

Research report

# A qualitative study exploring employers' recruitment behaviour and decisions: small and medium enterprises

by Jacqueline Davidson

Department for Work and Pensions

Research Report No 754

# **A qualitative study exploring employers' recruitment behaviour and decisions: small and medium enterprises**

Jacqueline Davidson

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First published 2011.

ISBN        978 1 84712 989 5

Views expressed in this report are not necessarily those of the Department for Work and Pensions or any other Government Department.

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# Acknowledgements

Sincere thanks are due to the employers who took part in the study. They all gave generously of their time on several occasions to participate in the research. Their openness in, and commitment to, the research has provided data which furthers our understandings about the recruitment of disabled people in SMEs.

Thanks also to colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) who have contributed valuable comments and help throughout the course of the study: Julian Williamson, Andrew Stocks and Gilly Burgess.

Thanks to Professor Roy Sainsbury at the Social Policy Research Unit (SPRU) for his excellent supervision of the project and for very helpful comments on the report. The support staff in SPRU have provided an excellent service and special thanks are due to Dawn Rowley and Sally Pulleyn.

# The Author

Dr Jacqueline Davidson is a Research Fellow in the Social Policy Research Unit, University of York, working on the welfare and employment programme. She has research interests in disability, social security and the labour market, and comparative social policy.

# Summary

## Introduction

### Research rationale and aims

There has been much emphasis on increasing the employment rate in the United Kingdom (UK) in recent years and policy has increasingly been geared towards increasing the labour market participation of people with traditionally high rates of non-employment, such as disabled people. The introduction of the Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) with increased conditionality can be seen as an attempt to get more disabled people into work and participating in work-related activity, which raises questions about employment opportunities in the labour market for disabled people. For example, it is already known that people can face discrimination in employment recruitment procedures according to age, gender, ethnicity and disability (Kitching, 2006) and research has highlighted that disabled job applicants may be discriminated against when compared to non-disabled applicants with similar skills and experience (MacRae and Laverty, 2006).

Research on employer recruitment procedures has mainly been concerned with larger organisations, which are not representative of employers in the UK. Statistics published by the Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS) highlight that of the 4.8 million private sector enterprises in the UK in 2009, 99.3 per cent were small businesses and 0.6 per cent were medium businesses.<sup>1</sup> In 2009, small and medium enterprises (SMEs) accounted for 59.8 per cent of UK private sector based employment<sup>2</sup>. However, despite the prevalence of SMEs in the UK economy, relatively little is known about their recruitment procedures and how these might relate to the employment of disabled people.

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) commissioned the Social Policy Research Unit (SPRU) at the University of York to undertake exploratory qualitative research into the recruitment practices of employers in SMEs, particularly as these relate to disabled people. The research findings generated from this study have a clear policy focus and application: to facilitate better the DWP's engagement with SME employers in relation to the employment integration of disabled workers.

The overall aim of the study was to explore the factors which influence the decision-making processes in SMEs' employment recruitment decisions, and relate these to the recruitment of disabled workers.

The main sub-aims were to:

- explore the social context which might impact on employers' decision-making processes;
- identify employers' conceptions of 'ideal' applicants and how these might affect recruitment practices;

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<sup>1</sup> There is no national or internationally agreed definition of an SME. The EU defines a medium enterprise as one which employs fewer than 250 people; a small enterprise as employing fewer than 50 and a micro enterprise as employing fewer than 10 people. BIS gives the following employment figures for SMEs in 2009: 3,813 million employed in SMEs with 1-9 employees; 3,251 million employed in SMEs with 10-49 employees and 2,633 employees employed in SMEs with 50-249 employees.

See [http://stats.berr.gov.uk/ed/sme/Stats\\_Press\\_Release\\_2009.pdf](http://stats.berr.gov.uk/ed/sme/Stats_Press_Release_2009.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> See [http://stats.bis.gov.uk/ed/sme/Stats\\_Press\\_Release\\_2009.pdf](http://stats.bis.gov.uk/ed/sme/Stats_Press_Release_2009.pdf)

- to explore whether employers' recruitment behaviour is influenced by the DWP's current arguments for employing disabled workers.

The qualitative methods used in the research study consisted of a literature review, 60 in-depth interviews with 30 employers, focus groups with employers and follow-up telephone interviews with a selection of employers.

The fieldwork for this study was conducted during an economic recession in the UK and the majority of employers taking part in the research were affected in some way by it.

One of the persistent criticisms of research conducted in relation to employment interview procedures is their lack of applicability to the 'real world', with many of them utilising an experimental methodology. A key element of the present research design was to identify employment vacancies as they were advertised by employers and to use these to ground the exploration of recruitment decisions in SMEs in as close to real-time as possible. In this way, the study sought to place employers' experiences of and attitudes towards disabled people in a meaningful context and to limit any problems with recall in retrospective interview accounts. Employers were interviewed before and after they had made their recruitment decisions and some employers also took part in some follow-up interviews which were used to discuss the main findings emerging from the in-depth interviews. Employers taking part in the research were assured of anonymity to avoid generating socially desirable accounts.

## Findings

### **Factors influencing the recruitment decisions of SME employers**

The overriding concern of employers – to find someone who they perceived could 'do the job' or who was the best person for the job – featured consistently throughout the research and can be related to their perceived business needs. All the employers considered that the role they were recruiting for was an important one and for some employers the role advertised was seen as crucial to the survival of their business as they attempted to combat lost revenues in other areas of their business because of the economic recession.

Deciding who to shortlist for a vacancy was sometimes constrained for an employer because of a lack of applicants for the post. Otherwise, employers chose candidates to short-list on the basis of such factors as curriculum vitae (CV) construction; the applicant's travelling distance to work, their qualifications, skills and experience, their age and employment history. Employers operated with several stages of short-listing, starting with when the applicant telephoned or called in to request an application form or further information about the advertised vacancy.

Employers reported forming first impressions of candidates from their appearance, manner and dress. The candidate's perceived performance at interview informed recruitment decisions.

Successful candidates were chosen in relation to a range of factors which can be related to the business concerns and needs of SMEs:

- **Flexibility.** Employers sought someone with a flexible attitude to work and a willingness to perform a number of roles, especially in an economic recession.
- **Competence.** Could the person do the job properly?
- **Reliability.** Would the person be at work when they were supposed to be?
- **Stability.** Personal stability could be taken by some employers as a sign of reliability.

- **Location.** Employers perceived that employees living close to workplaces can minimise costs and disruption associated with travelling to work.
- **Attitude to work.** A strong work ethic was valued by employers.
- **Personality.** Personable employees were thought to enhance customer relations, especially in the service sector.
- **Honesty.** Employers wanted employees they could trust with the best interests of the business.

Employers perceived a number of risks to their business of employing inappropriately. For example, incompetent or rude staff would risk reputations, customers and ultimately the business itself. Employers also perceived potential risks to other staff and customers where the role being recruited for was related to the direct care and safety of others, for example, care work or food preparation.

### **Employing disabled people: SME employers' attitudes and experiences**

Employers operated with different understandings of the concept of disability. Some had relatively narrow understandings, associating the term with physical conditions or wheelchair users. Others had much wider conceptualisations of disability, but this could mean that in referring to any health condition of any severity the term was rendered meaningless for employers.

While some employers did not consider there would be any difference in employing someone with either a physical or mental health condition, other employers thought that a mental health condition would be more unpredictable and therefore harder to manage in the workplace. Employers perceived difficulties in employing people with fluctuating health conditions because of the unpredictability that absences at short notice would introduce to work routines. Most employers also argued that employing a disabled person would depend on the specific role that was available and whether or not they 'could do the job' with their health condition.

The data provided examples of employers who had recruited people with (past) health conditions. Again, their primary concern was whether the conditions were stable and manageable and whether they would affect the person's ability to 'do the job'. In all these cases the successful candidates were seen to be the best people for the positions. Employers' experiences of working with disabled people varied. Some recounted very positive experiences, others less so.

Employers perceived that the main uncertainties around employing (more) disabled people were the (un)suitability of the built environment, risks to productivity, risks to the disabled person, other staff and potentially customers, especially where the work was considered to be relatively dangerous and the potential negative impact on other staff if they had to compensate for any lost productivity. Employers also lacked detailed information and knowledge on specific health conditions and this made it difficult for them to judge the potential of a disabled applicant in any specific role.

Employers would mostly consider making changes to the hours worked rather than the tasks involved in a role.

While employers recognised the rights of disabled people to participate in paid employment, and that they should therefore be considered on an equal basis for employment opportunities, they did not consider that they in the SME sector should be obliged to employ disabled people. In this respect they considered that larger businesses operating with economies of scale and able to allocate fixed and knowable roles to staff would be much better placed.

### **Encouraging the employment of disabled people: SME employers' perceptions of policy levers and validity of arguments for employing disabled people**

Some employers in the study considered that the vacancies they had advertised were not at all suitable for disabled people. Other employers mentioned a range of policy levers which they would find potentially useful and which can be related to overcoming their uncertainties in employing disabled people. For example, employers were keen to find the best person for the job and thought that a job broker to match disabled applicants to specific employment vacancies would be helpful in this respect. Employers also perceived that the wider workforce would also need to be educated about disability issues in order to combat wider discriminatory attitudes and reassure staff about the capabilities of disabled workers.

Employers would also value a channel which provided them with information on health conditions and the capabilities of applicants with different kinds of impairment and health conditions. Work trials were also seen as a relatively risk free way of assessing a candidate's suitability for a particular role.

The provision of financial help was seen as crucial for some employers who argued that SMEs were unlikely to (be able to) fund adaptations to the build environment or purchase expensive equipment for the benefit of one employee.

To varying extents, employers perceived that there were a range of arguments that could be made to SME employers for the recruitment of disabled people, including:

- brings diversity and a different viewpoint;
- disabled workers are as productive as non-disabled workers;
- enhances employer reputation and image;
- shows employers commitment to the workforce;
- positive impact on staff morale; and
- more innovation to business due to diversity.

Ultimately however, employers stressed that the core concern of whether the disabled person could 'do the job' would take primacy.

Policy levers which make it easy and financially worthwhile, or at least do not penalise SME employers financially for employing disabled people and which are well publicised would be thought useful by employers. Several of the suggestions made by employers are already DWP policy initiatives, for example, Access to Work, Disability Employment Advisors (DEA) and job brokers. However, knowledge about these initiatives was found to be low among the sample group and so the implication is that these could be better targeted at SME employers.

### **Policy implications**

Employers' recruitment decisions were made with a consideration of the economic and labour market context and this operated to constrain their choices in relation to the recruitment of disabled people. Employers focused on attaining flexibility, maintaining productivity, lowering their costs and increasing profit margins and taken together these concerns informed their quest to find the best person for the job or someone who 'could do the job'. This poses questions for the ability of DWP policy to influence the wider economic context and the policy implications outlined reflect this constraint.

## The recruitment process

The employers' concern to find someone who can 'do the job' suggests that it might be helpful to present employers with an economic rationale for considering employing disabled people: there is a **business case** for attracting the widest pool of suitably qualified applicants for the post. Employers could be given information when they approach Jobcentre Plus to place a vacancy on how to target their vacancies at disabled people or how to make their adverts nondiscriminatory.

Some employers might also benefit from being informed about the relevant anti-discrimination legislation and also to be offered Human Resources (HR) advice to inform them of the basic principles of short-listing and interviewing and the criteria for doing so. There may also be scope for informing employers on what might be the most useful questions to ask candidates at interview and the benefits of conducting standardised interviews and more formal rating techniques than 'gut feelings'.

## Understandings of disability

The findings suggest there is scope to inform employers' understandings of disability in line with the social model of disability. Employers could also be informed of the dangers of making assumptions about disabled people's capabilities and of the potential of disabled people once any required adjustments had been made.

## Overcoming the perceived uncertainties in employing disabled people

Employers considered the built environment as a potential barrier to the employment of disabled people. There is currently help available from Access to Work for assistance with adaptations but knowledge of this seems low among SME employers and so information on such schemes could be more effectively targeted at SME employers.

Concerns about the productivity of disabled workers might be addressed by policy aiming to educate employers on the capabilities of disabled people and also perhaps in providing work trials. The findings also suggest that there might be a much wider role for job brokers who currently engage with larger employers through current Pathways to Work provision and there are potential lessons here for the providers who will implement the new single Work Programme.

Those employers in the study who were able to accommodate absences at short notice from work were companies that operated with banks of staff to draw on. Further research might explore the potential for this.

Employers' lack of knowledge about specific health conditions and impairments might be addressed by offering health and safety advice, for example as part of the Fit for Work services currently being piloted or through workplace seminars to address any misperceptions employers and employees might have about disabled workers. There may also be some benefit in publicising the National Health Service's (NHS) Health for Work Adviceline for small businesses'.

The main areas that policy might address include:

- providing SME employers with the option of accessing training in best practice in the recruitment process;
- tailoring the language about disability so it is meaningful to employers (and the wider society) and providing them with information on the social model of disability to highlight the assumptions and attitudes which can affect disabled people with health conditions and impairments;

- providing appropriate points of contact for information about employing disabled people including information on the relevant legislation, and on specific health conditions for employers who might then be able to make better decisions on the potential of a disabled applicant in a given role;
- being proactive in informing SME employers of the current help available to employ disabled people: including help with adaptations and equipment, with wage subsidies, with job brokering and work trials and with information needs about employing disabled people. This might help with the perceived financial costs of adapting the built environment for employing disabled people.

In such ways SME employers may be better informed of the positive contribution that disabled people could make to their organisations on the one hand and the potential for any associated financial costs to be met by government on the other.

# 1 Introduction

This report presents findings from a qualitative research study concerned with the recruitment decisions of employers in small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in the United Kingdom (UK). The research was commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and carried out by the Social Policy Research Unit (SPRU) at the University of York in 2009-2010. This introductory chapter sets out the policy context to the study on employers' recruitment decisions (see Section 1.1), before outlining the research questions and aims (see Section 1.2). Section 1.3 discusses the research design and methods employed on the study and Section 1.4 concludes by outlining the structure of the report.

## 1.1 Policy context

There has been much emphasis on increasing the employment rate in the UK in recent years and policy has increasingly been geared towards increasing the labour market participation of people with traditionally high rates of non-employment, such as disabled people.<sup>3</sup> Employment rates of disabled people have long lagged behind the overall working age population in the UK and recent research shows that while three-quarters of non-disabled people are in work, only a third of disabled people are. Research further suggests that the chances of employment might vary in part, according to the nature of impairment (Berthoud, 2006).

Broadly speaking, policies to increase the employment rates for disabled workers can be categorised as taking either a compensation or an integrative approach. While the compensation approach focuses on benefits to support sick and disabled people who are out of paid work, the more integrative approach focuses on supporting the employment and rehabilitation of disabled people. These include policies aimed at making 'work pay' and to decrease the discrimination faced by disabled people. Specific integrative policy levers include:

- Working Tax Credits for disabled people (and other financial incentives for disabled people);
- Pathways to Work;
- Provision of DEA in Jobcentre Plus;
- access to work (advice and support for costs associated with working);
- the job introduction scheme (provides the employer with a subsidy for the first six weeks of employment);
- Job brokers, for example under the New Deal for Disabled People;
- an Occupational Health advice line for small businesses run throughout Great Britain by the National Health Service (NHS);
- seminars and workshops providing information on disability and on recruiting disabled people.

Recent policy initiatives might be said to have strengthened the integrative strand of policy towards disabled people of working age. The introduction of the Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) with increased conditionality for disabled people, in particular, can be seen as an attempt to get more disabled people into work and participating in work-related activity. This raises questions about employment opportunities in the labour market for disabled people. For example, it is already

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<sup>3</sup> Improving the life chances of disabled people: Prime Minister's Strategy Unit.

known that people can face discrimination in employment recruitment procedures according to age, gender, ethnicity and disability (Kitching, 2006). Thus, there may be significant barriers to employment for some groups of people which mean that they are not considered on an equal basis with other applicants by employers and research has highlighted that disabled job applicants may be discriminated against when compared to non-disabled applicants with similar skills and experience (MacRae and Laverty 2006). On the labour supply side, existing research is informative in highlighting the barriers to employment faced by disabled people (see Chapter 2). The recognition that employers might discriminate against people who are sick or disabled has led some to suggest that the higher rates of self-employment among disabled people in the European Union (EU) is partly a result of employer discrimination and inflexible working practices, which can result from a lack of knowledge and a lack of understanding on the part of the employer (DEB, Pagin, 2009).

On the labour demand side, some work on employer recruitment procedures has been undertaken but this has mainly been concerned with larger organisations, which are not representative of employers in the UK. Statistics published by the Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS) highlight that of the 4.8 million private sector enterprises in the UK in 2009, 99.3 per cent were small businesses and 0.6 per cent were medium businesses.<sup>4</sup> In 2009 SMEs accounted for 59.8 per cent of UK private sector based employment<sup>5</sup>. However, despite the prevalence of SMEs in the UK economy, relatively little is known about their recruitment procedures and how these might relate to the employment of disabled people.

The DWP commissioned the SPRU at the University of York to undertake exploratory qualitative research into the recruitment practices of employers in SMEs, particularly as these relate to disabled people. The research findings generated from this study have a clear policy focus and application: to facilitate better the DWP's engagement with SME employers in relation to the employment integration of disabled workers. This focus is reflected in the research questions and aims in Section 1.2.

### 1.2 Research aims and questions

This section sets out the specific research aims and questions that the study addressed.

The overall aim of the study was to explore the factors which influence the decision-making processes in SMEs' employment recruitment decisions, and relate these to the recruitment of disabled workers.

The main sub-aims were to:

- explore the social context (occupational sector, local labour demand, size of firm, existence of HR organisational function) which might impact on employers' decision-making processes;
- identify employers' conceptions of 'ideal' applicants and how these might affect recruitment practices. This includes identifying any preconceptions regarding a range of social characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, or disability, for example, which might affect any one applicant's chances of being short-listed;

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<sup>4</sup> There is no national or internationally agreed definition of an SME. The EU defines a medium enterprise as one which employs fewer than 250 people; a small enterprise as employing fewer than 50 and a micro enterprise as employing fewer than 10 people. BIS gives the following employment figures for SMEs in 2009: 3,813 million employed in SMEs with 1-9 employees; 3,251 million employed in SMEs with 10-49 employees and 2,633 employees employed in SMEs with 50-249 employees.

See [http://stats.berr.gov.uk/ed/sme/Stats\\_Press\\_Release\\_2009.pdf](http://stats.berr.gov.uk/ed/sme/Stats_Press_Release_2009.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> See [http://stats.bis.gov.uk/ed/sme/Stats\\_Press\\_Release\\_2009.pdf](http://stats.bis.gov.uk/ed/sme/Stats_Press_Release_2009.pdf)

- to explore whether employers' recruitment behaviour is influenced by the DWP's current arguments (for example, improved public image of the employer) and engagement practices (for example, lowering adaptation costs) for employing disabled workers.

The following section discusses the design of the research and the methods used to generate data.

## 1.3 Research design and methods

Conducting research with SMEs is sometimes difficult given the time constraints and pressures that many SMEs operate under. A persistent criticism towards empirical employment interview research has been its 'lack of applicability to the real world' with the majority of studies employing laboratory or experimental methodology or 'bogus' application forms or hypothetical interviewees with undergraduates as interviewers. This has led to calls to contextualise employment research with 'real' settings and 'real' people (Duckett, 2000: 1020).

This exploratory study design therefore attempted to engage employers in ways that they would find interesting and useful, without imposing unduly on their time. A key element of the design was to identify appropriate employment vacancies as they were advertised by employers and to use these as a means of exploring recruitment behaviour with employers in as much real-time as possible. In this way, the study was concerned to locate SME employers' knowledge, attitudes and practices towards disabled people within a meaningful context. The methodology aimed to capture and explore the recruitment practices of employers as near to when they occurred as possible, thus limiting problems of recall in retrospective interviews. Given the innovative nature of the qualitative research, methodological challenges encountered in conducting research with this sub-group were dealt with as they arose and the study design was amended accordingly (see Section 1.3.5).

Regarding the social context of the research, this study was conducted 2009-2010, this coincided with a particularly severe economic recession in the UK and the majority of employers taking part in this study were affected in some way by it.

### 1.3.1 The study sample

Thirty-six employers from two areas in the UK agreed to participate in the study and data from 30 employers was analysed. It was anticipated that interviewing thirty participants at two points in time would generate rich data which would be manageable given the time scale of the project. The recruitment methods used are discussed more fully in Appendix A. The main characteristics of the sample are set out in Table 1.1.

**Table 1.1 Sample characteristics**

Main characteristics	Number
Gender	
Women	14
Men	16
Location A	16
Location B	14
Vacancy/job role	
Mechanical/engineer	3
Chef/catering	5
Manager/supervisor/sales	6
Receptionist/administrator/office worker	5
Machine operator	3
Nursing/care	2
Waiting staff/assistant	2
Porter/chamber person	2
Tutors	2

The sample was purposive and while vacancies towards the lower end of the labour market were specifically targeted, the sample included a mix of vacancies from different labour market sectors. Sampling was designed to generate diversity in the employers recruited to the study. As with all small-scale qualitative samples it was not intended to be statistically representative and findings cannot claim to be a generalisation of the wider population of SMEs. The small numbers involved also mean that it was not possible to draw out industry specific recruitment practices or attitudes towards disabled people.

Ten of the 30 employers reported having applications or expressions of interests about their vacancies from disabled people. Of these:

- two employers had taken enquires from disabled people or their representatives about the vacancy. These were not followed up with a formal application;
- two employers reported receiving an application from someone who disclosed that they had health conditions; one of these employers did not consider the condition constituted a disability;
- one employer reported **surmising** that one applicant was disabled from their curriculum vitae (CV);
- four employers reported hearing about a candidates' disability or previous long-term health condition at interview stage;
- one employer reported **surmising** that a candidate had a disability at interview stage.

The above figures are given only to provide context to the empirical findings which follow in subsequent chapters and cannot be taken in any way as being representative of the amounts of applications SMEs receive from disabled people. However, they do illustrate the usefulness of the method of targeting employers' vacancies in real-time which, in this instance, has yielded examples and experiences of recruiting disabled people.

### 1.3.2 Methods

The main methods used for this research study will be discussed in turn and comprised:

- a short literature review;
- in-depth interviews with employers;
- workshops/focus groups with employers; and
- follow-up telephone interviews with a selection of employers.

### 1.3.3 Literature review

The empirical work was informed by a focused review of the literature to provide background for the development of specific research questions. The review briefly summarised the literature in the UK (given the DWP's policy interest in the UK) relating to:

- SMEs and potential factors that might influence their decision-making on recruitment; and
- employers' attitudes to disabled people.

The search strategy mainly focused on empirical literature after the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) (post 1995). Key search terms were used in combination to search the relevant databases of abstracts.

### 1.3.4 Interviews with individual employers in SMEs

In-depth interviews were carried out with employers who were in the process of recruiting staff and who had placed an advert in Jobcentre Plus or in the local press of their geographical area (see Appendix A).

The interviews were designed and carried out in two stages:

- **Stage 1:** those responsible for making recruitment decisions were interviewed when they were advertising for staff to explore the factors that influenced their decisions about constructing person specifications and short-listing potential candidates.
- **Stage 2:** a second interview was undertaken after the decision had been made to offer a candidate the job in order to explore the factors which influenced the decision. This interview was also used to explore employers' perceptions of disabled workers.

Many disadvantaged people can be excluded from employment opportunities before the interview stage. The first interview was used to explore employer practices in wording and constructing employment adverts, and to explore their ideas around ideal candidates. Procedures for selecting candidates for interview were also discussed at this stage if appropriate. Otherwise these were discussed in the second interview.

The second interview with employers was designed to take place after they had conducted employment interviews with potential candidates and had made a decision about recruiting. The factors affecting the recruitment decision were explored in this interview. Employers' experiences and perceptions of employing disabled people were also explored in the second interview.

Topic guides were used to facilitate the in-depth interviews with employers (see Appendix B). These were drafted to engage employers in a discussion of how they approached and conducted recruitment, using the particular identified vacancy to anchor the discussion.

Both sets of interviews were conducted face-to-face with employers. With the participant's permission, interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed professionally for analysis.

Given the exploratory nature of this research, it was embarked on without knowing whether employers in SMEs would find the subject matter sensitive, and hence give what they considered to be 'socially acceptable' responses to questions around employing disabled workers. The analysis presented in Chapters 3, 4 and 5, would suggest that, in the event, this was not the case and respondents felt able to express their practices, opinions and attitudes in a relatively unfettered way.

### 1.3.5 Workshops

Workshops with employers were intended to check the main findings which emerged from the in-depth interviews. They were also intended to explore how much consensus there was between employers regarding their role in recruiting disabled people, the role of Government in supporting employers to recruit disabled people and potential policy options. Two workshops were arranged, one in each research location. However, while six employers in each location said they would attend the workshops, only one employer from each location was able to make each workshop on the day. This illustrates the difficulties involved in getting a group of very busy people together in the same place at the same time, from a relatively small sample size. This is a useful research finding in itself which may inform future studies of a similar nature with SME employers. As is the case in qualitative research more generally, challenges in the field, such as this, cannot always be foreseen and have to be dealt with as they arise. In this instance the researcher conducted individual interviews with the employers who had turned up to the workshops using the topic guide that had been constructed for the focus groups and amended it slightly. It was subsequently decided to carry out another six interviews with employers to check findings and explore policy responses. These are discussed below.

### 1.3.6 Follow-up telephone interviews with a selection of employers

Follow-up interviews with employers were used in place of focus groups to check the main findings with employers and to generate ideas for policy interventions. Six employers took part in these telephone interviews. With the participants' permission, the interviews were recorded and transcribed professionally for analysis.

Data from the qualitative interviews were analysed using Framework, a thematic charting aid developed by the National Centre for Social Research (Richie and Spencer, 1994). Data from the interviews were classified and summarised thematically. Such an approach allows the analysis to be grounded in the participants' own accounts while also addressing policy issues.

## 1.4 Structure of the report

Chapter 2 provides a short review of the literature about employers' recruitment decisions and on employers' attitudes towards disabled people. Empirical studies in the UK conducted after the 1995 DDA are focused on.

Chapter 3 presents analysis of employers' recruitment decisions in SMEs. It considers the labour market context in which employers make decisions about who to recruit and their strategies in designing job adverts, short-listing applicants for interview, interviewing candidates and making a final selection.

Chapter 4 looks at employers' experiences of and attitudes towards employing disabled people. Understandings of disability are explored before considering employers' experiences of employing disabled people. The chapter also looks at the uncertainties employers perceive in employing

(more) disabled people before discussing what they consider to be reasonable (and unreasonable) adjustments to make to the workplace and job role.

Chapter 5 considers what employers thought about a number of policy levers, some of which are current DWP policy initiatives designed to integrate disabled people into the labour market. It also looks at their perceptions of current DWP arguments used for the benefits of employing disabled people.

Chapter 6 concludes the report with a summary of the main findings and their implications for policy.

## 2 Employers' recruitment practices in SMEs: a review of the literature

### 2.1 Introduction

To provide a context and inform the focus of the empirical study of employers' recruitment decisions and practices in SMEs as they might relate to disabled people, a focused literature review was undertaken. The review covered two main areas relating to:

- SMEs and potential factors that might influence recruitment decision-making; and
- employer's attitudes to disabled people.

The review presented in this chapter draws primarily on UK literature after the introduction of the DDA (post 1995). Section 2.2 considers the factors which might inform the recruitment decisions in SMEs and Section 2.3 looks at the literature on employers' attitudes to disabled workers. Section 2.4 concludes the chapter by outlining some hypotheses for the empirical study.

### 2.2 Factors affecting the recruitment decisions of SME employers

As the introductory chapter highlighted, previous research on employers' recruitment procedures has mainly been concerned with larger organisations, which are not representative of employers in the UK. Of the 4.8 million private sector enterprises in the UK in 2009, 99.3 per cent were small businesses and 0.6 per cent were medium businesses.<sup>6</sup> Despite the prevalence of SMEs in the UK economy, relatively little is known about the process of decision-making within them regarding recruitment procedures. Overall however, there has been an increasing interest in SME research over the past 30 years in the UK stemming from the realisation in the 1970s that larger firms in the UK were unable to generate sufficient jobs and hence prevent unemployment from rising. The role of SMEs in combating poverty, unemployment and deprivation therefore became of research interest (Blackburn and Smallbone, 2008).

Some researchers have pointed out that there are differences in the nature of SMEs when compared with larger organisations. Differences in staff numbers (Dex and Scheibl, 2001), for example, can mean that SMEs have less labour slack and 'analyses of the small firm have frequently acknowledged the existence of a family culture' (Ram and Holliday, 1993: 642). This can mean that employer-employee relationships might be less formal and more negotiated than in larger and more 'rational' organisations (Ram and Holliday, 1993: 645). In a similar vein, other research into SMEs suggests that the 'fit' of potential workers with the culture of the firm is important to SME employers and perceptions of not fitting in can militate against the employment of certain groups (see, for example, Pittaway and Thedham, 2005).

This section considers, in turn, the factors which might inform the recruitment decisions of employers in SMEs.

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<sup>6</sup> See: [http://stats.berr.gov.uk/ed/sme/Stats\\_Press\\_Release\\_2009.pdf](http://stats.berr.gov.uk/ed/sme/Stats_Press_Release_2009.pdf)

### 2.2.1 The labour market context

There is broad agreement that the labour market in Britain has undergone profound changes over the past quarter century, which have affected the nature and organisation of paid work (Sunley *et al.*, 2006). A major shift concerns that from manufacturing to services and while the rise of services has partly offset industrial decline, it has been accompanied by a growth in forms of flexible work. Many jobs in services involve 'nonstandard' forms of employment characterised by part-time working, temporary work, self-employment, home working, and shift work (Felstead and Jewson, 1999; Heery and Salmon, 2000).

Flexible labour markets are said to allow businesses to respond to changes in demand for goods and services: being able to hire and fire staff according to the demand for products and services at different times. A flexible labour force might further require staff who are flexible in regards to the tasks they are able to complete. This implies that employers, in trying to compete in such a context, will be looking to recruit staff willing to adapt to performing a number of job tasks (Floyd, 2003).

It might also be expected that the wider economic climate would have some bearing on how employers recruit potential workers. For example, in times of economic recession, and in areas of high unemployment, employers might have a larger pool of labour to draw on to fill their vacancies.

### 2.2.2 Human Resources

Research suggests that the existence of a personnel management or HR section might influence the recruitment process to make it less discriminatory for people from disadvantaged backgrounds to be short-listed and interviewed (for recent evidence on the UK context see Nunn *et al.*, 2010). Dedicated HR functions can bring knowledge and expertise on best practice in recruitment and can influence:

- where and how the job is advertised;
- how applications are screened and filtered;
- how the selection process for interview is made;
- whether there is an interview panel; and
- how the decision to recruit or not is made.

While it is large organisations that are more likely to have both the financial resources for HR and a flexible business model which would easier accommodate absenteeism (Jigsaw Research, 2009), HR practices have also been found in some SMEs (Bacon *et al.*, 1996; see also Dex and Scheibl, 2001). Bacon *et al.* (2006: 88) highlight, however, that HR practices can be interpreted in quite different ways in SMEs. For example, devolved management was seen by one employer as one of their staff doing 'a bit more' (see Dietz *et al.*, 2006). HR standards depend on who in the company is responsible for the policies and procedures and their backgrounds and training.

The absence of any guiding set of principles or standards for recruitment might matter in how employment decisions are made since, as Bacon *et al.* (1996) argue, the world of the small businessman can be 'quite isolated' and so the most frequent source of new ideas remains practical experience. For example, 'owner as employer' type of businesses with no personnel or HR sections have been found not to recruit people they perceive will not make a 'seamless' transition into the organisation (Jigsaw Research, 2009).

There is also research to suggest that employment decisions in smaller companies are more likely to be made intuitively (Lodato, 2008). In this respect, Bacon *et al.* (2006) found that managers in

smaller businesses could distrust psychometric tests or see them as too time consuming and less accurate than 'first impressions' (Bacon *et al.*, 1996: 96). While intuitive or 'gut feeling' decision-making has received relatively little attention in the literature, it is increasingly recognised as being important in cognitive processes and decision-making (Hodgkinson *et al.*, 2008). Some argue that intuition is 'a gradual process of implicit learning to develop 'tacit' representations' (in Hodgkinson *et al.*, 2008), and that it constitutes in effect bottom-up learning which though implicit may become explicit. For the social actors involved this can appear to involve 'no apparent intrusion of deliberate, rational thought' and the outcomes can be experienced as an 'holistic' 'hunch' or 'gut feel', leading to intuitions being defined as 'affectively-charged judgements that arise through rapid, non-conscious, and holistic associations' (Dane and Pratt, 2007 in Hodgkinson *et al.*, 2008).

Whether firms have a dedicated HR function may also affect the content and structure of an employment interview, as discussed below.

### 2.2.3 The employment interview

Despite long standing questions about the employment interview's validity in predicting successful work performance (Kennedy, 1994) and the onset of arguably more validated means of selection, the employment interview is by far the most frequently used employment selection and decision-making device in organisations. It is in such contexts that many organisational and business theorists would argue that 'inappropriate, inaccurate and even illegal decisions can occur' (Purkiss *et al.*, 2006: 162).

Eder and Harris (1999: 3) state that the 'employment interview's *raison d'être* is the selection of an applicant who best "fits" the particular requirements believed to be associated with successful work performance'. They also note that interviewer judgement can be influenced by a range of personal and political agendas. As they further state, companies can utilise employment interviews in quite different ways in the selection process, using them early on or later in the hiring process or using multiple interviews (Eder and Harris, 1999). Howard and Ferris (1996: 112) argue that the employment interview is influenced by the 'nonverbal and self-promotion behaviours of the applicant, interviewer training, and the requirements of the job'.

Without HR knowledge or recruitment training, some SME employers may not be familiar with best practice in recruitment techniques. Kennedy (1994) argues, for example, where interviews are to be carried out then those involved in conducting them should be given special in-depth training concerning aspects of the interview process so as to attempt to limit interviewer bias in the assessment of candidates for employment. Training would involve them understanding the importance from an HR perspective of why interviews should be standardised across applicants and should ask the same questions in the same order. Such training would also include an in-depth understanding of the position to be filled so that the questions asked at interview are directly related to the knowledge, skills and abilities required for the post (Kennedy, 1994).

Interviewers can also make 'early impressions' about candidates in an interview which will have little grounding in the candidate's ability to do the job in question. Some research suggests that interviewers reach decisions within the first four minutes of an interview (Kennedy, 1994). 'First impressions', of an applicant, for example, from how candidates are dressed, and nonverbal communications, for example, the way they walk, can also inform decision-making in the early stages of an interview (Kennedy, 1994).

### 2.2.4 Perceptions of ideal candidates

That employers have been found to make recruitment decisions in the first minutes of an interview lends weight to the thesis that recruiters can operate with stereotypes of 'idealised successful

applicants against which real applicants are judged' (in Kennedy, 1994: 111). We might hypothesise that predetermined factors valued by employers might incorporate skills, gender, age or family circumstances, for example, which may disadvantage some candidates more than others. Some of these factors may come into play in the short-listing stage where they are discernable from an application form or CV.

Other research (quoted in Kennedy, 1994) suggests that the recruitment process will be a relative one. In other words, candidates invited for interview or applying for a post are compared against each other to make a decision, as well as or instead of against an 'ideal type'.

The following section considers the post 1995 literature on employers' attitudes to disabled people in the UK.

### 2.3 Employers' attitudes to disabled people

While there are findings which suggest that employers perceive that disabled people do not apply for jobs (Stevens, 2002), there is also a range of literature which suggests that employers operate with discriminatory recruitment practices on a number of levels. Recent examples would include racial discrimination (Wood *et al.*, 2009), and area-based selection of applicants (Nunn *et al.*, 2010).

Employers are part of the wider population of the UK and hence subject to the same dominant discourses and prejudices around disability, which research has found can arise from misconceptions, ignorance and poor understanding about health conditions and impairments (see for example, Grey *et al.*, 2009; Grewal *et al.*, 2002).

Previous research on employers' attitudes to disabled people highlights that employers can perceive disabled people to be more of a health and safety risk than non-disabled people and to be less productive. Employers may also be reluctant to confront the wider discriminatory attitudes of staff (Duckett, 2000). In the UK, Kelly *et al.* (2005) found that small employers thought that provided a disabled person 'could do the job' they might be recruited. The authors also found however that employers held the perception (rather than having gained experience) that people with what they termed 'severe' sensory, physical or psychological impairments would be the most difficult to employ because of worries about reduced efficiency and potential disruption to the workplace. Employers in some small companies have been found to have very narrow perceptions of disabled workers as wheelchair users and people with physical impairments (DRC, 2004).

Research further suggests that employers perceive a range of barriers to making workplace adjustments, including the financial implications of doing so, the nature of the work premises and possible resentment from other staff members (Kelly *et al.*, 2005).

Other research highlights that perceptions of whether disabled people would be able to fulfil a role depends on what exactly is involved in that role. For example, physical impairments were considered more of a barrier by employers in transport companies than they were by employers in IT based businesses (Stevens, 2002).

Kelly *et al.* (2005) also imply however, that employers' perceptions and attitudes are subject to change over time and they cite examples of employers in 2005 being less likely to believe that the employment of disabled workers would be a major risk for them or that disabled workers were less productive than other employees, when compared with 2003. Still, Kitching (2006), when considering the recruitment practices of SMEs, found that employment opportunities might be restricted for older workers, ethnic minorities, lone parents and particularly, disabled people. Other research with employers who had positive attitudes to disabled workers, has found that they

consider the extra costs of employing disabled people associated with equipment and adaptations, in additional training and supervision, extra paperwork in applying for grants and any sickness absences that the disabled person might take (Schneider and Dutton, 2002).

Research by the Disability Rights Commission (DRC, 2004) found a variety of attitudes towards disabled people among a sample of small employers.<sup>7</sup> These included:

- companies that were confident that they would be able and willing to employ disabled people;
- companies who wanted to do better in this respect; and
- employers in companies who said they had very little familiarity with the issues faced by disabled people and who thought it would be difficult to employ a disabled person, perceiving that disabled employees would negatively affect company finances, collegiality and sickness records.

The latter companies were also found to be more discriminatory towards older people, ethnic minorities and women.

### 2.3.1 Understandings of disability

It might also be hypothesised that the way in which employers understand disability will influence their perceptions of disabled applicants and workers. Jackson *et al.* (2000), for example, found that variation in employer willingness to adjust their selection processes was dependent on employers having knowledge of the DDA in the UK and on them having positive attitudes towards disabled people. Conceptualisations of disability have been grouped into two 'models'. The medical model of disability focuses on the impairment or condition as preventing the disabled person from participating fully in society. The onus is on the disabled person to fit into the norms and patterns of mainstream society. As Barnes and Mercer (2005) point out, the medicalised approach, depicting disabled people as 'dependent legitimised disabled peoples' exclusion from paid work' (Barnes and Mercer, 2005: 530).

An opposing view is forwarded by those who argue for a social model of disability. This model recognises that impairments and chronic illness pose difficulties for disabled people but would argue that the main problems are societal barriers which exclude disabled people from taking part fully in society. Such barriers include the environment (for example, inaccessible buildings), attitudes (stereotyping, discrimination and prejudice) and organisational procedures and practices which are inflexible and therefore exclusionary. The social approach argues that societies 'disable' people with impairments (Barnes and Mercer, 2005).

Duckett draws on the social model of disability when he suggests that the literature on disabled people and employment interviews problematises the disabled interviewee rather than the employment interview. The focus of such research can be on changing the individual rather than 'the structural environment in which 'problematised' behaviours occur' (Duckett, 2000: 1021).

Notwithstanding the literature documenting the discrimination of disabled people, some research has found that disabled applicants have been rated by employers as equally or more desirable for employment than non-disabled applicants (Duckett, 2000: 1022). In such studies, it is argued, social desirability may have been at play with participants rating disabled people more favourably in order to gain social approval (Duckett, 2000: 1022).

Given the potential sensitivity of trying to explore employers' discriminatory decision-making processes regarding disabled applicants, researchers in the field have used a variety of methods. One piece of research involved employers being sent fictionalised CVs which differed only in whether or not the hypothetical applicant disclosed a disability. Findings suggested that employers might

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<sup>7</sup> In this case, companies employing up to 50 people.

discriminate according to impairment. This research also found that, overall, twice the number of companies discriminated against disabled people as treated them equally. Non-disabled people were twice as likely to get a reply from the employer, and non-disabled applicants were invited to twice as many interviews as were disabled people. Applications from disabled people were rejected at the first stage twice as often as those from non-disabled people (MacRae and Laverty, 2006).

Employers can be 'put off' employing disabled people because they find it confusing to try and keep up with the changing terminology around impairment and being disabled (Berry, 2007). Some small employers also perceive that disabled employees would 'claim discrimination' if a job offer did not work out (DRC, 2004). Qualitative research carried out for the DWP (Jigsaw Research, 2009) suggests that SMEs can sometimes consider that government legislation to combat discrimination (for disabled people, women with children, older workers and ethnic minorities) does not take account of the realities of the business world. In talking about disabled people, for example, some employers were concerned about having to manage sickness cover and deal with absenteeism, or make adjustments to the workplace. Employers look for candidates they perceive will 'fit' their organisation and not challenge their efforts to minimise absenteeism. This can be especially so in smaller companies and in jobs requiring low skill sets (Jigsaw Research, 2009). Employers were also open about flouting the law – for example, maternity legislation – which they perceived as a threat to the survival of their company. Exceptions were found to be where companies have a major aim to reflect the make-up of the community in their workforce, or where recruitment of disadvantaged groups (perceived to have a strong work ethic) is driven by the composition of the available pool of labour geographically (Jigsaw Research, 2009).

Recent research again highlights that attitudes to disabled people may vary according to impairment and some research is starting to move away from looking at attitudes to 'disabled people' and is instead looking at attitudes towards different impairments (Grey *et al.*, 2009). This suggests that employers will make decisions according to impairment type, perhaps in relation to the specific job role they will be asked about in the empirical interviews.

While there is a range of policy initiatives that would perhaps help SME employers to recruit disabled workers in the UK, one study found that some employers have no experience of receiving applications from disabled people. This research also found a lack of awareness about, and a lack of use of, government schemes to help employ disabled people (Stevens, 2002).

## 2.4 Conclusion

This short review of the literature on factors affecting employment decisions and employers' attitudes towards disabled workers suggests a number of factors which might be pertinent to the consideration of employers' recruitment decisions in the present empirical study.

The literature suggests, for example, that the wider economic context will see employers keen to recruit people who will be flexible and willing to perform several roles within the company. This might be compounded for SME employers because of the lack of economies of scale and business pressures because of the recession. The recession can also be expected to provide employers with a wider pool of labour to draw on in times and areas of high unemployment. The literature on employers' attitudes towards disabled people further suggests that, in the absence of HR principles, and especially in times of economic recession where businesses might be struggling to survive, employers may be reluctant to hire people they perceive as less productive and for whom start-up costs in relation to adaptations might be higher. In sum, in such a context, employers may be less willing or less financially able to adjust roles for employees.

The following chapter presents the empirical data on the factors affecting the recruitment decisions of SME employers.

# 3 Factors influencing the recruitment decisions of SME employers

## 3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents data on the factors which informed the selection and recruitment decisions of SME employers in the study. It begins (see Section 3.2) by outlining the wider economic and labour market context at the time of the research which formed the background to the recruitment decisions of employers. The business need generating the vacancy is then discussed in Section 3.3. Section 3.4 discusses the recruitment process in more detail (the design of the job advert, short-listing applicants for interview, employment interviews, perceptions of ideal candidates and choosing a successful candidate). Section 3.5 concludes the chapter with a summary of the main findings.

## 3.2 The labour market context

This section considers the labour market context that formed the background to the recruitment decisions of SME employers at the time of the research, and discusses the:

- economic context and the effects of the recession;
- perceived supply and quality of labour; and
- number of applications received for posts.

### 3.2.1 The economic context and the effects of the recession

At the time of the empirical research (2009-2010) both the geographical areas where the research was carried out were experiencing the wider economic recession in the UK. However, some employers in the study did not consider that their business had been affected by the recession and their concerns were to (at least) maintain their current levels of business. Other employers reported that they had been affected negatively by the recession, having seen a decrease in sales and revenue, experiencing problems with cash flow and profit margins and also, in some cases, having to make staff redundant. Some other employers conversely, had grown through the recession usually because their business had in some way benefited directly from it: for example, people eating at less expensive eateries or attempting to cut expenditure by having goods repaired rather than replacing them.

### 3.2.2 The perceived supply and quality of labour

Some employers perceived (sometimes long standing) problems with the quality of labour available to them. Concerns at the lack of apprenticed tradesmen were common in industry and manufacturing businesses, for example. In the voluntary sector, some employers felt that it could sometimes be difficult to attract relatively highly qualified staff who were only being offered short-term contracts because of the nature of funding in that sector, which tended to be short-term.

There was also a concern about the quality of available labour to fill some of the low paid, low status employment positions and some employers perceived that it might be better financially for UK nationals to remain on benefits rather than to take up such work. Employers perceived this was compounded where travelling costs to remote locations, or locations not well served by public transport, had to be incurred by workers.

### **3.2.3 The number of applications received for posts**

Most employers in the study had seen a rise in the number of applications for posts advertised in recent times. Many were inclined to attribute the increase to the rise in unemployment due to the recession. Perceived benefits of receiving more applications per post included the choice between more, and sometimes higher calibre, applicants. However, an increase in applications also meant that employers had more work during the applications process in deciding who to shortlist and in answering telephone enquiries about the job from potential candidates. The increase in time spent could be experienced as frustrating where employers perceived that many of the applicants were not actually qualified or otherwise suited to the job but because of the recession were applying for 'just any job'. Some employers also felt that some applicants were just 'going through the motions' of applying for work in order to fulfil Jobseeker's Allowance conditionality but that they did not actually want a job.

## **3.3 The business need**

The vacancies advertised by employers in the study could be related to their business needs identified by them at the time of the research. For example, the most basic business need identified was to maintain an established customer base and/or maintain the company's established reputation in the market place, hence maintaining turnover and profit. Getting the right staff for the role, no matter what that role was, was seen as crucial since, as one employer put it: 'you're only as good as your staff'. Other employers were recruiting in order to respond to growth in their business and it was hoped that the new recruit would allow the employer to take a step back from the day-to-day working of the business and think about more strategic direction for the business and/or to allow the sole owner to have some time off or holidays.

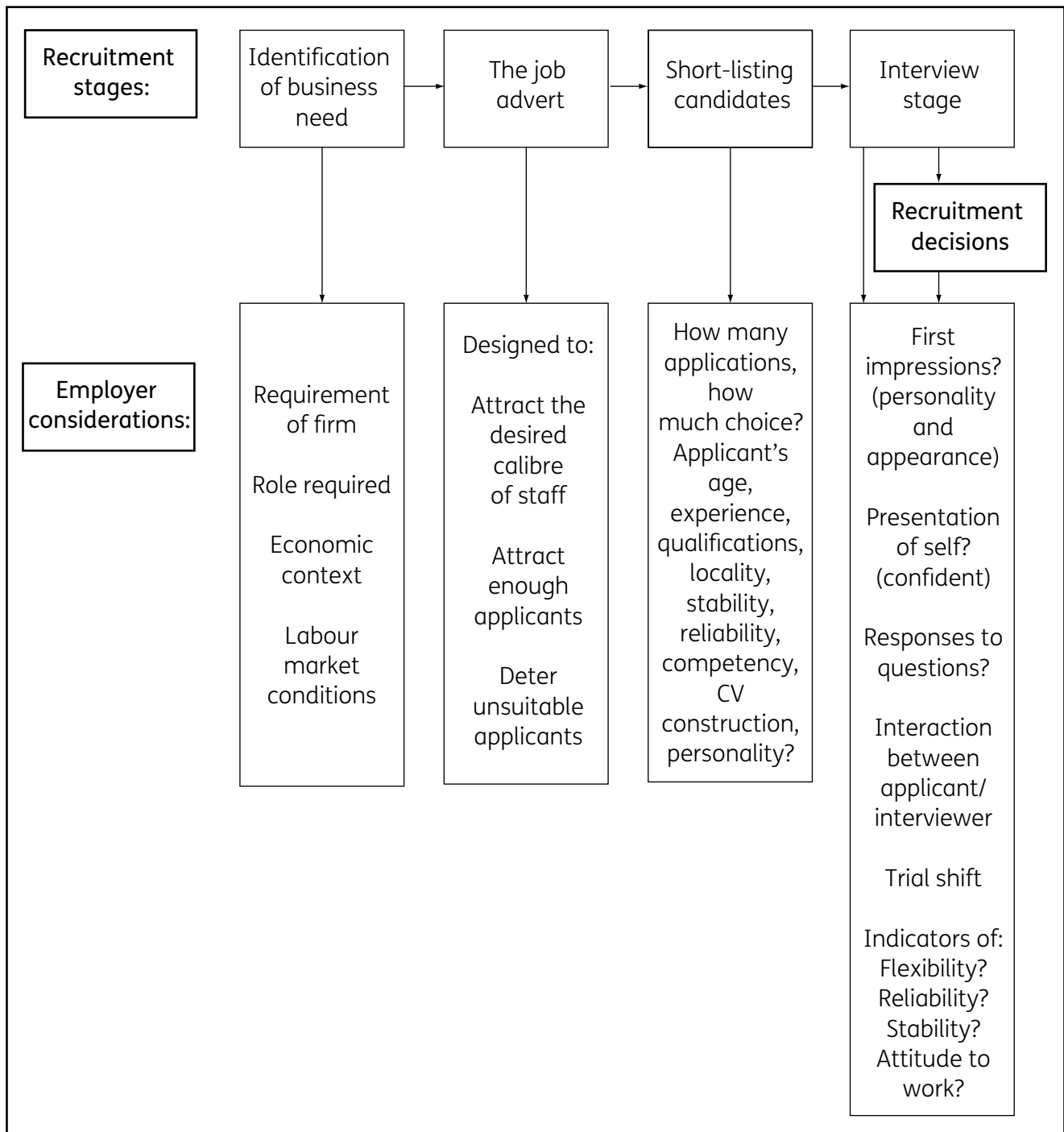
There were other employers who were attempting to expand their business and the advertised role was considered crucial to this expansion. In some instances, this expansion represented attempts to diversify in the face of falling profits and custom from more established areas of business.

Employers perceived several risks to their business and to the wellbeing of customers and clients in employing inappropriately. For example, incompetent or rude staff would risk reputations, customers, turnover and ultimately the business itself. Where the role advertised was specifically related to the care and protection of others (for example, nursing, care work, car mechanic, food preparation, machinery operation) there were also potential risks of harm to the worker, customers, and other staff.

## **3.4 The recruitment process**

This section separates the recruitment process into discrete components to highlight SME employers' concerns at each stage. The factors informing the recruitment decision are represented diagrammatically in Figure 3.1.

**Figure 3.1 Employers' recruitment decisions**



Each stage is discussed in turn below:

- the design of the job advert;
- short-listing applicants for interview;
- employment interviews;
- perceptions of ideal candidates; and
- choosing a successful candidate.

### 3.4.1 Design of the job advert

Employers spoke about trying to get the main requirements of the job across to potential applicants in the job advertisement. Some employers wanted to stress the qualifications (technical and professional) or skills (for example, the possession of a driving licence, customer service skills, computer literacy) or attributes (presentable, hard working, able to work under pressure) which would be necessary for the job. A number of employers spoke of trying to get the core tasks over to potential applicants, including those tasks which might deter applicants as this was seen to save the time of both the employer and the potential applicant. For example, some employers stressed where shift work or lots of travelling were required. Others conversely had tried not to be too prescriptive in their adverts so as not to put applicants off from applying.

Some employers had also explicitly stipulated in the advert that flexibility would be required from potential employees so that potential applicants understood that there may be other roles and duties to perform apart from those traditionally associated with the main role advertised.

Mostly employers had constructed the job adverts themselves or with help from a business or life partner. Some employers who placed their job advert with Jobcentre Plus said they had received assistance to compile their advert or had been given advice on the content of the advert. Some employers had been unaware, for example, that it was unlawful to stipulate a preferred age in a job advertisement.

It might be that in specifying the skills and duties required employment adverts may act to dissuade some disabled people from applying for certain positions. For example, some of the tasks detailed for roles might be seen to imply that the applicant would need to have a level of physical strength and mobility: 'carrying luggage', 'collecting linen', 'cleaning', 'changing beds'.

### 3.4.2 Short-listing applicants for interview

Short-listing job applicants for interview was a process used by most of the employers in the study. One employer, who did not shortlist, worked on the basis of interviewing all applicants, up to a certain number, then withdrawing the advert.

Employers could have several stages of short-listing and analysis highlights that the process of short-listing starts much earlier than the application form stage. Rather, the process can begin when potential applicants phone up or arrive at the employment premises to ask for an application form or to enquire about the job, when employers can ask them some very basic screening questions, such as their current position and experience and the reasons for applying for the job. Employers gave examples of discounting applicants who they had seen briefly when they had come to ask for application forms on the basis of such factors as their height and their English language skills and perceived commitment to that specific job role. Similarly, short-listing could also happen over the telephone when candidates phoned to enquire about a position. Examples here include employers being put off potential applicants because of their telephone manner, or lack of experience or because of their English language skills. There were two examples in the data of employers being approached by disabled applicants at this stage. An applicant with dyslexia had phoned to enquire about a job and had been dissuaded from proceeding any further after being told by the employer that the job involved reading and writing. A care worker had telephoned on behalf of a disabled applicant and after discussion the employer decided not to invite the applicant for interview.

Short-listing candidates for interview was perceived as beneficial by employers because they did not have the time to see all the applicants who applied for a post and not all applicants who applied were perceived as suitable for it. That said, some employers received very few applications and in such instances all the applicants were interviewed and no short-listing was necessary. Another

view held by some employers on the usefulness of short-listing was that interviewing too many candidates was overwhelming and could actually make it more difficult to choose one for the post.

Drawbacks to short-listing included the possibility of dismissing potentially good candidates from the paper application or telephone conversation stage. For example, for some vacancies, someone with the necessary skills and aptitude for the job but with a relatively poorly constructed CV might not make it to interview stage.

The process of short-listing was described by employers in relative terms. In other words, deciding who to discount for interview depended on the applications received. For example, if five candidates out of 65 have the qualifications or experience needed for the post (a nursing qualification, say), the rest can be discounted on that basis. Applicants were short-listed for interview on the basis of the qualifications and experience required for the post and sometimes, where perceived possible, on their personalities: especially where the role required contact with customers and clients. While the process of choosing and rejecting applicants for short-listing could be a fluid one, some employers short-listed with relatively set criteria for discounting applicants for posts: where core qualifications were required but not possessed, for example, or on age, or language skills. Time gaps in CVs and evidence of having multiple jobs in a relatively short period of time could also make some employers wary about a candidate's commitment to the post they were applying for, or to question their background: where were they and what were they doing for the period unaccounted for in their CV?

Some employers also discounted applicants who they perceived had:

- poorly constructed CVs;
- CVs which displayed a poor understanding of English language; or
- not targeted their CV at the specific job advertised.

Other employers looked at the short-listing stage for candidates who lived locally. This was perceived to limit any potential problems with travelling to work in relation to costs and public transport reliability, especially for jobs paying at or around the minimum wage.

Applicants were also discounted by some employers because they were perceived to be too qualified, which led to a number of concerns. Firstly, there were concerns about how much salary an over-qualified candidate would be expecting. Secondly, the employer questioned how long such a candidate might potentially stay with the company if the job was just a 'stop gap' to tide them through the recession. This was perceived as an even greater risk where the employer would need to invest time and resources in training the successful applicant for the position. There was one example of an employer who received an application form from someone they 'felt' was 'possibly' disabled. They did not invite the person for interview because the application had reached them after the closing date and the applicant did not have the core qualification required for the role. The employer also thought that their CV was poorly constructed. Another employer had received an application from someone who had said they had diabetes, but the employer did not consider this as a 'disability'.

### 3.4.3 Employment interviews

Before the interview proper,<sup>8</sup> employers often formed first impressions about a candidate on meeting them or speaking with them. For example, potential candidates and interviewees who

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<sup>8</sup> This could either be at the time of the employment interview or beforehand – where the prospective applicant had called in person to pick up an application form or to enquire about the employment position.

were personable, described by employers as 'smiley' or 'friendly', were perceived to have made an effort with their clothes and appearance and who were confident (but not over confident), generally made good impressions on employers. In turn, employers perceived such people would make good impressions on customers and clients.

Conversely, those (potential) candidates who were perceived by employers as 'scruffy' or dressed, in employers' opinions, for a 'night out', who talked in an informal manner, appeared self-conscious or were obese were thought to give a negative first impression. Again, such characteristics were perceived to make potentially bad impressions on customers, and, in some cases to impact on their abilities to do the job advertised. For example, a lack of personal care was related by employers to an applicant's abilities to do some kinds of work. Employers looking for care assistants often perceived that someone who could not look after their own personal hygiene would not be able to do it for residents in a care home. Conversely, some employers questioned whether someone who they perceived as 'overdressed' would be willing to get 'their hands dirty'.

On the whole, employment interviews were considered by employers to be the best available method of recruiting. However, employers did recognise a number of drawbacks with using employment interviews. For example, some employers perceived that 'anyone can tell you anything' in trying to secure employment and thought that some candidates might be tempted to exaggerate or embellish their experience or abilities. They also perceived that interviews can be very tense situations and candidates may not perform at their best if they are very nervous. However, there was also the counterview that a tense interview allowed an employer to see how a candidate would cope with stressful situations.

For these reasons, some employers used interviews in conjunction with trial shifts, for chefs or care assistants, for example, or more often gave the successful candidate a trial period of employment (usually between two and three months). Trial shifts were seen as useful by some employers as they allowed an assessment of both the candidate's abilities and their potential fit with the other staff. However, trial shifts were not used at all by some other employers because training was needed before the successful candidate could undertake the tasks required for the job.

In some instances, employment interviews seemed to be less important for some jobs. For example, a motor vehicle technician was more or less taken on for a trial over the telephone. Analysis suggests that this seems to be partly because the potential candidate could be questioned about technical matters related to the job over the telephone and it becomes clear to the employer whether or not they 'know what they're talking about'. There may also be (occupational) cultural factors at play here. This finding is partly mirrored by the views of an HR administrator interviewed who said that an applicant's CV construction was considered very important for an HR job, but not for construction workers, who just needed a 'ticket' (a certificate to say they were safe to operate specific plant machinery).

Employers considered that there were a number of characteristics that made for a good interviewer. These included being able to draw people out and get them to talk about themselves in an interview. Being able to relax people who might be nervous, knowing what questions to ask in an interview and knowing their business and its needs, along with the role they were recruiting for within it were also seen as important in conducting successful interviews.

Some employers worried that they were not asking the right questions of candidates in interviews in order to elicit information on their suitability for the role. Similarly, another view was that the interplay of social characteristics of the interviewer/interviewee could sometimes preclude asking certain questions which might be perceived by the candidate as culturally inappropriate. For example, one employer felt uncomfortable asking candidates who were not from the UK about their family situation and how long they had been in the UK because they were not sure how the questions would be received.

Employers described a range of interviewing styles which can be situated along a continuum from highly structured to unstructured interviews. Some employers operated with quite standardised interview formats and set questions and were relatively well rehearsed in the arguments associated with using such interview formats – such standardisation was perceived as being ‘fair’ to all the candidates. Other employers had lists of questions that they had prepared but did not necessarily ask of all candidates. Some other employers carried out interviews on an informal basis, waiting until the candidate had arrived for interview before deciding what questions to ask.

A range of questions were asked by employers in interviews which covered the applicant’s skills and experience and their reasons for wanting the job. Other topics included the candidate’s attitude to work, their personal circumstances, their interests outside work, their family commitments and their health.

Employers gave examples of interviews in which candidates had disclosed health conditions in the employment interviews when they had been asked whether they had any conditions which might affect their ability to do the job or that the employer should know about. In two instances, candidates had disclosed that they had been on long-term sick leave with a mental health condition. The discussion that ensued revolved around an exploration of the reasons or triggers for the absence and on any potential impact on the post applied for. In both cases the employer was reassured that the instances in question were isolated incidents which would be unlikely to be repeated. Another employer reported that a candidate had disclosed a stomach condition and discussion in this instance had revolved around the stability of the condition and, again, any potential impacts on the job applied for. One other candidate had disclosed to an employer that they had previously been off work for a year after an accident and the discussion had again revolved around any implications for the post applied for.

### 3.4.4 Perceptions of ideal candidates

Employers were asked in their first research interview to describe their ideal candidate for the position they were recruiting for. Analysis of the main themes emerging from employers’ perceptions of ideal candidates can be seen to relate to the particular ways in which small businesses operate, most specifically, without economies of scale and with smaller resources than bigger firms. Moreover, sometimes some of the particular requirements of SMEs, most notably for flexibility, (discussed below) were intensified by the wider economic environment in which most of the SMEs operated in at the time of the research. The main themes relating to ideal candidates are each discussed below:

- **Flexibility:** A flexible employee seemed to be one of the key requirements of SMEs. Employers were keen to recruit someone with a flexible attitude to work, who would ultimately perform a number of different roles in the company as and when needed. A number of employers said that since they did not have the benefits of economies of scale (for example, where there were not enough cleaning or administration duties to merit employing a cleaner or an administrator) staff were expected to ‘muck in’ and carry out tasks over and above those associated with the actual job recruited for. This need for flexible employees had become more pressing with the recession, especially where, for example, cleaners or receptionists had been made redundant or had not been replaced if they left.
- **Competence:** Could the person be relied upon to carry out what was expected of them in a competent manner or to put it another way, to do the job properly? For example, treat residents in a nursing home with respect and not abuse them, cook food in a restaurant properly or pass on an important message to management from reception.

- **Reliability:** This related to a person's presence at work; their time keeping and attendance. Would they be at work when they were supposed to be?
- **Stability:** Personal stability was prized by some employers as an indicator that, most especially, potential **male** workers would be more reliable. 'Family **men**' were perceived as needing to work to provide for their partner and family and, because they had such responsibilities and commitments, they would in turn be more committed to work (and so less likely not to turn up to work and more likely to do a good job in order to keep it).<sup>9</sup> Stability was also indicated for employers in the length of time people stayed in their last jobs. Employers viewed people who had multiple jobs in a relatively short space of time as potentially unsettled, unreliable or uncommitted to particular employment positions. They also saw it as a risk to employ someone who might leave after a few months, in some cases after the employer had invested resources in training them.
- **Geography:** A candidate's location in relation to their workplace was also seen as important by some employers in hiring staff. Potential benefits of having a candidate who lived close by involved the lack of travelling time/costs to work for employees. This was seen as beneficial to employees most especially when they were on, or close to, the minimum wage. Being located close to work also made them appear more reliable to employers in that they were not reliant on (public) transport to get to work and where needed, they could be called out to work at short notice. Some employers also added that they liked to support the local economy.
- **Attitude to work:** A range of desirable attributes mentioned by employers relate to attitude to work. Some employers wanted people with a strong work ethic: someone who 'wants to work' rather than be on benefits and who was 'hungry' for the job. Such a person would show willing and be grateful for the opportunity of work. In this vein some employers talked disparagingly about candidates who had tried to negotiate interview dates, or who had made it clear to the employer that their time for interview was limited because of other commitments. Some employers saw foreign nationals who they had employed as exemplifying someone with a strong work ethic and contrasted this with some people in the UK who, they perceived, might prefer to be on benefits rather than to accept low paid or low status, unattractive work.
- **Personality:** Some employers stressed that it was very important that they 'get on' with the successful candidate since they would have to work with them, sometimes alone with no other staff to talk to or interact with. Personable employees and those with good social skills were also considered extremely important in customer-facing roles: smiley, chatty, confident and outgoing qualities were valued. Some employers thought that finding staff with a good personality was important because, unlike skills, this was one aspect that people could not be trained on. Some employers were averse to employing people they felt might be 'troublemakers' and that might cause discontent in other staff. Similarly they did not want anyone to come in and 'take over' the business.
- **Honesty:** the importance of finding honest staff was stressed by some employers. Some recounted incidences where previous employees had allegedly stolen from them or not told them the truth on some aspect in an employment interview.

The following sub-section highlights that these characteristics were subsequently found (in the second research interview) to have informed the recruitment decisions of employers.

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<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, this proposition did not hold for women with families – some employers considered that women with children were at more risk of being called away from work, for example, if they were the main carer.

### **3.4.5 Choosing a successful candidate**

Some employers had relatively structured systems in place to make recruitment decisions. For example, they might rate candidates' answers to the questions asked of them at interview and then compare the ratings of all the candidates interviewed to come to a decision about who to employ. These employers were often not at liberty to make the decision on their own and had to decide with other panel members about whom to recruit after discussions of the relative strengths and weaknesses of candidates. Other employers who were free to decide on a successful candidate sometimes talked about using their 'instinct' or 'gut feeling' to make a decision about whom to employ. When this was probed in the in-depth interviews however, the considerations underlying their decision could be related to the job vacancy and the characteristics they were looking for in an ideal candidate (outlined above and discussed further below).

Employers typically gave a combination of responses when they were asked why they had chosen the candidate they did, which were very much in keeping with their perceptions of ideal candidates. Some employers said that the candidate had either the aptitude, the skills, qualifications or experience they were looking for, in other words that they were potentially capable of 'doing the job'. Others had perceived the candidate to be 'reliable' from a discussion of their previous work history (length of tenure in previous position(s), for example). That the (male) applicant had come over as a 'family man' who was keen or 'hungry' to work to support their family had also favourably impressed some employers.

The successful candidate's personality was stressed by a number of employers. Aspects of the candidates' personality that were considered favourably by employers included the perceptions of them being relatively relaxed and not too nervous but also not too self-assured in an interview situation. For example, one candidate had given the impression of being 'sociable but hardworking'. Another was perceived to have a 'nice aura' and some employers also said that they had personally liked the candidate and thought they would be able to work with them. Employers in the service sector, especially, mentioned that they had perceived that the applicant's personality would be well accepted by their customers (for example, successful applicants for care work were described as 'friendly' and 'caring') and that they would 'fit' in with the rest of the staff.

Employers also spoke of the successful candidate showing a 'drive' or 'ambition', having specifically asked at interview whether there would be any prospects for promotion in the future. This had seemed to signal to employers that the person was not just looking for 'any job' and also demonstrated a work ethic. Employers also looked favourably on candidates who had done some research into the company and could answer some general questions on the company's business operations at interview. This was perceived to demonstrate interest and initiative. Those candidates who had demonstrated an ability and willingness to be flexible in their roles and tasks, to 'muck in' had also been looked on very favourably by some employers.

Some employers had perceived that their successful candidate had made an effort for the interview and had dressed 'smartly' for it or that they 'looked the part'. Some employers had partly made their decision based on the applicants' age or the fact that they lived locally. Again, these attributes were related in various ways to the job vacancy. For example, one employer purposely wanted someone 'mature' because they perceived that this would be a better 'fit' with their customer base. Another employer did not want to take on women or men who were likely to want to take maternity/ paternity leave at some future point in time because they perceived that it cost too much to train a replacement for such absences.

Perceptions that the candidate was 'honest' were held by employers, for example when someone said at interview that there was an area of the job advertised that they might need to be trained on.

Employers were asked to rate in order of importance the factors which had led to them offering the successful candidate the employment position. Some employers said that it was not possible to rate the factors in order of importance since they were all equally as important as each other. In practice then, the factors were interrelated. One employer said, for example, that while enthusiasm would have been their number one factor of importance for hiring a chef, it would be counterproductive to have someone who was enthusiastic but an 'absolute disaster area' in the kitchen.

Some employers gave primacy to one factor: variously these were qualifications, skills or experience for the position, the candidate's personality or attitude, their perceived reliability, a good reference from a previous employer – which was perceived to mean the candidate was honest and reliable and that they were able to commence work relatively soon.

### 3.5 Summary

This chapter has presented the empirical findings on the factors which informed the employers' recruitment decisions. Employers considered that the role they were recruiting for was an important one in their business and as such were concerned to find someone who they perceived could 'do the job'. For some employers however, the vacancy represented an attempt to combat falling revenues in other areas of their business sustained because of the economic recession and in such instances the role advertised was seen as crucial to the survival of the business. All the employers perceived risks to their business in employing inappropriately.

Employers attempted to attract suitable applicants (and sometimes put off inappropriate applicants by stating, for example, that shift work was involved) through the wording of their job adverts. Deciding who to shortlist for interview was sometimes constrained by employers through a lack of applications for a post. Where employers did have a choice about which candidates to shortlist however, their judgements were variously informed by factors such as the construction of an applicant's CV, their travelling distance to work, their qualifications and experience, their age and employment history.

The candidate's performance in answering questions and the interaction between employer and candidates at interview stage also informed recruitment decisions. Successful candidates were chosen in relation to a range of factors that were related to the business concerns and needs of SMEs. Variously, these included: flexibility, competence, reliability, stability, location, attitude to work, personality and honesty.

Chapter 6 will draw on the following themes explored in this chapter:

- the importance of the labour market context for informing recruitment decisions;
- the factors informing the recruitment decisions of SME employers; and
- the recruitment process and how policy might facilitate SME employers in thinking about employing (more) disabled people.

# 4 Employing disabled people: SME employers' attitudes and experiences

## 4.1 Introduction

This chapter considers employers' experiences of, and attitudes towards, employing disabled people. Section 4.2 looks at employers' understandings of the term 'disability'. Employers' experiences of recruiting and working with disabled people are outlined in Section 4.3 and Section 4.4 highlights employers' perceived uncertainties in employing (more) disabled people. Perceptions of reasonable and unreasonable workplace adjustments are presented in Section 4.5 before considering the role of SMEs in employing disabled people (Section 4.6). Section 4.7 concludes the chapter with a summary of the main findings.

## 4.2 Employers' understandings of 'disability'

The term 'disabled' is widely used in popular and policy discourse. As we have seen in Chapter 2, however, there may be different understandings about what the term actually means to different people, or sub-groups in the population. Employers were therefore asked what they understood by the term 'disabled'. Several themes arose from these responses, which will be discussed in turn in this section:

- the breadth of the concept of disability;
- social and medical models of disability; and
- differentiating between disability and health conditions.

Some employers operated with relatively narrow understandings of the concept of disability, for example, mentioning wheelchair users or people who had severe sensory impairment in their discussion. It was not uncommon for employers to mention 'wheelchair' or 'limbs' in the first sentence when discussing their understanding of the term. Other employers understood that the term disability applied to a very wide range of impairments; that it could mean 'anything'. Some mentioned that disability might cover any kind of medical condition and others noted that probably everyone could be classed as having some form of disability (that is, some form of health condition or impairment). These employers sometimes said that because the term disabled covered such a wide range of conditions it could be rendered meaningless since, without specifying a specific condition, the term itself did not convey to them a potential applicant's suitability for a particular employment position. Employers with relatively wide understandings of the term were also more likely to think that it covered a range of physical and mental health conditions. Even so, some employers with a relatively wide understanding of the term also said that their first thoughts on hearing the term were of someone with 'mobility needs'. Some other employers thought that the term disabled carried negative connotations, for example, one employer thought that it was a 'terrible word' that evoked 'terrible stereotypes'.

Some employers had understandings of disability that were closely aligned to the social model of disability. For example, one employer understood the term disabled to mean that someone would need 'some sort of adjustment in order to carry out their duties'. Other employers operated more with a medicalised understanding which saw the focus on what a disabled person could not do: 'I think of someone who's just not able to do anything' or 'someone without full function', being examples.

Understandings of disability were relative and as might be expected, those employers who dealt daily with disabled people, for example, in the care profession, had relatively wide understandings and also noted how the concept had changed over time in that it had widened out from describing wheelchair users. Some also noted that the language around disability had also changed over the years.

Interestingly, some employers differentiated between a disability and a health condition. The criterion for this seemed to be that if a condition could be controlled with medication, or was not constant, then some employers considered that it was not a disability. For example, one employer said that someone who used a wheelchair was disabled but someone who had diabetes, which could be controlled with medication, was not.

#### **4.2.1 Perceptions of physical and mental health conditions**

Employers were asked whether they perceived any differences in employing someone with a physical or mental health condition. Some saw no differences here and said that the main criterion for them was whether the applicant's health condition, whatever it might be, would allow them to do the job as well as anyone without such a condition. In other words, it would depend on the fit between the applicant's health condition and the job. Some employers who did not differentiate between physical and mental health conditions perceived that neither could be accommodated in the roles they were recruiting for.

Other employers considered that it might be harder to identify a mental health condition during the interview process and that, if the applicant did not tell them about it beforehand, they may not find out about such a condition until the applicant had been employed. Some employers also thought that a physical health condition would be easier to manage in the workplace. In part this might be related to employers' lack of knowledge of mental health conditions and what they could sometimes perceive to be the unpredictable nature of them. One employer also thought that the media ran sensationalised stories about people with mental health conditions which could make employers wary of employing people with certain types of conditions.

### **4.3 Experiences of employing disabled people**

As the literature would suggest, some employers maintained that they had never knowingly had an application from a disabled person. Some employers questioned whether disabled people would train in certain professions, for example, as vehicle mechanics.

However, as Chapter 3 illustrated, there were examples in the data of employers receiving applications for the vacancy advertised from disabled people and people with health conditions. A number of these applicants were not successful. Examples include an employer who received a telephone call from a disabled person's care worker who enquired about the job on their behalf. The employer was averse to interviewing the disabled person for the position as they perceived that, were they to employ them, they would need another person to supervise them because they would have to work in a relatively dangerous environment. Another employer had a hand-delivered application from someone with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder and said that they had

been impressed with the candidate's honesty. The employer considered that the job required high levels of concentration and, after having looked up the condition on the internet, they were a bit 'sceptical' as to whether the candidate would be able to cope. Finally, one employer surmised that an applicant presenting for interview had learning disabilities and while they said that they had been impressed with the candidate's aptitude for the position they thought that other applicants had aptitude and more experience.

There are also examples in the data of employers who **had recruited** people for the advertised vacancy with, or people who had previously had, long-term health conditions. A primary concern for employers appeared to be whether the condition was **manageable and stable** and therefore not disruptive to work. One successful applicant, for example, had been asked at interview whether they had any health complaints that might affect their work and had told the employer that they had a stomach condition which was under control with medication. Another two employers had taken on someone who had previously been off sick for a period of some months with mental ill health but both had been able to assure the employer that such absences were not likely to be repeated. In all these cases, the applicants were considered by the recruiters to be the best choice for the positions available. Similarly, in all these instances the successful applicant's (previous) condition or disability was perceived to have no, or very little, effects on their ability to perform in the role.

These concerns also held when employers described previous instances of hiring disabled people or people with health conditions. Employers gave examples of people who had been hired with health conditions which had not impacted on their ability to perform in the roles required. For example:

- one employer had recruited someone with polio after being, and feeling, assured that this would have very little impact on their ability to do the job required;
- someone with a hearing impairment could hear office telephones and colleagues with a hearing aid;
- someone who had lost some fingers could do their driving job; and
- someone with limited vision in one eye could work in a retail outlet.

Some employers had also recruited disabled people in the past while knowing that there would be some (limited) effect on their work organisation. For example, for one person recruited with a mental health condition, the employer had set up regular meetings, allowed time off for medical appointments and provided a supportive environment which included checking as to whether the employee had taken their medication. One employer had taken on someone they considered as an outstanding applicant with a fatigue condition who, it was agreed, would need to leave the workplace at least once a week at short notice. Another employer guaranteed suitably qualified disabled applicants an interview for posts and had a wealth of experience in employing disabled applicants and in making all kinds of adaptations for them.

Other employers recounted different experiences of working with disabled people. One employer who had taken on someone with a mental health condition said that they had not anticipated how disruptive to the work routine and to the other staff this would be: the other staff kept alert for signs of their condition and also looked after the person when they became unwell at work. Another employer described working with a disabled member of staff as 'taxing and tiring' for their colleagues.

Some employers gave examples of having previously taken people on, who, after starting work, then disclosed a disability or health condition. In one instance the employer had wanted to work with the employee to manage the condition and in the other instance the employer had not, perceiving that their condition prevented them from being fully able to perform in the role.

## 4.4 Uncertainties in employing (more) disabled people

Employers were asked in their in-depth interview what they perceived the main uncertainties were in employing (more) disabled people. Some employers said that they had no uncertainties in employing more disabled people, usually because they had already done so and knew what would be involved for their business. Other employers perceived several risks to employing (more) disabled people which are discussed in turn below:

- the built environment;
- risks to productivity;
- risks to the disabled person;
- risks of breaching work-related legislation;
- risks of offending customers/clients; and
- impact on other staff.

### 4.4.1 The built environment

The built environment was often perceived as not conducive to employing disabled people. In some instances, buildings were not considered accessible to disabled people because of the lack of lifts or dangerous work environments, for example, factory floors. Employers cited the perceived costs involved in adapting buildings for a minority of employees, and the fact that buildings may be listed or rented property (so the landlord has no incentive to make the building accessible) as barriers to adapting.

### 4.4.2 Risks to productivity

Perceived risks to productivity for employers centred on concerns about whether the disabled person would be able to 'do the job', would they be both competent and reliable? There were corresponding risks to profit, the business and their reputation if a disabled employee could not 'do the job'. Some employers stressed that they were unable to 'carry' anyone because market competition was fierce and profit margins narrow, especially in the economic recession. A related point here is that some employers noted that they worked with a minimum staff and that they had put their staff under more pressure to work harder and perform more roles in the company (intensified for some by the recession) in efforts to remain competitive in their market. Most employers said that they would be unable, or would find it extremely difficult, to accommodate people with **fluctuating** health conditions because of their business need for reliability. One employer said that in current economic conditions they did not need 'unpredictable people' in the workforce. Some also said that the uncertainty in whether the employee would be at work would lead to an inability to plan for work and would impact negatively on business. An exception to this were some employers in the care sector who were better equipped to deal with (sudden) absences from work because they operated shift patterns and had a bank of staff to call on.

### 4.4.3 Risks to the disabled person

Some employers reported that they were concerned that their lack of knowledge about specific health conditions would mean that they would not know what tasks they could ask a disabled applicant to do, especially in what they considered relatively dangerous work environments. In this respect, risks to physically disabled people were seen to arise from physically demanding roles (mechanics, waitresses, care assistants, cooks). Employers thought it would be easier to adapt an office based work environment for people with physical or sensory disabilities. Some employers questioned whether people with mental ill health would be able to cope with the stress engendered by work, especially in some roles which were customer facing or considered to be high pressured.

### 4.4.4 Risks of breaching work-related legislation

Employers could sometimes perceive that government legislation was contradictory. On the one hand employers were told that they should not discriminate against disabled people but this seemed at odds with the health and safety legislation they also had to abide by. A number of the jobs were considered dangerous for disabled people to perform with potential risks to themselves and to others (customers, clients, other staff). Some employers did not know whether they would in effect be breaking such legislation by employing a disabled person for some roles.

### 4.4.5 Risks of offending customers/clients

Some employers perceived that there was the potential to offend customers if a condition was perceived as 'shocking', for example, Tourettes Syndrome or severe disfigurement. Some employers thought that their clients might be resistant to dealing with anyone with conditions with which they were unfamiliar and gave examples of current client prejudices to do with gender and ethnicity. They noted that they had to respect such wishes where people were paying for a service (this was especially so where people were paying for personal care given its potentially intimate nature). One employer in the hospitality sector perceived that while their customers would not mind, and might even think it was good to have hired disabled people, ultimately they would not want it impacting on their 'experience' of the service they were paying for.

### 4.4.6 Impact on other staff

Some employers perceived that their existing staff might have limited understandings about disabled people. This, they reasoned, could lead to staff feeling, and so behaving, awkwardly around a disabled employee or not wanting to work with them. There was also thought to be the potential for staff resentment and stress if the employer recruited someone who did not 'pull their weight' or had to be 'carried' while earning comparable wages. Even in the caring professions it was recognised that staff would be resentful of someone not performing their allotted duties.

## 4.5 Reasonable and unreasonable workplace adjustments

Some employers had adapted the job vacancy advertised to suit the successful applicant, but not on the grounds of disability. The changes made by employers can be grouped into two kinds: hours worked and duties performed. Changes to hours worked included one instance where the hours were increased for the successful applicant in order for them to be able to come off benefits. In another instance, someone was undertaking a college course to gain professional qualifications linked to the job, and successfully negotiated being able to leave early one day a week. In both of these instances the candidates were perceived to be the most suitable ones for the position.

Changes to the role or duties included one instance where the employer had not been able to recruit for the position advertised. They therefore cut some of the duties required effectively narrowing the role and recruited a suitably qualified candidate internally. One other employer changed one aspect of a job that the successful candidate had said at interview they were unable to do (which was to use a specific data base). They outsourced this piece of work because the candidate was perceived to meet all the other criteria for the job to a high level and to suit the person (mature) specification.

The data showed that very few job applicants had asked for changes to the role or hours in any way. When employers were asked whether they **would** have considered adapting the role that had been advertised there was far more scope for changing the hours worked than the tasks involved in the role. Some employers said that they would not think about changing the role or hours worked in

any way: they were asking for exactly what they needed. Other employers said that they would only think about making adjustments of any kind for exceptional candidates, perceiving that there were plenty of average candidates to choose from and so no accommodation need be made for them. Some employers perceived that they could fill their positions very easily (for example, low skilled positions) in an economic recession engendering higher unemployment.

Where the possibility of making changes to the hours worked was mentioned by employers, examples included the possibility of negotiating starting and finishing times or scheduling the person to work some shifts rather than others. The willingness to consider this seemed influenced by the nature of the business. For example, it may be harder to negotiate on hours worked in a customer-facing role in a shop or restaurant where the establishment had set times of opening.

Employers were less likely to say they would consider adapting a role. The main reason given by employers for not thinking about adapting a role seemed to be the SME employers' need for flexibility. Many of them said that in a small enterprise 'everybody has to do a bit of everything'. This may be especially so where there are only one or two employees working alongside a proprietor. Some employers said that agreeing to perform other tasks as and when required, over and above the main role recruited for, was a core part of the contract that potential employees were asked to sign. Some employers also considered it unreasonable for someone to have a role adapted so that their productivity was lower than that of their colleagues: 'it's unreasonable that someone would expect to get a job and not be fairly well up to speed with other people' because this would put extra performance pressure on the rest of the staff.

Other employers questioned how far one should go in adapting a role before it became something other than what the employer needed. Some employers did say they would be prepared to provide support to enable people to perform their roles better, for example, support for a mental health condition, or provision of equipment or in one case, extra time that would enable someone to perform their duties.

While there appeared much less scope for any changes to the tasks involved in the role for the person recruited, employers did give examples of having changed roles for **existing staff** to accommodate short-term illnesses and pregnancies. Some employers stressed that all but minor adaptations only worked in the short-term otherwise other staff could become resentful of their increased workload.

There were also other examples of longer term adaptation to working patterns to accommodate conditions like alcoholism and Bipolar Disorder. One employer said they tried to meet all the requests for flexible working practices put before them because they did not 'want to lose good staff'. One SME employer was initiating a phased return for someone who had recently had what they termed as a 'nervous breakdown' and had offered the person reduced hours for some time because they were a good worker and the rest of the staff liked working with them.

In relation to workplace adaptations, employers seemed prepared to consider what they termed as minor adaptations. For example, one said that they would be prepared to look at installing handrails but would not contemplate redesigning a kitchen, or installing a lift, especially for a part-time post. Another employer referring to an office environment said that they would be prepared to move the work station of someone using a wheelchair to the ground floor. One other employer who had previously remodelled an office to accommodate someone with a hearing condition said that they would consider how much the adaptations were going to impact on other staff.

## 4.6 Role of SMEs in employing disabled people

This section considers employers' perceptions on the role of SMEs in employing disabled people. Employers' perceptions of the role that government should take in supporting SMEs to employ disabled people are discussed in Chapter 5.

### 4.6.1 The role of the SME in employing disabled people

Employers were asked what the role of SMEs should be in employing disabled people. None of the employers said that disabled people should not be recruited into SMEs and some said that everyone had a right to work or that disabled people needed to work. However, they did say that SME employers should not be **forced** to recruit disabled people, for example, under some kind of quota system. Employers pointed out that in comparison with bigger firms, SMEs did not have the economies of scale that would allow them to easily adapt roles to suit disabled applicants. One employer considered that employing disabled people would put too much strain on SMEs who would need to keep up with a raft of legislation and 'put things in place' to accommodate disabled employees. Other employers said that they were not in favour of any kind of positive discrimination no matter what the grounds (for example, disability, gender or ethnicity). As we have seen, some employers did employ disabled people, others would consider it as long as the person could do the job, and some would consider making minor adjustments. However, other employers said that they did not think that their roles were suitable for recruiting disabled people (because of the perceived risks and other factors outlined above) for example, those associated with working on a factory floor or a kitchen environment. This was not at all seen as being discriminatory, as one employer put it: 'basically we don't discriminate, but it's not a job for somebody who isn't fully mobile'.

Some employers said that they thought the SME employers' duty, from a business point of view, was to find the best person for the job: regardless of any other characteristics (for example, gender, ethnicity, disability) and some also said that they thought all employers had a duty to consider a disabled applicant on the same terms as a non-disabled applicant.

Some of the employers, who thought that SMEs should not be required to take on disabled people, recognised that they might feel differently if they, or someone close to them, were to become disabled.

## 4.7 Summary

Employers understood the term disability in a number of different ways. Some had relatively narrow understandings, associating the term with physical conditions or wheelchair users. Others had a much broader understanding of the term and this could sometimes mean that the term was rendered meaningless for employers. Saying that someone was disabled did not indicate what a person's capabilities might be in relation to paid work. Employers differed according to where their understandings of disability lay in relation to the social and medical models of disability.

Some employers also distinguished between a disability and a health condition and considered that a disability was a condition which was 'constant' whereas a health condition which could be controlled with medication (for example, diabetes) was not a disability.

Some employers did not perceive any differences in employing someone with either a physical or mental health condition. Other employers however, thought that physical conditions might be easier to manage in the workplace. There was perceived difficulties in recruiting people with fluctuating conditions because of the unpredictability this would bring if people went off sick at very short notice.

While some employers had very little experience of working with or employing disabled people, others had more. A primary concern where employers had recruited disabled people for the vacancy advertised was whether the condition was both **manageable and stable** and would affect their ability to 'do the job'.

Employers' experiences of working with disabled people varied. Some employers recounted very positive experiences and instances where adaptations had worked well for the disabled person and the firm. Others had had more negative experiences of working with disabled people.

The main uncertainties around employing (more) disabled people for employers revolved around: the suitability of the built environment, risks to productivity, risks to the disabled person, other staff and customers, especially in work which was perceived as relatively more dangerous, and the potential impact on other members of staff.

Employers mostly considered making changes to the hours worked more than the tasks involved in the job role for a disabled applicant. However, there were several examples in the data of employers who had made (mostly short-term) adaptations for existing staff members.

While employers recognised disabled peoples' rights to paid employment, they did not consider that SMEs should be obliged to employ disabled people. Rather, they considered that their duty was to consider people on an equal basis and find the best person for the job at hand, no matter what their other characteristics may be.

Chapter 6 will draw on the following themes explored in this chapter:

- employers' understandings of disability and the potential to influence these;
- perceptions of differences in mental and physical health conditions;
- perceived uncertainties in employing (more) disabled people and how some of these might be overcome; and
- the perceived role of SMEs in employing disabled people.

# 5 Encouraging the employment of disabled people: SME employers' perceptions of policy levers

## 5.1 Introduction

This chapter considers SME employers' perceptions of policy levers for engaging SMEs in recruiting disabled people. Section 5.2 presents data on employers' perceptions of policy levers, some of which are currently, and might potentially be, used by the DWP for integrating disabled people into the workforce. Section 5.3 looks at employers' perceptions of the various arguments for employing disabled people, and Section 5.4 concludes the chapter with a summary.

## 5.2 Perceptions of employer engagement practices

Data on employers' perceptions of policy levers which might be used to engage business in employing disabled people was generated both in the second individual interview with employers and in the follow-up telephone interviews with a sub-section of employers.

One important point is that most employers were not aware of what kind of help or information was available to them to employ disabled people. This was evident when employers were asked to suggest some potential policy levers (not prompted by the researcher) which might encourage SMEs to recruit (more) disabled people some of the suggestions<sup>10</sup> they made relate in some way to current policy interventions. This point will be returned to in Chapter 6.

Employers were specifically asked how useful the following policies would be for them:

- A DEA situated in Jobcentre Plus.
- Payments for adaptations to premises and equipment.
- Grants to help with employment costs; wage subsidies.
- Job broker to assign disabled candidates after consultation with employers.
- Workshops aimed at addressing misconceptions around disability and seminars to make the recruitment process more receptive to disabled candidates.
- Online employer toolkit.
- Help with interviewing.

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<sup>10</sup> These included financial assistance for adaptations and equipment, a job broker, information on health conditions and impairments, wide-scale investment in disabled people's training and education, educating employers and the wider workforce, and advertising and promoting the help available.

- Work trials.
- In work health support.

There were some employers who did not see any of the policy levers as being relevant to them in their current recruitment drive, saying that they did not consider the jobs they had available could be undertaken by disabled people because of health and safety reasons.

The main themes arising from the remaining employers are discussed in turn below.

### **5.2.1 A DEA situated in Jobcentre Plus**

As has emerged throughout the report, most employers perceived that they knew little about the very wide range of health conditions that exist. This means that they often cannot make an informed judgement as to whether a disabled person might be able to perform adequately in a specific role. Some employers perceived it would be very useful to have the disabled person's capabilities explained to them by someone qualified to do so. Employers then felt that they would have a better idea of whether the disabled person would be able to do the job. Some employers also wanted information about legislation on employing disabled people.

When employers were presented with the policy lever of a DEA some thought that this would be helpful as a resource to use for gaining relevant and detailed information about employing disabled people. One employer said that the advice would have to be offered in a non patronising way. Another echoed this saying that, if they were to have questions about employing disabled people it would be helpful to know there was someone there to offer advice without employers being obliged to take it. Another employer perceived that a DEA sounded like it would fill a need for information they would have before they employed a disabled person. This employer stressed that they would want access to expert advice on what the implications would be for the disabled person in carrying out specific roles. To be useful, the DEA would need to be able to tell employers whether or not the potential employee would be able to carry out the roles required. The employer would then feel assured that they were not breaking any professional or legal codes of conduct and would have information about managing a disabled person in what was, for them, perceived to be primarily an able-bodied environment.

### **5.2.2 Payment for adaptation to premises and equipment**

Some employers stressed that, given their recruitment concerns outlined in previous chapters, the availability of payment for adaptations and equipment would not be reason enough to employ disabled people. Rather, if the candidate they favoured happened to be disabled then in such cases they would find it helpful to know that such payments were available. One employer thought that financial help with any increases in employment insurance premiums that might be associated with employing a disabled person would also be helpful. Some others noted that help with such costs would be especially important in a recession when disabled people were likely to find it harder to find employment and SME employers would find it harder to pay for adaptations.

One employer in the follow-up telephone survey perceived that in some instances the availability of such payments may tip the balance in favour of employing a disabled person. They gave a hypothetical example of where it might cost a small business £20,000 to adapt a building for a relatively low skilled, low profit returning position of employment. The employer argued that SMEs would be unlikely to fund such an adaptation and so would not hire a disabled candidate, even if they were the best person for the job. However, if such costs are met by government then they are effectively taken out of the equation in the employment recruitment decision. All other things being equal, it seems that SME employers will choose the candidate that costs less to employ.

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Another employer thought that such payments would be very helpful. They stated however that the application process for them should not involve employers in a great deal of 'red tape' and 'bureaucracy' since in their opinion this would put employers pushed for time in SMEs off from applying.

### **5.2.3 Grants to help with employment costs; wage subsidies**

Some employers in their individual interviews said that a wage subsidy would be helpful to struggling businesses. Any financial support was welcomed, especially in the economic recession. Other employers considered that subsidies should only be paid if the disabled person was not as productive as a non-disabled person in the same role. Some of these employers questioned why a disabled person who could do the job at the same capacity as a non-disabled person would need to be subsidised. Others thought that this would be insulting to the disabled person and that it might create moral hazard for employers who might hire more disabled people just to get financial subsidies rather than because the disabled person was the best candidate for the job, which can be seen to discriminate against those candidates who are not disabled. Some employers stressed that they would not employ anyone who was not fully able to do the job, regardless of any subsidy.

These findings were echoed in the follow-up interviews. In addition, one employer said they were against positive discrimination. In their opinion, if someone was worth employing, they were worth employing as an equal. This employer also questioned how the disabled person's self-confidence would be affected knowing that the employer was being subsidised to employ them. Another said that their main criterion would always be whether the candidate could 'do the job'.

### **5.2.4 Job broker to assign disabled candidates after consulting with employers**

The idea of a job broker to match disabled candidates to specific employment positions was one that was generated in the individual interviews with employers without a prompt. Some employers in the individual interviews thought that the best way to recruit a disabled person who could actually do the job available would be to establish a broker who would mediate between employers and disabled people and match candidates to vacancies. Echoing the data from the follow-up telephone interviews with a subset of employers, they stressed that it would be no good just sending them 'any' person, the broker would need to know specifically what the employer was looking for so that they could match appropriate candidates for the job and send them to the employer for interview.

Similarly, in the follow-up interviews where employers were asked directly about the potential usefulness of such a policy lever the general consensus was that this would be very useful because employers would, with the help of the broker, effectively know the applicant's capabilities and how these might relate to the available role. As one employer put it, this would potentially match 'up the employee's skills and range of abilities to a position so that it would be a success rather than just getting people off lists for the sake of it'. One employer said that the job broker would need to understand the company and its limitations in adapting the environment.

### **5.2.5 Workshops aimed at addressing misconceptions around disability and seminars to make the recruitment process more receptive to disabled candidates**

Workshops for employers aimed at addressing misconceptions around disability were presented as a policy lever for consideration to employers in the follow-up telephone interviews. Some employers said that they would be unlikely to take time out to attend anything like this because of time pressures. Another said that these would only be helpful if they were already thinking about employing disabled workers. Similarly, one employer said that the employers who were labouring

under misconceptions about disability would be quite unlikely to attend a workshop since they would not necessarily know they were misguided. One employer said that while these would be good they would be more useful if they could be delivered in-house, to both employers and staff.

Finally, one employer stressed that these events would also need to provide employers with information about how to get help with financing the employment of disabled workers since in their business the first question was always: 'how much is it going to cost me and what's the benefit I'm going to get?'

None of the employers in the follow-up telephone interviews who were asked about the usefulness of recruitment strategies tailored to make their recruitment process more receptive to disabled employees thought they would not be useful. However, some said that they would be unlikely to attend these because of time constraints.

### **5.2.6 Online employer toolkit**

Employers thought that an online toolkit for employing disabled people would be a good resource to have. Many liked the immediacy of the internet, and one employer said that they would find an online toolkit useful as they could access and return to it as and when they needed to. They also said that this idea fitted with the way they currently researched other employment issues online: maternity pay, statutory sick pay and tax. One employer thought that most SMEs would have access to the internet and another found the internet useful as they could access information they needed late at night or at the weekends outside normal business hours. Other advantages were considered to be that an employer could access only the information they were looking for and could look at advice in as much depth as they wanted. One employer thought the toolkit would be most useful if it contained a comprehensive guide to the appropriate legislation around employing disabled people, grant applications for adaptations and if it could also lead employers to an organisation, such as Jobcentre Plus, to access in-depth information on a one-to-one basis.

### **5.2.7 Help with interviewing**

Employers were asked in their individual interviews whether help with interviewing disabled candidates would be useful to them. Some employers said that they would not want any help with interviewing candidates, seeing recruitment as something they wanted to keep control over. Others thought that it might be useful to have some information on the best way to conduct interviews, for example, what the best questions might be to ask candidates. Other employers thought that it would be useful to have someone in the interview with disabled candidates to discuss health conditions and their implications with or to assist the disabled person as an aid to communication or interpretation where necessary.

### **5.2.8 Work trials**

Work trials were considered by some of the employers in the individual interviews to be useful in a number of ways. Firstly, there was a perception that they would be useful for the disabled person to let them see what kinds of work they might like to do. Secondly, the employer would be able to see how the disabled person performed and if they were not considered to be best suited to the job they could be let go at the end of the trial without the employer needing to feel that they might be accused of discrimination. Thirdly, there was the potential for the involvement of a third party for the employer to discuss concerns with. One employer said that a work placement might operate like a college placement where there was a tutor that the employer could discuss concerns with. Some employers also felt that this would be more acceptable to other members of staff (and customers in some instances) because the disabled person was on a trial basis and would not be taken on if they were not able to fully do the job.

### 5.2.9 In work health support

Some employers, when asked about it in individual interviews, saw no need for any kind of in work health support provision. Others thought that something like an Occupational Health service they could call on might be useful. Some employers would find a telephone or online service useful where they could telephone and ask about certain health conditions and what capabilities and restrictions might be associated with them. They also thought it might be helpful to be able to ask about the legalities and health and safety concerns around employing disabled people.

### 5.2.10 Investment in disabled people's skills and training

Investment in disabled people's skills and education was a theme found in both the telephone interviews and in the individual interviews with employers. Employers argued that they would not employ someone just because they were disabled: they would need to be the best person for the job and be able to perform adequately in the role. The best way to make them attractive to employers was, therefore, for them to have the skills and training employers were looking for. One employer said that if a disabled candidate was the best person for the job employers would not mind making (relatively minor) adjustments to the work place.

### 5.2.11 Educating employers and the wider workforce

One idea arising from the telephone interviews with employers was that employers needed to be told that they were missing out on an untapped source of skilled workers who would make a valuable contribution to their business.

Similarly another employer thought that employers needed to understand that they may be missing out on the best staff for their business for the sake of, for example, a £60 adaptation. But this employer also stressed that the wider workforce also needed to be trained to realise this and that government could usefully go into workplaces and attempt to get rid of any 'playschool mentality' where people might mark out the disabled person as different through a lack of understanding. This was echoed by some other employers who considered there to be a wider informative role for government in educating other staff members about disability and capabilities so that they would be more comfortable and understanding in working with disabled people.

### 5.2.12 Advertising and promoting the help available

Some employers who took part in the follow-up telephone interviews argued that any help available needed to be advertised to employers, since without impetus employers would not, of their own initiative, go and research how to employ a disabled person and what help might be available to do so. Such advertising could make it clear to employers that employing disabled people would not cost them any money or involve a lot of workplace disruption. It could also be used to reassure them that they would be able to find suitable applicants for their positions. One employer suggested testimonials from other SMEs who had successfully employed disabled people for this purpose.

One other employer mentioned that in all the contacts they had had with Jobcentre Plus in recruiting candidates, not once had they been asked about the possibility of recruiting disabled people, or told about any help that might be available. They therefore saw Jobcentre Plus as being able to better promote such opportunities.

## 5.3 Arguments for employing disabled people

Employers were asked in the follow-up telephone interviews how persuasive they found the following arguments that could be put forward for employing disabled people:

- brings diversity and a different viewpoint;
- disabled workers are as productive as non-disabled workers;
- enhances employer reputation and image;
- shows employer commitment to the workforce;
- positive impact on staff morale; and
- more innovation to business due to diversity.

Again, some employers said that none of the arguments would be persuasive to them in their business position since they perceived that they could not employ a disabled person in certain roles without very serious adaptations which they considered cost prohibitive, especially in an economic recession.

### 5.3.1 Brings diversity and a different viewpoint

Some employers in the telephone follow-up interviews said that they were not that interested in fostering diversity within their organisation and so this argument would not hold much sway with them. This chimes with employer responses to a similar question in their second individual interviews when they were asked if bringing diversity was an effective argument for employing disabled people. Some employers had responded by saying that diversity was an important value for them. For others, however, it was not and they perceived that if the business model meant little diversity in staff was needed then so be it.

Other employers in the telephone follow-up interviews questioned why the viewpoint of a disabled person should be given primacy. They perceived that different staff members in general would bring some level of diversity and different views to the workplace. Another view was that employing disabled people would bring welcomed diversity to the workplace and that they may have better insights into some customer groups, so adding value to the business.

### 5.3.2 Disabled workers are as productive as non-disabled workers

Employers agreed that disabled workers were as productive as non-disabled workers, **provided they were in the right job**. Employers saw no reason why a disabled person doing a role they were capable of would be any less productive than a non-disabled person doing the same role. This echoes the findings in Chapter 4, when employers were seen to be concerned with the fit of the disabled person with the specific vacancy. Employers gave examples of where disabled people would be less productive in an unsuitable role. For example, one said that someone who used a wheelchair would probably be quite capable of inspecting a factory line but would not be as productive working and lifting things onto that line. Another reasoned that 'you can't expect a person in a wheelchair to put slates on a roof' in as productive a way as a non-disabled person.

### 5.3.3 Enhances employer reputation and image

Some employers in both the individual interviews and the follow-up telephone interviews found the potential enhancement of reputation and image to be a valid argument for employing disabled people. One thought that they would be seen as being a 'fair' employer and another similarly said that it would promote a good image to potential employees. Another person thought that

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employing disabled people probably would enhance their reputation 'in the right circles' but thought that in the general public's view it would not really make that much difference. Some employers did not find this a valid argument at all and one of these said that they 'couldn't care less what anyone thinks of us'.

Another employer perceived that it was unfortunate that such arguments probably were valid and said that some employers would be interested in such an image as part of a 'marketing armoury' which included not just the employment of disabled workers but also being an environmentally friendly employer. This employer perceived that such arguments could be more about promoting image rather than substance and that discriminatory practices were able to continue behind such images.

### **5.3.4 Shows employer commitment to the workforce**

Employers in the follow-up telephone interviews were asked whether the argument that employing disabled people showed a commitment to the workforce would be a valid one for them. Some said that it would be, but that they would only employ a disabled person if they were the right person for the job. Another employer said that it would show a commitment to employees if adaptations were made to accommodate people. Similarly, another employer said that it showed commitment to staff on the part of the employer when they were prepared to work with, and build on, people's strengths and weaknesses. One employer gave an example from their own experience when an employee valued by both staff and the employer had been given a phased return to work after being off with a mental health condition.

One employer said that they saw this as a 'non-argument' and that employing a disabled person showed no more commitment to the workforce than employing a Polish worker. They considered that investment in training and flexible working practices were the types of things which showed employer commitment to the workforce.

### **5.3.5 Positive impact on staff morale**

Data on this topic has in part already been explored in Chapter 4 where it was highlighted that one of the perceived uncertainties employers had in employing disabled people was the potentially negative impact on other staff members. This theme also arose in the telephone interviews when employers were asked about the validity of the argument that employing disabled people would have a positive impact on staff morale. This perception of a negative impact on staff can be related to employer concerns about the productivity of a disabled worker compared with other staff. One employer, for example, perceived that their hard pushed staff would see the arrival of a disabled worker as yet another problem to deal with in an already stressed working environment, possibly considering themselves discriminated against if they had to make up for lost productivity in any way. Another employer who did not agree with the argument that employing disabled people had a positive impact on staff gave an example where staff could be demoralised if they felt they had to pick up the work of someone else.

One employer said that employing disabled people could have a positive impact on staff as long as their integration was handled correctly and staff were given an understanding of the health condition.

### **5.3.6 More innovation to business due to diversity**

Some of the employers in the telephone follow-up interview considered the argument that disabled people would bring more innovation due to diversity as potentially persuasive. One employer in particular recounted that this had been just so with one of their members of staff who had a mental health condition. The employer said that while this member of staff sometimes had to be

off work at short notice, the benefits the business reaped from their creativity made up for this. Another employer said that they could be persuaded by this view since innovation was seen as very important to the business: 'I only care about the business at the end of the day'. Some employers would not be persuaded by this argument since they considered that disabled people's viewpoints would be no more diverse or innovative than anyone else's.

## 5.4 Summary

This chapter has considered employers' perceptions of policy levers for engaging SMEs in the recruitment of disabled people. Some employers considered that for some roles in their business, disabled people were not employable regardless of what policy levers might be available. However, other employers saw merits in the provision of policy levers, such as a DEA, payments for adaptations and towards wage costs, job brokers, and an online employer toolkit to provide information and help for employing disabled people.

Many of the policy levers employers would value relate to overcoming some of the uncertainties they have about employing disabled people, discussed in detail in Chapter 4 and therefore in many ways the employers' perceptions of the usefulness of these levers can also be directly related to their business concerns. For example, employers are keen to find the best person for the job or someone who 'can do the job' and a job broker was considered to be of great assistance in this respect. Gaining information about health conditions and impairments, be it through a DEA or an online toolkit would also allow an exploration of whether the candidate would be able to do the job. Work trials were also seen by some employers as being able to test out the disabled candidate's capabilities in a role at no risk to the employer.

Similarly, the provision of financial help for workplace adaptations was seen as crucial for some employers who would not be able to fund these from the business, especially where they were struggling financially because of the recession.

Employers also perceived that there were arguments that could be made to SME employers for the recruitment of disabled workers but that ultimately, the core concern of them being able to 'do the job' took primacy.

In sum then, policy levers that make it easy and attractive for SMEs to think about employing disabled people, which make it financially worthwhile to do so, or at least do not penalise them financially for doing so, and which are well publicised, would be thought useful by employers. Some of the policy levers discussed and thought useful by some employers are already part of the DWP' policy. Some other suggestions are not currently DWP policy, peer promotion and advice from SMEs who successfully employ disabled people, for example. However, the data highlight that employers were not much aware of current DWP policy initiatives. The lack of awareness about such measures among employers in the study raises questions for how such policy measures are publicised to the SME sector.

Chapter 6 will draw on the following themes explored in this chapter:

- policy levers for reducing the uncertainties SMEs face in employing (more) disabled people;
- the usefulness of arguments for employing disabled people;
- the role of government in helping SMEs to employ disabled people and how this relates to current DWP policy initiatives;
- the lack of employers' awareness about current DWP policy levers for employing disabled people.

# 6 Encouraging the employment of disabled people in SMEs: Summary and policy implications

## 6.1 Introduction

This final chapter of the report summarises the research findings in Section 6.2, and considers the resulting policy implications, in Section 6.3. Policy implications address the DWPs concern to facilitate better the DWPs engagement with SME employers in relation to the integration of disabled workers.

## 6.2 Summary of the main findings

As the literature suggested (see Chapter 2), the empirical data highlighted that the wider economic context in which SMEs operated was key to understanding their recruitment decision-making. In this respect, one of the strongest themes to emerge from employers was their business need for flexible staff, who would be able and willing to perform roles over and above those more traditionally associated with the advertised vacancy. This need was exacerbated for some employers who were facing lower turnovers and profit margins in the economic recession. That said, some employers spoke of having asked more from their staff in recent years as they tried to remain competitive with minimum outlay and overheads.

Employers also spoke of not being able to ‘carry’ any worker who could not perform at full capacity, and in a flexible labour market, that perhaps means performing at full capacity **in a number of roles**, especially during a recession. This concern with flexibility was recognised by employers as a barrier to the employment of disabled people, with some of them voicing that larger firms with the benefit of economies of scale would be better able to allocate knowable and stable roles to employees with health conditions. The wider economic context (the ongoing recession and relatively high unemployment) at the time of the research, also meant that employers had more candidates to choose from and some of them recognised that all else being equal, disabled candidates with qualifications and skills for the role in question would be disadvantaged when compared with qualified candidates without a disability.

Employers were keen to employ someone who they perceived could ‘do the job’ and some spoke of finding the best person for the job. They also recognised that employing the ‘wrong’ staff could mean that their business would suffer financially through loss of customers. This concern with finding someone who could do the job was evident in the attributes employers were looking for in candidates. For example, flexible employees were seen as important for the reasons discussed above, and competent and reliable employees would further the interests of the business in that the employee would both be able to do the job and would also be at work to do it. An employee who was honest, with a stable background and a work ethic was also valued as someone who would stay with the business and be committed to working for the employer. An employee who lived locally was also important to some employers since this removed any potential problems with travelling to

work and so increased the prospect of a reliable employee. Personality was perceived as important by employers in a number of ways. Firstly, it was important that the employers' staff 'fit' together well to avoid any clashes of personality and what they termed as 'troublemaking' which would lead ultimately to a disruption of working practices. Secondly, those employers in the service sector especially perceived that personable staff would benefit their customer relations. Some employers also said that a good personality was important since, unlike skills, this was one aspect people could not be trained on.

The absence of HR management in most SMEs meant that employers were free to shortlist not just on the qualifications and experience required for the position, but also on other concerns, where and when they had them, of age and location, health and indicators of reliability and stability, for example. The data also highlighted that employers took account of the first impressions they formed of candidates in relation to their personal appearance and mannerisms. They could also make instinctive decisions about who to employ, what they often described as their 'gut feelings' which when probed were underpinned by indicators of the attributes they were looking for in a candidate (see above).

Employers differed in relation to their understandings of disability. Some operated with relatively wide understandings of the term and others had a rather narrow conception related mainly to mobility and sensory impairments. However, those employers with a relatively wide understanding could often feel that the term was rendered meaningless since it did not give an indication of a person's capabilities. Employers also felt they lacked detailed information about specific health conditions and impairments and how these might affect a candidate's ability to 'do the job'.

Some employers worked with an understanding of disability which can be aligned with the social model of disability, considering that someone may need to have adaptations in place for them to be able to their job. Other employers thought more in terms of the medical model of disability, discussing more about how a disabled person would not fit with their work environment. It was noticeable in this respect that those disabled applicants who had been taken on by employers were thought to have stable and manageable conditions and to be able to 'do the job' without any adaptations being made. Similarly, some employers saw people with mental health conditions as potentially more unpredictable to manage in the workplace when compared to people with physical impairments and employers also saw barriers to managing someone with any kind of fluctuating health condition. Other employers had adapted the work place in the past, most often for existing employees and some of these stressed that such adaptations were only sustainable in the short-term. In part, this was because it was seen as unfair to other staff members to ask them to take on part of someone else's role. Other employers gave examples of where it had worked well to employ and work with disabled people but some others had more negative experiences.

There were a number of uncertainties for employers in employing (more) disabled people. These included the built environment and the expense associated with adaptations, concerns about the productivity of disabled workers, risks to the disabled person from a dangerous work environment, fears of breaking work-related legislation and the impact on other staff and (sometimes) customers.

Employers did not consider that SMEs should be obliged to employ disabled people but saw it as their role to consider candidates equally for vacancies and to think about employing a disabled person where they were the best candidate for the job, or could do the job. Employers mostly considered making changes to the hours worked rather than the role advertised for any successful candidate.

Knowledge of current DWP strategies to engage employers in recruiting disabled people was low among the SME employers in the study. While some employers did not consider that there would be

any policy levers that would encourage them to recruit disabled people, several suggestions were generated by other employers. These included:

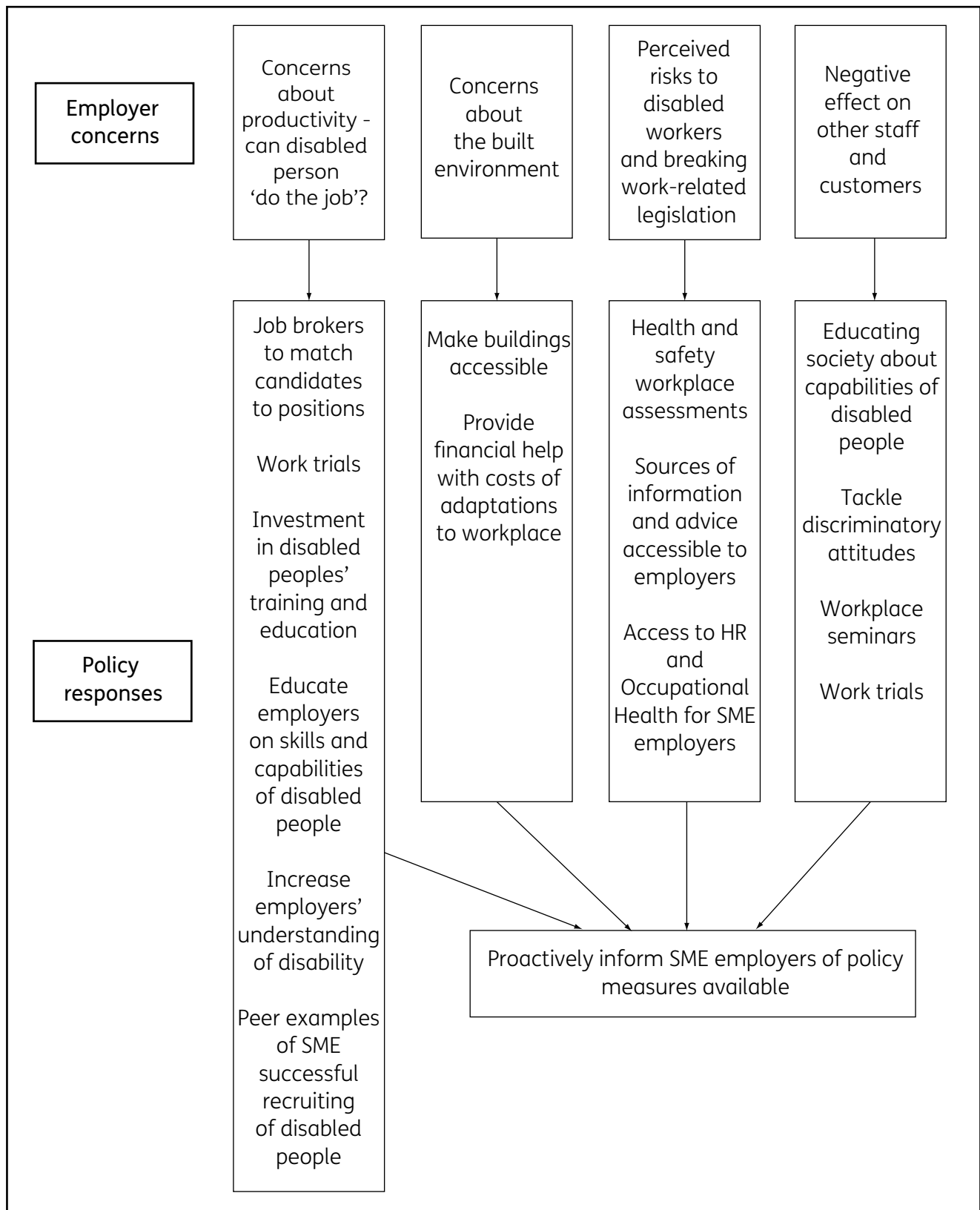
- financial help for adaptations to premises and purchasing equipment;
- the establishment of a job broker who could match disabled applicants with specific employment vacancies that they would be 'able to do';
- information on health conditions and educating the wider workforce;
- investment in disabled people's education and training so as to make them more attractive to employers; and
- advertising and promoting the help available.

All these suggestions can be seen as attempts to reduce some of their current uncertainties about employing disabled people. Employers perceived that a range of arguments (potentially) used by DWP might be used to promote the recruitment of disabled people. These included disabled people providing innovation through diversity, or that disabled people are as productive as non-disabled people in the right role, but the core concern had to be whether the disabled person could 'do the job'.

### 6.3 Policy implications

As outlined in Chapter 1, this research had a clear policy focus in being designed to inform the DWP's strategy of engaging with SME employers in relation to their recruitment of disabled workers. This section returns to the main themes drawn out from each of the empirical chapters and considers some of the policy implications resulting from them. Figure 6.1 illustrates which of the employers' concerns and uncertainties in recruiting disabled people might be addressed by different policy interventions.

**Figure 6.1 SME employers' concerns in employing disabled people and potential policy responses**



### 6.3.1 The economic context

As we have seen, employers' recruitment decisions are made with a consideration of the economic and labour market context which can be seen to act to constrain their choices in relation to the recruitment of disabled people. Employers focus on flexibility, maintaining productivity, lowering costs and maintaining and increasing profit margins and it is this labour market context that drives the employers' quest for the best person for the job, or someone who can 'do the job'. To this end they argued that they would consider a disabled applicant for an employment position on **the same basis** as anyone else. One interpretation of this finding might suggest that such a labour market context can be seen to demand more of disabled people in that they do not just have to be as good as their non-disabled counterparts, but in some cases, they need to outperform them. This poses questions as to the ability of DWP policy to influence this wider context: to make business less competitive, increase profit margins and mitigate the effects of the recession. The following policy implications are therefore made with the assumption that the economic context remains unchanged.

To be clear, the primary policy issue that the following policy recommendations attempt to address rests on the assumption from the empirical data that disabled people, with the appropriate qualifications for an employment position may be passed over by employers in SMEs in favour of a similarly qualified person without a disability because of concerns about:

- their productivity;
- their reliability;
- the effects on other staff and customers; and
- the potential costs relating to their employment.

### 6.3.2 The recruitment process

Before considering how policy might intervene at different points in the recruitment process (see Figure 3.1), it is worth noting that some employers reported that they had never received an application from a disabled applicant, which suggests that there might be scope for encouraging suitably qualified disabled applicants to apply for vacancies in SMEs. That said, there is also the question of whether or not disabled people disclose their health condition at application stage. For example, previous research findings suggest that some people with health conditions may not disclose them to employers at the application stage for fear of employer discrimination (Davidson, 2006; Sainsbury and Davidson, 2006). Given the research finding that employers look for a suitably skilled person who can 'do the job', there may be further scope for educating employers in the skills and capabilities of disabled people. Similarly, this finding implies that there is also the need to invest in the education and training of disabled people. This might be especially so for people who may have been on Incapacity Benefit or ESA for some amount of time.

Employers could also be given information by DWP on how to target their vacancies at disabled people, or to make the wording of job adverts nondiscriminatory, when they place an advert with Jobcentre Plus. It seems most useful to present such information to employers by presenting them with the **business case** for doing so: to meet their concern to attract the widest pool of suitably qualified applicants for the post.

As we have seen, employers could (sometimes unknowingly) use a range of discriminatory criteria to shortlist applicants for interview such as age and location, for example. Some employers might benefit from being informed about the relevant legislation. However, some employers might know that they are flouting equal opportunities legislation. It might therefore be helpful for employers to be offered HR advice to inform them about the basic principles of short-listing and the criteria

for doing so. This could include making the business case for doing so: if they were to consider criteria beyond what they usually short-listed on this may increase their chances of getting more appropriate candidates to choose from.

Similarly, employers could be better informed about the arguments for not making judgements from first impressions and it might also be useful to inform them about other methods of recruiting apart from interviews. There is also scope for informing employers about what might be the most useful questions to ask candidates, the benefits of conducting standardised interviews and using more formal rating techniques rather than ‘gut feelings’ to make decisions about the applicants. Again, making clear the business case for doing so might be useful in couching the provision of such information.

### **6.3.3 Understandings of disability**

The findings suggest that there is the potential to inform employers’ understandings of disability in line with the social model of disability. Employers could be informed about the dangers of making assumptions about disabled people’s capabilities and the potential of disabled people once any necessary adjustments had been made.

There is also scope to inform employers’ understanding of the concept of disability and expand it from narrow understandings associated with mobility and sensory impairments. What would be important here however would be to provide employers with an understanding of the capabilities of disabled people. In this respect, employers were seen to have a need for information on specific health conditions. This may be increasingly important in that, as the literature suggested, attitudes to disability can be impairment specific. In the present study for example, some employers perceived that mental health conditions might be more unpredictable than physical ones and therefore harder to manage. Dispelling myths and explaining conditions to employers would therefore be helpful. In part this might be accomplished by giving SMEs access to Occupational Health services as proposed by the Black Review (2008).

### **6.3.4 Overcoming the perceived uncertainties in employing disabled people**

There were a number of uncertainties for employers in employing (more) disabled people. This section considers these in turn and the policy measures that might be helpful in addressing them.

Employers could consider the built environment as a barrier to employing disabled people. This suggests that policy measures to make buildings accessible would be helpful. SMEs may not have the funds required for adaptations and equipment and so assistance with meeting these costs would also be useful. There is currently help available from Access to Work with such costs, however knowledge of this appeared to be very low among employers. This resonates with recent research suggesting that Access to Work take up is low (Aston, 2009). This suggests that information on such schemes for adaptation and equipment could be more effectively targeted at SME employers.

Concerns about the productivity of disabled workers centre on the disabled person’s performance in relation to other staff members: their outputs and attendance at work. These might be positively informed by policy educating employers on the capabilities of disabled people and also perhaps in providing work trials so that the employer can see how the applicant would perform on the job, as currently happens for unemployed people. Employers also argued for a job broker to match disabled applicants to specific vacancies to give them more certainty in this respect. There are already job brokers available under local authority initiatives and so the policy implication here is that employers in SMEs need to be better informed of their existence and roles (for example, in matching and the provision of information). We also know that under Provider-led Pathways, job brokers contact larger organisations and engage them effectively in thinking about recruiting disabled people. The present study suggests that there may also be scope for contacting SME employers and as such the findings carry potential lessons for the providers who will implement the new single Work Programme.

Analysis highlighted that those employers who were able to accommodate staff absences at short notice operated with a bank of staff. There may be scope for exploring with employers the establishment of banks of staff across some industrial sectors to cover short-term absences, although this may not be practical for very small firms where a detailed knowledge of the business is required.

Employers were concerned that their lack of knowledge about specific health conditions would mean that they would not know what tasks they could ask a disabled applicant to do, especially in what they considered relatively dangerous work environments like kitchens, workshops and factory floors. A related point was that some employers also feared breaching legislation on health and safety if they employed a disabled person in particular types of role. There may be scope for policy here to offer health and safety workplace assessments as part of the engagement strategy. These could form part of the Fit For Work services currently being piloted (Black, 2008).

Analysis highlighted that strategies to engage employers in the recruitment of disabled people may also need to engage other staff. The impact on other staff from employing disabled people regarding potential disquiet was something that employers were concerned with. This related to concerns about other staff having to pick up extra work if the disabled employee could not perform at full productivity levels and at having to manage staff attitudes towards disabled people. Concerns about productivity could, it might be suggested, be tackled by the policy suggestions made above. Educating the wider society about the capabilities of disabled people and about health conditions may help to tackle discriminatory attitudes based on ignorance. There may also be scope for policy to offer workplace information seminars where employees could be given information to dispel myths and where they could ask questions and raise their concerns.

Changing wider societal attitudes on disability should also help to combat some employers' perceptions that their customers might be offended or socially embarrassed if they were to employ disabled people.

### 6.3.5 Arguments for employing disabled people

Given the employers' concerns with finding the right person for the job, or someone who could 'do the job' it might be said that the most effective arguments for employing disabled people might be those that in some way focus on the capabilities of disabled people. For example, that disabled people are as productive as non-disabled people **in the right role**, or that they will bring innovation to the business through diversity and different viewpoints. The findings show however, that arguments will need to be backed up by more practical help for employers, such as information, advice and help with adaptations.

### 6.3.6 The role of government in supporting SMEs to employ disabled people

Employers perceived a range of ways that government could support SMEs to consider recruiting disabled people. In part the findings from this research chime with recent research undertaken for the DWP, which suggests that SMEs can circumvent legislation designed to encourage greater recruitment of diverse groups. This research found that what might be more effective for influencing SME practices would be 'real life' examples of disabled employees in SMEs and the challenging of stereotypes. Other things that were suggested to be of potential worth included funding for initiatives to give SMEs the chance to work with disadvantaged groups before employing them on a more permanent basis: for example, coaching and mentoring, work placements, work experience and apprenticeships. There was also the feeling that funding should be directed towards helping potential candidates succeed in the application and interviewing process, by, for example, providing help with CV construction, interview skills and training (Jigsaw Research, 2009).

As we have seen, some of the employers in the present research also saw the role of government as encompassing the provision of financial help for adaptations to premises and for purchasing equipment and the establishment of a job broker whose role would be to match disabled applicants with specific employment vacancies that they would be 'able to do'. Employers also thought that they, and their staff, should be provided with information on health conditions and on workplace legislation. Some also thought that there should be large scale investment in disabled people's education and training so as to make them more attractive to employers. Some employers considered that examples of successfully employing disabled people from other SMEs might also be useful in engaging them to think about employing disabled people. All these policy suggestions can be linked to employers' current uncertainties around employing disabled people.

What is noticeable about these suggestions is that many of them are already (DWP) policy initiatives. Access to Work, for example, provides help with adaptations for employers. There are also policy initiatives which include the role of a job broker. For example, the DEA in Jobcentre Plus can offer information and advice about employing disabled people and WORKSTEP provides mediation between disabled people and employers. There are also advisers who can offer information and advice in current Pathways to Work provision. There is also the NHS' Occupational Health advice line, which operates throughout Great Britain.

One of the main policy implications must be the lack of awareness about such policy initiatives among SME employers. This implies that DWP might look at how it currently informs SMEs of such initiatives. The findings suggest that SME employers are unlikely to research such initiatives of their own accord, especially where they perceive a range of barriers to employing disabled people. It may therefore be more effective if policy is proactive in informing SME employers of the help that is available to them in employing disabled people.

Future research with a larger sample base, might potentially consider whether SMEs of different sizes and in different sectors, would find some policy levers more or less useful to them. Future research could also look at how disabled people perceive SME job adverts as well as their broader perceptions about and experiences of applying for SME vacancies.

## 6.4 Concluding comments

This report has considered the factors which inform the recruitment decisions of SME employers and how these relate to the recruitment of disabled people. The wider economic and labour market context informed employers' recruitment practices in that they looked for someone who they perceived could 'do the job' and, in the absence of economies of scale, who could perform a range of roles within the firm. In part, this context also generated a range of uncertainties in employing disabled people including:

- their productivity levels;
- the built environment;
- risks to the disabled person; and of breaching work-related legislation; and
- a perceived negative impact on staff and customers.

Without a significant change in the wider economic context, the main areas that policy might address in combating some of these uncertainties include:

- providing SME employers with the option of accessing training on best practice in the recruitment process;

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- tailoring the language about disability so that it is meaningful to employers (and the wider society) and providing them with information on the social model of disability to highlight the assumptions and attitudes which can disable people with health conditions and impairments;
- providing appropriate points of contact for information on employing disabled people, including information on the appropriate legislation and on specific health conditions;
- being proactive in informing SME employers of the current help available to them to employ disabled people: including help with adaptations and equipment, with wage subsidies, with job brokering and work trials and with information needs about employing disabled people; and
- equipping disabled people with the skills and qualifications which are attractive to employers.

In such ways, employers may be better informed of the positive contribution that disabled people could make to their organisations on the one hand and the potential for any associated financial costs to be met by government, on the other.

# Appendix A

## Recruiting the study group

The study group for the research project comprised of 36 employers. Two other employers who agreed to take part in principle over the telephone later withdrew: one because they had changed their mind about participating in the study and one because of ill health. The recruitment target for the study was 30 employers and so not all the interviews with the 36 employers were charted and analysed for the research. The employers not included either were not SME firms; had filled their vacancy between arranging and conducting the first interview or had not filled their vacancy at all by the time the period of field work came to an end. Interestingly, there was no attrition from the study.

Employers were recruited via two sources: their job adverts in Jobcentre Plus or/and job adverts in a newspaper local to their geographical area. These sources were searched for new and suitable vacancies on a regular basis throughout the field work period. While the researcher attempted to gain as wide a spread as possible over types of vacancies and employment sectors, choice of which employers to contact was constrained and limited by the amount of vacancies advertised via recruitment agencies. Such adverts did not give the name of the company and so it was not possible to contact these employers.

The economic context in which the research was conducted (a period of relatively high unemployment) meant some of the job vacancies advertised were withdrawn just days after they had been placed, sometimes well before the closing date stated, because of the volume of people phoning the employer to apply and enquire about the vacancy.

Initial contact was made by the researcher via a telephone call to the company to identify the most appropriate person to interview, if this was not stated in the job advert. In some instances this required many attempts to contact the relevant person because they were not available at the time the researcher called. Some employers also said at this stage that they were interested but did not have time at that point to discuss the implications (they were keen to know how much of their time would be taken up) of taking part in enough depth and asked the researcher to call back at a more convenient time. Employers were told the main purpose of the study at this initial stage and asked if they would like to take part. They were also asked some screening questions on the size and independence of their firm. Where they agreed in principle to taking part in the research the researcher visited them and presented the employer with an information sheet on the project and answered any questions they had before proceeding. At all stages of the research, employers were assured of anonymity of self, firm and of geographical location which may have contributed to them feeling able to express their views in a relatively open way in the research interviews.

Those employers who declined to take part in the research primarily stated time constraints as a reason for not wanting to take part. Some employers were protected by 'gatekeepers' such as PAs or secretaries. In some of these instances the gatekeeper requested that the researcher assemble the information about the project in an email to send to them. No replies were received to these emails by the researcher.

In some cases the telephone number given out in a job advert was unobtainable and in others the number led straight to an answering machine. None of the messages left by the researcher at this initial stage were returned.

The employers who did take part had demands on their time and sometimes needed to rearrange interviews at short notice or forgot that they had made an appointment with the researcher for an interview. In all cases interviews were (re)scheduled at a time and at a location to suit the employer concerned. Often the research interviews took place on the employment premises and as such they could be frequently interrupted by enquiries from other staff and customers.

In order to sample as diverse a range of job vacancies as possible, employers were sampled from two areas in the UK which had contrasting socioeconomic compositions and diverse labour markets.

Sampling was designed to generate diversity in the employers recruited to the study. As with all small-scale qualitative samples it was not intended to be statistically representative and findings cannot claim to be a generalisation of the wider population of SMEs.

# **Appendix B**

## **Qualitative study of employers’ recruitment decisions: SMEs: Topic guides**

## Qualitative study of employers’ recruitment decisions: SMEs

### Topic guide: first interview

#### **Interviewer’s introduction**

- Explain that the aim of this study is to learn more about how employers in small and medium sized enterprises make recruitment decisions. How do they decide who to employ? The study is funded by the Department for Work and Pensions who are interested in finding out what informs recruitment decisions and how this relates to employing disabled people; or people with health conditions. The findings will inform how government might support and engage with small and medium firms in the future.
- The research is being carried out in two different locations in the UK. All locations, firms and employers will be anonymised in the final report and all data held will be treated in accordance with the Data Protection Act.
- The Social Policy Research Unit is an independent organisation.
- This interview forms part of the first phase of research for this study. We are interested in finding out about the background of the firm and the recruiter and also the background to the job vacancy. I would like to interview you again once you have selected an applicant for the position.
- Our discussion today will concentrate on:
  - A brief background to the firm.
  - Your previous experience of conducting interviews.
  - Background to the vacancy.
  - (If applicable at this interview) short-listing of applicants.
- The discussion will take around 30-45 minutes.
- Ask for permission to use recorder. Explain that recordings will be typed up professionally and seen only by the research team.
- Reiterate how material will be used – a report for DWP in which their views are included, but they will be anonymous.
- Taking part is completely voluntary.
- Check informed consent. Ask them to sign the consent form.

If asked what we mean by ‘complying with the Data Protection Act’ explain that we will:

- keep all data in a secure environment;
  - allow only members of the research team (including administrators and transcribers) access to the data; and
  - keep the data only as long as is necessary for the purposes of the research and then destroy it.
-

## **1. Background**

- How would you describe the nature of the firm’s business?
- What are the current priorities/issues/concerns facing the firm?
- How many employees?
- Does the firm have a HR/personnel department
  - Someone who specifically deals with personnel issues (probe for informal HR).
- How would you describe your position and role in the firm?
- How long have you been in this role?
  - Brief employment history
  - Qualifications
- What is your previous experience of selecting and interviewing applicants for jobs?
- Have you ever had any formal training for selecting or conducting employment interviews?
  - If so, probe.
  - Usefulness?
- Have you had any other sort of guidance or advice?
  - Probe (learnt by doing; learnt from colleagues)
  - Usefulness?

## **2. The vacancy**

- Thinking about the position of (specific vacancy, for example, waitress), what do you see as being their main or overall role in the company?
  - Importance of role to company?
  - Main tasks?
  - Any risks to the company in not employing appropriately?
- In what way does this role reflect the company’s business needs?
- How did the vacancy come about?
  - Expansion of firm; area; creation of new role.
  - Replacement of staff .
  - Has this vacancy arisen before? (for example, in the last year or so)?
- Is retention of staff an issue?
- If so:
  - Why?
  - What is done to retain staff?

- I saw this job advertised (refer to source); can you tell me how and where else the job was advertised?
  - Jobcentre Plus.
  - Local newspapers.
  - Web.
  - Informal networks.
  - Employment agencies.
  - Other.
- Why were these advertising sources used?
  - Have these methods been used in the past?
  - Costs?
  - Usefulness?
- Were there any sources you chose not to use?
  - Jobcentre Plus?
  - Probe why.
- Who composed the job advert?
  - Self.
  - HR (formal or informal).
  - Helped by Jobcentre Plus/other.
- What considerations were taken into account when designing the job advert in trying to appeal to potential applicants?
  - Probe: Any consideration given to deter certain applicants through design.
- Who were you looking to attract for the position?
  - Technical; professional skills?
  - Interpersonal skills?
  - Experience in similar job?
  - ‘Soft skills’; ‘fitting in’ with existing organisational culture/structure.
  - Other.
- Why?
  - Which of these are most important?
  - Are these requirements unique to your firm or are they representative across your industrial sector?
- Did/do you have an ‘ideal’ applicant/potential worker in mind (when constructing advert)?
  - What characteristics would that person have?
  - Why?

- Thinking now about the current state of the economy in general, how difficult/easy would you say it was to recruit people in your particular sector/type of business?
  - Was this the case before the down turn; how have things changed?
- Are there any recruitment issues with the local labour market?
  - How does the local labour market influence the way you go about employing people and advertising for staff?
- Expectations about filling the post?
  - Easily.
  - Quickly.
  - Difficulties.
- Has there been much interest in the post?
  - Why/not, do you think?
- How have you received applications?
  - By application?
  - In person?
  - By phone?
  - Letters?
  - Other?

### **3. Short-listing applicants (if applicable for first interview)**

- How important/useful would you say the process of short-listing, or choosing which applicants to invite for an interview, is to you?
  - Why?
  - How does it help you?
  - Any drawbacks?
- In general, how would you rate the quality of the applications received for the job?
  - Why do you say that; applications better/worse than last experience of recruiting?
- How many applications were received?
  - Pleased/surprised.
  - Disappointed.
- How were applications made by prospective candidates?
  - By application form (post/email).
  - In person.
  - Through a third party?
  - By telephone.
  - Any from Jobcentre Plus; employment brokers/welfare to work providers?

- Application format?
  - Firm’s application form.
  - Applicant specific format.

I would like to talk with you now about how you decided which candidates to shortlist.

- Can you talk me through the process you went through to disregard applicants?
- Can you talk me through the process you went through to select applicants for interview?

*Prompts*

- Number of suitable applicants for the post.
- Applicants qualifications and experience.
- Gender.
- Ethnicity.
- Nationality.
- Age.
- Disability/health conditions.
- Applicants sickness record.
- Qualifications.
- Skills.
- Work experience.
- Indicators of dependability; trustworthiness or their opposites.
- Indicators of the traits associated with the job in question, (for example, physical strength; personability) notions of ‘good employee’.
- Perceived ‘risks’ associated with some potential candidates? (for example, costs of litigation, maternity leave, Sickness absence, adaptations, productivity, conflict, reliability, business costs?).
- Their personal interests or hobbies.
- Differences between an ‘ideal employee’ and a ‘typical employee’.
- Perceived ‘fit’ with firm.
- Perceived ‘fit’ with other staff.
- Other, for example, presentational issues.
- Which of these was the most important?
  - Why?

- If you have time constraints, are there any ‘rules of thumb’, or short cuts you use for making a shortlist quickly, or for not selecting applicants?
  - How did these come about?
  - How useful are they?
- Are there any constraints on the selection process, for example, are you free to select according to your judgement?
- How many applicants did you consider for the post?
  - Why those particular applicants?
- Were/are any of these candidates the preferred applicant on paper? If so, why?
  - Strength of covering letter.
  - Format of CV.
  - Qualifications.
  - Personal attributes.
  - Personal references.
  - Education.
  - Work experience.
  - Previous knowledge of candidate; of candidate’s last employer.
  - Other.
- How important to you is it to have a preferred candidate at this stage?
  - Why?
- How useful is it to have a preferred applicant before you interview candidates?
  - How often does a preferred candidate actually get offered the job?
- What do you think the interviews will be like?

Thank participant for their time. Check still happy to have views included. Remind them of second interview and give them contact details.

## Qualitative study of employers’ recruitment decisions: SMEs

### Topic guide: second interview

#### **Interviewer’s introduction**

- Remind them that the aim of this study is to learn more about how employers in SMEs make recruitment decisions. How do they decide who to employ? The study is funded by the Department for Work and Pensions who are interested in finding out what informs recruitment decisions and how this relates to employing disabled people; or people with health conditions. The findings will inform how government might support and engage with small and medium firms in the future.
- The research is being carried out in two different locations in the UK. All locations, firms and employers will be anonymised in the final report and all data held will be treated in accordance with the Data Protection Act.
- The Social Policy Research Unit is an independent organisation.
- This interview forms second phase of research for this study. We are interested in finding out about who has been selected for the position we spoke about in the last interview.
- Our discussion today will concentrate on:
  - (If applicable at this interview) short-listing of applicants.
  - Pre interview process.
  - Interview process.
  - Post interview process.
  - Decision-making about who to employ.
- The discussion will take around 30-45 minutes.
- Ask for permission to use recorder. Explain that recordings will be typed up professionally and seen only by the research team.
- Reiterate how material will be used – a report for DWP in which their views are included, but they will be anonymous.
- Taking part is completely voluntary.
- Check informed consent. Ask them to sign the consent form.

If asked what we mean by ‘complying with the Data Protection Act’ explain that we will:

- keep all data in a secure environment;
- allow only members of the research team (including administrators and transcribers) access to the data; and
- keep the data only as long as is necessary for the purposes of the research and then destroy it.

## 1. Short-listing applicants (if applicable for second interview)

- How important/useful would you say the process of short-listing, or choosing which applicants to invite for an interview, is to you?
  - Why?
  - How does it help you?
  - Any drawbacks?
- In general, how would you rate the quality of the applications received for the job?
  - Why do you say that; applications better/worse than last experience of recruiting?
- How many applications were received?
  - Pleased/surprised.
  - Disappointed.
- How were applications made by prospective candidates?
  - By application form (post/email).
  - In person.
  - Through a third party?
  - By telephone.
  - Any from Jobcentre Plus; employment brokers/welfare to work providers?
- Application format?
  - Firm’s application form.
  - Applicant specific format.

I would like to talk with you now about how you decided which candidates to shortlist.

- Can you talk me through the process you went through to disregard applicants?
- Can you talk me through the process you went through to select applicants for interview?

### *Prompts*

- Number of suitable applicants for the post.
- Applicants qualifications and experience.
- Gender.
- Ethnicity.
- Nationality.
- Age.
- Disability/health conditions.
- Applicants sickness record.
- Qualifications.
- Skills.

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- Work experience.
- Indicators of dependability; trustworthiness or their opposites.
- Indicators of the traits associated with the job in question, (for example, physical strength, personability) notions of ‘good employee’.
- Perceived ‘risks’ associated with some potential candidates? (for example, costs of litigation, maternity leave, Sickness absence, adaptations, productivity, conflict, reliability, business costs?).
- Their personal interests or hobbies.
- Differences between an ‘ideal employee’ and a ‘typical employee’.
- Perceived ‘fit’ with firm.
- Perceived ‘fit’ with other staff.
- Other, for example, presentational issues.
- Which of these was the most important?
  - Why?
- If you have time constraints, are there any ‘rules of thumb’, or short cuts you use for making a shortlist quickly, or for not selecting applicants?
  - How did these come about?
  - How useful are they?
- Are there any constraints on the selection process, for example, are you free to select according to your judgement?
- How many applicants did you consider for the post?
  - Why those particular applicants?
- Were/are any of these candidates the preferred applicant on paper? If so, why?
- Strength of covering letter.
- Format of CV.
- Qualifications.
- Personal attributes.
- Personal references.
- Education.
- Work experience.
- Previous knowledge of candidate; of candidate’s last employer.
- Other.
- How important to you is it to have a preferred candidate at this stage?
  - Why?

- How useful is it to have a preferred applicant before you interview candidates?
  - How often does a preferred candidate actually get offered the job?
- What do you think the interviews will be like?

### **1. (A) Interest in the post**

- Has there been much further interest in the job since the last time I spoke with you?
  - By application?
  - In person?
  - By phone?
  - Letters?
  - Other?

### **2. The employment interview**

#### *Pre interview*

- What are your overall thoughts on the interview as a method of choosing applicants for a job?
  - What is useful about it?
  - What is not useful about it?
  - Any risks involved from using the interview to choose applicant?
  - Any better way; way to improve it?
- Did you have a preferred candidate from having read the applications?
- How did you prepare for the interviews?
  - Lists of questions.
  - Preparing exercises/tests.
- How useful was the preparation you did for the interview?
- Did it help you to make the best decision?
- Did you have a standard format for the interview? Or was each interview different?
- Were the same questions asked of each candidate or did it depend on the person; or a bit of both?
  - Why?
- Did you form any opinion upon meeting the applicants but before interviewing them (from their dress, poise, etc.)?
- What were these?

- When were these formed?
  - Immediately before the interview.
  - Already knew them.
  - Had already met them before.
  - By telephone.
  - Other.
- How important was this initial opinion or impression of applicants in your decision making?
  - How did it help you?
  - Any disadvantages from making initial impressions?

### **The interview**

I would now like to talk with you about the interviews with the applicants you interviewed for this position.

- In general terms, how do you feel the interviews went?
  - Probe why went well/not well
- Did the interview alter or confirm any views or expectations you might have had about applicants before hand?

### *Prompts*

- Categorisations based on physical appearance:
  - Gender.
  - Race.
  - Nationality.
  - Age.
  - Socioeconomic level.
  - Education and qualifications.
  - Stated interests and goals and intentions.
  - Personableness.
  - Seemed dependable/undependable; not/trustworthy etc.
  - Seemed to/not to indicate traits associated with the job in question seemed to indicate ‘trustworthiness’ (for example, a bouncer would need to be ‘physically strong’, for example – notions of ‘good employee’; differences between an ‘ideal employee’ and a ‘typical employee’).
  - Range and relevancy of experience.
  - Interviewee behaviour and demeanour.
  - Interaction between interviewer and interviewee.

- What kinds of questions did you ask candidates?
  - Qualifications.
  - Previous work experience.
  - Personal situation.
  - Health/sickness history.
  - Other.
- What did you feel were the most useful questions to ask?
  - Why?
- Were any of these questions key to you making your decision on who got the job?
  - Which ones?
- How important was the interview process (information and impressions gained prior to and during the interview) in your decision making for this job?
- Any limitations?
- Was it the best way of recruiting?
  - Why?
- Any improvements you can think of that could be made to the interview process in this instance; in general?
- What skills do you think are needed to be an effective interviewer?
  - Do you think you have these?
- What, if anything, did/do you find difficult about carrying out interviews?
  - What would help you?

### **Post interview**

I would now like to talk to you about how you decided on the successful applicant for the post.

- Without giving me any personal information (name, etc.), can you describe the person that you offered the job to (qualifications, etc.)?
- Were they your first choice?
- Why did you decide to offer them the job?
  - Performance at interview.
  - Skills/qualifications.
  - ‘Ideal employee’.
  - Interaction between you (interview panel) and them at interview.
  - Other.
- How do these qualities you have mentioned relate to the vacancy?

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- Which of the factors/qualities would you say was most important for the right person for the job to have?
  - Probe for hierarchy of factors mentioned and inter-relationship.
- Do you have any reservations about having offered this person the job?
  - If so, what?
  - What would reduce these uncertainties?
- When did you make the decision about who would be offered the job?
- How did you make that decision?  
(for example, comparing applicants overall – deciding on one specific attribute needed).
  - Do you have any quick ways of doing this?
- How free were you to make this decision yourself?
- Were there any constraints on your decision making?
- Was it a difficult decision?
- Why/not?
- What about the other applicants – what reservations did you have about them?
- When was the applicant offered the job? (in interview, at end of interview, sometime after all interviews).
- Did you change the job offered in any way to suit the successful applicant? Why?
  - Hours.
  - Tasks.
  - Other.
- What kind of change(s) do you think it would have been acceptable to make for this role?
- Why?
- What kind of change(s) do you think it would have been unacceptable to make for this role?
- Why?
- Have you ever changed the job offered in any way to suit an applicant?
- Why?

### 3. Recruitment of disabled workers

I would now like to ask you some questions about your experiences of employing and recruiting disabled people and people with a health condition.

- When you see the term ‘disabled’ on leaflets or websites or in relation to employment law, what do you understand it to mean?
  - Explore responses.

- Thinking about the vacancy you have just recruited for, did you receive any applications from disabled people or people with a health condition?
  - How do you know that you did/not?
- Was any attempt made to target the vacancy at disabled people?
  - Why?
  - If so, how?
- Did you consider short listing anyone with a disability for this vacancy?
  - Why?
- Did you consider interviewing anyone with a disability for this vacancy?
  - Why?
- What are your thoughts about employing people who are disabled or who have health conditions? Would you employ someone with a:
  - Mental health condition
  - Physical health condition or disability?

### *Probe*

- Perceptions of benefits (skills, social reasons, positive impact on business).
- Perceptions of potential drawbacks (potential costs involved, adaptations, little information about legal standing/requirements, negative impact on business).
- Context/fit of person’s condition and job requirements.
- Do you think that these opinions are common to your employment sector?
- If you wanted to employ someone with a:
  - Mental health condition.
  - Physical health condition or disability for this vacancy, is there anything that you would you have to do, change, or overcome?
- From your perspective, how realistic would it be for you to adapt the work environment or the specific role you wanted filled for someone with a health condition or disability?
  - Probe nature of condition.
  - Probe physical or mental ill health or disability.
- Have you ever had to adapt the work environment to retain an existing employee?
  - Why?
  - Why not?
- Do you have any experience of employing or working with people with long-term health conditions or people who are disabled?

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- Have you ever received any employment applications from someone who has made it known to you in their application that they have a health condition?
  - Explore their response to application(s).
- Do your job adverts have information on equal opportunities contained in them?
- Have you ever interviewed someone who has told you at that stage that they have a health condition?
  - Explore response.
- Are you aware of any local help or initiatives or government help or incentives available to enable employers to take on disabled people/people with a health condition?
  - How did you hear about them/not know about them?
  - How useful are they/not?
  - Probe: Consistency of these messages.
- What would you say the biggest uncertainties are for you in employing (more) disabled people?
  - Which of these do you think is most important?
  - Probe hierarchy.
  - Potential sensitivities (terminology; fear of litigation)?
- Is there any help or information that would encourage you to think about employing disabled people/people with health conditions?
- Is it the role of employers to take on disabled people?
- Probe: Sense of responsibility to local community.
- Do you feel it is the role of Government to help SMEs employ disabled people?
- What do you think of the following ways of encouraging you to employ disabled people?
  - Selection and interview support.
  - Work trials.
  - Employment subsidies.
  - Support for adjustments.
  - In work health support.

- What do you think is the most effective way for Government to help your firm to employ disabled people?
- What do you think is the most effective way for Government to help SMEs in your sector to employ disabled people?
- What do you think of the following arguments for employing disabled people – do they relate to way your business operates on a day to day basis?
  - Increase in diversity.
  - Impact upon staff.
  - Reflection on employer.

Thank them for their time.

Remind them that we will be organising focus groups of employers and that we will contact them nearer the time to invite them to participate.

## Qualitative study of employers’ recruitment decisions: SMEs

### Topic guide: Focus groups with employers

#### **Interviewer’s introduction**

- Explain that the aim of this study is to learn more about how employers in small and medium sized enterprises make recruitment decisions. The study is funded by the Department for Work and Pensions who are interested in finding out what informs recruitment decisions and how this relates to employing disabled people, or people with health conditions. The findings will inform how government might support and engage with small and medium firms in the future.
- The research is being carried out in two different locations in the UK. All locations, firms and employers will be anonymised in the final report and all data held will be treated in accordance with the Data Protection Act.
- The Social Policy Research Unit is an independent organisation.
- This focus group forms the second phase of research for this study.
- Our discussion today will concentrate on:
  - The main themes arising from the individual interviews
  - The role of the employer in recruiting disabled people
  - The role of Government in supporting SMEs to recruit disabled people
  - Policy recommendations for the future
- The discussion will take around 60-120 minutes and there will be a refreshment break.
- Ask for permission to use recorder. Explain that recordings will be typed up professionally and seen only by the research team.
- Reiterate how material will be used – a report for DWP in which their views are included, but they will be anonymous.
- Taking part is completely voluntary.
- Establish ground rules for the group discussion: that we treat each other in a respectful manner, each person is given a chance to air their opinion and we agree to maintain confidentiality within the group.

If asked what we mean by ‘complying with the Data Protection Act’ explain that we will:

- keep all data in a secure environment;
  - allow only members of the research team (including administrators and transcribers) access to the data; and
  - keep the data only as long as is necessary for the purposes of the research and then destroy it.
-

## 1. Major themes arising from the research

I would like to check some of the main findings from the research with you. This is to make sure I have understood what you have told me in the interviews I did with you and to give you the opportunity to add anything you think I may have missed.

1.a) Is it fair to say that the main things SME employers consider when selecting candidates for interview are:

- Locality.
- Indicators of stability and reliability.
  - Length of tenure in previous jobs.
- Competence:
  - Experience.
  - Skills.
- Age.
- CV construction:
  - Neat.
  - No spelling mistakes.

1.b) Are there any other factors?

1.c) Why are these factors important?

- Needs of business.
- Personal preference.

1.d) Is it possible to rank the factors above in order of importance?

1.e) Is it fair to say that the main things SME employers consider when recruiting a candidate are:

- Flexibility:
  - In attitude.
  - In being willing to undertake a number of roles (lack of economies of scale).
  - Flexibility even more important in a recession.
- Competence:
  - Can they do the job asked of them/ability.
  - Do they have the skills/experience needed.
- Reliability:
  - Will they be here when I need them to be/when they say they will.
- Stability:
  - Will they stay in the job more than a couple of months.
  - Is their personal life stable (child/care; ill-health; relationships); otherwise affects reliability.

- Locality:
  - Are they local enough to avoid transport problems.
  - Minimum wage difficult to fund long commutes to work.
  - Commitment to local area.
- Attitude to work:
  - Do they have a strong work ethic?
- Personality/general attitude:
  - Will they ‘fit in’ with the rest of staff/work culture.
  - Will I like them.

1.f) Are there any other factors?

1.g) Is it possible to rank the factors above in order of importance?

1.h) Why are these factors important?

- Needs of business.
- Personal preference.

1.i) Is it fair to say that the main uncertainties SME employers have in recruiting (more) disabled people are:

- The built environment.
- Risks to productivity leading to loss of profit, loss of business.
- Risks to the health of the disabled person.
- Risks of breaching work-related legislation.
- Risks of offending customers/staff.
- Impact on the work load of other staff possibly leading to unrest.

1.j) Any other factors?

1.k) Is it possible to rank the factors above in order of importance?

## **2. Employing disabled people**

In this section I would like you to think about what role SMEs should take in employing disabled people and how best Government might facilitate this.

2.a) What should SMEs role be in employing disabled people?

- Is it the role of SMEs to employ disabled workers?

2.b) Thinking about what SMEs role should be in employing disabled people, how could Government best support that?

- Is it the Government’s role to encourage/support SMEs in employing disabled workers?
- What is it reasonable of Government to expect SMEs to do in relation to employing disabled people?

What would you consider to be reasonable changes to make for employing disabled people?

What would you consider to be unreasonable changes to make for employing disabled people?

2.c) Thinking about the factors that influence your recruitment practices, how persuasive do you find the following arguments for employing disabled people?

- Brings diversity; a range of different people with different backgrounds to the workforce.
- Disabled workers are as productive as non-disabled workers.
- Enhances the employer reputation/image.
- Shows employer commitment to workforce.
- Has a positive impact on staff morale.
- More innovation due to diversity and different viewpoints.

2.d) Thinking about the range of factors that influence your recruitment decisions – would the following services be useful in enabling you to employ a disabled person?

- Disability employment advisor to offer advice accessible through Jobcentre Plus.
- Payment for adaptations to premises and equipment.
- Grants to help towards employment costs for the first six weeks.
- Assigned job broker to supply capable disabled candidates after discussion with employers.
- Workshops aimed at informing and dispelling misconceptions around disability issues (allowing employers to ask questions, etc).
- Recruitment strategy seminars tailored to individual employers with the intention of making companies recruitment policies more receptive to disabled employees run by Jobcentre Plus.
- Online employer ‘toolkit’ that is a comprehensive guide to employing disabled people.

Probe as to why/not useful.

### **3. Policy recommendations**

3.a) If you were asked to compile and put forward policy recommendations to Government to get SMEs to employ disabled people, what would they be and why?

- If needed, prompt with ideas raised by employers in interviews:
  - Encourage disabled people to apply for jobs.
  - A body set up to survey working conditions of the SME employer, assess the job role and offer advice on its suitability for different disabilities/health conditions.
  - Help with interviewing techniques/training for employers as relates to disabled people.
  - Reduce prejudice in society against disabled people/integrate disabled people earlier into mainstream.
  - Help post recruitment (to integrate disabled people, staff information talks, for example).
  - Legislative changes (lessen risk to employer of being sued).
  - Monetary incentives.

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3.b) How would these suggestions work in practice?

- Explore detail of suggestions.

3.c) If you had to pick one service or option to recommend, which would it be?

- Why?

Thank participants for their time.

Check they are happy for their views to be included.

## Qualitative study of employers’ recruitment decisions: SMEs

### Topic guide: follow-up telephone interview with employers

#### **Interviewer’s introduction**

- Explain that the aim of this study is to learn more about how employers in small and medium sized enterprises make recruitment decisions. The study is funded by the Department for Work and Pensions who are interested in finding out what informs recruitment decisions and how this relates to employing disabled people, or people with health conditions. The findings will inform how government might support and engage with small and medium firms in the future.
- The research is being carried out in two different locations in the UK. All locations; firms and employers will be anonymised in the final report and all data held will be treated in accordance with the Data Protection Act.
- The Social Policy Research Unit is an independent organisation.
- This interview forms the second phase of research for this study.
- Our discussion today will concentrate on:
  - The main themes arising from the individual interviews.
  - The role of the employer in recruiting disabled people.
  - The role of Government in supporting SMEs to recruit disabled people.
  - Policy recommendations for the future.
- The discussion will take around 30-40 minutes.
- Ask for permission to use recorder. Explain that recordings will be typed up professionally and seen only by the research team.
- Reiterate how material will be used – a report for DWP in which their views are included, but they will be anonymous.
- Taking part is completely voluntary.

If asked what we mean by ‘complying with the Data Protection Act’ explain that we will:

- keep all data in a secure environment;
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## **1. Major themes arising from the research**

I would like to check some of the main findings from the research with you. This is to make sure I have understood what you have told me in the interviews I did with you and to give you the opportunity to add anything you think I may have missed.

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- Locality.
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  - Length of tenure in previous jobs.
- Competence:
  - Experience.
  - Skills.
- Age.
- CV construction:
  - Neat.
  - No spelling mistakes.

1.b) Are there any other factors?

1.c) Why are these factors important?

- Needs of business.
- Personal preference.

1.d) Is it possible to rank the factors above in order of importance?

1.e) Is it fair to say that the main things SME employers consider when recruiting a candidate are:

- Flexibility:
  - In attitude.
  - In being willing to undertake a number of roles (lack of economies of scale).
  - Flexibility even more important in a recession.
- Competence:
  - Can they do the job asked of them/ability.
  - Do they have the skills/experience needed.
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- Stability:
  - Will they stay in the job more than a couple of months.
  - Is their personal life stable (child/care; ill-health; relationships); otherwise affects reliability.

- Locality:
  - Are they local enough to avoid transport problems.
  - Minimum wage difficult to fund long commutes to work.
  - Commitment to local area.
- Attitude to work:
  - Do they have a strong work ethic?
- Personality/general attitude:
  - Will they ‘fit in’ with the rest of staff/work culture.
  - Will I like them.

1.f) Are there any other factors?

1.g) Is it possible to rank the factors above in order of importance?

1.h) Why are these factors important?

- Needs of business
- Personal preference

1.i) Is it fair to say that the main uncertainties SME employers have in recruiting (more) disabled people are:

- The built environment.
- Risks to productivity leading to loss of profit, loss of business.
- Risks to the health of the disabled person.
- Risks of breaching work-related legislation.
- Risks of offending customers/staff.
- Impact on the work load of other staff possibly leading to unrest.

1.j) Any other factors?

1.k) Is it possible to rank the factors above in order of importance?

## **2. Employing disabled people**

I would now like you to think about what role SMEs should take in employing disabled people and how best Government might facilitate this.

2.a) What should SMEs role be in employing disabled people?

- Is it the role of SMEs to employ disabled workers?

2.b) Thinking about what SMEs role should be in employing disabled people, how could Government best support that?

- Is it the Government’s role to encourage/support SMEs in employing disabled workers?
- What is it reasonable of Government to expect SMEs to do in relation to employing disabled people?

What would you consider to be reasonable changes to make for employing disabled people?

What would you consider to be unreasonable changes to make for employing disabled people?

2.c) Thinking about the factors that influence your recruitment practices, how persuasive do you find the following arguments for employing disabled people?

- Brings diversity; a range of different people with different backgrounds to the workforce.
- Disabled workers are as productive as non-disabled workers.
- Enhances the employer reputation/image.
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- Recruitment strategy seminars tailored to individual employers with the intention of making companies recruitment policies more receptive to disabled employees run by Jobcentre Plus.
- Online employer ‘toolkit’ that is a comprehensive guide to employing disabled people.

Probe as to why/not useful.

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  - Help with interviewing techniques/training for employers as relates to disabled people.
  - Reduce prejudice in society against disabled people/integrate disabled people earlier into mainstream.
  - Help post recruitment (to integrate disabled people, staff information talks, for example).
  - Legislative changes (lessen risk to employer of being sued).
  - Monetary incentives.

3.b) How would these suggestions work in practice?

- Explore detail of suggestions.

3.c) If you had to pick one service or option to recommend, which would it be?

- Why?

Thank participants for their time.

Check they are happy for their views to be included.

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This report presents findings from a qualitative study concerned with exploring the recruitment decisions of employers in small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in the UK and how these might relate to the employment of disabled people.

Data for the study was generated with 30 SME employers. The methods used included in-depth interviews with employers before and after they had made their recruitment decision, focus groups with, and follow-up telephone interviews with, a selection of employers.

The findings highlight the factors influencing the recruitment decisions of SME employers, their attitudes and experiences of employing disabled people and their perceptions of the validity of arguments for employing disabled people. The report concludes with a discussion of the policy implications which arise from the findings.

If you would like to know more about DWP research, please contact:  
Kate Callow, Commercial Support and Knowledge Management Team,  
Upper Ground Floor, Steel City House, West Street, Sheffield, S1 2GQ.  
<http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rrs-index.asp>

**DWP** Department for  
Work and Pensions

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Published by the  
Department for Work and Pensions  
July 2011  
[www.dwp.gov.uk](http://www.dwp.gov.uk)  
Research report no. 754  
ISBN 978-1-84712-989-5