect on all EU countries (Euroopan Komissio, n.d.). Consequently, after the EU level, country-specific legal environments will be explored. Finally, the chapter culminates in a comparative analysis of the prevailing legal environment, taking into account both EU and country-specific laws.

3.2.1 Laws and Regulations in the EU

The European Parliament and the Council of Europe adopted the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD), Directive 2022/2464, on 14 December 2022, and it entered into force on 5 January 2023 (Directive 2022/2464; HE 20/2023 vp, p. 5). Basically, the directive sets out detailed information requirements for companies on the impact of their activities on sustainability issues as well as their impact on the company, which need to be presented in a sustainability report (HE 20/2023 vp, p. 5). Also, like financial statements, the sustainability report should be certified by an opinion issued by an external auditor or an independent certification body (European Council of the European Union, 2022). The CSRD applies to all large-scale enterprises, and small and medium-sized enterprises whose securities are admitted to trading on a regulated market in the Union, in other words, listed SMEs (Directive 2022/2464; HE 20/2023 vp, pp. 7-8).

What does the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive have to do with PWDs? Firstly, the directive helps stakeholders assess the non-financial performance of companies, encouraging them to build more responsible business models; hence, sustainable business operations become an integral part of the directive's target companies (HE 20/2023 vp, pp. 5-6). Secondly, the reporting standards address PWDs directly in

multiple ways. For example, companies must provide the following information in their reports:

a description of the diversity policy applied in relation to the undertaking's administrative, management and supervisory bodies with regard to gender and other aspects such as, age, **disabilities** or educational and professional background, the objectives of that diversity policy, how it has been implemented and the results in the reporting period. If no such policy is applied, the statement shall contain an explanation as to why that is the case. (Directive 2022/2464, art. 1, section 5a).

Clearly, human rights and equality-related issues have become more commonly demanded information as stakeholders have become more aware of the CSR factors and their effects on society and sustainability altogether. Especially, as companies targeted by the CSRD must specifically report information about the realization of social and human rights in their business activities on at least the following levels:

equal treatment and opportunities for all, including gender equality and equal pay for work of equal value, training and skills development, the employment and inclusion of **people with disabilities**, measures against violence and harassment in the workplace, and diversity. (Directive 2022/2464, art. 1, section 8).

respect for the human rights, fundamental freedoms, democratic principles and standards established in the International Bill of Human Rights and other core UN human rights conventions, including the UN Convention on the **Rights of Persons with Disabilities**, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the International Labour Organization's Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work and the fundamental conventions of the International Labour Organization, the European Convention for the protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, the European Social Charter, and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. (Directive 2022/2464, art. 1, section 8).

The EU has fought discrimination and promoted equality in employment and occupation long before the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive. As discussed superficially in Chapter 3.1, there is a Directive "establishing a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation" that was adopted at the end of the year 2000 (Directive 2000/78/EC). The purpose of the directive is to go against age, **disability**, gender, religion or belief, or sexual orientation-related direct or indirect discrimination in employment or occupation (Directive 2000/78/EC, art. 1). Also, even though this directive promotes

equal treatment towards PWDs among other groups, it still allows EU countries to implement measures ensuring PWDs health, safety, and integration within the workforce (Directive 2000/78/EC, art. 7).

Not only does the Directive 2000/78/EC fight against discrimination of individuals such as PWDs in their working life, but it also fights for reasonable accommodation for PWDs (Directive 2000/78/EC, art. 5). What this means is that the employer should take necessary actions

...where needed in a particular case, to enable a person with a disability to have access to, participate in, or advance in employment, or to undergo training, unless such measures would impose a disproportionate burden on the employer. This burden shall not be disproportionate when it is sufficiently remedied by measures existing within the framework of the disability policy of the Member State concerned. (Directive 2000/78/EC art. 5).

Additionally, The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, a legally binding document that joins together all the prime personal rights, prohibits “Any discrimination based on any ground such as sex, race, colour, ethnic or social origin, genetic features, language, religion or belief, political or any other opinion, membership of a national minority, property, birth, disability, age or sexual orientation...” (Official Journal of the European Union, 2016). It also proclaims that the Union respects the rights of disabled individuals to access measures promoting their independence, social integration, and community participation. Given this, promoting PWDs' employment and prohibiting discrimination against them are fundamental rights of PWDs.

3.2.2 Austrian Legal Environment

The Austrian Federal Act on Equality of People with Disabilities (Federal Disability Equality Act - BGStG) is a law that aims to eliminate and prevent discrimination against PWDs, and thus, to ensure the equal participation of people with disabilities in life in society and to enable them to lead self-determined lives (Bundesgesetz über die Gleichstellung von Menschen mit Behinderungen BGBl. I Nr. 82/2005 1 § 1). Also, the law does not

classify special measures to ensure the equal participation of people with disabilities in society as discriminatory (BGBl. I Nr. 82/2005 1 § 7). According to BGBl. I Nr. 82/2005 1 § 5, Direct discrimination occurs when a PWD experiences less favorable treatment in a comparable situation than another person experiences, has experienced, or would experience. Also, indirect discrimination occurs when apparently neutral regulations, criteria, or procedures, as well as characteristics of designed areas of life, can put PWDs at a disadvantage compared to others, unless they are justified by a legitimate aim and proven to be necessary and appropriate. Furthermore, harassing and ordering to harass a PWD is also considered discrimination, as well as ordering to discriminate against a PWD.

When it comes to PWDs' employment, Austria has a consolidation of laws for the Employment of Persons with Disabilities (Bundesrecht konsolidiert: Gesamte Rechtsvorschrift für Behinderteneinstellungsgesetz, BGBl. Nr. 22/1970). It comes with an employment obligation that requires all employers who employ 25 or more employees in the federal territory to employ at least one disabled person for every 25 employees (BGBl. Nr. 22/1970 § 1). Furthermore, the Federal Minister of Labor, Health and Social Affairs can change the number of PWDs to be employed for certain sectors of the economy by ordinance in such a way that at least one PWD is to be employed for every maximum of 40 employees. Both laws BGBl. I Nr. 82/2005 and BGBl. Nr. 22/1970 consider disability non-temporary (lasting more than six months) physical, mental or psychological functional impairment or impairment of sensory functions that is likely to make participation in society and/or in working life more difficult (BGBl. I Nr. 82/2005 1. § 3; BGBl. Nr. 22/1970 § 3).

Direct and/or indirect discrimination and harassment of PWDs in a work setting is also strictly prohibited according to BGBl. Nr. 22/1970 § 7a-c. Similarly to BGBl. I Nr. 82/2005 1 § 5, direct discrimination occurs if a PWD experiences less favorable treatment in a comparable situation than another person experiences, has experienced or would experience, or indirectly, if apparently neutral regulations, criteria, or procedures as well as

characteristics of designed areas of life can put PWDs in a disadvantage compared to others, unless they're justified by a legitimate aim and proven to be necessary and appropriate. What is to be remembered is BGBl. Nr. 22/1970 considers these definitions through the work environment.

When employing PWDs, employers must take every possible account of their state of health, depending on the nature of the company type, the type of establishment, and the working conditions (BGBl. Nr. 22/1970 § 6). Also, employers must take the appropriate measures to enable PWDs access employment, pursue a profession, advance and participate in education and training measures, unless these measures would place a disproportionate burden on the employer, which is not the case if it can be adequately compensated by funding measures in accordance with federal or state law.

3.2.3 Finnish Legal Environment

The Finnish Non-Discrimination Act's purpose is to promote equality and prevent discrimination and to enhance the legal protection of those who have been discriminated against (30.12.2014/1325, 1 §). The law in its original form entered into force in 2004, but as it was hard to understand, it has since been reformed (Leppänen, 2015, p. 4). As could be expected, the Non-Discrimination Act shares similarities with the EU Directive 2000/78/EC, as the directive was a guiding line for the enactment of the Non-Discrimination Act (Leppänen, 2015, pp. 2-4).

The Non-Discrimination Act also prohibits all forms of direct and indirect discrimination based on, for example, disability, among other personal characteristics. In addition, harassment, denial of reasonable accommodation, and instruction or order to discriminate are also considered discrimination in the law (30.12.2014/1325, 8 §). Furthermore, the Act also prohibits employers from requiring characteristics or circumstances referred to in the Act (30.12.2014/1325 17 §). Still, positive different treatment is allowed, because "Proportionate different treatment that aims to promote de facto equality, or to prevent

or remove the disadvantages attributable to discrimination, does not constitute discrimination.” (30.12.2014/1325, 9 §)

According to the Act, employers must ensure PWDs’ equal access to work by making appropriate adjustments in each situation (30.12.2014/1325 15 §). When evaluating the feasibility of these adjustments, factors like company size, financial capacity, and nature and extent of the operations, along with costs and available support, are considered. Additionally, employers must provide a written report to a PWD upon request if they believe they've faced discrimination due to denied reasonable adjustments while applying for or working in an occupation. Furthermore, according to Vammaispalvelulaki (675/2023 28 §), PWD has the right to receive the reasonable mobility support he or she needs if he or she has particular mobility difficulties and is unable to use public transport independently without undue difficulty. In addition, this support is to be arranged by the wellbeing services county for work and study trips, as well as for employment support activities, work activities, and other normal life trips. Assistance in the movement of a disabled person may be provided as a transport service, by personal assistance or escort, providing a car or other means of transport suitable for the person's use as financial assistance, granting financial assistance for the purchase of a car or other vehicle, or by other suitable means (675/2023 29 §).

3.2.4 German Legal Environment

Discrimination has been addressed in Germany with the General Act on Equal Treatment of 14 August 2006 (BGBl. I S. 2510). Discrimination in this law covers direct and indirect discrimination, harassment, sexual harassment, and ordering a third person to do anything of the aforementioned (BGBl. I S. 2510 Section 3). The law aims “to prevent or to stop discrimination on the grounds of race or ethnic origin, gender, religion or belief, **disability**, age or sexual orientation” (BGBl. I S. 2510, Section 1). Discrimination on the foregoing criterion is strictly forbidden in relation to:

1. conditions for access to dependent employment and self-employment, including selection criteria and recruitment conditions, whatever the branch of activity and at all levels of the professional hierarchy, including promotion, 2. employment conditions and working conditions, including pay and reasons for dismissal, in particular in contracts between individuals, collective bargaining agreements and measures to implement and terminate an employment relationship, as well as for promotion, 3. access to all types and to all levels of vocational guidance, vocational training, advanced vocational training and retraining, including practical work experience, 4. membership of and involvement in an organisation of workers or employers or any other organisation whose members carry on a particular profession, including the benefits provided for by such organisations, 5. social protection, including social security and health care, 6. social advantages, 7. education, 8. access to and supply of goods and services which are available to the public, including housing. (BGBl. I S. 2510, Section 2)

Germany has also passed a separate law considering PWDs, the Law on Equality for People with Disabilities (Gesetz zur Gleichstellung von Menschen mit Behinderungen [Behindertengleichstellungsgesetz – BGG], BGBl. I S. 1467, 1468), which aims to eliminate and prevent discrimination against PWDs and to ensure their equal participation in life in society and to enable them to lead a self-determined life (BGBl. I S. 1467, 1468 § 1). The law defines PWDs similarly to Austria's Federal Disability Equality Act (BGStG), meaning that PWDs are individuals who have long-term (lasting more than six months) physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments, which, in interaction with attitudinal and environmental barriers, can prevent them from participating equally in society (BGBl. I S. 1467, 1468 § 3). Nonetheless, the Law on Equality for People with Disabilities covers some similar themes with the General Act on Equal Treatment, but in addition to discrimination issues, the law addresses themes such as: Accessibility, and the importance of creating accessible environments for PWDs; Participation of PWDs in the society; And Accommodations, meaning that for example, employers are required to ensure that people with disabilities can fully participate in work (BGBl. I S. 1467, 1468).

3.2.5 Lithuanian Legal Environment

Lithuania has maybe the broadest PWD-inclusive law of the four target countries of the paper. That is the Lithuanian Law on the Social Integration of the Disabled I-2044 which aims to

regulate the establishment of disability, medical, vocational and social rehabilitation for disabled persons, the adjustment of conditions for the disabled, as well as the development and education of the disabled, and shall establish legal, economic and organizational guarantees for the occupational, vocational and social rehabilitation of the disabled. (Law on the Social Integration of the Disabled I-2044 Article 1).

Lithuanian Law on the Social Integration emphasizes that PWDs are entitled to the same rights as every other Lithuanian resident (I-2044 Article 2). Additionally, the law promises PWDs: Access to public and state structures and participation in deliberation of questions concerning PWDs; Protection from discrimination, exploitation, abuse and scornful behaviour; Possibility for to live with their families or in other suitable environments, and not to be put into institutions without the consent of their own, their parents, or guardians; Medical, functional, psychological and pedagogical assistance in their place of residence, except in cases where assistance is given in special institutions; Opportunity to be educated and developed, to gain a profession, and work and engage in useful activities in accordance to their abilities, interests, and opportunities; To take PWDs into account in the preparation of governmental and other national programs; To provide information and consultation to PWDs, their parents, or guardians about their rights and legitimate interests; The chance perform duties to the extent of their abilities, skills, and knowledge. Still, PWDs are liable for their actions, with the exception of cases provided for in laws; Lithuania to cooperate internationally to solve disability issues (I-2044 Article 2).

According to I-2044 Article 8, PWDs shall be provided with medical, professional, and social care to help PWDs to integrate into their personal, professional, and/or public life. Furthermore, I-2044 Article 14 states that PWDs have a right to be educated and

developed in their home, area of residence, or in institutions with their abilities, interests, and physical and mental conditions considered. Additionally, according to I-2044 Article 17, PWDs have the right to work according to their physical and mental condition, professional skills, and interests. Also, if a PWD possesses qualifications for a job, employers are prohibited from refusing to hire them or discriminating against them in any other way on the grounds of disability. The working conditions for PWDs should be designed in accordance with the findings of the commission establishing disability (I-2044 Article 20). Also, PWDs are allowed on their own wish to exempt themselves from working overtime, nighttime, on holidays, and/or on rest days if the findings of the commissions establishing disability do not provide otherwise. Furthermore, PWDs are granted 35 vacation days annually.

PWDs should be employed in regular work positions, or such positions that are especially accommodated for the PWD's needs (I-2044 Article 18). Also, local governments annually establish quotas for employers for a certain number of PWD employees in a company. The lower limit is that if a company has no less than 50 employees, the number of jobs reserved for PWDs shouldn't be lower than 2% of the total employees. Employees failing to comply will have to pay contributions to the National Employment Fund. On the other hand, employers who comply will receive subsidies from the Employment Fund to accommodate PWDs. From the hiring end to the dismissal end, according to I-2044 Article 19, "Employers may only dismiss inculpable disabled employees on their own initiative upon receiving consent from the local government social security service and sending the disabled employee a 4-month written notice of the anticipated dismissal."

3.2.6 Comparative Analysis of the Legal Frameworks in Different Contexts

Overall, the directives, laws, and regulations discussed across the EU, Austria, Finland, Germany, and Lithuania bring out the shared commitment to prohibiting discrimination against PWDs, promoting equality, and protecting the rights of PWDs in both working and everyday life, with an addition of endorsing sustainable practices within businesses.

Starting from the top down, from the EU level, the minimum requirements regarding occupational equal treatment in EU countries come from Directive 2000/78/EC, which establishes a general framework for equal treatment in employment with an aim to combat discrimination based on various grounds, including in regard to disability. At the same time, the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (2022/2464) enforces the Directive 2000/78/EC by requiring companies to disclose detailed information regarding their sustainability impacts, including their approach to diversity, equality, and inclusion. As a result, the principles and directions that the directives demand are condensed into specific measures (laws) to address the contexts within each country.

All the target countries in this paper do take PWDs into consideration in each of the countries' legal systems, but naturally, there are both similarities and differences in how exactly the laws are enacted. For example, all four countries have laws that prohibit both direct and indirect discrimination, harassment, denial of reasonable accommodations, and ordering or instructing discrimination. However, Austria, Germany, and Lithuania have separate laws that promote equality and anti-discrimination for PWDs, with Lithuania's law being the broadest, but Finland incorporates disability rights within their broader non-discrimination legislation.

Even though all the countries' laws aim basically to eliminate and prevent discrimination against PWDs, to ensure the equal participation of PWDs in life in society, and to enable them to lead a self-determined lifestyle, only Austria and Germany define disability in their laws. Finland and Lithuania, on the other hand, do not define disability in the laws discussed in the countries' respective chapters, as the laws most likely apply as they are to any person who is considered a PWD, and the criteria for disability are likely determined by some other authority.

Of the four countries of focus, Austria and Lithuania are the only countries that have PWD employment quotas set for companies. Austria requires all employers who employ 25 or more people in the federal territory to employ at least one disabled person for

every 25 employees (BGBl. Nr. 22/1970 § 1), but in Lithuania, local governments are allowed to establish PWD quotas per a certain number of employees per company, where no less than 2% of PWD employees is allowed if a company employs 50 or more people (I-2044 Article 18). Furthermore, Lithuania is the only country from the targets to have set a mandatory monetary contribution to the National Employment Fund for companies failing to meet the quota, but it also pays subsidies for companies that willingly accommodate PWDs. Conversely, to the preceding countries, Finland and Germany have no set quotas that would require companies to employ a certain number or percentage of PWDs.

Overall, together with the EU, Austria, Finland, Germany, and Lithuania share a commitment to combat discrimination against PWDs, promote equality, protect PWDs' rights in various aspects of life, and thus also encourage sustainable practices within businesses. Moreover, the EU-level directives create a basis for equal treatment in employment and sustainability reporting, but it is each of the countries' responsibility to adopt these principles to their own contexts. While there are variations in approaches, the common aim is to ensure that PWDs can function in society equally to anybody else. Still, considering the PWD employment rates of each of the target countries, Austria with a 39% employment rate, Finland with 56,9 %, Germany with 56,9 %, and Lithuania with 53,9% (Felix, 2023), it is evident that the legal frameworks by themselves are not the only force affecting these statistics. Thus, what remains for consideration is how the impact of these legal structures is manifested in the activities of SMEs. For this reason, the next chapter deals with how laws, among other forms of forces, affect the management of SMEs.

3.3 Understanding SMEs' Perspectives on PWDs

For an entity to be categorized as a small or medium-sized enterprise (SME), it must meet specific criteria. For example, in the EU, an SME has been defined by the Commission Recommendation 2003/361/EC followingly. First, what is considered an enterprise is “any entity engaged in an economic activity, irrespective of its legal form” (2003/361/EC,

art. 1). Second, medium-sized enterprises do not employ more than 250 employees, their annual turnover is less than 50 million euros, and/or the balance sheet total does not exceed 43 million euros (2003/361/EC, art. 2). Whereas small enterprises do not employ more than 50 employees and their annual turnover and/or balance sheet is less than 10 million euros. Furthermore, the staff headcount is determined by counting full-time employees as annual work units (AWU), and part-time and seasonal workers as fractions of AWU (2003/361/EC, art. 5). Regarding the headcount, employees, owner-managers, partners actively involved in the enterprise and receiving financial benefits, and individuals legally recognized as employees under national law are counted as staff of the enterprise. Third, an SME is an independent enterprise whose capital or voting shares are not 25 % or more owned by a single external entity or jointly owned by other enterprises and/or undertakings (2003/361/EC, art. 3).

As previously stated in Section 3.1, the role of SMEs is crucial for the global economy, as they account for 40% of the world's GDP, 90% of all businesses, and 50% of all employment opportunities (Keating & Worsteling, 2023, p. 2). Also, SMEs were found to hire people on different grounds from larger companies, and their working arrangements are found to be more flexible (Keating & Worsteling, 2023, p. 2; Dex & Scheibl, 2001, p. 419). For these reasons, it should be more than justified to dive into SMEs' managerial perspectives and see how PWDs' employment opportunities might be affected by them.

The first thing that will be taken a look at is the reasoning SMEs use in hiring. Although, according to Keating and Worsteling (2023, p. 2), "even though most of the working population is employed in SMEs, less research has gone into understanding how they make employment decisions compared with larger organisations." One way to look into the SMEs' grounds for hiring PWDs is through the study of Moore et al. (2007 p. 113), which looked into "the perceptions of small business owners and managers of the impact of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) on their firms," a law that protects PWDs against discrimination related to employment, governmental services and programs, and public physical accommodations (Moore et al., 2007, p. 113). On the EU level, ADA shares

similarities with the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and Directive 2000/78/EC (Official Journal of the European Union, 2016; Directive 2000/78/EC).

Interestingly, a big part of small businesses in the study by Moore et al. (2007 p. 122) complied with the ADA even though they weren't necessarily required to, due to for example company size, which correlates with the statement of Dex and Scheibl (2001, p. 419) about SMEs having more flexible and family-friendly working arrangements. Moreover, of the companies that complied with ADA, 52,3% did it for the positive effects, such as decreasing staff turnover and providing enhanced product quality, and 47,4% did it to avoid negative incentives such as lawsuits (Moore et al., 2007, p. 122). Also, a majority of the companies found that the benefits of investing in accommodations for PWDs outweighed the costs. However, there was also a group of employers who did not know there could be benefits, such as financial incentives. On the other hand, Mak (2011, p. 82) in a study that looked into the occupational rehabilitation of cancer survivors, discussed joint activities between stakeholders and the development of an occupational rehabilitation system for cancer survivors in Singapore. The following joint activities could prove beneficial in educating employers about PWD employment:

(1) government to translate research into policy considerations, (2) stakeholders to support and participate in initiatives and services, (3) journalists to educate and interest the public in the issues and proposed solution and (4) practitioners to translate the new information into practice (Mak, 2011, p. 82).

In addition to compliance with laws and regulations, people-related risk management can be identified as one of the key factors for SMEs making the decision whether or not to hire a PWD (Annett, 2017, p. 30). As exemplified in a study by Annett (2017), supervisors from six SMEs who were in contact with a business network involved with disability service organizations were interviewed as they had had recent chances to hire a PWD. This study found that only one of the six hiring supervisors had hired a PWD, three were considering, and the last two wouldn't even consider hiring a PWD (Annett, 2017, p. 32). Mainly, the thoughts that emerged from the supervisors were related to the risk of PWDs

being a time-consuming burden, as they would require more supervision, support, management, and duties from the supervisors themselves (Annett, 2017, pp. 32-33).

The findings by Annett (2017, pp. 32-33) about SMEs' willingness to hire PWDs are in slight contradiction with Dex and Scheibl's (2001) findings about SMEs having flexible and family-friendly working arrangements. Mainly, because according to Annett (2017, pp. 32-33), adapting to the PWD's needs in regard of the nature of the work and safety issues were seen as concerns, whereas Dex and Scheibl (2001, p. 427) argued that flexibility is adopted by SMEs if resource requirements are low enough, employee retention increases and turnover lessens, and/or workforce is acquired efficiently. It is also to be remembered that Moore et al. (2007, p. 122) argued that SMEs who invested in PWD accommodation found that the benefits outweighed the costs. In conclusion, it can be stated that SMEs' decisions on hiring PWDs don't necessarily stem only from institutional pressures such as ADA, but also from the resource requirements of hiring a PWD. In addition, public bodies' joint activities similar to Mak's (2011, p. 82) proposal could be a way to inform SMEs about findings made by Moore et al. (2007, p. 122), that SMEs who invested in PWD accommodation found that the benefits outweighed the costs.

A modern way that some employers currently partake in employing and managing minorities, and thus, PWDs, is through affirmative action. In its broadest meaning, Crosby's (1994, p. 15) definition from nearly over 30 years ago describes affirmative action as measures taken by organizations to ensure that their policies and practices do not discriminate against individuals based on their gender or ethnicity. Nowadays, a more modern definition of affirmative action is a description of "positive action" by Johnson (2009). He describes positive action as "consisting of proportionate measures undertaken with the purpose of achieving full and effective equality in practice for members of groups that are socially or economically disadvantaged, or otherwise face the consequences of past or present discrimination or disadvantage" (Johnson, 2009, p. 6). Consequently, when considering these definitions, it is to be reflected back to the previous chapters

where the legal framework and regulations of the EU and the target countries were discussed.

Starting from the higher level, the purpose of EU directive 2000/78/EC is to forbid all occupational age, **disability**, gender, religion or belief, or sexual orientation-related direct or indirect discrimination while allowing countries to implement additional measures (positive action) ensuring minorities' health, safety, and integration within the workforce (Directive 2000/78/EC, art. 1). Similarly, The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union prohibits any and all discrimination based on sex, race, colour, ethnicity, genetics, language, religion, political opinion, nationality, property, birth, disability, age, or sexual orientation is strictly prohibited (Official Journal of the European Union, 2016). Accordingly, the target countries of the thesis all have banned discrimination and harassment of PWDs (Federal Disability Equality Act – BGStG; 30.12.2014/1325, 8 §; BGBl. I S. 2510, Section 1; I-2044 Article 2). Additionally, the positive/affirmative actions appear in, for example, Austria's and Lithuania's legal systems in the form of PWD employment quotas (BGBl. Nr. 22/1970 § 1; I-2044 Article 18). It is clear that directives, laws, and regulations all have an emphasis on the same issues that affirmative/positive action covers, but is it enough?

According to Gupta and Priyadarshi (2020), affirmative action is not enough just as it is. From their study, it can be interpreted through statements of PWDs that had experienced affirmative action that the efforts their organizations had made were superficial, lacking direction, and discriminatory, even when the intentions were good (Gupta & Priyadarshi, 2020, pp. 626-630). For example, one interviewed PWD claimed that they only received routine assignments, but at the same time, people without disabilities in junior positions received more challenging tasks (Gupta & Priyadarshi, 2020, p. 627). Even when affirmative action fights discrimination and promotes equality towards minorities, affirmative action in itself does not have the right tools to reach the goals. Possibly, diversity management could provide additional processes, tools, and goals for organizations to reach every single person's needs and individual qualities more effectively.

3.4 Diversity Management

In diversity management (DM) diversity equals difference, and managing these said differences can be challenging, because they include both invisible and visible elements of people (Davim & Machado, 2017, p. 73). For example, diversity can concern such dimensions as gender, appearance, age, way of dressing, the color of the skin, and physical abilities. Furthermore, diversity can be considered to be context-dependent and subjective, as it is dependent on a person's point of view to see who/what is, or is not similar to themselves. After all, some people may see different aspects of diversity to be more prominent than others.

Diversity management's core is leading organizations towards inclusive working environments where every single person's needs and individual qualities are met (Guerci & Riccò, 2017, p.236). Moreover, the authors argue that the needs and qualities should be "managed in a diversified, effective, efficient, and equitable way," which calls for high mutual awareness of diversity among the people in the organization, and everybody should be committed to it. Although it is only possible if diversity management policies are implemented correctly.

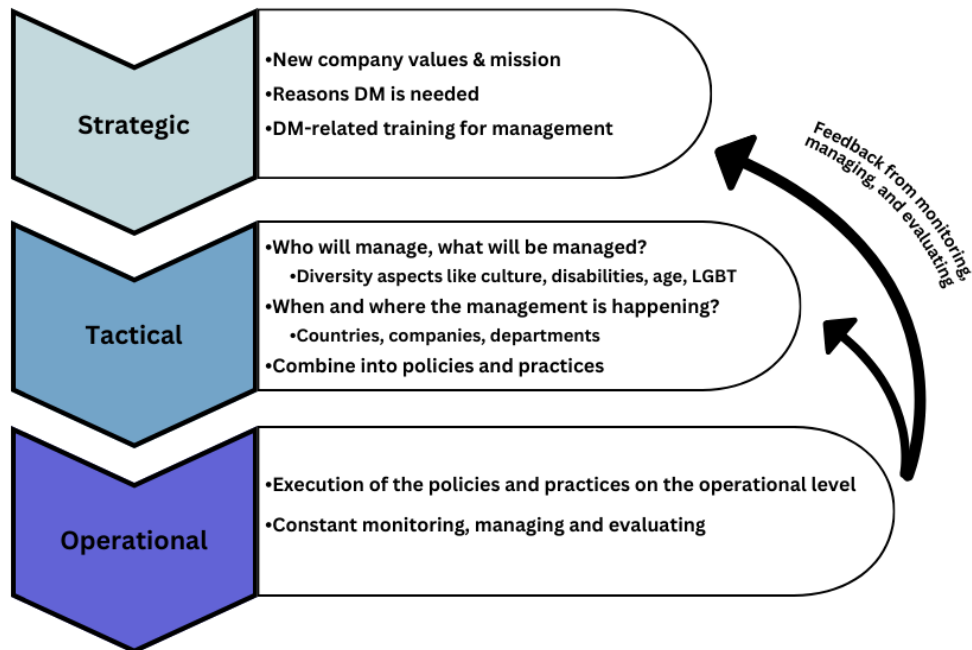


Figure 5. Author's interpretation of Guerçi & Riccò's (2017, p. 237) view on the process of DM implementation.

How does the implementation of DM work in businesses and organizations? To answer this question, the implementation process should be examined piece by piece. According to Guerçi & Riccò's implementation process (2017, p. 237), diversity management should be implemented on three levels, which are the strategic level, tactical level, and operational level. The strategic level includes forming new company values and mission, and reasoning why diversity management is needed (Guerçi & Riccò, 2017, p. 238). Usually, at this point, DM-related training of the upper management is needed for achieving a clear path with set goals for how the company and the people within should proceed with DM. The tactical level includes planning on who will be managing diversity; what aspects will be managed, e.g., culture, disabilities, age, LGBT; when the managing is happening; and where the managing will be happening, as in specific countries, companies, or departments (p. 238-239). This should result in diversity policies with specific practices (p. 240). Lastly, on the operational level, the policies and practices that were devised at higher levels are executed on the company's operations, which are then constantly monitored, managed, and evaluated (p. 241).

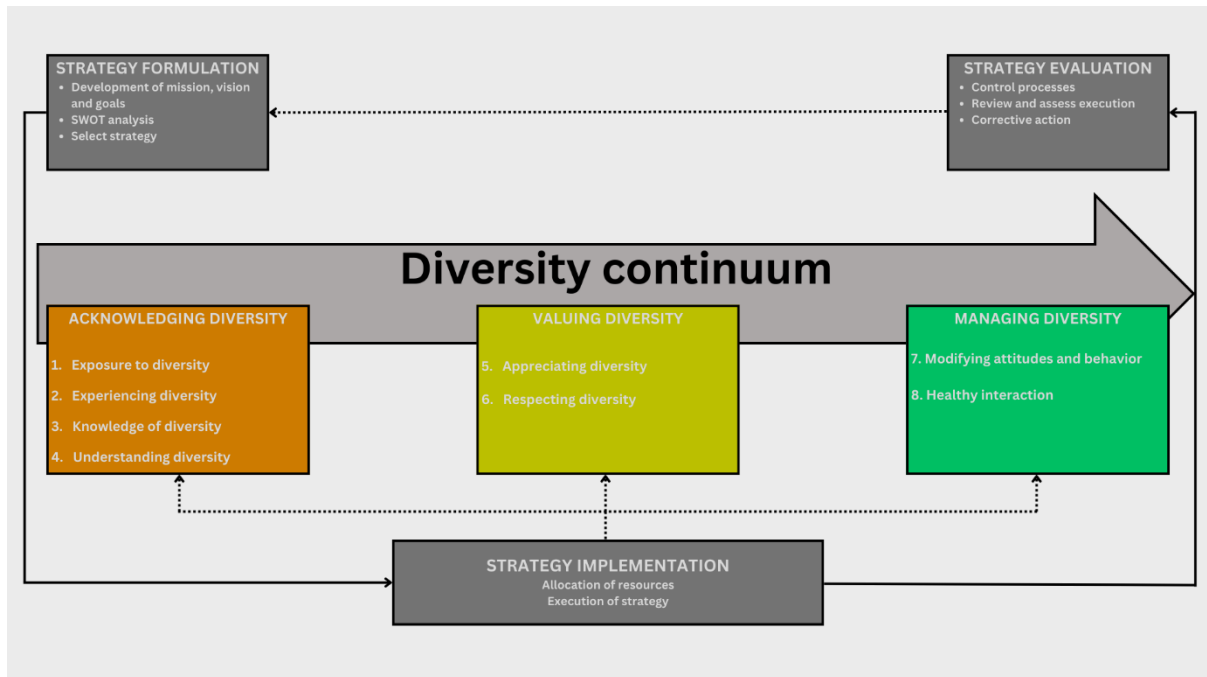


Figure 6. Author's interpretation of Friday & Friday's (2003) view on the process of DM implementation.

On the other hand, Friday & Friday (2003, pp. 865-866) view diversity as a linear continuum that spans from the acknowledgment of diversity (avoidance or handling), through valuing diversity (passive appreciation), to managing diversity (goal-oriented activities). Furthermore, to move an organization along this continuum to the preferred "managing diversity" area, the authors suggest that a planned change approach should be taken, which unfreezes the current organizational diversity culture through a devised "planned change-corporate diversity strategy" that is aligned to the certain organizational level (corporate, business, or functional) that the strategy will be implemented on (Friday & Friday, 2003, pp. 867-869). After the culture has been unfrozen and motivation for change has been set, an eight-step process of managing diversity can be put into action, and each step in **Figure 6** is to guide the organization towards managing diversity as part of the diversity continuum (Friday & Friday, 2003, pp. 872-873). Lastly, the organizational culture will be refrozen, and the upkeep of the refined diversity management culture will be handled through, for example, continuous diversity training (Friday & Friday, 2003, pp. 876).

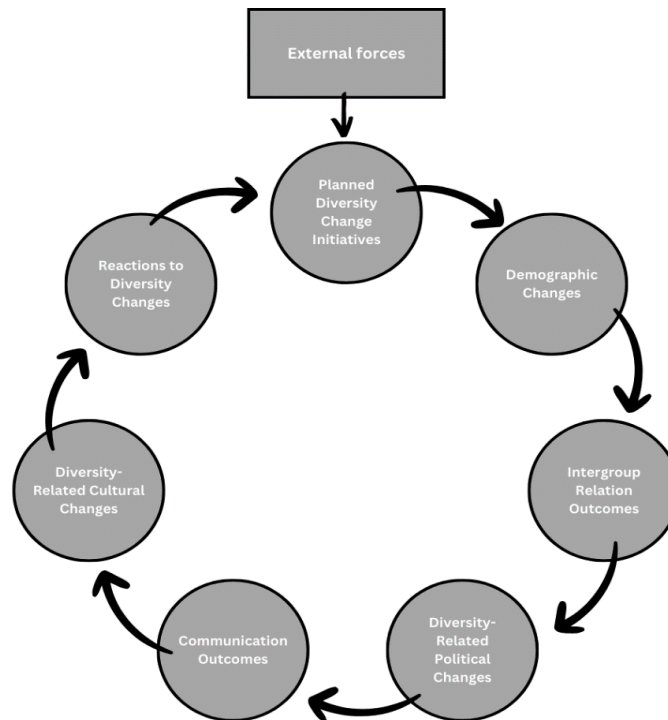


Figure 7. Author's interpretation of the interconnectedness of Gonzalez's (2010) diversity change implementation process.

Whereas Friday and Friday (2003) described managing and modifying diversity as a linear process, González (2010) argues the contrary. González (2010, p. 203) claims that changing diversity is a systemic, multilevel, and nonlinear process. Hence, a “holistic” approach is suggested that should include changes regarding cultural, demographic, and political policies of organizations in an effort to change diversity through the process (González, 2010, p. 203). Furthermore, according to González (2010), the planned diversity change initiatives are driven by external factors such as legal, moral, economic, or competitive forces, but the driving force is dependent on an organizational context such as its structure (pp. 200-203). Nonetheless, after the change initiatives have been decided on, the activities can affect the organization on three different levels that are demographics, diversity-related culture, and diversity-related politics (González, 2010, p. 203). First, demographic diversity changes, such as changes in proportions of marginalized groups, have negative, neutral, or positive intergroup relations outcomes, which can lead to segregation, assimilation, or integration of/in the target groups (González, 2010, p. 204).

Second, diversity-related political changes, such as changes in the distribution of power, have communicational outcomes such as destructive conflict, silence, or constructive dialogue (González, 2010, pp. 204). And lastly, diversity-related cultural changes can create outcomes related to resistance, apathy, or commitment toward diversity changes (González, 2010, pp. 204). In conclusion, Gonzalez's view on diversity management through his systemic, multilevel, and nonlinear process model emphasizes an ever-changing model of changing/managing diversity through interconnected changes, which is visualized in Figure 7.

In conclusion, diversity management is a complex process of managing differences which requires a mutual understanding and awareness of diversity as a whole, not forgetting the importance of goal setting and commitment to the process to achieve the set goals. Also, as seen, diversity management implementation processes undergone in this chapter illustrate the different views on DM, as Friday & Friday (2003) look at managing diversity and implementing DM practices as a planned linear process, whereas Gonzalez (2010) argues for an emergent and reactive process. Guerci & Riccò (2017) on the other hand have taken a hybrid approach combining both Friday & Friday's and Gonzalez's takes, resulting in a planned approach that also leaves room for emerging issues, thus making a constantly active and improvable process.

3.5 Current Problems From Different Viewpoints

According to Khan et al. (2018, p. 172), PWD employees tend to be more productive and motivated than other employees, and they possess higher occupational retention rates along with better work safety rates. Also, the rights of PWDs and protection from discrimination are being enforced by a plethora of laws and regulations from EU-level to country-specific levels, and SMEs are seen as flexible employers who could also take PWDs' needs into account (Directive 2022/2464; BGBl. I Nr. 82/2005; 30.12.2014/1325; BGBl. I S. 2510; I-2044; Dex and Scheibl, 2001, p. 419). Still, employment rates among PWDs are low, as stated by Felix (2023), only 51.3% of working-age PWDs in the EU are

employed. Hence, this chapter opens up the issues from both employers' and PWD employees' perspectives regarding PWD employment.

3.5.1 Employer View

The first issues coming from the employers' side that will be examined are stigmas. Stigma occurs when a person notices a difference in others that they view negatively, which then leads to a negative reaction or prejudice against those individuals (Green et al., 2005, p. 199). It also has different sources, such as Physical stigma, which is body related, and focuses mainly on body appearance and disabilities; Tribal stigma, which relates to belonging into certain groups or categories; Moral stigma, which relates to, for example, inappropriate behavior; Servile stigma, which relates to, for example partaking in degrading activities; Emotional stigma, which relates to confronting challenging and intimidating emotions; And associational stigma, which relates to associating or being in contact with other stigmatized actors (Zhang et al., 2021, pp. 193-194). Thus, PWDs that often experience physical stigmatization can suffer from others', such as employers' biased perceptions of suitability for certain jobs or professions, and PWDs might themselves start expecting negative treatment by internalizing the stigmatization as who they are (Lyons et al., 2018, p. 1981; Santuzzi & Waltz, 2016, p. 1117) Furthermore, Bonaccio et al. (2020, p. 146) found that physical stigma can lead to employers remembering less of the information that a PWD provides in an interview situation, as the employer tends to focus more on the source of the stigma, in other words, disability. Overall, stigmatized diversity and minority groups are reported to suffer from discrimination in their career lives in forms such as denial of employment opportunities, reduced and restricted mobility and career options, employment termination, and social exclusion (Beatty & Kirby, 2006, p. 29).

The second employee-side issue that is examined is stereotyping and labeling. Colella and Varma (1999), in a study about the effects of stereotyping on the evaluation that

PWDs receive at work, stated that stereotyping and labeling can have an effect on multiple areas regarding PWD employment. Firstly, disability in itself was not seen as an issue regarding PWDs' performance ratings, but stereotypic beliefs were seen as possibly having an indirect effect on them (Colella & Varma, 1999, p. 91). Secondly, stereotyped and biased views of PWDs were seen as possible to affect the expectations about the PWD's future performance, even when objective performance data was presented that would prove the contrary (Colella & Varma, 1999, p. 92; Vornholt et al., 2018, p. 46). Thirdly, in addition to biased performance expectations themselves, it was found that the biased views could hinder the possibilities of PWDs' training and promotion opportunities, even leading to denial of necessary accommodations (Colella & Varma, 1999, p. 92; Vornholt et al., 2018, p. 47). Fourthly, despite the harsh and biased expectations and reviews, when considering punishments and firing decisions, the stereotypical norm seemed to be not to punish or fire a PWD first, even in the case of poor performance (Colella & Varma, 1999, p. 92). Lastly, when a PWD was positioned in a job that was more of a fit for them, the evaluation of the PWD included more positive adjectives, but it was thought to reflect socially desirable responses rather than true attitudes. In conclusion, biases and stereotypes based on disability can lead to unfair treatment, limited opportunities for development and advancement, and the formation of barriers to inclusion in the workplace.

The third issue faced by PWDs coming from the employers' side is discrimination. Even when there are laws and regulations from the EU level all the way to country levels as discussed in chapter 3.2, according to Annett (2017, p. 29), discrimination remains a common issue and it is leading to underemployment of PWDs despite all the laws and regulations against discrimination, whether they regard PWDs or anybody else. The author also states that "In-group perpetuation and out-group discrimination" (p.29) is a common coping mechanism against the unknown. Put simply, this means people often favor those who are similar to them while treating those who are different unfairly. Often, discrimination happens due to stereotypical and stigmatized ways of thinking, as people with physical disabilities can face especially subtle discrimination at work due to the

inability to hide their disabilities (Lyons et al., 2018, p. 1981), which might include ways such as ignoring PWDs in formal or informal events or gatherings (Bonaccio et al., 2020, p. 150). Also, direct discrimination, which also takes place due to stigmatization, stereotyping, and labeling concerns more, for example, employers' refusal to employ PWDs altogether (Annett, 2017, pp. 30-31). Particularly, the costs of accommodating PWDs, perceived increase in workload of supervisors, stigmatized views of PWDs' education and performance, and similar issues are often the underlying reasons in not giving PWDs a chance when seeking employment (Ameri et al., 2017, pp. 331-332; Annett, 2017, p. 31; Bonaccio et al., 2020, p. 147).

To conclude from the employers' side. Stigmatization, labeling and stereotyping, and discrimination are significant challenges faced by PWDs in their professional lives, which also affects their employment opportunities as well as their willingness to seek employment (Bonaccio et al., 2020; Green et al., 2005; Lyons et al., 2018; Santuzzi & Waltz, 2016; Zhang et al., 2021). Also, according to Keating & Worsteling (2023, p. 2), the main hiring decisions by SMEs when hiring PWDs include categories such as "(1) the need for accommodations that may be costly or time-consuming; (2) lower levels of education or skill; and (3) stigma and discrimination from potential employers or coworkers," which were all present in the issues handled in this chapter.

3.5.2 Employee View

From the employees' point of view, the first issue to be examined is the perception of barriers to getting employed and being in employment. When talking about biased views concerning disabilities, it is not only the employers or other externals who are guilty of biased views and thinking. According to Vornholt et al. (2018, p. 48), PWDs' ability to get employed or maintain employment can be hindered by their own biased views and perceptions, which could include things as anticipation of stigmatization, discrimination (Bonaccio et al., 2020, p. 150), or other similar issues. Of course, a PWD who has experienced, for example, excessive demands, discrimination, or stigmatization will more

easily anticipate it in the future (Bonaccio et al., 2020, p. 150; Vornholt et al., 2018, p. 48). However, Vornholt et al. (2018, p. 48) argue that PWDs often anticipate negatives such as stigmatization more often than they experience it, for example, when applying for work. The author also stated that experiences with barriers, such as too high expectations of employers, will exhaust PWDs considering overcoming barriers and thus, increasing the perception of barriers present in working life (2018, p. 48). Because of this, some actual barriers that PWDs face are the following issues that will be examined from the employees' point of view.

The second issue from a PWD point of view is job requirements and the application process. Bonaccio et al. (2020, p. 158) argue that occasionally, the process of applying for a job has been discouraging for PWDs as application forms and websites have poor or absent accessibility features, which also can be interpreted as thoughtlessness towards diversity that is not perceived as welcoming. Additionally, as the scope and demands of jobs have expanded, and expectations of efficiency in terms of increased working hours and pressure have increased, the attractiveness of job openings and the ability to partake in working life has decreased (Vornholt et al., 2018, p. 48; Bonaccio et al., 2020, p. 144). However, this can be interpreted additionally as a discriminatory issue from the employers' side, as these issues rely on the willingness of the employer to provide accommodations for PWDs. Still, according to Felix (2023), school early is twice as common among PWDs as among people without disabilities, which could also be an indicator of the concerns among PWDs of whether they are qualified enough for a job, as according to Bonaccio et al. (2020, p. 155), both PWDs and employers might fear that a disability can prevent PWDs from performing certain tasks.

The third issue is the disability identity, which will be handled through two separate problems that PWDs face. Firstly, when applying for a job and when in employment, PWDs face the decision of whether or not to disclose their condition to their employer or colleagues, for example, the PWDs' personality, circumstances, and past experiences frequently influence the decision-making process surrounding disclosure (Vornholt et al., 2018, p. 48). The reasoning behind the decision to tell about a disability to employers

might lead them mistakenly to assume that the PWD job seeker lacks interest in demanding roles or responsibilities (Bonaccio et al., 2020, p. 144; Vornholt et al., 2018, p. 48), as exemplified by Gupta & Priyadarshi's study (2020, p. 627), where a PWD claimed that they only received routine assignments. In contrast, people without disabilities in junior positions received more challenging tasks. Alternatively, PWDs opt not to reveal their impairments because they perceive themselves as not fitting the typical description associated with PWDs (Santuzzi & Waltz, 2016). As a result, PWDs can start suffering from identity contradiction which according to Beatty & Kirby (2006, p. 36) means that, for example, due to the diverse descriptions and definitions of disability, a PWD can meet the criteria for disability according to one definition, while simultaneously meeting the criteria for possibly being considered able-bodied according to another definition.

In conclusion, from a PWD point of view, perception of barriers in working life, discouraging application processes and demanding job requirements, and adapting to or disclosing a disability identity can be considered prevalent issues (Beatty & Kirby, 2006; Bonaccio et al., 2020; Santuzzi & Waltz, 2016; Vornholt et al., 2018). Especially when considering PWDs' efforts in seeking employment or staying at work, these issues seemed to become integral parts of the problem. It is also important to point out the lack of sources and available data from the point of view of PWDs, because it seems that the employers' side is heard more than the PWDs' side.

3.6 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework is derived from a wide range of sources related to the research question (Kananen, 2015, pp. 112-117). Mainly, literature related to the subject, previous studies, and scientific articles are commonly used in forming a theoretical framework for research. Thus, the goal is to highlight the most relevant theories and research findings related to the subject under study. Additionally, this framework can be compiled into various orders, including chronological, methodological, and thematic orders.

The theoretical framework of this thesis is compiled thematically. Figure 8 is an illustration of the themes and/or subject areas of the thesis, and how their interconnectedness is interpreted by the author. The theory begins with the subject of understanding physical disabilities, which has a direct effect on the employment of PWDs in the European Union. This consists of legal environments in the EU affecting the target countries, which directly affect the SMEs' perspectives on PWDs in each country. These perspectives are interconnected with the problems that are currently identified by employers and employees themselves, as well as with diversity management that works as a tool to solve said issues. This entirety in the end affects the overall employment landscape of PWDs. Overall, this chain of effects that the entities have on each other can be viewed as understanding physical disabilities being interconnected with the employment landscape of PWDs.

However, despite the fact that the theoretical framework presents a pattern for the flow of activities, information, laws, regulations, and tools to tackle the employment issues of PWDs, there are questions that the framework, thus the literature, has not been able to respond to. Firstly, even though WHO (2010; 2011; n.d.b) and Kuvalekar et al. (2015) provide thorough descriptions of physical disabilities, it is unclear if people really understand them. Do these descriptions help in addressing the disabilities themselves, or do they rather hide the person behind a description?

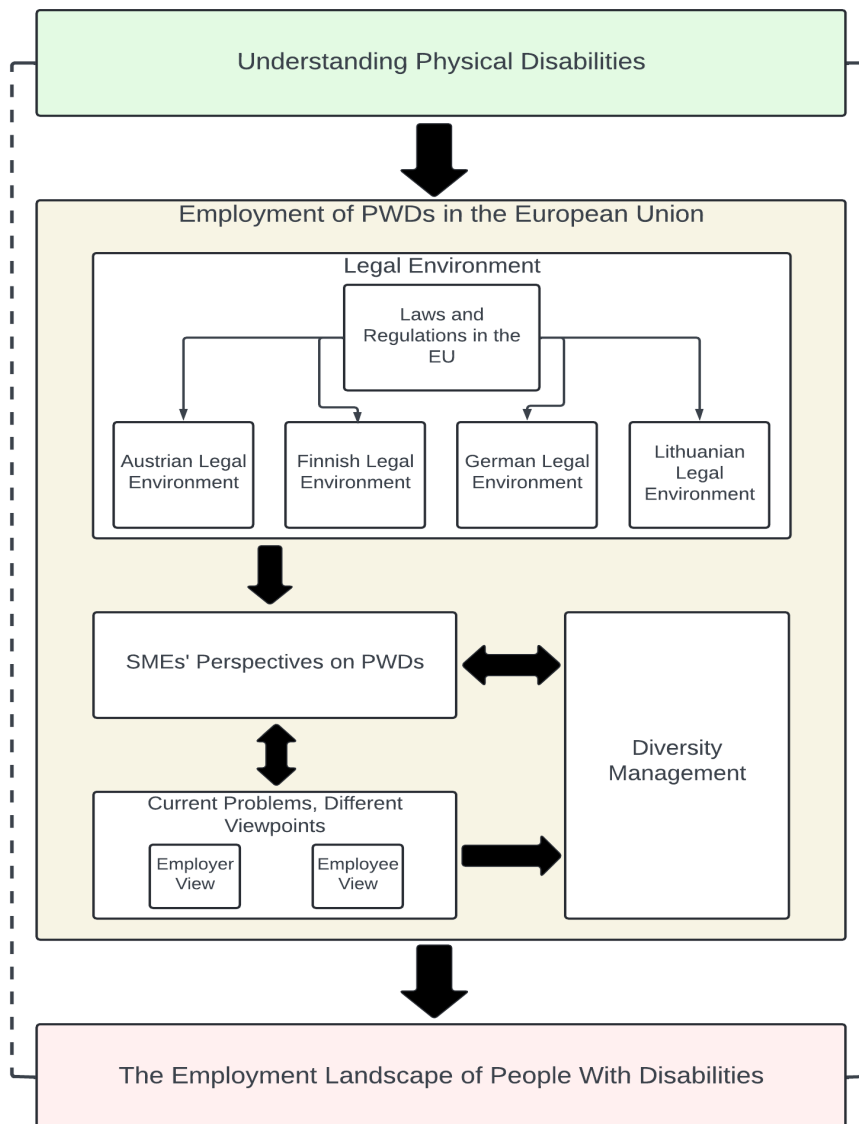


Figure 8. The theoretical framework of the thesis.

Secondly, there is a multitude of issues, including employment-related problems, that PWDs face in their daily lives, which were presented in Figure 2 (the European Council of the European Union, 2024; Buchanan & Hammersley, 2023, p. 30). To fight these issues, the European Commission (2021) even has a strategy that is being implemented between 2021-2030, not to mention the NGOs' activities throughout Europe. Besides, there are also laws and regulations reaching from the EU level to the individual countries' level that protect PWDs and aim to ensure equal treatment towards them. It is apparent that SMEs should comply with laws, as they are obliged to, but regardless, issues persist. For example, Annett (2017, pp. 32-33) argued that many supervisors

thought PWDs were a time-consuming burden. Also, according to Moore et al., (2007, p. 122), only 52.3% of companies affected by ADA complied with it for the positive effects, and the other 47.7% complied just to avoid the negatives, such as lawsuits, even though it was found that SMEs who invested in PWD accommodation found that the benefits outweighed the costs. Overall, institutional pressures and resource requirements were found to affect SMEs' hiring decisions on PWDs. This raises the question, why companies are reluctant to hire PWDs, even though there are proven positive examples.

Thirdly, as the focus was shifted towards the tools available for SMEs to address diversity in SMEs, it was found that affirmative action was not enough by itself (Gupta & Priyadarshi, 2020, pp. 626-630). Therefore, the focus was turned to diversity management, whether any tool or procedure from that area could provide solutions. Several working alternatives were found, such as Friday & Friday's (2003) planned linear process, Gonzalez's (2010) emergent and reactive process, and Guerci & Riccò's (2017) hybrid approach. The question remains: why are there issues with PWDs' employment, even when there are ready-to-implement diversity management tools and processes to mitigate diversity-related issues? For example, are SMEs unaware of these tools, or do the companies refuse to address the issues for some reason?

Lastly, the current problems from the viewpoints of employers and employees. From the employers' side, stigmatization, labeling and stereotyping, and discrimination were found affecting PWDs' employment (Bonaccio et al., 2020; Green et al., 2005; Lyons et al., 2018; Santuzzi & Waltz, 2016; Zhang et al., 2021). Furthermore, what was affecting employers' hiring decisions in regards of PWDs included issues related to accommodations, education and skills, and anticipated stigma and discrimination from the work community (Keating & Worsteling, 2023, p. 2). Still, the motives behind these thoughts of the employers' side remain unknown. From the employees' side, the perception of barriers in employment, self-doubt, previous experiences of discrimination, unjust job requirements, the rigidity of the said requirements, and doubts about disclosing one's

disability could be considered as prevalent issues (Beatty & Kirby, 2006; Bonaccio et al., 2020; Santuzzi & Waltz, 2016; Vornholt et al., 2018). Yet, little explanation could be found on why PWDs have these thoughts. Few explanations were found, such as experiencing discrimination predisposes one to anticipate discrimination also in the future (Bonaccio et al., 2020, p. 150; Vornholt et al., 2018, p. 48), and PWDs can perceive themselves as not fitting the typical description associated with PWDs (Santuzzi & Waltz, 2016). However, no explanation could be found for the thought processes behind the undeniably discouraged thoughts.

All the aforementioned questions form a problem with the fact that the theoretical framework is portrayed as working linearly, as in Figure 8. Mainly, what needs to be understood is that if the influential relationships of the topics in the theoretical framework worked as the literature can be interpreted to suggest, there would be no issues regarding the employment of PWDs. This means that, with the current flow of the theory, the understanding of physical disabilities should translate into actions regarding the employment of PWDs in the EU, which would then affect the employment landscape of PWDs, removing the problems in the process. However, data and statistics suggest otherwise. For this reason, there must be issues that are affecting the employment of PWDs that could not have been addressed in the literature, or thus, by the theoretical framework as it currently sits. Therefore, it comes to the investigation of the experiences and reasoning given by the interviewees in the empirical part to reveal what is hidden behind the current theoretical framework. But first, it is necessary to get familiar with the methodology of the study, because it is the toolset used to gather said experiences and reasoning.

4 Methodology

This chapter introduces the research methodology of the thesis. The chapter opens with a description of the research philosophy and approach utilized in the thesis, flowing logically to the research method that was applied. Next, data collection is discussed, including descriptions of the primary data sources. Afterwards, the chapter progresses to examine how data was analyzed in the study, and eventually ends with a take on the reliability and validity of the study.

4.1 Research Philosophy and Approach

Research philosophy can be described as a set of beliefs and assumptions about collecting, analyzing, and using data to develop new knowledge (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2016, pp. 124-125). According to Saunders et al. (2016, pp. 127-128), these sets of assumptions can be separated into three themes. First is ontology, which covers assumptions about the nature of reality. The second is epistemology, which considers assumptions about knowledge. Third is axiology, which covers the effect of the researcher's values on the research process.

According to Saunders et al. (2016, pp. 135-136), a singular, one true, and ordered reality is typical for a positivist view on ontology, which is how the theoretical framework is portrayed in Figure 8. However, this thesis falls within the philosophical scope of critical realism, which has a different view on reality. According to Wynn and Williams (2012, p. 789), in Roy Bhaskar's critical realism, our reality is divided into three nested domains, which are domains of real, actual, and empirical. From these three domains, according to Saunders et al. (2016, p. 139), first, the real is the broadest domain, which includes "Causal structures and mechanisms with enduring properties." Second, the actual, which includes "Events and non-events generated by the Real; may or may not be observed." Last, the empirical, which includes "Events that are actually observed or experienced."

Thus, the definition of reality and its layers in critical realism illustrates that the theoretical framework of this thesis is actually a version of reality that has now been established.

According to Archer et al. (2016), critical realism is a philosophical approach developed by Roy Bhaskar. In his book, *A Realist Theory of Science*, originally from 1975, Bhaskar addresses ontology and epistemology in multiple ways. Mainly, critical realism highlights ontological realism, which emphasizes the existence of reality beyond human perception. Also, it acknowledges that knowledge is socially situated and subject to historical and cultural influences. Thus, Archer et al. (2016) argue that critical realism lands in the realm of research philosophies between positivism and interpretivism. Further comparison of ontologies, epistemologies, and axiologies of positivism, critical realism, and interpretivism is shown in Figure 9.

	Ontology (Assumptions about reality)	Epistemology (Assumptions about knowledge)	Axiology (Role of values)
Positivism	There is a one true external and independent reality that is real.	Knowledge is found from experience, in other words, observation.	Value-free and objective stance.
Critical Realism	Reality is an external and independent entirety, but understanding of reality is mediated through perceptions, experiences, and observations.	Knowledge is socially constructed and historically situated, thus, bound by context.	Acknowledging the possibility for bias due to people being individuals. Aims to be as objective as possible.
Interpretivism	Reality is complex, socially and individually constructed. There is not a single entity of reality, but rather a collection of interconnected realities.	Knowledge is subjective.	Value-bound and subjective stance.

Figure 9. Comparison of ontology and epistemology between positivism, critical realism, and interpretivism. Developed from Saunders et al. (2016, pp. 127-128, 135-141) and Eriksson & Kovalainen (2016, pp. 13-21).

As the validity of the theoretical framework was questioned in section 3.6, it can be said that the purpose of this research is to uncover the *hidden structures and mechanisms* that shape the employment landscape of PWDs in the European Union by studying PWDs' employment experiences in SMEs, which could not be found from the literature alone. This means that the theoretical framework has now established a version of the real, the target has shifted to the actual (events), and the empirical (experiences of the interviewees) through the study's findings, which can reveal aforementioned hidden structures and mechanisms. By exploring these domains, it is possible to gain valuable insights that help adjust the theoretical framework (real) to a form that takes all the dimensions of reality into account.

After taking a stand on the research philosophy of the study, it is logical to discuss the study's approach to research. This study was conducted with a qualitative approach, which needed to be carried out to achieve a deeper understanding of the research subject; in other words, the qualitative approach provides a means to uncover and understand complex and context-dependent experiences of PWDs. (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016, pp. 4-6; Saunders et al., 2016, pp. 168-169). Qualitative research is frequently used to collect information to gain a more profound understanding of an event, phenomenon, or equivalent, opposed to the quantitative approach, qualitative research does not seek to quantify or generate generalizable results or theories unlike quantitative research, which focuses on statistical patterns and generalizability (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016, pp. 4-6; Saunders et al., 2016, pp. 166-169). Using a qualitative approach with a critical realist perspective helps to ensure that both structural conditions (the real) and the subjective experiences (the actual and the empirical) are taken into consideration, which provides the possibility to dive deeper into the work experiences of PWDs.

As the nature of the study is qualitative, it is essential to understand how theories are developed. Theory development in research has three distinct approaches: deductive, inductive, and abductive approaches (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 145; Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016, pp. 22-23). From the approaches, deduction leans toward the rationale

of building a theory and then testing it with a research strategy, whereas applying induction goes for the opposite path (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 145). In comparison to these two “basic models of social science research” (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016, p. 22), abduction offers a combination of the two principles. Accordingly, Saunders et al. (2016) describe abduction followingly: “you are collecting data to explore a phenomenon, identify themes, and explain patterns, to generate a new or modify an existing theory which you subsequently test through additional data collection” (p. 145). According to Fletcher (2017, p. 188) and Wynn and Williams (2012, p. 789), the abductive approach aligns with the critical realist stance as theories by themselves are fallible and understanding reality requires exploration beyond observable facts. This study utilizes the abductive approach because of the fact that this study aims to uncover hidden mechanisms that cannot be seen in the theoretical framework as it is.

4.2 Research Method: Interview Study

The purpose of this thesis was to study and compare the experiences of PWDs considering their employment in SMEs in Austria, Finland, Germany, and Lithuania to find out why their employment situations remain challenging. Furthermore, it was to be explored how diversity management could be introduced to SMEs in a way that would influence the employment situation of PWDs in Europe. Thus, the aim was to gain a greater and deeper comprehension of PWDs’ experiences regarding themes like applying for a job, the type of employment experience, career progression, and possibly ending employment through the view of the PWD themselves.

This study employed qualitative interviewing, utilizing a semi-structured interview method. Characteristics of a semi-structured interview include pre-designing the questions used in the interviews, and usually, the interviewee gets to familiarize themselves with the questions and their theme before the interview (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016, pp. 91-95; Saunders et al., 2016, pp. 388-391). Moreover, the questions are often divided into themes, and the interview questions for this thesis were thematically conducted

from the theoretical framework of the research paper. Still, this does not mean that the researcher must follow a specific order or pattern in the interviewing process (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 391). Instead, the interview is kept as a conversational event, where additional questions may be added to the discussion, or some premeditated questions may be omitted if seen as necessary. Furthermore, as the interview is kept conversational, the significance of recording the event cannot be diminished.

The interview events conducted for this study can be considered cross-cultural interviews because the interviewees were from different cultural backgrounds: Austria, Finland, and Lithuania. Thus, the role of the language used in the interviews was to be given thought. As the author/interviewer is Finnish, it was an instinctive choice to interview the Finnish interviewees in the shared mother tongue. It is the language used in everyday life on both sides, which the author thought would be important in ensuring the natural flow of conversations. When it came to the interviewees that were not Finnish, the author thought that the next best language to utilize in the interviews was English, as it was a language the author was next most proficient in, and the thought was that English would be one of the more common second languages for people from the EU as well. Also, as English would be the “second language” for both sides in the interviews with people outside Finland, the thought was that it would not put either side at a disadvantage.

Marschan-Piekkari and Reis (2004, pp. 228-229) argue, that the choice of language can influence the power dynamics between interviewer and interviewee, as the possibly dominant language of the interviewer can place the interviewer in a position of power, while the interviewee may be uncomfortable with the language of choice due to it not being their strong area, which can lead to restrained answers to the interview questions. Consequently, this can straightforwardly affect the quality of the interview data. Furthermore, according to Marschan-Piekkari and Reis (2004, p. 233), dialects and different cultural ways of communication are also notable challenges that an interviewer may face in a cross-cultural context. Most importantly, what can be taken away from Marschan-

Piekkari and Reis (2004) is that language is not just a way of communication but also a cultural tool that can influence the interview process and outcomes. Also, adjusting the interview language to be more inclusive and equitable can help balance power in the interview event, which would include allowing interviewees to speak in their preferred language if possible.

4.3 Data Collection

Following the combination of critical realist and qualitative approaches, the focus was on gathering detailed data through the chosen method described in the last section: semi-structured interviews. However, to reach the interview stage and thus collect data, a multitude of activities had to be undertaken. Next, the process of acquiring interviewees will be examined.

In total, 11 organizations were contacted by e-mail, and from four private individuals, three were contacted through e-mail, and one in person. Out of all the 11 organizations contacted, three gave a response. The responses shared a commonality in that the organization in question was unable to directly assist the author in connecting with potential interview candidates or relevant channels to reach them, and instead requested that they follow a website link for further information about their activities. After all, two of the three respondents, which were an umbrella organization from Finland and an action alliance of the relevant disability associations from Germany, offered to help in the effort of reaching potential interview candidates. The Finnish umbrella organization was not able to connect the author with potential interviewees directly, but the organization recommended writing an invitational message, which was then published on the organization's social media channels. The German action alliance responded similarly to the connection request, but also forwarded the author's email to all its member associations. Although these organizations offered wide-scale assistance, no connections were made to potential interview candidates. By contrast, from the aforementioned four private

contacts through email and social media, the author scheduled an interview with the four individuals.

The sample group, which was initially planned as the primary data source for the study, was intended to consist of 16 interviewees, all private individuals. The sample size was to be stratified into four sub-groups, with four interviewees per target country: Austria, Finland, Germany, and Lithuania. However, due to language barriers and the aforementioned difficulties in reaching potential interview candidates, the interviews were conducted with a smaller sample consisting of two people from Finland and two from Lithuania.

Interviews of the private individuals were conducted as one-on-one interviews, where only the interviewer (author) and the interviewee were present. Out of the four interviews considering private individuals that were carried out for the study, three were conducted through Microsoft Teams, and one was conducted in person. Teams was chosen as a tool for the interviews because, as an online communication service, it diminished the geographical barriers that would have otherwise made interviews impossible. Furthermore, Teams also provided means to record the interviews, which was important in making transcriptions possible and enabling further analysis of the interviews later. Also, the interview conducted in person was recorded with the author's mobile phone's recording application. The interviews for the Finnish interviewees were conducted in Finnish, while those for interviewees from other countries were conducted in English. Furthermore, all of the interviewees in the sample group were people with physical disabilities of working age. The individual specifications of the interviewees are presented in Table 1.

Undeniably, a sample size of four interviews, two each from Finland and Lithuania, would have been small for the study. However, as critical realism aims to present descriptions of reality by analysing participants' interpretations about their experiences of reality (Wynn and Williams, 2012, p. 793), it is justified to say that even a single experience can

be meaningful in gaining access to unique observations. Therefore, the focus in the interview was on the depth rather than the breadth of the individual experiences when capturing employee views. Fortunately, after the private individuals were interviewed, a new chance was presented to gather primary data for the research.

To capture the views and experiences of the SMEs, additional primary data was collected. The University of Vaasa was a part of a hackathon, DEI4SME, held February 4th-19th, 2025 (DEI4SME, 2025), and the participating organizations for the hackathon also included SMEs from Austria. The subject of the research paper and the hackathon were closely related, as the theme of the hackathon was “Promoting the inclusion of diverse groups in the internationalisation of SMEs” (DEI4SME, 2025), with disability being one of the diversity dimensions in the challenges. For this reason, it was possible to collect data through unstructured interviews in three hackathon sessions, each considering a separate Austrian SME. Even though the focus of the research was on the employment experiences of PWDs, it was seen that the views of SMEs as well could provide valuable information in solving the challenges PWDs face in employment. These SMEs are also listed in Table 1.

Private Individuals			
	Nationality	Age	Employment Status
Person 1	Finnish	30	Employed
Person 2	Finnish	27	Employed
Person 3	Lithuanian	37	Employed
Person 4	Lithuanian	35	Employed
Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises			
	Nationality	Company Type	
SME 1	Austrian	Service provider. Cleaning, facility management, woodworking, and reuse shop	
SME 2	Austrian	Developer and producer of test hardware for micro-chip testing	
SME 3	Austrian	A "hub" that brings PWDs and companies together, serving the benefit of both parties	

Table 1. The list of primary data sources.

4.3.1 Description of Private Individual Interviewees

Each of the interviewees was affected by a unique type of physical disability. As exemplified, interviewees 1 and 4 were affected by a disability affecting structures related to movement and mobility. On the other hand, interviewees 2 and 3 were affected by disabilities related to the eye, ear, and related structures.

It's a congenital disability. So it's left-sided hemiplegia. So basically a physical disability where the left side doesn't work in the same way as the healthy right side. So there's spasticity in the hand at least. (Person 1)

I have movement disability. For other words, this is cerebral palsy. But this is just on legs, not on hands. (Person 4)

I a hereditary visual impairment, tunnel vision... (...). It involves poor vision and, dark blindness. (...) ...my visual impairment rate is currently 90%. (Person 2)

I am hard of hearing. (Person 3)

All four interviewees had a higher educational background, and their fields were business administration, social services, and technical fields. Still, two interviewees, Person 2 and Person 3, were continuing their studies despite having a profession already. Furthermore, all interviewees were also employed when the interviews were conducted. Person 1 had a bachelor's degree in the social sector and worked on a fixed-term contract as a school assistant and after-school club instructor. Person 2 was a Bachelor of Business Administration and worked as a Business Development Manager in the IT sector while also pursuing a master's degree in international business. Person 3 had a degree in architecture and worked in the field as a freelancer, but also pursued a master's degree in management. Lastly, Person 4 was a board member of an independent living association and had degrees in philology and international business.

4.3.2 Description of Interviewees From SMEs

The group of SMEs interviewed for the study consisted of different Austrian organizations that are each working, or are aspiring to work with PWDs. The responses of the companies will be treated anonymously. Altogether, the organizations are as follows: SME 1 is an Austrian regional service provider that specializes in employing individuals who are disadvantaged in the labor market. Universally, the concept resembles a supported employment model. The company specializes in cleaning, facility management, woodworking, and a reuse shop, making it their region's largest employer for disadvantaged workers, employing 33 people, including 27 PWDs. The non-profit, social integrative company also supports migrants, older workers, and people who are long-term unemployed, offering job stability and career prospects with extended dismissal protection. In addition, the company follows the requirements of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).

SME 2 is an Austrian company that develops and produces test hardware for microchip testing. It offers services that include designing, prototyping, and serial production of semiconductor testing solutions. Currently, the company employs a total of 87 people, of whom 2 are PWDs. The headquarters of the company are in Austria, but it operates internationally and is currently invested in Asian markets.

SME 3 is a nationwide Austrian organization funded by the government. Since its inception in 2020, the company has provided PWDs with free support in finding training, selecting a career, and securing employment. SME 3 is an initiative of the Social Ministry Service, serving as the primary point of contact for companies across all sectors, including the public and non-profit sectors, regarding questions related to work and disability. Overall, the company acts as a hub that brings PWDs and companies together, serving the benefit of both parties.

4.4 Data Analysis

After presenting the data collection process of the study, it is important to take a stand on the analysis of the data collected. It is clear that a qualitative research method, such as the interview study utilized in this research paper, produces qualitative data. According to Saunders et al. (2016, pp. 568-569), whereas quantitative data is numerical and standardized, qualitative data is usually complex and non-standardized, which requires the researcher to undertake an in-depth, conceptualized analysis to interpret it. This process helps to extract and clarify both visible and hidden meanings in the data, which can be used in producing either a comprehensive overview or a detailed interpretation of the study's subject (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016, p. 120), which ever is necessary in enabling the researcher to meet the objectives of the study and answer the research question(s).

There are two distinct approaches to qualitative data analysis: the deductive and inductive approaches (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 569). Mainly, these approaches are differentiated by their relationship to the theoretical framework of the research. The deductive approach focuses on the fact that there is already an established theoretical framework, research questions, and objectives, which act as pre-determined themes guiding the data collection and thus, data analysis (pp. 569-570). On the other hand, the inductive approach is the direct opposite of the deductive approach. Mainly, because in the inductive approach, the data is collected first, as it is the catalyst for developing questions and hypotheses, and the theories emerge through the analysis of the data (p. 570). This study utilizes the combination of deductive and inductive approaches for data analysis, since there is a set of pre-determined themes in the form of a theoretical framework, research questions, and objectives to guide the analysis, but new and unexpected insights are also expected to emerge from the data.

Data analysis in this study was conducted by using the pattern matching technique. According to Vargas-Bianchi (2025, p 66), in pattern matching, the principle is to compare the anticipated outcomes that the theoretical framework predicts with the outcomes

that the empirical data shows. In other words, the role of the researcher is to compare whether the empirical data supports or contradicts the theory. In practice, the author conducted data analysis followingly: First, each interview recording was transcribed with Microsoft Word into a text form. After this, the author listened through the recordings while following the transcription texts to ensure any anomalies, unnecessary repetitiveness of words, or mistakes were fixed. As two of the interviews were conducted in Finnish, the transcripts of said interviews were translated into English. After this, a combination of deductive and inductive approaches was utilized in the analysis. In the deductive view, the pre-existing themes, which in this study were the themes of the theoretical framework (see Figure 8), were used in categorizing data, while the inductive view allowed for any unexpected themes that were not identified in the theoretical framework to emerge.

4.5 Reliability and Validity

The classic way to measure the trustworthiness of a study is through reliability and validity (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 202; Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016, p. 305). From the aforementioned two criteria, reliability refers to the study's replicability and consistency, which facilitates other researchers to achieve similar results by replicating the original study (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 202; Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016, p. 305). Of course, if similar results are achieved or can be achieved, the research can be considered reliable. However, the study faces multiple threats to its reliability, primarily participant error and bias, as well as researcher error and bias (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 203).

To minimize participant error, the interviewees were allowed to influence the scheduling of the interviews and were allowed to familiarize themselves with the questions, thereby enabling them to provide as in-depth answers as possible. On the other hand, efforts to avoid participant bias included providing full anonymity for the interviewees. Lastly, the author's measures to avoid researcher error and bias included thorough preparation for the interviews, maintaining a neutral stance during the interviews, and recording the interviews.

Concerning the validity of the study, simply put, it refers to how accurately the research and the research methods have been able to study the right things, and how suitable the used research measures have been to derive said results (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 202-204; Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016, p. 305; Kananen, 2017, 176). In other words, validity refers to the assurance that in the research, what was intended to be studied has actually been studied. To maximize validity, the interview questions were designed in accordance with the established theoretical framework. Additionally, it was acknowledged that interviewees might not understand or could misunderstand the questions due to, for example, language barriers, and because of that, the interview questions were formed as clearly and straightforwardly as possible to minimize this risk. Additionally, a fair amount of time was reserved for each interview, and the aim during the interview was to ensure that the interviewee understood the question, for example, by asking for clarification on the answers.

5 Findings

This chapter presents the study's empirical findings, organized according to the themes of the research paper's theoretical framework to maintain structure. Furthermore, to ensure that the research questions of the study can be answered and its objectives met, the findings will be disaggregated according to the respective theoretical sections. This is to help the processing of the findings and identify the key similarities and differences between them. Every section of the findings is divided into employee (PWD) and employer (SME) views.

5.1 Understanding Physical Disabilities

This section handles themes that consider understanding physical disabilities in a work context. On the employee side, topics such as the physical disabilities' effect on working ability, along with accommodation and support needs, are discussed. Also, some preparation for the theme of employment landscape is done by inquiring about the individuals' home countries' employment situation for PWDs. The employer side focuses more on the general situation with physical disabilities in Austria.

5.1.1 Employee View

To start building an understanding of employment with physical disabilities, it was relevant to understand whether the disabilities affected the interviewees' ability to work, but also whether the interviewees had ever needed any accommodations to be able to work. Mainly, when it came to any mobility-related disability, issues related to such as accessibility and commuting were more common. When it came to disabilities related to sensory functions, accommodations were seen as important, but accessibility was again important when it came to visual impairments. All of the interviewees openly discussed how their disabilities affect their ability to work, but Person 1 downplayed the effects of

their disability, whereas Person 2 discussed that other people would not be likely to notice that they have a disability.

From my own experience, it doesn't have any effect. I do things differently if I can't do something exactly like so called healthy people. So far there has been no problems at work because of this particular issue. (...) I don't need any assistive devices. (...) From an adaptation perspective, it could be something like, if a task is very physically demanding and requires both hands, it might make sense to assign someone else if possible, but I wouldn't consider it impossible for me either. (Person 1)

Overall, it affects almost everything, but if somebody saw me working, they probably wouldn't even notice that I have a visual impairment this severe. I have found my own ways of working. But how does it appear? (...) ...there needs to be a larger font on all text, as well as a greater contrast and so on... (...) ...moving around is a challenge for me, I have a white cane and a personal assistant... (...) ...using public transportation is nearly impossible... (...) I don't have a driver's license due to my visual impairment.... (...) ...interacting with people, I also find it difficult to recognise people's faces and facial features... (...) ...even in workplaces or schools, the lighting has to be in good condition... (...) ...it's really such a difficult difficult thing that I try my best to cover it up... (Person 2)

This year I'm working usually online because I said so many projects like the easy-to-read. (...) When you have physical disabilities it makes problems because you need to find where to go, how to go, who can help you. But when I was working, I was not feeling problems because environment was positive, not negative about disabled people. (Person 4)

Yes, for example, I need better inclusive online feedback manager for chats about projects. An inclusive sound system, like FM special for the hard-of-hearing. (Person 3)

The discussion continued with employment opportunities for PWDs in the interviewees' home countries. Starting from the Lithuanian side, the common thought was that there is room for development, but the interviewees also gave compliments to the progress made in the country regarding employment opportunities, and also the overall quality of life. What was seen as creating barriers were especially societal attitudes, disparities, fears, and employer biases, but what was seen as creating change was exposure to

diversity through international experiences and events, as well as self-advocacy regarding PWDs' abilities and rights in the workplace.

Currently, there is still a long way to go in developing job opportunities for people with physical disabilities in Lithuania. Despite the significant progress in the overall quality of life, challenges such as disparities and fears between people with disabilities and those without persist. (...) I am different - I have international experience and have participated in special classes with diverse communities. This background has made it much easier for me to connect with others. (Person 3)

We are not as good country as like Sweden or Norway... (...) We are moving forward, but of course we have also people who are not accepted to the job place, but this is, I think, a question that we ourselves should take much more initiative to do something, to talk with the employer. Tell them yes, I have disability, but I can do this, maybe I need some help, but we should talk and you should try to make a positive mind for everyone employed. (...) When the employer has a point of view of one disabled person, they start to make worse decisions. (Person 4)

Continuing from the Finnish side, although Finland has a strong legal framework protecting PWDs, the interviewees' thoughts were more focused on the systemic issues. They saw the overall employment situation being relatively good, but issues such as employers' views on costs and productivity concerns, as well as employer biases, prejudice, and a lack of awareness surfaced.

They are pretty good, but I see it as there is still years of progress needed. For example, there is work to be done on prejudice and on getting more egalitarian mindsets. (...) I feel that employers or companies think that we don't have the same talents, when in reality our talents could bring even more valuable knowledge and skills to the job. (...) I think it's maybe in productivity, or thinking that it's an easy solution to always take the "healthy" person. However, hypothetically speaking, it could be that the healthy person could be a bad recruit. (...) The end result may be that the recruitment of a person with a disability is more successful... (Person 1)

I try to hide my disability. I've been in my current job for two and a half years, and it took over two years before I informed my employer about my disability. (...) ...Nobody knew I had a disability. (...) Even when there are laws regarding accessibility, equal employment, and discrimination... (...) ...you can never know why you were not hired. (...) ...was it because of my qualifications or because of my

disability... (...) I think that somehow it is thought that if a person has a physical disability, then that person is a burden for companies. (...) For example, I had made an error at work, and people asked me directly if the error was due to my disability. (...) ... people don't understand, they don't understand what the disability is, what parts it consists of, and how it affects the person... (Person 2)

5.1.2 Employer View

According to SME 3, there is a total of 1,9 million people with disabilities in Austria. This means that 25 % of Austrian people have a disability. Of all PWDs in Austria, 14 % are mobility disabled, 3 % are visually impaired, 2 % have hearing impairments, 4 % have mental impairments, and lastly, 7 % have a combination of impairments. Additionally, in Austria, there is a total of 1201 companies that are obliged to hire PWDs. Also, SME 3 introduced the Austrian Disability Employment Act (BEinstG), being one of the key determinants of disabilities, and according to its §3, disability is defined followingly:

A disability is the effect of a non-temporary physical, mental, or psychological functional impairment or impairment of sensory functions that is likely to make it difficult to participate in working life. A period of more than six months is deemed to be non-temporary. (SME 3)

Furthermore, SME 3 stated that for a person to be eligible to be considered “beneficially disabled,” they have to reach a degree of disability that is determined to be 50 % or higher in its severity by the Assessment Ordinance. However, a person must send an assessment notice that contains a doctor’s medical statement to the Social Ministry, which then determines the severity of the disability. Austria also has a disability pass, which entitles a PWD to personal benefits.

5.2 The Employment Landscape of People With Disabilities

This section focuses on the theme of the employment landscape of PWDs. On the employee side, the discussions consist of themes such as the individuals’ career paths from

past to present, experiences of working and seeking employment in SMEs, and factors influencing PWDs' employment opportunities in SMEs. Also, the role of public policies and social attitudes in shaping PWDs' employment experiences is explored. On the employer side, it is discussed how SMEs 1 and 2 operate to support the employment of PWDs in Austria.

5.2.1 Employee View

The baseline of how each interviewee experienced their personal employment landscape was formed by inquiring about their employment history, current employment status, and whether they had ever worked in an SME. In fact, all interviewees had experience working in SMEs, and most of them were currently working in one. Still, there was variation considering the employment types, from fixed-term to full-time contracts and freelancing. The interviewees were also asked to discuss what they think have been the most important aspects and events in their employment history. One thing that appeared to be significant for all interviewees was internships and the value they have brought. Mainly, internships were seen as important because they provided opportunities to demonstrate skills and establish trust with employers. In addition, the aspects that have affected the career choices of the interviewees include their personal backgrounds, life experiences, and issues associated with disability, leading to career paths even in advocacy and peer support roles.

Notably, diversity and inclusivity in the workplace were also common themes in the responses, which can be seen from some interviewees' disappointment with the lack of inclusiveness in society and workplaces, particularly in Lithuania. Multiple interviewees acknowledged that their education and professional opportunities, along with personal experiences, societal pressure, biases, and different levels of diversity and inclusion, have all affected their professional journeys.

I have worked in an SME as a cleaner. (...) I currently work in the social services sector on a fixed-term contract. I got the job through internships because I feel I was able to show who I am as a person and build confidence in myself and my abilities. (...) The results so far have been really good. ...and I feel that I have received great feedback and that I have been worth recruiting, and I think that this will give me really valuable work experience for the future and confidence that I can do it. (...) Life experiences have affected my employment. If you think about my current job, it may have started from the idea that I want to support people, especially ones who are in a disadvantaged position. (...) If we think about my work as a school counselor, I feel that it allowed me to support children who were experiencing different societal pressures. (...) As a child, I was bullied because of my disability... (...) In practice, you could say that I have turned my weakness, my disability, into a strength of mine. (Person 1)

It is an IT wholesale company... (...) ...80 people here at the Finnish end, but at the global level, let's say I have twenty-six, twenty-seven thousand colleagues... (...) I feel like the company that I currently work in can be classified as an SME in Finland, even though it's part of a global enterprise... (...) I have previously worked in my father's renovation service, doing all kinds of things, like office and physical work. But before that, I had a summer-café for two summers... (...) ...I ran it as an entrepreneur... (...) The size of my employer in Finland is close to an SME size. (...) We had a course with internships. I did mine at a Finnish startup that sells software. At the end of the course, we had a day where everyone presented their internship experiences. Representatives from the participating companies attended as well. During my presentation, I must have made a good impression because a few days later, the company contacted me (...) and I was hired for a fixed-term position, which later became permanent. (Person 2)

I am architect so I worked in companies between 10-50 people, never bigger. (...) After studies left to USA for internship. Its an up and down cycle. I left office because of toxic people. (...) I am currently studying for my Master's degree and working more as a freelancer. I left my office job and am now looking for international opportunities. (...) I am collaborating with people in the USA, because I do not want to work with Lithuanians, because very little progress in inclusivity. (Person 3)

I worked in a spa center as an administrator, with maybe 10 people. (...) ...now I'm working on some projects like consulting and advocating... (...) I am a board member of an Independent living association. (...) I was in Sweden doing an internship about personal assistance, and I was thinking maybe when I come back to Lithuania, I need to create an association. When I came back, other people joined, so we all created this association. For some years we were doing this just like volunteers, but this year we got financing from the government. (Person 4)

The participants also shared experiences of searching for job opportunities in SMEs in their home countries and the factors that affect the search for said opportunities. Surprisingly, few interviewees stated that they have not actually needed to look for a job, but the opportunities had been presented through connections or active recruitment. This is well presented through Person 2, who stated that they were employed because a company representative was likely convinced of their performance in an internship course, hence inviting them for a job interview. Still, the interviewees' consensus appears to be that securing employment as a PWD in both Finland and Lithuania is challenging, with biases, disability disclosure doubts, and societal attitudes emerging as reasons.

Sometimes it's easy, sometimes it's hard, because very few people with disabilities pursue careers, and there is limited experience with special needs. Development starts from education to make a difference. In the soviet union, schools were divided. (Person 3)

Maybe just a few times I was searching. We have some agencies where we go to give our information about our education and so on. Later, they inform us if there are places to work. (...) As I was working in the spa center, I was not searching for anything, but for my current job, they were searching for me. (Person 4)

...you never know why you weren't hired. That's what's inside everyone, whether it was because you were qualified or not. Or was it because I had a disability... (...) I have evidence of my experience and how far I've educated myself and of my working life, but I still don't even get invited for interviews. (...) I have opened up about my disability on LinkedIn... the post got attention, but nobody came to talk about the post, so for Finns, this is also a bit like a trait that they do not dare to talk about such sensitive issues. But did that possibly affect my employment prospects? Yes, I think there is some kind of connection. (Person 2)

My experiences with looking for a job have really been limited to getting work through connections. A good friend of mine, through whom I got the job, worked for that company. (...) He might have unknowingly created a culture of acceptance, showing the employer that I was fully capable of doing the job well. (...) My employers have gotten to see my skills firsthand, and they have seen what kind of person and worker I am, as the recruitment has not happened, for example, online. (...) If I had written about my disability in an application, that might have had

created prejudice, but as I have gotten the opportunity to go and show that I am just like anybody else, all has gone well. (Person 1)

The interviewees also described situations where their employment had come to an end. Overall, three of the interviewees discussed the situations as not being unusual in any way, and their ending of employment consisted of fixed contracts coming to an end or self-induced resignations due to the willingness to move forward in their careers. The only difference is with Person 3:

Once left because of toxic people. I left the office due to poor communication, toxic colleagues, and a lack of inclusive solutions. On December 3rd, during the COVID period, after three months in the new office, I was suddenly turned off from the online office, which was a challenging time for me to make inclusive community online to show good examples for Lithuanians. I dislike how bosses can refuse to provide reasons after three months- this is the fake right of Lithuania. Despite the difficulties in December, a member of Rotary offered me a chance to work online, which was a bright spot during that time. (Person 3)

Lastly, the interviewees were asked what factors they believe most significantly influence the employment opportunities in SMEs for PWDs, and what role public policies and social attitudes play in shaping their employment experiences. The answers regarding the factors affecting the employment opportunities were extensively issue-focused, essentially pointing towards employers. These issues were: Prejudices and attitudes about PWDs' ability to work; Inequality in both life and employment; Employers picturing PWDs as a burden for businesses; Both direct and indirect racism and discrimination; Lack of understanding about disabilities; And lack of inclusiveness, awareness, education, and training, combined with disinterest towards them. Furthermore, the Lithuanian side brought up some systemic issues as well, which were accessibility, legislation, policies, support services, and social perceptions, which were seen as culturally dependent.

Well, prejudices, for example, about whether they can do the job. Fear of accommodation needs. Thinking that a person with a disability cannot do something, when in reality they can. (...) ...there are such easy solutions, and it is the disabled person himself who should be asked what it is. (...) I would also say that experiences of inequality in general, in life and job search, have an impact, because it is

easy to get the feeling already in the recruitment process that many things are required that are challenging for people with disabilities, when in reality, things could easily be made more doable. (Person 1)

In my mind, when job interviews reach the point that a person tells the employer about their disability, I get a picture that the employer starts to think, "Can this affect us in some way? Is this a burden for the company?" (...) It can increase the threshold for hiring that person. (...) Of course, it won't be said directly to the applicant. (...) I have an immigrant background. Even I was born in Finland, there is racism... (...) ...it's more on the passive side. Meaning that you won't be actively discriminated against, but left out of communities... (...) They don't have that experience. They haven't lived in the situation that I'm in or any other person with a physical disability, because it's like a daily struggle for us... (...) Employers lack experience in asking the right questions, and they have a distorted view of these issues. (Person 2)

Toxic people, poor communication, toxic colleagues, lack of inclusive solutions, little progress in inclusivity, disparities, and fears between people with disabilities and those without persist. (...) Accessibility, awareness, and attitudes, education and training, legislation and policies, support service, social perception, networking opportunities... I think it all depends on cultural identity. (Person 3)

When the interviewees talked about the role of public policies and social attitudes affecting their employment, the Finnish interviewees shared a commonality in the view that even though there are laws, regulations, and support networks in place, there is still development needed. Mainly, societal pressures, overall lack of understanding of disabilities, and feelings of being a burden and inadequate were seen as issues in their view. On the other hand, amongst Lithuanian interviewees, Person 3 believed that rights to inclusion, equality, and diversity are non-existent, whereas Person 4 had not had any negative experiences on the matter, and believed these issues touch everybody, PWDs or not. Overall, the responses seem to signal that only people who understand disabilities seem to understand these issues, and there is a common view on the need for a shift in both public policies and societal attitudes.

Society creates a lot of pressure to fit into a mold. (...) ...it does create a kind of pressure and a feeling of inadequacy and makes you criticise yourself, whether I fit into this modern society. That's why I said that there's still a lot of development

to be done, and I think it's really important, because there's so much diversity in today's world, and it's going in a much more accepting direction... (Person 1)

*In concrete terms, it's good that Finland is a welfare state, and you are actually trying to be helped out. (...) ...professor *****, who got us connected, helped me open up more about my disability. (...) ...I thought, wow, this person did something that no one in my history ever did, but these teachers in my past, in elementary school, middle school, and high school, we just sat down with the rehabilitation instructor and made a need-for-help plan. (...) ...these are the kind of things that for teachers were a bit of a burden... (...) Even though we live in Finland and there are these Non-Discrimination Acts and such, it still feels like it is only the people who have experience up close living with a disability who can ask the right questions. (Person 2)*

There are no influential rights of inclusion, equality, and diversity in Lithuania. (Person 3)

Talking about people's attitudes, so my experiences have been quite good, because for example, I have been invited in all work positions, but other people with disability, I hear many discriminatory things and all other things, which are everywhere, for disabled people and for non disabled. (Person 4)

5.2.2 Employer View

SME 1 is an employer that supports people in disadvantaged positions in the labor market, so correspondingly, the company has a set of specific visions and strategic goals. The company aspires to: support peoples career development by helping employees retain jobs or transition to similar roles within the region while securing retirement contributions; create inclusive employment opportunities for people with disabilities in company's operating area; adapt work processes to ensure all employees can manage their tasks; expand employability for those otherwise excluded from the labour market; and promote equal opportunities for long-term unemployed and older workers through permanent positions.

SME 2 is a company where DEI is seen as essential for innovation and collaboration, and thus, it is willing to integrate it as part of the company's operations. The goal of the

company is to create a sustainable and inclusive work environment that meets industry standards, while also providing meaningful employment opportunities for PWDs that cater to their aspirations as well as the company's needs. Furthermore, this company views inclusion as a strategic advantage that enhances innovation, employee retention, and competitiveness, and does not want to take steps just to fulfill legal requirements. The goal is to set the standard for inclusive employment in the sector by incorporating DEI into the company's strategies.

5.3 Legal Environments

This section focuses on the legal environments that impact the employment experiences of PWDs. On the employees' side, the focus was on the individuals' knowledge regarding laws and regulations that affect them. Additionally, an understanding of the performance of these laws and regulations was also sought. The employer side perspective provides a practical view of Austria's legal environment and its effects on SMEs.

5.3.1 Employee View

After the theme of employment landscapes, the interviewees reflected on their knowledge of the laws affecting PWDs' employment, as well as how the laws perform in their respective home countries. The Lithuanian interviewees expressed that they have a good understanding of the laws and also gave compliments to them, given the fact that Person 4 even works with said issues. However, the Lithuanian interviewees believe that the laws have no effect, as they are not enforced and compliance is not followed, especially since there are also municipal differences regarding legislation. Person 4 even suggests an international advocacy committee to monitor the situation in Lithuania.

There are good laws, but they are not doing anything. It is time to create an international advocacy committee to monitor the situation in Lithuania according to the rules of the EU, UNICEF, etc. For example, offices that have 20-50 people need

to accept people with special needs to make an inclusive community. Not being followed. (Person 3)

...I work with regulations a lot. We are like social partners for the government, so we get some files and we give advice on how to improve them. We advise what things to take into consideration. (...) The laws are good in theory but poor performance. There are municipal differences. Sometimes there are differences when you live in one town, it can be different than another town. Sometimes people have difficulty understanding these things. (Person 4)

On the Finnish side, the Constitution, the Non-Discrimination Act, the Employment Contracts Act, and the Social Welfare Act were cited. The overall consensus among the Finns was that the laws generally work well, primarily due to the obedience and respect shown towards them, but little practical consideration was given to the laws. Person 1 mentioned a law called "SORA" that they think possibly affects studying PWDs.

Well, there's the Disability Services Act. And the Non-Discrimination Act. Then, in the social sector, I believe there is a law called "SORA" that has some impact, if I'm not mistaken. (...) To my knowledge, it affects how a disabled person can apply to schools. (...) I have learned about these through general research and at school. In the educational sector, you need to understand those laws. And of course, it's also good to mention the Social Welfare Act. The constitution is also probably related. (...) ...I was once accepted into a practical nursing school, but my education was terminated mid-studies because it was determined that patient safety couldn't be guaranteed in my work... (...) I believe that the laws work well overall... (...) I don't feel like I have even considered the laws in practice at the time. But perhaps it would be good to increase awareness about these laws. (Person 1)

In Finland, the laws work 100% because everyone is afraid of them... (...) ...If I ever faced discrimination or was unfairly restricted from doing something, I know the law is on my side. (...) No one wants to risk getting too close to the law and do something wrong, especially when it comes to disabilities. You have no choice whether you become disabled or not, and it's a part of a persona and identity. (Person 2)

None of the interviewees also mentioned having knowingly relied on any laws in question. Points of view varied from not wanting to make a situation about oneself, to not knowingly relying on the law. Nevertheless, Person 4 has helped other people navigate legal protections and has also advocated for policy changes. Overall, the Finnish

interviewees are aware of laws that offer protection, although this protection does not appear to be actively evident in their daily lives.

Lastly, on the theme of legal environments, the focus was on the laws' effects on SMEs' attitudes regarding PWD hiring. For the Finnish interviewees, the effects of the laws and regulations on SMEs' hiring attitudes were unclear. Both interviewees agreed that the laws are likely followed, but there are still issues that the laws have not fixed. In Lithuania, laws and regulations seem to have little to no impact on SMEs, as the only compliance reported was when government subsidies were available.

There might have been some effects, but they have never been evident. I would argue that it has had an impact somewhere. (Person 1)

They are followed closely, and there's no way around them when it comes to protecting people with disabilities. (...) ...even when there are laws regarding accessibility, equal employment, and discrimination, I still believe that some discrimination exists. You can never know why you were not hired. (Person 2)

Absolutely zero effect in my experience. (Person 3)

Some SMEs use government subsidies to hire PWDs, but many still do not comply with disability laws. For example, if in a public sector works about 25 people, there should be 5 percent of disabled people. (...) When I worked in the spa center, our director made the environment more accessible. She was using some support from the government. (Person 4)

5.3.2 Employer View

SME 3 introduced the Austrian Disability Employment Act (BEinstG), which states that in Austria, companies that employ 25 people or more are obliged to hire one PWD for every 25 employees. Also, companies that do not employ people by the BEinstG requirements have to pay an equalization tax, which is a fixed number per vacant mandatory position. First, for companies that hire 25 to 99 persons, the tax is 335 € per vacant PWD position. Second, for companies that hire 100 persons or more, the tax is 472 € per vacant PWD

position. Lastly, for companies that hire 400 persons or more, the tax is 499 € per vacant PWD position.

According to the statements of SME 3, from all Austrian companies obliged to hire PWDs, only 30 % fulfill the hiring requirements, as the remaining 70 % do not. However, some companies employ PWDs, but they have not managed to reach the hiring requirements fully, which are then, by statistics, classified as companies that have not complied with the law. Still, there are also companies with fewer than 25 employees who are not obliged to hire PWDs, but decide to do it regardless. SME 3's representatives think that part of the reason some companies can even be said to be afraid of hiring PWDs is the increased protection against dismissal, but in contrast to beliefs that the protection is in force immediately, it actually comes into force after 4 years of employment.

5.4 SMEs' Perspectives on PWDs

This section handles the SMEs' perspectives on PWDs. On the employee side, the focus was on getting a surface view of SMEs' DEI practices and then deepening into aspects influencing SMEs' hiring abilities, and how employers' perspectives on disability influence the interviewees' day-to-day work life. The individual interviewees also shared advice they would give to other PWDs who are seeking employment in SMEs. On the employer side, SME representatives share the issues that affect their companies' ability to hire PWDs, and ways to tackle the issues.

5.4.1 Employee View

Opening the SMEs' perspectives on PWDs, the interviewees shared their observations on how they had seen SMEs manage DEI, and what they thought were the driving forces behind the actions. The Lithuanian point of view was divided. Person 3 stated that there is neither inclusion nor support for PWDs in Lithuania, but Person 4 thought that

companies that have leaders who have experience with PWDs and disabilities most likely have good DEI practices. The experiences with disabilities could be counted as a driving force behind DEI practices, but Person 4 also mentioned that there are nowadays a lot of great examples on social media, which can drive companies toward inclusivity.

Next to no inclusion and support for disabled. Cannot say that i have ever noticed any inclusive policies. (Person 3)

I think that companies who have directors who have experience in disabled matters are thinking quite positively and understand inclusion and diversity. But for people who have not experienced things like that, it is more difficult. (Person 4)

From the Finnish perspective, the interviewees had no experiences to share related to DEI. Nevertheless, the thought was that resources and organizational structures have an effect on how SMEs approach DEI issues. For example, even though some companies actively employ PWDs through wage subsidies and social support programs, employment quotas, and sufficient workplace adaptations were seen as a challenge. For improvement, Person 1 proposed a dedicated HR personnel or social counselors to support PWD employees as a potential solution. However, Person 2 argued that emphasizing labels like disability, ethnicity, or gender increases division, and saw skills and merit as more important than quotas, as inclusion means equal opportunity rather than fulfilling diversity metrics.

I have no personal experience of the issue in question. (...) ...there are companies that employ, for example, people with intellectual disabilities, but they don't receive full pay for it. (...) ...an employee who is either developmentally, like mentally disabled or physically disabled person, can be employed, for example, with wage subsidies or similar. (...) ...companies could have their own kind of channel for HR, for example, something like a social counselor... (...) ...the starting point here must be that first, the disabled person in question must be interviewed and asked very concretely, what kind of support do you feel you need? (Person 1)

As far as I know, I've never come across any, and I've never heard of it. (...) Why do we have to be in a society where we have to highlight things and put them on a pedestal? As long as we use terms like disabilities, religiousness, sexuality, skin color, or ethnicity, and as long as we raise these issues, there is something

fundamentally wrong with society. (...) ...I also think there are these quota jobs, which is something nobody still admits. (...) It should be about hiring great people, not showcasing stats. (...) The real goal should be equal opportunity. (...) If two equally qualified candidates apply, and the one with a disability is overlooked just because of that, then something is clearly wrong. (Person 2)

Next, the interviewees continued with descriptions of what influences SMEs' ability to employ people with physical disabilities based on their experiences. For the Lithuanian interviewees, government subsidies and support were seen as important in enabling SMEs to hire PWD. In general, they thought that companies need to meet inclusivity, education, and diversity standards, but also understand that PWDs want to work for them if the aforementioned issues are taken into account. From the Finnish point of view, government support and other incentives were proposed to improve SMEs' ability to employ PWDs. Person 1 highlighted factors such as disability awareness, erasing prejudice and stigma, and believing in people's abilities.

There is a need of increasing awareness in a positive sense. And understanding, meaning not being inherently prejudiced, but removing that stigma and seeing that there's a lot of good in people. There's a need for belief in people's abilities, and to see the person as a developing employee. Just like with the staircase model, where you start from somewhere and move forward with small steps that feel good. In the best case, it can be that a disabled person is a better employee than others. We would actually map out what kind of person is in question and through this, then start developing the work to be suitable for the disabled person. (...) The way I would see it is that companies can adapt their operations if they just want to. It would bring a broad and diverse range of perspectives to the business, and in the best case, if a person with a disability were hired, it could eliminate bias. (Person 1)

Next, the interviewees reflected on how employers' perspectives on disability have influenced their day-to-day work life. From the Lithuanian perspective, external views on disability have not affected their life that negatively, especially as Person 4 has worked in supportive environments. Additionally, Person 3 has transformed negative experiences into a resource for personal growth and improvement.

Be stronger, and better, with a dream of own office. (Person 3)

In my day-to-day work perspectives have not affected me negatively. I have worked in supportive environments. Of course, sometimes I see comments also that anyone don't want to employ disabled people. (Person 4)

From the Finnish perspective, Person 1 talked about employers possibly favoring non-disabled individuals in hiring because they could appear as easier hires, even when a PWD could have better skills and expertise. Trust was also highlighted, as PWDs should be allowed to demonstrate their capabilities and contribute to the company. Person 2 was concerned about the lack of understanding about disabilities, leading to simple mistakes being blamed on the disability rather than being seen as ordinary errors. They thought that disability is often ignored until it becomes an issue.

... it's often thought that it's always the easier choice to hire the healthier person. However, hypothetically speaking, it could be that the healthy person could be a bad hire as a person, and the physically disabled person could have some limitations, but on the other hand, a lot of valuable knowledge and skills.(...) ...it all comes down to trust. I need to be trusted. (...) ...hiring a disabled person could actually be the better decision, leading to productivity for the company. (Person 1)

I feel like my employer is pretty passive about it. (...) What I fear is that if I someday made a big mistake, like anyone could, as nobody is perfect, they'd blame it on my disability. (...) It's like it doesn't exist until something goes wrong, and then suddenly, it's a factor. (...) Do they have like an interest in understanding my visual impairment more? I don't know. (Person 2)

Lastly, the interviewees got to provide advice for other PWDs seeking employment in SMEs. On the Lithuanian side, the answers consisted of self-development and making yourself visible. Person 4 summed the idea up by saying “...if we do nothing ourselves, we will not get opportunities.”

Disabled people need to develop skills that can be useful to companies. (Person 3)

Everyone should be braver, more active, search for opportunities, because if we do nothing ourselves, we will not get opportunities. Be proactive and confident.

Network and stay visible, attend cultural events, use social media, and connect with potential employers. (Person 4)

The advice from the Finnish side showed division, as Person 1 recommended meeting employers and discussing one's situation openly, whereas Person 2 thought the opposite, and recommended not to mention about disabilities at first. Still, both interviewees shared a thought on how a PWD should show employees they are just as good of employees as people without disabilities. However, Person 1 shows it through embracing their disability, whereas Person 2 works around it.

It's worth asking for a concrete meeting and openly explaining your situation, but also by motivating and justifying things well. (...) I've been open about my own situation, so it has made it possible to adapt the activities, or it has also been possible to state that we don't need to adapt anything. (...) Employers have seen that you are this kind of person and you're capable of what others are capable of. (...) I am persistent. A person who wants to develop. So it has given the readiness to move forward. (Person 1)

Unfortunately, I believe in the fact that it's not necessarily worth mentioning the disability at first. (...) ...understand your disability, how it affects you, and build a life hack that you can use to work around it. Show employers that you can perform just as well, if not better, than non-disabled candidates. Some companies focus on just hiring "doers" and don't care about disability, but many still see it as a hiring risk. (Person 2)

5.4.2 Employer View

SME 1 has identified some challenges that affect the company's drive forward, and thus, their ability to hire PWDs. Firstly, the financial side. Currently, the company has to maintain a relatively high self-financing rate of 70%, which is due to governmental and other organizational support decreasing over time. The company pays its employees regular salaries, but the Austrian Social Ministry's support covers estimately about 300 € per worker a month. Additionally, the sector experiences high competition, as the company also competes with regular businesses on an equal basis. Nonetheless, the current demand for SME 1's services is high, and it surpasses the company's ability to supply,

because the PWDs work more limited hours than the competitors' employees. Of course, the demand is driven even further, as the company generally offers lower prices than its competitors because, for example, of the performance of the employees that fluctuates daily, understandably for various reasons, which then affects the overall performance.

From SME 1's perspective, employee performance was highlighted as an issue for the company. How the company sees it manifesting is that employees are stretching the breaks, doing things other than their work for the day, especially when there are no bosses around. This usually upsets team leaders, who are responsible for the team and communicate with the customers. The team leads are usually flexible and socially competent individuals, but at times are unhappy if they are accompanied by slower trainees or get their team members switched between teams. Thus, in the company, the area manager supports team leads, who support other employees. Giving the employees social support is a key to improving their mood and, eventually, performance, which is supported by multiple team-building events annually. Although the company representatives expressed their concern about the aging employees and disabilities worsening, which calls for workforce restructuring.

Restructuring of the workforce could prove itself as an issue, because, as the company representatives stated, it is difficult to get employees who are suitable for the team lead position. Mainly because the base work alone is physically demanding, but also because the team lead should be able to drive the company car. Of course, this is mitigated by the company having a widespread network in the job market. In fact, the company cooperates with various organizations that are supported by the employment services, and others that enable PWDs to receive training from the company for free. Furthermore, they have a project co-founded and financially supported by the EU, which enables people to stay with the company for five months. On the other hand, the company gets several applications per job posting, and unfortunately, they cannot employ everyone due to the lack of resources. Still, the company states that the best thing they can do is offer jobs and social support to PWDs, along with other target groups.

SME 2 has also identified a set of challenges and obstacles that are hindering the current progress toward reaching the goals regarding employing PWDs. One issue that the company deemed to be affecting their goal was reaching the physical barriers in the company premises, and hence, people with mobility impairments are unable to access certain areas in the building. Additionally, current specific jobs require specific skills and attributes from employees that may conflict with PWDs' physical capabilities. Accordingly, as the company aspires to achieve sustainable DEI in its long-term strategy, future-proofing company properties as well as the jobs is seen as crucial, not only to fulfill legal obligations just by enabling PWDs to work in the company, but also to make them feel included in the company culture and processes.

Indeed, in addition to physical barriers, the company recognizes inclusion barriers as another significant challenge that needs to be overcome. For the company, inclusion is envisioned to be instigated already from the recruitment process. However, the company needs to find a way to mitigate fears in potential candidates with disabilities, not only regarding applying for the jobs, but also to disclose their strengths and weaknesses. Furthermore, the company has recognized the need for training and initiatives that could help create awareness of inclusion challenges, further supporting PWDs, and also encouraging collaboration between people with and without disabilities.

5.5 Diversity Management

This section goes deeper into views on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) practices in SMEs regarding PWDs. On the employee side, there are two focus points. The first point is the DEI practices that the individuals have experienced, and the second is the DEI practices that SMEs should adopt. On the employer side, SME representatives share how DEI is taken into account in their company contexts in Austria.

5.5.1 Employee View

The discussions turned next to the interviewees' experiences with DEI, more precisely, if they could recall experiencing or witnessing any certain DEI practices towards PWDs. The Finnish interviewees had never experienced any certain practices that would have been specifically pointed towards PWDs, but Person 1 had seen some activities being adapted according to a person's abilities and needs. On the side of the Lithuanian interviewees, Person 4 worked amongst other PWDs, so experiences with accommodations and accessibility could be pointed out. On the other hand, Person 3 had never witnessed or experienced any inclusion and support for the disabled, as per their statement from the previous section.

I have seen some adaptations in some activities that another person was assigned to do. It has been more or less making some tasks easier, considering the person's disability. (Person 1)

Simply put, I have not come across any. (Person 2)

When I worked in the spa center, our director made the environment more accessible. So she was using some support from the government. There was inclusion and diversity because were PWDs working, maybe three or four now I don't remember exactly. Place where I worked online had implemented assistance for people who were hard of hearing. (Person 4)

Next, the interviewees shared their views on the types of DEI practices they believe SMEs should adopt for PWDs. From the Lithuanian side, it was acknowledged that the practices are context-dependent; however, the suggestions primarily focused on accessibility, coaching, training, following rules related to disabilities, and the development of inclusive technologies tailored to the needs of people with disabilities. Also, participating in disability-related campaigns was encouraged. The Finnish view encompassed a rather holistic perspective with PWD at the center. Person 1 suggested that employer support and patience are necessary from the beginning, meaning that the job should be comprehensively adapted and mapped out, along with any changes it might require, while also considering the wishes of the PWD. Person 2 sought an open-minded employer, but one

that still focuses on the work rather than solely on the disability, as companies should have well-thought-out practices that ensure PWDs are considered properly. All in all, proper, continuous, and considerate adaptation of employers is highlighted in all answers.

5.5.2 Employer View

When it comes to SME 1, the company has taken several actions to combat issues they have faced regarding employing PWDs. For example, at the beginning of employment, each employee will build an action plan and a skills profile with a person from the company. Mainly, it considers what the employee wants to achieve, how they can achieve it, who is responsible for the activities helping towards the goal, when the deadlines are, and what the results are. Correspondingly, the company offers training, participating in concrete work, individual accommodations, health-promoting measures, social integration, and collaboration with additional support networks through individual counseling

Other solutions that SME 1 was aware of were accommodations and tools that help in mitigating performance adjustments and other issues: Inclusive leadership, because all staff members should feel appreciated and encouraged to participate, which could be achieved through bias awareness training, mentorship programs, and communication protocols; Performance tracking methods along with flexible work models which strike a balance between productivity and avoiding overburdening specific workers, and also guarantee that each worker is assessed based on their contributions rather than strict production benchmarks.

When it comes to SME 2, the company sees raising awareness on DEI, as it is important to communicate that PWDs are welcome in the company, and work can be adapted. To be able to adapt work, the company has to be aware of the employees' strengths and weaknesses. Still, it is also important to understand that the adaptations cannot be done by sacrificing industry-specific skill requirements. This brings out the challenge of

assigning the right jobs to the right people while taking into consideration what tasks can be individually adapted to ensure both inclusion and workflow are secured. Exploring combining multiple tasks for one position was mentioned to be worth exploring.

SME 2 has already taken action and also possesses some knowledge of the aforementioned issues. For example, the company has already experienced hiring PWDs, as they currently employ two, and they also have two job openings that are described as being well-suited for PWDs. The postings give information about the tasks and their requirements, such as needing a driver's licence, and fine motor skills. This proves that even with the existing structures in place, the company has some ability to hire PWDs. To further bolster the "right jobs for right people" mode of operation, and to ensure that employees are given real responsibilities and genuine long-term positions will be established, the company has recognized job profiles as a possible tool in recruitment and career development. In addition to all aforementioned, the company has some accessibility features already in place, namely, access to public transportation, parking spaces near the company entrance, and accessible building pathways as well as restrooms.

SME 3 offers companies a comprehensive range of services to help them attain DEI practices in their daily activities. First, recruiting services help determine job requirements, advertise positions, and select suitable candidates. Second, funding management helps in accessing financial support and reducing costs. Third, accessibility services help by designing barrier-free workplaces, implementing diversity measures, and enhancing employer branding. Fourth, legal guidance, which includes dismissal protection, anti-discrimination, and compliance with labor laws. Fifth, successful employment services, which support workplace adaptation, conflict resolution, and maintaining employee work capacity. And lastly, separation management provides alternatives to separation, assists with outplacement, and provides post-employment support for affected employees.

5.6 Current Problems, Different Viewpoints

This section presents the views of the currently identified problems regarding PWDs' employment. On the employee side, the focus is on colleagues' and supervisors' attitudes and behaviours towards disability, physical disabilities influencing one's work experience, and misunderstandings and biases about disabilities in the workplace. Additionally, the individuals share their thoughts on how SMEs can improve the employment experiences of PWDs. On the employer side, SME 3's representatives share their views on the PWDs' employment issues in Austria.

5.6.1 Employee view

When the interviewees got to reflect on how their colleagues' and supervisors' attitudes and behaviours towards their disability affect their work experience, the Lithuanian perspective was slightly divided. Person 4 had never encountered any certain attitudes towards them as a person, or based on their disability, especially as their working environment has always been inclusive. With Person 3, the experiences were mixed, as they had had good colleagues, but misunderstanding managers, which was proposed to be a remnant from the Soviet era in Lithuania.

It was different between people. I had some good colleagues that were a pleasure working with, but they were not as influential as the managers wished, and they wanted to keep me as the team leader to make inclusive and variety of us. Because of the false perception that I want to undermine the system, which is not true; I just want to improve it. Soviet Union thinking. (Person 3)

As I said before, we are working with disabled and non disabled people together. So everyone likes to help each other if needed. Talking makes a better environment. (Person 4)

On the Finnish side, what has especially increased the motivation and contribution of PWDs has been the employers who have given PWDs a chance, shown trust towards them, and demonstrated both affirmation and inclusion by showing that they are part

of the team. However, there have been times when well-meaning actions have resulted in unintended consequences. This is demonstrated by Person 2, who described how another person in a meeting started zooming in on their screen, so Person 2 could see better. It was all in vain, because the same person had to say it out loud why they were doing it.

Well, the fact that people have trusted in my abilities has improved my motivation to work, and I would dare to say that it has also improved my work input and overall quality of my work, because I know that people trust me. I am not thought of as a weak link in any way. It has been noticed that maybe I don't hold on to the mop handle like others, but the end result is exactly the same. (...) My employer has said that you are enough and you are one of us. It has created a situation where I have felt good, a feeling that I could develop and work. (Person 1)

*... in a client meeting, one of my clients started zooming in on their shared screen a lot and said, while other people were also in the meeting, "I'm zooming in so ***** can see better." (...) I know well what they meant by it, but people sometimes try to do good things, but don't think them through. Of course, I appreciate the effort. (...) ...sometimes, if you want to help, you don't have to announce it... (...) you probably know that some people film videos to donate money to someone. You can donate anonymously, I think that's a much nicer idea than bragging about helping. (Person 2)*

The interviewees were also requested to share an instance where their physical disability influenced their work experience. In addition to the experience Person 2 shared on the last question about well-meaning actions having had unintended consequences, Persons 1 and 4 shared some of their experiences:

Well, there was a situation where only a manual transmission car was available. In that case, I couldn't be sent on a work assignment because there were no other employees available who could drive me to the assignment. I can only drive an automatic transmission car myself. (Person 1)

As I have cerebral palsy, it can affect me more when I have to for example give a presentation and get more nervous. It can become difficult to stand. I should just need to find another position or maybe to help with hands a little to change your body position. (Person 4)

Going forward, the discussion changed from the physical disability influencing work experiences to the topic of whether the interviewees had ever experienced misunderstandings or biases about their disability in the workplace. It is also noteworthy to highlight the notable concern of specific individuals about the possibility of such incidents recurring. On the Lithuanian side, Person 3 has encountered misunderstandings when they have had to read lips, stating that chat feedback applications are important to them. Furthermore, Person 4 has encountered misunderstandings, as not all people understood that, despite having a disability affecting legs, they can stand if necessary.

Yes I have, because I can't always read lips, which sometimes leads to misunderstandings. That's why chat feedback helps me understand more easily. for example, Slack, Google Teams etc. (Person 3)

Of course, some usually ask, maybe you need to sit. But I say I can also stand. (Person 4)

Person 2 worries about how colleagues might react if they started using a white cane at work. Person 2 states that in unfamiliar environments with unknown people, the threshold for using a cane is lower, whereas they fear being judged in a familiar environment. Besides, people often have assumptions about blindness without recognizing the complexity of visual impairments. This leads Person 2 to frequently encounter misinformed questions, such as suggestions to undergo laser surgery, which would not be beneficial. Overall, misunderstandings about disability persist, even when intentions are good.

...I have this fear of how others would perceive it. (...) If I showed up with a cane or a personal assistant one day, would my colleagues suddenly see me differently? (...) Nothing about my vision would have changed... (...) I'd just be choosing to use tools that help me. (...) People have this image of blindness. (...) They think that if you are blind you need a guide dog, or you use sunglasses and a cane, but not all blind people are like that. (...) ...what you really hear a lot is go for laser surgery.... (Person 2)

Person 1 has faced prejudice in the workplace. For example, their colleagues have made remarks about Person 1's physical condition, questioning their ability to do the job.

Person 1 describes that the coworkers have not seen them as a whole person, but instead have focused on the disability over everything else. Person 1 described these experiences as frustrating and offensive, but instead of reacting, they have channeled the frustration into a drive to prove their capabilities.

Well, prejudice to the extent that there have been doubts about whether I can do the job.. (...) Also, if I've met someone new at work, the first thing they ask me is, "Do you have a sore leg? Of course, it can be just a human question, but he has not looked at me as a person like others, but has rather asked me directly why I walk strangely. Because of this, others have questioned whether I can carry something heavy. Prejudices like that.(...) I have felt that it has hurt me in some way, because I have tried to make it clear that I can do it. If I can or can't do something, I'll say so. I have internally resolved the anger, which has then been followed with desire to show off. Yeah, this kind of Finnish way of thinking might be the result of that. (Person 1)

For the last question, each interviewee was asked, "How would you think SMEs could improve the employment experiences of PWDs?" It is best to let the quotes speak.

Educate employers on disability rights and inclusion. Promote hiring policies that encourage PWD recruitment. Create a culture of trust, where PWDs feel valued in the workplace. (Person 4)

Mentorship and support programs!!! Improve workplace accessibility. Follow rules!!! (Person 3)

Employers don't know how to ask the right questions, and the conversation often goes in the wrong direction. Ideally, when a disability comes up in an interview, the response should be: "Great that you shared this. Let's figure out how we can support you and improve our company in the process." (...) It should be about learning and adapting together, not just about whether I can do the job. (...) The focus should be on starting from the same baseline, focusing on skills and strengths, not just limitations. A job should fit the person, and the person should fit the job. (...) But some hiring criteria just makes no sense. (Person 2)

Stop being prejudiced. And to be frank, look in the mirror if you doubt someone's capabilities. Everyone is equal and there's a lot of good in everyone, you just have to find it. If you have the motivation to find it, you have the possibility to get a really good, respectful, and loyal employee who does their job very well and brings

significant added value to your company. And also, if you hire disabled people, for example, you can think about it from an image perspective too. But don't think about the image alone. There should be a genuine desire to be present in the development and trust in what a person can do. And listen to the employee. That's perhaps what I want to bring to the world, that people are trusted and whatever your background, you can really be a lot of good and value-producing, as a person. For the company in general too, and the fact that when you trust a person, you are already removing stigmas about disability through your own actions. We're talking about Finland as a whole. If this idea could be shared with the world, we might be able to improve equality everywhere. So, encounter a person as a person, and don't focus on the person's external factors or other backgrounds so prejudicially. (Person 1)

5.6.2 Employer View

SME 3's representatives thought that the reason why 70 % of Austrian companies are not complying with Disability Employment Act (BEinstG) is that people, including employers, have prejudiced and biased views of PWDs. For example, when employers and co-workers hear that a person is affected by a disability classified as 50 % by the disability assessment ordinance, they often think in the most stereotypical ways about the person in question. What is highlighted by the comments is the need for education to change people's views on disabilities. Meaning that people should be directed away from thoughts that focus only on limitations and the negatives, and rather pointed to the fact that even if a person is disabled, it does not mean that they are unable to work. It is more a matter of adjustments and accommodations. Therefore, disability disclosure was also an emerging issue amongst PWDs.

6 Discussion

This chapter explores the deeper meanings and broader implications of the study's findings. Firstly, it is important to delve into the deeper meanings of the findings because a more in-depth examination of the empirical findings makes it possible to find the most relevant answers to the research questions and thus, reach the objectives of the study (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 640). Secondly, having a deeper understanding of the findings of the study makes it possible to conceptualize what are the theoretical and practical implications of the study.

In the beginning of the study, it was established that only 51.3% of of working age PWDs are in paid employment in the EU area (Felix 2023), and the gap between employment rates of PWDs compared to employment rate of people without disabilities averages 24.4 percentage points in EU (Buchanan & Hammersley, 2023, p. 32), despite there being a variety of structures and changes in attitudes to mitigate the challenges in PWDs employment. For this reason, it was clear that there are factors that made the issues persist, which induced the need for research to uncover said factors, and also to explore possibilities to influence the situation. To get an overall understanding of the current knowledge of the issue, a literature review was conducted, forming an understanding of reality in the shape of a theoretical framework of themes that affect the employment of PWDs.

After building the theoretical framework, it was noticed that, by the current understanding of reality, there supposedly prevails an interconnectedness and a flow of effects between the themes of the framework. This would mean that if the flow of effects was to work as presented, the problems would have effectively been mitigated at the end of the flow. For this reason, it was apparent that there were hidden elements not seen in the theoretical framework that prevented this from happening, which needed to be uncovered.

Critical realism aims to present descriptions of reality by analysing participants' interpretations about their experiences of reality (Wynn and Williams, 2012, p. 793), so experiences are understood being the key in gaining access to unique observations about reality and thus, a deeper understanding of matters affecting it. For this reason, the empirical part of the study was focused on gathering experiences of the focus group of the study, PWDs. This proved to be essential in finding what is shaping PWDs' employment experiences.

The key findings of the study could be divided into three different themes. First, there is a lack of understanding about (physical) disabilities, which could be identified being a root cause of multiple challenges that PWDs face when it comes to employment. Second being that the institutional effects on SMEs' perspectives on PWDs are dependent on societal and cultural contexts. And third being the limited understanding that SMEs have of disabilities, diversity, and diversity management, even though there are examples of how to embrace them. These issues will be further handled in the following sections.

6.1 Experiences of Perceptions on Disability

Do people really understand (physical) disabilities, and do these existing descriptions help address the disabilities themselves, or do they rather hide the person behind a label? Taken from the theoretical framework, it is clear that PWDs suffer from, for example, stigmatization, labeling and stereotyping, and discrimination coming from the employers' side (Bonaccio et al., 2020; Green et al., 2005; Lyons et al., 2018; Santuzzi & Waltz, 2016; Zhang et al., 2021), and what could be interpreted as issues stemming from PWDs side were perception of barriers in employment, self-doubt, previous experiences of discrimination, unjust job requirements, the rigidity of the said requirements, and doubts about disclosing one's disability (Beatty & Kirby, 2006; Bonaccio et al., 2020; Santuzzi & Waltz, 2016; Vornholt et al., 2018). The reason for combining these issues with the question regarding people's understanding of physical disabilities lies behind the following fact. According to the empirical findings of the study, understanding disabilities and the issues

stemming from both the employers' and the employees' sides seem to walk hand-in-hand.

When it comes to the private people who were interviewed, they all presented a level of self-knowledge. Each interviewee acknowledged their ambitions and understood their own strengths and weaknesses, in particular when it came to navigating through life and employment with a disability. Even so, one message from all interviewed PWDs was pushing through: Employers need to stop assuming and start listening. This message can be further fortified by the fact that, according to the interviewees, people, universally, or in the shape of employers or coworkers, who have had prior experience with PWDs or understanding about disabilities, have been the ones who have been dismantling the issues that PWDs face in their life and employment. These people understand that it is important to move the view beyond disability and look at the person as an entirety.

Seeing beyond the disability appeared to be especially important when the interviewees had been seeking employment. Internships have enabled the establishment of understanding and trust between a PWD and the employer. Also, getting employment through connections involves a mediator who establishes trust between the PWD and the employer beforehand. Furthermore, some interviewees saw being open to employers about disabilities as important to establish trust and transparency for easier collaboration, but there was also a view against that. One interviewee trusted in hiding their disability and focusing solely on their skills when searching for employment. This communicates that there is a contradiction between dismantling the disability labels and avoiding the disability label altogether, especially when it comes to disclosing one's disability.

Disability disclosure is "influenced by factors such as self-identity, personality, context and previous experience" (Vornholt et al., 2018, p. 48), and it is also a matter of balancing between the positive and negative outcomes that might emerge from the disclosure (p. 49). In the case of Person 2, who was against disability disclosure, the thought was that

companies see PWDs as a hiring risk, and it is better to work around the disability than to embrace it. One thing that would explain this kind of thought is also in the main question of this section: do the existing descriptions help address the disabilities themselves, or do they rather hide the person behind a label? The following quote from Person 2 would argue the latter: “As long as we use terms like disabilities, religiousness, sexuality, skin color, or ethnicity, and as long as we raise these issues, there is something fundamentally wrong with society” (Person 2).

Indeed, the issue of the disability label seems to be a commonly recognized issue among private individuals. It can be interpreted from their statements that being labeled disabled has exposed them to: being compared to “healthy” people, being treated improperly and unjustly, feelings of inequality, pressures from society, ignorance, stigmas, stereotypes, and other negative social and psychological issues caused by the people who do not understand disabilities. These issues of labeling, as said before, have either been attempted to be dismantled by openness about the disability or avoided altogether by closing up about it.

The thought is no different when it comes to SMEs. For example, SME 3’s representatives stated that in Austria, companies are hesitant to employ PWDs because they often think in the most stereotypical ways about disabilities, especially when it becomes apparent that a person is classified as 50 % disabled by the disability assessment ordinance. SME 3 highlighted the need for education to change people’s focus from limitations and the negatives, as being disabled does not mean that PWDs are unable to work. Corresponding to the statements of the individual interviewees, SME 3 also saw these issues creating negative effects, such as disability disclosure issues. SME 2 understood this issue as well, as they want to mitigate fears in potential candidates with disabilities, not only regarding applying for the jobs, but also to disclose their strengths and weaknesses.

In conclusion, what could not be seen from the theoretical framework, but became apparent through empirical findings, was the lack of genuine understanding about

disabilities in both society and working environments. This lack of understanding is the force that drives PWDs behind the clinical and institutional labels, which in turn seem to bring up stigmatization, stereotyping, and discrimination on the employers' side, and, for example, perception of barriers in employment, self-doubt, and uncertainty regarding disability disclosure on the employees' side. As Person 2 said, "You have no choice whether you become disabled or not, and it's a part of a persona and identity." Therefore, society and employers need to stop making assumptions and start listening and learning actively, because that is what PWDs themselves have tried to form as a norm by being open, honest, and transparent about their disabilities. Otherwise, a common ground will not be reached, and issues will persist.

6.2 Institutional and Societal Realities Effects on SMEs' Perspectives

What was also questioned from the theoretical framework of the paper was the persistence of issues amongst PWDs' employment regardless of the existence of institutional forces such as laws, regulations, the European Commission's (2021) disability strategy, and NGO activities. Also, Moore et al. (2007, p. 122) argued that SMEs who invested in, for example, PWD accommodation found later on that the benefits outweighed the costs. Why are companies, including SMEs, seemingly reluctant to hire PWDs?

What needs to be pointed out first and foremost is that all interviewed individuals shared a common viewpoint on the following fact: It is good that there are laws, regulations, support networks, and other governmental efforts to mitigate the issues that PWDs face. However, there is work to be done. Some interviewees even describe there being "years of work needed," but interestingly, no interviewee has had to rely on any laws knowingly. Nevertheless, as institutional effects below the EU's laws and regulations are bound to national contexts, it is best to handle the issues by country.

In the Finnish context, the legal framework is strong, and there is a culture-bound respect for it, especially when it comes to disability and equality-related topics.

Furthermore, the Finnish interviewees shared a view that the law can be trusted and it will be on their side if they ever have to rely on it, as in Finland, the consensus is that the law cannot be disregarded. What was also recognized was Finland's standing as a welfare nation, which brought out the view that there is a genuine will to help people in disadvantaged positions, for example, in forms of wage subsidies and supported employment. Still, despite the positivistic view on the Finnish institutional framework, the interviewees had little practical knowledge of it. Of course, some implications were made towards common issues such as accommodation, resource, and productivity concerns that companies might have towards PWDs, but what could also be seen was that the deeper problems on the Finnish side were more systemic.

The most evident systemic issues that could be identified from the Finnish side share a commonality with the issues that the lack of understanding about disabilities brought forward. Mainly, the existence of stigmatization, labeling and stereotyping, and discrimination was pointed out, but the issue that could be interpreted from the answers is that the seemingly strict obedience with the law makes these issues more subtle. What could reinforce this is Person 2's notion about the Finnish trait of not wanting to talk about sensitive issues, such as issues around disabilities. This ties the systemic issues in Finland to societal contexts outside the immediate area of institutional influences. Accordingly, as Person 2 also has an immigrant background, they also brought forward the issue of racism, which adds intersectionality to the context, which means a way of many factors simultaneously affecting a person's identity and positioning in societal power structures (THL, 2023).

In the Lithuanian context, laws and regulations, and other institutional factors, were seen as well-intended, but they lack control and supervision. Person 3 had experienced unjust dismissal from a workplace and little to no inclusivity in work communities. Consequently, according to Person 3's opinion, laws and regulations do not affect PWDs' rights regarding inclusion, equality, and diversity, not only in employment, but also overall in Lithuania. This division was thought to be a remnant from the Soviet era. When it

comes to Person 4, they do not view the situation as harshly, but they stated that some Lithuanian SMEs use government subsidies to hire PWDs, but many still do not comply with disability laws. Overall, Person 4 sees societal issues touching everybody in the country, not just PWDs. Also, Person 4 views that, for example, some Nordic countries are ahead of these issues, which inspired them to organize an association to advocate and consult regarding these issues. Both of the Lithuanian interviewees think that PWDs themselves should take more initiative to improve their position in working life and society, but there is still a need to educate employers and society in general regarding disability rights and inclusion, and especially, to monitor that the rights are respected.

In the Austrian context, despite the country having over 1200 companies obliged to hire PWDs, and failing to meet the PWD employment quotas will result in government-issued fines, only 30% meet the hiring requirement. It is not always a case of choiceful actions. Some companies that employ PWDs have just not been able to meet their hiring obligations, and despite their efforts, these companies are categorized as not fulfilling their obligation. Possible institutional issues behind this can be various. For example, even though cooperating with various supported organizations, SME 1 faces resource issues, as governmental and other organizational support has decreased. However, institutions can also create problems through definitions and the ambiguity in communication. As exemplified in the previous section, companies were hesitant to employ people who were defined as disabled by the assessment ordinance. Additionally, SME 3's representatives reported companies' timidity in hiring PWDs due to protection against dismissal. Contrary to the companies' beliefs, it only comes into force after 4 years of employment. But employing PWDs is not always instigated by the law, as some companies with fewer than 25 employees, who are not under obligation, employ PWDs (BGBl. Nr. 22/1970 § 1). It is not always about fulfilling legal obligations, but rather setting new standards (SME 2).

In conclusion, even though the laws, regulations, support networks, and other governmental efforts are appreciated and supported, how they affect SMEs' perspectives on

PWDs seems to be bound to the cultural and societal norms of countries and how the institutional frameworks are regarded in each context. In Finland, there is a common belief in the effectiveness of institutional frameworks, and what is culturally shown outward is strict obedience to the law. Indeed, the laws should mitigate the reported systemic issues, but what actually might be masking them from the masses is the reserved communication culture. In Lithuania, the institutional structures, such as laws, were found to have a minimal effect on the realization of equality, inclusion, and similar rights, affecting not just PWDs. This is an indicator of not only the reported Soviet era division, but also of laws not being enforced, which would require changes in the Lithuanian societal context to be fixed. Lastly, in Austria, companies are failing to meet hiring quotas, which is a two-sided problem. On one side, companies are willing to hire PWDs, but suffer from, for example, resource issues and not necessarily understanding the law. On the other side, companies are unwilling to hire PWDs due to the problematic label of disability, displaying a lack of understanding of disabilities. Still, a hope for a change in society was presented, as SME 2 wanted to go beyond legal obligations in PWD hiring.

6.3 Diversity and Inclusion Lived by PWDs

Diversity management encompasses managing both visible and invisible differences among people (Davim & Machado, 2017, p. 73). What makes it challenging is that diversity can be considered context-dependent. However, diversity may consider aspects such as age, gender, appearance, and physical abilities, among other attributes. Because diversity management is challenging, it was relevant to investigate how it works through recognized diversity management tools, such as Friday & Friday's (2003) planned linear process, Gonzalez's (2010) emergent and reactive process, and Guerri & Riccò's (2017) hybrid approach. Why are there issues with PWDs' employment, even when there are ready-to-implement diversity management tools and processes to mitigate diversity-related problems?

It is noteworthy to mention the individual interviewees' relatively little experience in diversity management and DEI-related activities. On the Finnish side, the interviewees had no firsthand experience with DEI tools or practices, and only Person 1 had seen some adaptations being made for work to be more suitable for a person. On the Lithuanian side, experiences showed division, as Person 3 has never experienced DEI activities from companies, and they described inclusion and support for PWDs being nonexistent in Lithuania. Person 4, on the other hand, has worked in inclusive environments and has experienced accessibility improvements. Furthermore, they had also seen assistance for people hard of hearing in an online working environment. Thus, it seems that progress with DEI is still noticeable only in selected workplaces, and in certain contexts/circumstances, even though there are tools and processes ready to use.

Looking at the DM tools considered in the study, all three share the commonality of approaching diversity with intent, meaning that companies should have a genuine will and a plan to integrate diversity into their strategies and operations. Also, when companies implement DM, organizations must be committed to the activities. Comparing this to the interview data from SME representatives, the concept proves itself. All three SMEs have integrated diversity into their strategies and are aware of where and how, for example, disabilities should be addressed. Also, the SMEs 1 and 2 have DEI-related goals, they understand their current shortcomings, and most importantly, are willing to learn and improve on the matters, meaning that DEI is an integral part of their strategies. Of course, given the ambiguity of diversity and disabilities, it is justified to say that many employers could have difficulties in approaching the matter(s). To mitigate, for example, SME 3 provides services to help other companies attain DEI practices. All in all, employers who understand and value diversity and have a genuine will to integrate it as a part of the company's strategies are in a good place for achieving it. The tools and services are there to guide the process, and it is for the companies to choose one that is the most suitable for them.

When considering disability as a diversity dimension, it is evident that experience and understanding disabilities matter. But notably, attaining these is not always in the hands of companies. In the Lithuanian context, not many PWDs tend to pursue careers (Person 3), making experiences with special needs limited, and societal attitudes that increase division do not help. Also, if sensitive issues are not addressed from either the employers' or employees' side, no learning outcomes will be achieved, as could be interpreted from the Finnish experiences. For example, SME 2 wants to communicate that PWDs are welcome in the company, and work can be adapted, but to be able to adapt, the company has to know employees' strengths and weaknesses. However, PWDs' experiences show that employers fail to communicate these points and tend to ask the wrong questions. Overall, to manage disability as a diversity dimension, employers need to have a strong grounding in it. However, gathering the knowledge is not always in the employers' hands, meaning that mutual respect and communication between employers and PWDs are required to form a common ground for development.

In conclusion, the individual interviewees' lack of experience with DEI suggests that the concept is not widely adopted by SMEs. There may be various reasons, but the lack of experience among employers regarding disabilities makes it harder for employers to adapt and adjust to PWDs' needs. Furthermore, the lack of communication and the possibility of establishing communication, whether due to societal contexts or individual-related issues, deepens the gap between employers and PWDs, which cannot be solved with DM tools and activities that are implemented here and there. Therefore, employers who understand and value diversity and have a genuine will to integrate it as a part of the company's strategies. Thus, what is highlighted is the need to make employers not only to understand disabilities, but also to understand diversity and the possibilities it could bring to their operations.

6.4 Critical Realist Framework and Implications for Theory and Practice

As the original theoretical framework of the thesis was questioned, it is only relevant to fit the analysed results from the empirical part of the study to a revised framework that also fits the critical realist perspective of the study. In Figure 10, previously identified theories and the knowledge extracted from the empirical data are now fitted to reality, divided into three nested domains: real, actual, and empirical. This represents the author’s viewpoint on how the employment of PWDs in the European Union can be understood in terms of mechanisms, events, and experiences.

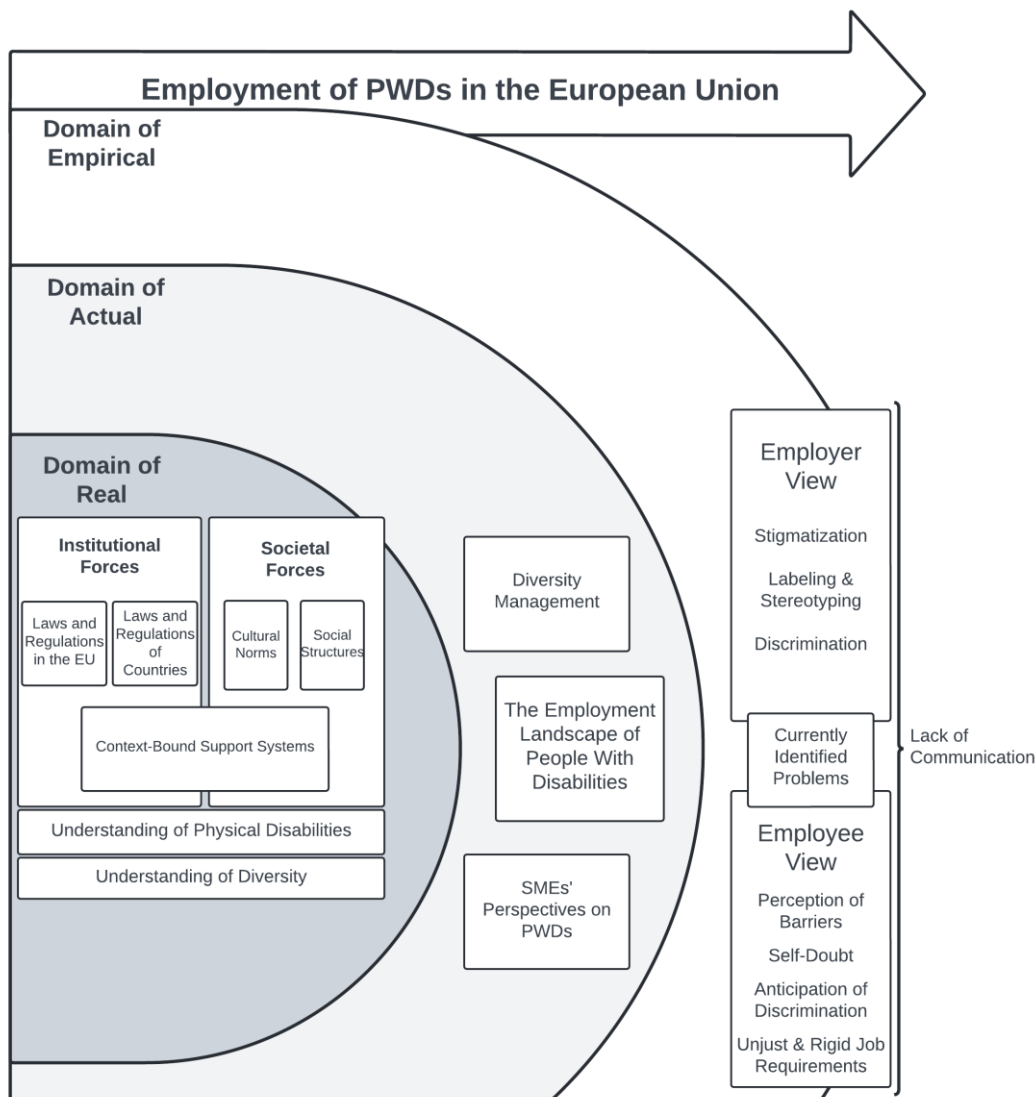


Figure 10. Critical realist framework depicting the employment of PWDs in the European Union.

The interviews conducted for this study encompassed a multitude of themes that resulted in rich, experience-based data, especially from the side of employees (PWDs). Additionally, the data provided by the SMEs' representatives contributed to the study by allowing additional perspectives to add further rigor or reveal discrepancies regarding the contexts that were studied. That being said, it is now time to conclude the findings and see how the analysed data answers the research questions and simultaneously determine the theoretical and practical implications of the study.

6.4.1 Theoretical Implications

Considering the theoretical implications of this study, it is necessary to point out that many studies that have regarded disabilities in employment contexts before do not look into physical disabilities alone. Furthermore, when it comes to analysing experiences in terms of revealing root causes of issues that PWDs face, especially in employment, a scarcity of studies from said viewpoint is evident. Also, little consideration has been given to SMEs as the employer side in studies regarding disabilities and employment as a whole. Thus, not only is unemployment among PWDs an issue as highlighted in the beginning of the study, but the aforementioned points also highlight a research gap in the literature regarding disability, employment, and management studies.

The core objective of the study was to find the reasons for PWDs' challenges in employment in the EU despite the presence of supportive frameworks by studying their employment experiences in SMEs. In the center of the issues that PWDs face in employment, regardless of their nationality, lies the concept of how (physical) disabilities are understood and looked at. The experiences of the interviewees confirmed findings from literature: stigmatization, labeling, stereotyping, and discrimination were issues stemming from the employers' side, which, on the other hand, caused issues such as perception of barriers in employment, self-doubt, and uncertainty regarding disability disclosure. However, evidence showed that if employers had experience (in other words, understanding) of disabilities, the issues were not that prominent.

Coming to the employment experiences in different institutional and societal contexts, what was highlighted was that different cultural and societal contexts include different norms that affect the influence of institutional frameworks on SMEs. In Finland, institutions are respected, but a reserved communication culture can affect the realisation of PWDs' rights. In Lithuania, there is evidence of societal division. Also, laws, regulations, and other institutional factors lack control, supervision, and understanding, resulting in non-compliance. And in Austria, there are issues with societal attitudes mixed with evidence of not understanding the law, but also genuine problems exist, such as resource issues. However, even though the reasons for issues vary between countries, the problems PWDs face remain similar, although the severity and the multitude of problems seem context-bound.

Overall, because (physical) disabilities are not genuinely understood, PWDs are forced behind the clinical and institutional labels. These labels are the source of stereotypical thinking, stigmatization, and discrimination to which employers are guilty, by the experiences of PWDs, which cause separate problems among PWDs depending on the context. Moreover, institutional forces and societal forces should create support systems to help mitigate the issues, but cultural norms and social structures are at the root, hindering the efforts from reaching PWDs. Of course, context-dependent issues such as a lack of resources cannot be left out either.

6.4.2 Practical Implications

Considering the practical implications that this study offers, the focus is on diversity management. According to the analysis and reflection between theories and the empirical data, multiple conclusions can be made, but none of them necessarily relate to the practices of diversity management, but rather to how to prepare for its utilization. The preparation work proves to be an important aspect of diversity management.

As stated in the discussion, the individual interviewees' lack of experience with DEI suggests that the DM practices are not widely adopted by SMEs or are limited to only some companies. Furthermore, the activities did not seem to be all that comprehensive, at least from the PWDs' point of view. After comparing empirical data and literature, it made the reason clear. Diversity management is not just about companies choosing the best DM practices when a sudden need emerges, but it is rather a binding choice that requires companies to change all the way, starting from the strategic level. Diversity must become a core value of the company, meaning that companies need to also recognize a genuine need for it.

Diversity must not only be valued by the organization aspiring to include DM into their organizational activities, but it also needs to be understood. Meaning, that SMEs need to understand what diversity actually means, and that means also understanding the diversity dimensions that will be managed. In this case, without an understanding of disabilities, there will not be success. To understand the dimensions of diversity that will be managed, there needs to be learning. Communicating diversity between employers and employees is the key to learning outcomes and efficient DM. The lack of communication, whether due to societal contexts or individual-related issues, only deepens the gap between employers and PWDs, and as previously said, no DM tool implemented without intent and preparation will provide any meaningful results. However, SMEs are not alone with the struggles with DM, as it is not an easy task. What is to be remembered is that consultation about the issue might just be available, as SME 3 helps companies with DM related issues.

In conclusion, companies that aspire to include DM into their activities cannot do it overnight. There needs to be clear reasons and thus, needed changes in company strategies and values for DM and DM-tools to work. Also, diversity needs to be valued and understood well, along with the dimensions of diversity that are planned to be managed. By communicating with diversity groups, common ground and well-rounded practices can be achieved, but most likely, there is professional help for the issue as well, if needed.

6.5 Limitations

This study is subject to several limitations that should be acknowledged. The first limitation of the study is the sample size for the empirical part of the study. Altogether, four private individuals and four representatives of three SMEs were interviewed, which hindered the possibility of deriving generalizable results. Furthermore, the purpose was to gather interview data from Austria, Finland, Lithuania, and Germany, but interviewees were acquired from only the first three countries. Also, the intended sample size for the study was planned to be 16 people, four from each target country, but due to challenges in getting interviews, the total number of interviewees ended up being eight people, four from Austria, two from Finland, and two from Lithuania.

The second limitation relates to the cross-country nature of the study. The main research question of the study involved finding the reason for PWDs' employment challenges across the EU despite the presence of supportive frameworks, which was to be done by examining the employment experiences of PWDs in different EU countries. However, to keep the study feasible, the target countries involved needed to be limited to four. Undoubtedly, this delimitation made it more challenging to derive such results from the study that would be applicable throughout the whole EU area. The fact being, even the EU countries share the commonality of belonging to the same union, there are still numerous country-bound differences that could not be considered in this study. Also, reflecting on the depth to which the literature could be considered in a study of this scale, probably everything worth considering could not be fit into the study, even with the limited number of countries.

The third limitation of the study is the composition of the group of interviewees. As said in the previous paragraph, four private individuals and four SME representatives were interviewed. This group divides into the viewpoints of four PWD employees, two each from Finland and Lithuania, and four SME representatives from Austria. This means that the perspectives of SME representatives from Finland and Lithuania, and the

perspectives of PWDs from Austria, are missing completely, making the views from each country one-sided.

The fourth limitation of the study relates to language. As the author of the study is Finnish, it is clear that being able to interview a part of the interview group in a common mother tongue, the data produced is likely to be more in-depth than with other interviewees who were interviewed in English. Even though English was accepted as the interview language by both sides, it goes without saying that when speaking in a foreign language, one may not be able to communicate as accurately and richly as in mother tongue. This can be seen from the quotes from the interviewees in the findings chapter.

The fifth limitation of the study is the interviews with SME representatives. As the possibility to utilize interviews with SME representatives emerged, the only possibility at that point was to interview them unstructuredly. As there was no opportunity to form any interview questions and plan in advance, some important questions were possibly left out that would have otherwise brought value to the study.

6.6 Future Research

There are possibilities and potential for future research areas regarding the topic and the theme of this study. Especially, if the challenges in the employment of PWDs persist through time, it communicates a need for a wider-scale study of the reasons behind the reasons of said challenges, because without that knowledge, it is arguably challenging to mitigate them. Admittedly, this study is unlikely to guarantee any substantial changes in the challenges faced by PWDs in employment, but it has the potential to serve as a guideline for future studies.

Reflecting on the study's limitations, the study's breadth comes into question for future research. It is possible to conduct a more in-depth study limited to a single country, making it feasible for a researcher conducting a similar study to reach more interview

candidates and consider the cultural, societal, and other country-bound contexts carefully. Furthermore, if the research's target country is the researcher's home country, it would most likely guarantee higher-quality results. Particularly, as the cultural contexts and institutional structures would already be familiar, and language barriers and other power distances that might be present in a cross-cultural interview would be diminished. Of course, as this study represented the cross-cultural side, what comes into question is also going the opposite way and expanding the scope of the research regarding target countries. This would naturally generate broader results regarding the challenges in employment that PWDs face in the EU, not forgetting the reasons behind said challenges. Naturally, what needs to be considered here is that when the scope of countries is expanded, it opens the door for culture, language, and other context-related challenges, raising the possibility of, for example, data-quality issues.

Also, as discussed in the limitations, the composition of the interview group was unbalanced, consisting of only PWDs from Finland and Lithuania, and only SME representatives from Austria. Irrespective of the choices regarding narrowing or expanding the scope of the study, considering countries, what would be worth considering is including both PWDs and SMEs representatives as groups of interest. This way, it would be possible to access multiple points of view that would still be relevant for finding the reason for PWDs' employment challenges despite the presence of supportive frameworks through lived experiences, and whether diversity management (or something else applicable) could be used in SMEs to influence the employment situation of people with physical disabilities.

However, what could be the most effective way to tackle the reasons behind PWDs' employment challenges is the combination of the aforementioned propositions. First, to be able to gather as in-depth and high-quality data as possible with minimal risks related to culture, language, and other context-bound issues, research should be conducted as country-bound, but considering both PWDs' and SMEs' points of view. This said, similar research should be conducted in multiple countries natively, and after a desired number

of countries have been studied, a meta-analysis should be conducted based on said studies. This way, it would be possible to consider the countries in the EU as a whole and to determine if it is possible to form generalizable results that would be applicable everywhere in the EU. Of course, qualitative studies do not aim to produce generalizable results, but as the problems with PWDs' employment are considerable in the entirety of EU countries, gathering data about recurring issues and other themes across different national contexts could still come in handy in providing solutions to said issues.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Interview questions in English

General

- Could you tell me about your history, for example, education, and your situation in the working life?
- Could you briefly describe your disability?
- To what extent, if any, does your physical disability impact your ability to work?
- Have you ever needed, or would you need any accommodations or support (for example, assistive devices) to be able to work?
- What do you think about the availability of job opportunities for people with physical disabilities in your country?

The Employment Landscape of PWDs

- Have you ever worked in a company that could be described as a small or medium-sized company?
- What is your current employment situation?
- What kind of employment history do you have?
- Can you describe your experiences in looking for a job (in SMEs) in your country?
- Have you ever been offered an advancement in your career?
- Could you describe situations where your employment has ended?
- What factors do you believe most significantly influence the employment opportunities in SMEs for people with physical disabilities? Are there any specific reasons for your thoughts?
- What role do public policies and social attitudes play in shaping your employment experience?

The Legal Environment

- Do you know of any laws or regulations in your country that affect the employment of people with (physical) disabilities?
- How do you think these laws perform when thinking about ensuring equal employment opportunities for people with (physical) disabilities?
- Have you ever needed to rely on these laws?
- By your experience, do the laws related to the employment of people with disabilities affect SMEs' attitudes or not?

SME Perspective

- How do companies (SMEs) manage diversity, equality, and inclusion based on your observations?
- What aspects in your opinion influence SMEs ability to employ people with physical disabilities?
- What advice would you give to other people with physical disabilities seeking employment in SMEs?
- In your experience, how do employers' perspectives on disability influence your day-to-day work life?

Diversity Management

- Can you recall any certain practices (in SMEs) related to diversity, equity, and inclusion of people with (physical) disabilities that you have experienced or witnessed?
- What kind of practices do you think SMEs should adopt to improve their diversity, equity, and inclusion towards people with (physical) disabilities?

Currently Identified Problems

- How do your colleagues' and supervisors' attitudes and behaviours towards your disability affect your work experience?
- Can you share an instance where your physical disability influenced your work experience?
- Have you ever experienced misunderstandings or biases about your disability in the workplace?
- How would you think SMEs could improve the employment experiences of people with (physical) disabilities?

Appendix 2. Interview questions in Finnish

Yleiset

- Voisitko kertoa minulle hieman itsestäsi ja historiastasi, esimerkiksi koulutuksestasi ja tilanteestasi työelämässä?
- Voisitko lyhyesti kuvailla vammaasi?
- Missä määrin, jos ollenkaan, fyysinen vamma vaikuttaa kykyysi työskennellä?
- Oletko koskaan tarvinnut, tai tarvitsetko tällä hetkellä mahdollisesti jonkinlaisia mukautuksia tai tukea (esimerkiksi apuvälineitä) voidaksesi työskennellä?
- Mitä mieltä olet fyysisesti vammaisten henkilöiden työllistymismahdollisuuksista maassasi?

Fyysisesti vammaisten henkilöiden työllisyystilanne

- Oletko koskaan työskennellyt yrityksessä, jota voisi kuvailla pieneksi tai keski-suureksi yritykseksi?
- Mikä on nykyinen työllisyystilanteesi?
- Millainen työhistoria sinulla on?
- Voisitko kuvailla työnhakukokemuksiasi (pk-yrityksiä koskien)?
- Onko sinulle koskaan tarjottu etenemismahdollisuuksia urallasi?
- Voisitko kuvailla tilanteita, joissa työsuhteesi on päättynyt?
- Mitkä tekijät mielestäsi vaikuttavat merkittävimmin fyysisesti vammaisten henkilöiden työllistymismahdollisuuksiin pk-yrityksissä?
- Mikä rooli nykyisellä julkisella politiikalla ja yhteiskunnan asenteilla on työkokemuksiesi muovaamisessa?

Lainsäädännöllinen ympäristö

- Tunnetko tai tiedätkö lakeja tai säädöksiä, jotka vaikuttavat fyysisesti vammaisten henkilöiden työllistymiseen?
- Miten mielestäsi nämä lait toimivat, kun ajatellaan fyysisesti vammaisten henkilöiden yhtäläisten työllistymismahdollisuuksien varmistamista?
- Onko sinun koskaan tarvinnut turvautua näihin lakeihin?
- Koetko, että vammaisten työllisyyteen liittyvät lait vaikuttaneet pk-yritysten asenteisiin?

Pk-yritysten näkökulma

- Oletko huomannut pk-yrityksissä erityisiä aloitteita fyysisesti vammaisten työntekijöiden mukaan ottamiseksi ja tukemiseksi?
- Mitkä tekijät mielestäsi vaikuttavat pk-yritysten kykyyn työllistää fyysisesti vammaisia henkilöitä?
- Mitä neuvoja antaisit muille fyysisesti vammaisille henkilöille, jotka etsivät työtä pk-yrityksistä?
- Miten työnantajien näkemykset vammaisuudesta vaikuttavat jokapäiväiseen työelämääsi?

Monimuotoisuuden hallinta

- Oletko koskaan törmännyt jonkinlaisiin käytäntöihin, jotka liittyvät työympäristön monimuotoisuuteen, tasa-arvoon ja mukaan sisällyttämistä, jotka olisivat liittyneet vammaisiin henkilöihin?
- Millaisia käytäntöjä pk-yritysten tulisi mielestäsi omaksua parantaakseen monimuotoisuuttaan, tasa-arvoaan ja mukaan ottamistaan, erityisesti fyysisesti vammaisten henkilöiden kohdalla?

Nykyiset ongelmat

- Miten kollegoidesi ja esihenkilöittesi asenteet ja käytös vammaisuuttasi kohtaan vaikuttavat työkokemukseesi?
- Voitko kertoa tilanteesta, jossa fyysinen vammasi on vaikuttanut työkokemukseesi?
- Oletko koskaan kokenut väärinkäsityksiä tai ennakkoluuloja työpaikalla, jonka uskot johtuneen vammastasi tai liittyneen siihen?
- Miten mielestäsi pk-yritykset voisivat parantaa fyysisesti vammaisten henkilöiden työkokemuksia?