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## The employer's perspective: employment of people with disabilities in wage subsidized employments

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The aim of this article is to examine employers' perspectives of the conditions of employment of people with disabilities within a context of wage subsidies. Employers in different workplaces were interviewed, and the interviews were analysed according to qualitative content analysis (Graneheim and Lundman 2004). The results show that four factors – attitude, matching, economic incentives and accommodations – are important for the employment of people with disabilities within a context of wage subsidies. Positive earlier experiences of people with disabilities serve as one of the reasons employers are willing to consider people with disabilities for jobs, but for hiring to take place, there must also be a match between the right person and the right job. Wage subsidies are seen, within this context, as an incentive to hire people who have reduced work capacity; accommodations are seen as necessary for the successful implementation of such hiring decisions. This knowledge can be applied in the design of support measures for unemployed people with disabilities.

**Keywords:** disability; employer; supported employment; wage subsidies; accommodations

### Introduction

In Sweden, at least one in ten persons of working age reports some kind of disability as defined in the United Nations' standard rules (Statistics Sweden 2009). About half of these people also report a reduced ability to work due to disability as defined by the respondents themselves (Statistics Sweden 2009). Swedish law prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities in the workplace (Swedish Government 1999); however, the law has been criticized for individualizing the problem and not addressing the behaviour of the market (Hännestrand et al. 2000). People with disabilities are still discriminated against in the labour market (Jones 2008; Statistics Sweden 2009), and despite active labour market measures to counteract this problem, higher unemployment rates for people with disabilities prevail in Sweden (Statistics Sweden 2009) as well as in other countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 2009). To address this exclusion from the labour market, Sweden has adopted policies, often in the form of employment programmes, to facilitate transition from unemployment to employment. The most utilized programme in Sweden is wage subsidies (Swedish National Audit Office 2007), with approximately 90,000 people currently employed in jobs

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with wage subsidies (Swedish Public Employment Service 2011). In the European context, programmes with wage subsidies have shown superior results to other active labour market programmes, but there have been few evaluations of active labour market programmes for people with disabilities (Kluve 2010), and the system of wage subsidies needs to be further researched. Active labour market programmes, in this context, are defined as ‘all social expenditure (other than education) which is aimed at the improvement of the beneficiaries’ prospect of finding gainful employment or to otherwise increase their earnings capacity’ (OECD 2012). Swedish evaluations (Swedish Ministry of Employment 2003; Swedish National Audit Office 2007) of wage subsidies mainly focus on the effects of wage subsidies and tend to lack employer perspective. Employers’ perceptions of employing persons with disabilities in a context of wage subsidies are highly relevant to an understanding of the system of wage subsidies. In the present study, we investigate Swedish employers’ perspectives of employing people with disabilities within the context of wage subsidies.

### **Wage subsidies**

For people with disabilities in Sweden, there has been disproportionately high unemployment for decades (Swedish Ministry of Employment 2012). This may be due to Swedish employers’ reluctance to employ people with disabilities (Knutsson and Persson 2001) and also to discrimination against people with disabilities in the workplace (Statistics Sweden 2009). To address this, Sweden has adopted facilitation policies that include wage subsidy programmes aimed at increasing labour market participation for people with disabilities. Wage subsidies are a form of financial assistance given to employers who employ people with reduced workability. The concept of workability is often poorly defined (Tengland 2010), and the use of the concept within the Public Employment Service is somewhat arbitrary (Swedish National Audit Office 2007). In Swedish labour market policies, ‘people with reduced workability’ is used both as a term describing a category of unemployed people eligible for support from the Public Employment Service (i.e. someone with a disability who may be in need of a workplace accommodation upon employment) and as a term describing employees who are eligible for accommodations and wage subsidies in their employments. To be eligible for wage subsidies, an individual must have a medical certificate of work disability. The level of subsidy is based on the level of reduction in ability to carry out the actual work. In most cases, the reduction in ability is difficult to measure, so the decision is made in consensus with the parties concerned. The wage subsidies can last for up to four years but are supposed to be renegotiated annually. Participants in wage subsidy programmes receive regular salaries according to collective agreements.

The research on wage subsidies in Sweden consists primarily of evaluations of efficiency and outcomes. An economic evaluation shows that wage subsidies have a slight positive effect on labour market participation but a negative effect on regular employment because subsidized employment causes displacement (Calmfors, Forslund, and Hemström 2002). An investigation of the wage subsidies system (Swedish Ministry of Employment 2003) found problems with both the Public Employment Service’s way of handling the system and the circumstances under which people with subsidized wages work. Major criticism was directed to the lack of job and career development, as well as to the effective ‘pinning down’ of candidates to low paid jobs (referred to hereafter as the *pin-down effect*). The Swedish National

Audit Office (2007) examination of the Swedish Public Employment Service's manner of handling wage subsidies revealed inadequacies in almost every part of the wage subsidy process. The audit pointed to deficiencies in documentation, in definitions of disability, in choices of measures, in matches between workability and actual workplace demands, in follow-up of job development and in the negotiation of prolonged subsidies. One of the problems with wage subsidies, when evaluated in relation to ability to work, is that ability to work is not a definitive concept. As for all humans, ability to work is ever-fluctuating, depending on situation as well as context, and therefore difficult to measure. The same can be said about disability. This suggests that the wage subsidies system, as compensation for employing people with disabilities with reduced ability to work, is a system of uncertainty, as noted in these evaluations (Swedish Ministry of Employment 2003; Swedish National Audit Office 2007).

### **Supported employment**

Supported employment (SE) is a method that focuses on individualized support for persons with various disabilities to assist them to enter the job market and obtain employment. In order to maintain employment, these individuals receive on-the-job training through their employers with the support of a job coach until they have acquired the necessary skills for the job. The job and the support are adapted to the individual's needs in relation to the employer's needs (Wehman et al. 2006). There has been increasing use of methods based on SE in many countries, including Sweden. The criterion for participation in SE programmes in Sweden is reduced workability. SE is often used in combination with wage subsidies in Sweden, and this can be seen as problematic in light of the above-mentioned criticism concerning the uncertain handling of wage subsidies (Swedish Ministry of Employment 2003; Swedish National Audit Office 2007). Criticism could also be raised against the use of SE together with wage subsidies: because SE aims to reduce barriers by matching individuals with jobs so that few or no hindrances arise in the given workplace, it stands to reason that, if this is done properly, there should be no need for wage subsidies because there should be no reduced workability in a given job.

### **Aim of the article**

An understanding of the perceptions and experiences of employers can be one of the keys to understanding reasons behind decisions to employ or not to employ a person with disability. Despite this, only a few studies have focused on understanding employers' views of recruitment and employment of people with disabilities (Waterhouse et al. 2010). The aim of this article, therefore, is to examine employers' perspectives regarding the conditions for employment of people with disabilities. As the study takes place within a context in which wage subsidies are used, the question it investigates is as follows: what are the main factors behind decisions to employ people with disabilities within a context of wage subsidies?

### **Method**

In 2007, a research project called Sustainable Work began in cooperation with three organizations working with SE. The aim of the project was to identify key components of a sustainable work situation for people with disabilities. The research

was carried out from 2007 to 2010. Register data and open-ended interviews were the primary sources of data. The study reported in this article is a part of the project, and the primary source of data in this article consists of interviews with employers and supervisors who have employed a person with disability.

### ***Selection of informants***

The inclusion criteria for the informants in this study were as follows: collaborating with an organization working according to the principles of SE and having in their employ persons with disabilities for at least six months. In total, 317 employers who had current experience employing people with disabilities were listed as potential informants. Of these, 21 were selected. The sampling method was to choose participants with various experiences. One set of sampling criteria referred to the characteristics (age, gender, type of disability and length of employment) of the employee(s) with disabilities. Another set of sampling criteria referred to workplace characteristics (company size, sector and branch), as such could play a part in employment decisions and job characteristics. The rationale for sampling employers with various experiences was to see whether these employers differed in their perceptions based on the characteristics of their experiences.

The job coaches from each of the three SE organizations contacted the informants chosen, introduced the study, and asked if they were willing to participate. Those who agreed to participate were contacted by a researcher who informed them of the purpose of the study, their rights, the procedures to be undergone, and the potential risks and benefits of participation. Of the 21 employers contacted, 19 agreed verbally to participate in the study. Two employers declined to participate because they no longer worked at the company or workplace in question and did not consider themselves up to date with the employment in focus. As they no longer worked at the workplace of interest, they were not considered eligible participants, and one of them was replaced by another informant at another company who did fulfil the eligibility criteria. All participants were guaranteed confidentiality and were informed that they could discontinue their participation at any time. Five of the informants discontinued the study before the interviews took place, citing lack of time. Two of these informants were replaced by supervisors in their places of work. Another three supervisors were also interviewed following recommendations from the employers. The supervisors were chosen because they had all been responsible for the recruitment processes and employments in focus. Since the supervisors in these cases replaced the employers and had a demand-side perspective in the interviews, they are referred to as employers in the result and discussion sections.

### ***Characteristics of the participants***

In all, 20 informants participated in the study, 15 employers and five supervisors. There were 13 males and seven females. Sixteen were from the private sector (12 employers and four supervisors), while the remaining four were employed in the public sector. The participants represented different company sizes: five of the participants were from small companies with less than six employees; five were from companies with more than 50 employees and the remaining 10 were from medium-sized companies. The supervisors were mainly from big or medium-sized companies; they had acted as contact persons for the SE organization and as supervisors of the

relevant employees, often replacing the employers in day-to-day issues concerning the employments in focus. The supervisors had been part of the employment decision, as they had been asked previously whether or not they wanted to supervise an employee with reduced workability. All the informants had current experience with employing or supervising employees with disabilities. The most common disabilities of which they had experience were neuropsychiatric diagnoses and learning disabilities, followed by psychiatric and somatic diagnoses. Other diagnoses represented among the employees in the study were hearing loss/deafness, brain injury, physical injury and loss of sight.

### **Data collection**

Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were carried out by one researcher in six cases and two researchers in 14 cases. The interviews took place in 2008. The researchers used an interview protocol that addressed various aspects of being an employer: why they choose to hire the person in question, introduction in the workplace and training, job development, accommodations, career development and workability versus productivity requirements. Questions also addressed disability-related issues such as the employer's former experiences of people with disabilities. Each interview lasted 30 to 90 minutes and was conducted at the informant's place of work. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

### **Data analysis**

A qualitative content analysis based on guidelines from Graneheim and Lundman (2004) was carried out. The selected focus of analysis in the study was the experience of being an employer of persons with disabilities. The data analysis was carried out in several steps. (1) All interviews were transcribed, read and reread in order to gain an overall sense of the content. (2) The next step was to identify items in the text as meaningful units. Criteria for deciding units as meaningful were that the units addressed the questions of why and how people with disabilities get and keep employment. (3) The units were categorized into different categories and subcategories. One category, for example, was *job development*, with subcategories including *formal training/education* and *informal training/education*. The categories were coded in an inductive manner, going from text to categories. (4) The meaning units were condensed into shorter descriptions close to the original text. (5) An interpretation of the underlying meaning of the condensed units was made with the aim of understanding the significance of these units in terms of the employment of people with disabilities (see Table 1). (6) The meaning units and their alternative interpretations were discussed by three researchers, resulting in consensus about how to interpret the meaning units. (7) The meaning units that described characteristic features of the employer's experiences and their interpretations were sorted into sub-themes with the aim of finding themes that expressed the concealed content of the complete data. The following are some examples of sub-themes: *being the right person to hire*, expressed by the informants in terms of the skills or characteristics they appreciated in their employees, and *suitable jobs*, expressed in terms of the kinds of working tasks informants thought suitable for the employees. These sub-themes were seen as expressions of 'matching the right person with a suitable job', so *matching* then became the theme. (8) The sub-themes and themes were analysed

Table 1. Examples of qualitative content analyses.

Meaning units	Condensed meaning units, description close to the text	Condensed meaning units, interpretation of underlying meaning	Sub-theme	Theme
In high school...it was an eye-opener...a lot of youth with disabilities...cerebral palsy... wheelchairs...some couldn't talk...couldn't control their bodies...but they were as smart as, if not smarter than, me and completely aware of their surroundings, and that was a real eye-opener. Maybe that's why I like to make it easier (in working life) for people with disabilities.	School was an eye-opener for me as I realized that people with different disabilities were both smart and aware of their surroundings, and this has formed my willingness to help	Understanding has gone from negative stereotypes of disability to seeing people with disabilities as skilled	Previous experience	Attitude
He is a pleasant and polite young man, a valued colleague, helpful. He never says no to an assignment – he does it happily.	He is a socially skilled employee with a willingness to work	The employee is valued because he has the social skills suiting the employer's needs and he acts in a helpful manner	Helpfulness/readiness	The right person
We have very many petty jobs... sitting and cleaning small plugs... it's a lot of working with your hands, and such a thing is, of course, extremely expensive to pay for... we have jobs for virtually everyone, regardless of disability... there is always something to do	The working tasks suiting people with disabilities in the workplace are low-skilled working tasks in the form of petty jobs which are expensive to pay for	The cost of production is lower if you hire subsidized labour in low-skilled petty jobs which are seen as suitable for people with disabilities	Low-skilled working tasks	Suitable jobs
you may only pay 20% (of the salary) the first and the second year...if I can make money, then it becomes interesting	If you just pay 20% of the salary during first years of employment, it is an interesting economical affair	Employing subsidized labour is a good deal because you get more productivity than you pay for	Wage subsidies	Important conditions
He gets very, very stressed out when he doesn't handle the job... then he wants a lot more time than the others need... and we have to let him have it, because it's a wage-subsidized job, so we can actually do so...	An accommodated work situation is allowed because of subsidized employment	An accommodated work situation is acceptable if someone else is paying for it	Accommodation	Important conditions

and reflected upon in light of existing literature on the functioning of the labour market and the concept of disability. The analysis looked for contextual factors that could yield a more thorough understanding of the different descriptions (that are described in the earlier steps of the analysis) of employers' perceptions concerning the employment of persons with disabilities. All researchers in the research group were involved in the first five steps of the analysis to strengthen the trustworthiness of the interpretations. The data analysis was written in Swedish and later translated into English by a professional translator.

### Central findings

Three themes emerged from the experience of being an employer of a person with a disability: (I) the employer's *attitude* formed by previous experience of people with disabilities and how this experience influenced social responsibility; (II) the *match* between the jobs that are considered suitable for people with disabilities and the personal characteristics desirable for the jobs offered and (III) the significance of *wage subsidies* as an incentive for employment of people with disabilities and as making possible the soft *accommodations* needed for such employees in the workplace.

Although severity and type of disability is likely to affect employment (Jones 2006b), the severity of the disability and the ways in which the disability affected each employee's ability to work were not explicitly expressed by the informants and did not appear as a theme in the analysis.

#### *Theme I: the attitude of the employers*

The vast majority of employers in this study had previous experiences of people with disabilities that influenced their decision to employ a person (or persons) with reduced work capacity. Such experiences, described in the interviews, mainly involved situations in which a person with disability had done something that the participant considered extraordinary – something unexpected which was at odds with their expectations. Many of the experiences related by the participants were of family, school or leisure activities. Employers described themselves as impressed by what those individuals had accomplished despite their disabilities, as the following quote illustrates:

*In high school...it was an eye-opener...a lot of youth with disabilities...cerebral palsy...wheelchairs...some couldn't talk...couldn't control their bodies...but they were as smart as, if not smarter than, me and completely aware of their surroundings, and that was a real eye-opener. Maybe that's why I like to make it easier for people with disabilities. (Employer, manufacturer of metal products, seven employees)*

Many respondents described concrete situations in which people with disabilities had proved themselves extraordinary, as competent and complete persons in the respondents' views.

Another reason mentioned for hiring the disabled was the desire to make it easier for those who have difficulty finding a job. It was considered a matter of social responsibility, as this employer describes:

*I think that as an employer you have a social responsibility. (Employer, book shop, seven employees)*

For two of the employers from larger companies, the employment of people with disabilities was part of a stated policy of corporate social responsibility (CSR). In smaller companies, the hiring of a person with disabilities was mainly attributable to the employer's own views concerning the importance of diversity in the workplace and helping others in life. Some employers also thought that employment of people with disabilities had a surplus value for other employees in the workplace:

*Employment of people with disabilities can result in other employees developing and changing their attitudes. (Employer, restaurant, 230 employees)*

These employers were eager to integrate such views into the workplace culture. The fact that they chose to concentrate on people with disabilities in their practice of social responsibility, however, seems to be connected to their previous positive experiences of people with disabilities.

### ***Theme II: matching***

Matching can be seen as a process containing two elements: the jobs that are considered suitable for people with certain characteristics (suitable jobs) and the personal characteristics necessary for the jobs offered. The types of jobs employers thought of as suitable or available to people with disabilities differed to some extent among the employers interviewed, but there were some common features. First and foremost, the employment of people with disabilities was seen as something unusual, as somewhat different from the employment of other people. This is illustrative of the participating employers' views concerning people with disabilities and working life: work was not seen as a disabled person's natural environment, and employing people with disabilities was often seen, at least initially, as something out of the ordinary. If the employment of a person with disabilities went well, however, respondents were happy to consider employing more people with disabilities, as several of the respondents had in fact done. Positive experiences of the initial employment of a person with a disability can thereby result in the employment of people with disabilities being seen as an ordinary, rather than unusual, occurrence.

In this study, most of the disabled employees were employed within industry or trade or in different services. Common occupational groups were factory workers, assistants and warehouse staff. Often the jobs involved assisting other workers in the workplace. The employees with disabilities were seen, in some cases, as complements to ordinary staff, as helpers. The jobs filled were mainly for low- or unskilled labour. Some of the tasks performed were monotonous and repetitive, and employers described these tasks as especially suitable for persons with disability. Petty jobs were also mentioned as especially suitable for employees with disabilities. This may be due to the fact that it is expensive to produce certain products in Sweden, so it makes sense to make use of subsidized labour for production tasks when possible. Employees with disability were seen as subsidized labour in that their employment entitled the company to wage subsidies.

*We have very many petty jobs... sitting and cleaning small plugs... it's a lot of working with your hands, and such a thing is, of course, extremely expensive to pay for... we have jobs for virtually everyone, regardless of disability... there is always something to do. (Employer, plastics industry, 16 employees)*



Only a few of the workers in this study worked in self-governed or independent work situations and they were often well- or even over-qualified for their jobs. These workers had a somewhat different situation than those who worked with low-skilled tasks. They were less often seen as ‘disabled’, and the respondents attached less importance to disability and more to the employee’s knowledge and experience. However, the word ‘disability’, as used by the employers studied, often seemed to suggest inability or reduced opportunity for development to the employers, and this is reflected in the characteristics of the jobs made available to most of the workers in the study. Employment of persons with disabilities was seen as a means to obtain employees who could do monotonous work and who would have no desire for advancement:

*It’s a way to get people who can do certain jobs – simple operations – and who may not have the same desire to do a lot of things, but are quite happy to have jobs to go to. (Employer, packing industry, 15 employees)*

Employment of people with disabilities in monotonous jobs was described as having several advantages. It was a convenient way of getting the labour-intensive work done (due to subsidized salaries) without demands for professional/career development, as the employees were assumed to be quite happy having jobs at all.

To be seen as the right person for the job is another prerequisite for obtaining employment. Employers described many skills that made the employees attractive for employment. The fact that almost all employees in this study were employed in positions that did not require more than some basic skills may have affected what kinds of skills the employers in question regarded as necessary for employment. Skills mentioned as attractive were personal characteristics such as loyalty, not necessarily skills related to the work tasks. Motivation, willingness to work, commitment and having a strong work ethic were described as attractive skills, as were readiness and devotion:

*He is a pleasant and polite young man, a valued colleague, helpful. He never says no to an assignment – he does it happily. (Supervisor, packing industry, 15 employees)*

To be a model employee in the workplace, social skills as well as experience are needed. The most attractive employees were those who had education, social skills and willingness to work:

*He is dutiful and loyal and he is trained as a mechanic... he has tremendous knowledge. (Employer, car rental, 10 employees)*

Formal education was a factor mentioned by all employers as important but not decisive. Some employers wanted a well-educated or trained employee, whereas others could see advantages with a ‘blank slate’, a person who could be formed to suit the workplace. Two of the employers offering unskilled jobs did not see lack of education or experience as a barrier to employment as long as they did not have to pay for an extensive learning period.

Although the matching process was successful in most cases, all but two of the employers saw no opportunities for career development for their employees with disabilities. In some cases, this was due to the disability and the employer’s

expectations of what the employee could cope with in work situations. In other cases, the nature of the tasks available in the workplace also played an important role in career development: there simply were no opportunities for advancement in some workplaces, especially not in unskilled jobs and in small companies.

### ***Theme III: wage subsidies and accommodations as important conditions***

There were two factors that were seen as important by the respondents when employing a person with disability: wage subsidies and accommodations. Wage subsidy was seen by all employers as compensation for reduced productivity. In the absence of wage subsidy, the employers emphasized, they would probably not have hired the person. On the other hand, employers reported that if a person with disabilities had the right education and/or former experience, they might consider employment. The wage subsidies created an important competitive edge, especially in small companies for which overall wage reduction was extremely important. Some of the employees were employed with wage subsidies that compensated up to 80% of their total salaries, lowering overall employment costs for the employer. One employer described why he saw advantages to employing at such low cost:

*You may only pay 20% (of the salary) the first and second years...if I can make money, then it becomes interesting. (Employer, gas station and restaurant, 40 employees)*

All employers saw the advantages of cheaper labour. A few employers considered that their employees' progress could eventually lead to employment without subsidy as long as their productivity reached a certain level. Where disability affected productivity, however, the employers could not justify, from a production perspective, employment in the absence of subsidy:

*It goes without saying that if we were to be in a position in which I would have to pay her full pay, then I could not justify it. I can't do it – not from a productivity perspective. But with the approach that exists today, that is, with wage subsidy, she is an asset. She may do small things all the time, but it doesn't go very fast. (Employer, furniture company, 500 employees)*

Thus, in these cases, wage subsidies play a decisive role and serve as one of the reasons for the respondents to employ a person with disabilities.

Whereas wage subsidies can be seen as important for positive outcomes with regard to people with disabilities in the decision-making processes involved in hiring, accommodations can be seen as necessary for successful implementation of these hiring decisions, that is, for successful continued employment of an employee with disabilities. All employees in the study were in some kind of accommodated work situation due to their disabilities. The accommodations were exclusively 'soft', such as adjustments in work hours, pace or type of tasks, as opposed to 'hard', which would involve various types of technical or physical adjustments in the workplace. If an accommodated work situation is seen as a necessary condition for successful employment, then accommodations clearly have consequences for job development and career.

The accommodated work situation was seen by some employers as problematic in that accommodation often ruled out flexibility. The need for accommodation could

be a barrier to employment from a productivity perspective. If a production process needs to be changed quickly, employers may lack the time to provide accommodation in the new work situation. However, none of the employers thought that the productivity of the employees with reduced workability was entirely related to adjustments in the pace of work or in tasks, and the wage subsidy was seen as a reasonable trade-off for accommodations.

*He gets very, very stressed out when he doesn't handle the job... then he wants a lot more time than the others need... and we let him have it, because it's a wage subsidized job, so we can actually do so... (Employer, personal assistance, 5000 employees)*

Depending on the accommodations, the employers said it was difficult to see how the wage subsidy could be reduced in the long run because of the accommodations made. The tasks excluded in the adjustments made still needed to be performed by someone else who needed to be paid. Should the wage subsidy disappear and the employers have to pay an unsubsidized salary, employers described their choice as easy: they would have to employ someone who could perform all tasks without accommodation.

## **Discussion**

The aim of this article is to describe employers' perspectives of the employment of people with disabilities. The employers were strategically chosen and had experience with employees with disability. The results show that four types of factors – attitude, matching, wage subsidies and accommodations – are important for the employment of people with disabilities within a context of wage subsidies.

It should be noted that all the employers in this study had had the opportunity to see the potential employee in action before making the hiring decision. The study took place in a context of SE in which the employers received support from an SE organization in the hiring/employment of a person with disability. Moreover, the results should be understood in light of the fact that economic incentive in the form of wage subsidy was used to encourage the hiring of people with disabilities. One can assume that the use of incentives rather than prescriptive legislation makes a difference with regard to which mechanisms are central to understanding employers' hiring decisions and accommodations in the workplace.

The size of the company may also influence employment decisions. Since employers' previous experience is an important factor for recruitment, it may be easier for a person with disability to obtain employment in smaller companies where the employer who has the experience of people with disabilities also has control over hiring decisions. In bigger companies, there is often more than one decision-making level, including human resource departments and supervisors, so a single person's experience might not have much weight. The employers in this study were mainly from medium-sized companies in the private sector, and this may have affected the employment decisions and recruitment processes. In Sweden, most people with reduced workability are employed in the private sector (Statistics Sweden 2009).

## **Limitations of the study**

The method chosen for the interviews and analysis has implications. Because the employment of people with disabilities is a socially and politically sensitive topic, it is

possible that the respondents expressed socially acceptable views, rather than disclosing their own personal views. The analysis may mirror a socially accepted view instead of illuminating what is actually the case. However, as shown, the respondents sometimes reported opinions that were not 'politically correct'. Furthermore, there is the risk of bias in content analysis – the author's understanding of a phenomenon can influence the interpretation. To counteract this risk, all the authors of this article were involved in the analysis and carried on a running discussion of the interpretations.

### **The employer's attitude**

A number of the respondents described previous experiences with people with disabilities, although these experiences did not directly relate to work capacity but generally had to do with areas other than work life. These experiences seem to be the basis for employers' decisions to open up the workplace to people with disabilities, functioning in this respect as a door opener to the labour market. This knowledge may serve as a reason for society to build integrated rather than segregated school and leisure areas, as the experiences reported took place in these kinds of contexts. But the kind of contact and the kind of disability can also influence the decision process. Research has shown that greater quality of contact with people with intellectual disabilities is associated with more positive attitudes (McManus, Feyes, and Saucier 2011). In this study, employers described a positive previous experience with emphasis on the positive aspects of the contact. Previous experience seems to affect the acceptance of people with disabilities in the workplace (Yuker 1994), and positive attitudes are related to experiences of working with people with disabilities (Copeland et al. 2010). Earlier positive experiences from areas of life other than the workplace and concrete experiences from the workplace can thus play a role in the decision process. This research shows the importance of positive experiences taking place in inclusive, as opposed to segregated, meeting points in working and social life for further encouraging the hiring of people with disabilities.

The previous positive experiences, however, did not affect the respondents' ideas about which people with disabilities can contribute in the workplace in a decisive way. This may seem paradoxical, but an explanation might be that the experiences of people with disabilities in different (non-work) environments are difficult to apply to the workplace. The employers describe experiences of a person with disability having done something extraordinary, something that was not expected of them in the actual situation. This view of extraordinary capability expresses a rather pathological view of people with disabilities as abnormal. This view of abnormality may partly explain the low expectations that employers express concerning which people with disability can contribute in working life in terms of future productivity and work capacity.

Other studies of employers' perceptions of people with disability in the labour market also reveal lower expectations of productivity as a factor affecting employers' assessments of the potential work capacity of people with disabilities (Unger 2002; Louvet, Rohmer, and Dubois 2009; Domzal, Houtenville, and Sharma 2008; Fraser et al. 2010). This suggests that such low expectation may be a fairly widespread phenomenon. When assessing a person's employment potential, an employer's notion of people with disabilities comes up against his or her perceptions of the demands of the labour market. Disability then seems to function as an indicator of low

productivity and reduced work capacity. In her study carried out at a Belgian car plant, Zanoni (2011) finds that the notion of disability tends to include a notion of lack of capability and flexibility – considered two of the most important requirements in the labour market today (Jessop 1994; Magnusson 1999, 2006).

In this study, the respondents' expectations and their evaluation of their employees' workabilities may be influenced by the environment in which the employment takes place. There may be a disproportionate focus on productivity in a wage subsidy context due to the fact that wage subsidies are based on reductions in productivity. In this context, this leads to people with disabilities being evaluated on different premises compared to other employees. For other employees, there is no need to discuss and evaluate productivity in this way, and this may lead to a positive bias towards people without disabilities and to a negative bias towards people with disabilities. There often seems to be a general belief in working life that being able-bodied is the same as having the capacity to work, and from this notion there arises a kind of ideal, a norm, from which ideas of a person with disability differ in several ways (Garland Thomson 1997). The result indicates that the general approach among the respondents to hiring a person with disability is not based on a person's right to have a job, but rather on the person's proving him or herself *worthy* (in terms of productivity) of having a job.

### Matching

The structure of the work and, especially, the perceived requirements of flexibility and adaptability in the labour market (Townsend, Waterhouse, and Malloch 2005; Jessop 1994; Magnusson 1999, 2006) affected the employers' images of suitable occupational roles. People who do not meet the norm are disproportionately represented in low-skilled jobs. Occupations for people with disabilities are often entry level, with fewer requirements for information and communication skills (Kaye 2009), and it is less likely for people with disabilities to be found in supervisory jobs (Schur et al. 2009). They are often employed in part-time or temporary jobs (Schur 2003). It is not unusual for people with disabilities to be seen as a workforce reserve.

The occupational roles of the employees in this study were predominantly entry-level positions devoid of requirements for specific skills. In these kinds of jobs, the tasks are often monotonous, with low control and few opportunities for learning new skills. Workers who perform tasks that are associated with low value are sometimes also seen as having low value due to the tasks they perform. Holmqvist (2009) identifies this feature of low value associated with certain kinds of tasks, referring to tasks with this feature as 'dirty work'. Some of the employees in this study were valuable to the employers precisely because they were performing low-paid 'dirty work'. This was their greatest asset in competing for the job, and this is the explanation for why they got hired. One of the problems that the Swedish Ministry of Employment's (2003) evaluation of the system with wage subsidies addresses is its pin-down effect on low-paid jobs. This pin-down effect is clearly illustrated in the present study. Matching people with disabilities to low-paid, wage-subsidized, low-value jobs is problematic because it may promote the detrimental, unfair and simply erroneous idea that people with disabilities are unsuited to more challenging jobs or tasks. These drawbacks should be seriously considered when addressing the wage subsidies system.

The personal factors cited as important by the employers in this study were almost solely soft skills such as a good work ethic, readiness and positive manners. One reason that people with disabilities are hired is that employers seek to obtain workers with soft skills such as a positive attitude towards work (Gilbride et al. 2003). Such behaviour can be seen as compensation for lack of formal education and experience, but it is also typically expected in the occupational role of assistant or helper. People with disabilities are viewed as likable but not as competent (Rohmer and Louvet 2009), which might explain why they are placed in occupational roles in which soft skills are more important than efficiency. It could be the case that loyalty and compliance are behaviours triggered by harsh labour market conditions.

### **Important conditions: wage subsidies and accommodations**

Two factors were considered to be important conditions for employment: wage subsidies and accommodations. The wage subsidy given to an employer can be viewed as a counter-weight to the labour market's demand for productivity, as the subsidy is meant to compensate for reduced productivity stemming from the disability. The wage subsidy thus functions as a bridge between the expectations of, on the one hand, productivity along with the ideal of 'able-bodiedness' and, on the other hand, the concessions employers feel they have to make in employing a person believed to be less productive. It is probable that considerations of productivity account for low employment rates for people with disabilities (Jones 2006a). This study indicates that such is the case: none of the employees would have retained their employment if they had not been able to satisfy the productivity requirements set by the respondents. In this line of reasoning among employers, wage subsidy is, primarily, compensation for individual inability to match the structure of working life and to meet the ever-increasing demands for maximum production and efficiency; that is, employers clearly see employability as an individual problem and solutions to this problem as on the individual level.

There are some risks associated with using the wage subsidies system as compensation for what is seen as individual inability. One major risk is that wage subsidy is regarded as compensation enough, causing little effort to be made to come up with other solutions, such as better job matches or accommodations. Another risk is that employees in subsidized employment are seen as 'second class employees' due to their being regarded as 'cheap labour' and because of the kinds of tasks they work with. To be seen as a 'second class employee' has serious consequences for the individual in both hiring and career opportunities. This risk could be counteracted by better job matches in order to avoid wage subsidies. The employees in this study who worked in independent jobs and who were well-qualified for their jobs were seen as 'first class' employees due to their knowledge and experience, and the respondents did not acknowledge them as 'disabled'. Experience and education were also factors that could lead to employers considering employment without subsidies. In a job for which the employee meets formal qualification requirements, there seems to be less need to discuss disability from a production perspective because the employee is valued according to his or her ability.

The way in which the disability affects the performance of duties in the workplace may in turn affect acceptance in the workplace (McLaughlin, Bell, and Stringer 2004). This may suggest that it is productivity in the workplace that is important for colleagues' acceptance, rather than the fact of having a disability or not. The

accommodated work situation, in these cases, has made it easier for the employees to conform to commonly accepted ideas concerning work capacity. In these cases, the accommodations seem to have functioned as they are meant to: they eliminated barriers in the context so that disability did not emerge in the situation at hand. The accommodated work situations have also helped to change the employers' perceptions of their employees' abilities: the abilities are no longer seen as internal, stable factors, but rather as external, unstable factors, in accordance with attribution theory (Weiner 2010). This is an important insight, in line with the notion of handicap as relative to environment. Positive beliefs about the reasonableness of accommodations in the workplace are associated with positive attitudes towards people with disabilities (Copeland et al. 2010), and this may be part of the reason that employers with previous experience of employees with disabilities, which is also associated with positive attitudes, are more positive than other employers towards hiring people with disabilities (Unger 2002; Knutsson and Persson 2001; Copeland et al. 2010).

Research about demand-side factors related to people with disabilities in the USA shows that knowledge of job accommodations was significantly associated with a company's commitment to hire people with disabilities (Chan et al. 2010) and that an accommodated work situation has a positive effect on a person's ability to retain his/her employment (Johansson, Lundberg, and Lundberg 2006). However, because the tasks available at a place of work depend on the possibilities for accommodation, the need for accommodations in hours and pace of work can affect which sorts of jobs and tasks are seen as suitable. Respondents sometimes saw the need for an accommodated work situation as an obstacle to professional development and career advancement in the workplace. The lack of opportunities for professional development can create many disadvantages for people with disabilities (Rigg 2005), such as lower wages and less on-the-job training. This can also have profound implications for career opportunities in the workplace (Colella and Varma 1999). A fruitful way of dealing with this issue might be to educate and support employers in ways to promote future workability during an employment, given that employers see lack of resources to retain people with disabilities as a barrier to employment (Chan et al. 2010) and because they express the need for assistance in identifying appropriate workplace accommodations (Stensrud 2007).

The majority of respondents in this study did not view the absence of professional development opportunities in the jobs offered as problematic. It seems as though the respondents attributed to the employees lack of desire and opportunity for professional development. This reveals a pathological view of people with disabilities, which may be one of the explanations of the overrepresentation of people with disabilities in jobs without opportunities for development and career (Rigg 2005). To counteract this inequity, labour market institutions and rehabilitation organizations should pay greater attention to this problem and create structures to support employers of people with disabilities to maximize their employees' full potentials throughout employment, and not only during the hiring process. However, respondents saw the presumed lack of need for professional development as valuable, because then the employee was not expected to make any demands with regard to having challenging work or career opportunities. Wage subsidies, in their current form, might constitute an obstacle to professional development because the subsidies are provided to compensate for loss of productivity and/or an accommodated work situation. There is a need to further study how wage subsidies and working

conditions may contribute to reproducing prevailing notions about people with disabilities and the effects this has on individuals and society.

## Conclusion

Several conditions important to employment in a context of wage subsidy emerge in the present study. Wage subsidies serve in this context as an incentive for hiring people with reduced work capacity, and soft accommodations are seen as necessary for the successful implementation of such hiring decisions (i.e. for the continued employment of those hired). Positive experiences and productivity seem to be two important factors for employers when hiring persons with disabilities.

Issues concerning work for people with disabilities are often discussed from a human rights perspective, whereas employers in this study mainly give voice to an individual perspective in which work for people with disabilities is discussed on the grounds of utility. The value of the human seems to be assessed in terms of the interests of productivity and, hence, in relation to economic profit. The human rights perspective, as outlined in the disability rights movement (Hurst 2003), was not brought to the fore in the employers' descriptions of their practical experiences, and the employers' perceptions of people with disabilities in the workplace were mainly based on perceptions of disability as limiting rather than enriching. People with disabilities were, in these cases, often seen as 'second class' employees because they were regarded as 'cheap labour' in subsidized employments and because they performed low-status tasks. Despite this, it appears that people with disability can also be highly valued in some positions in a wage subsidy context.

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