

© Emerald Publishing Limited. This AAM is provided for your own personal use only. It may not be used for resale, reprinting, systematic distribution, emailing, or for any other commercial purpose without the permission of the publisher.

The following publication Chan, J. and McGinley, S. (2024), "How position level, hotel classification and brand category affect attitudes toward disabled colleagues", *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, Vol. 36 No. 12, pp. 4357-4376 is published by Emerald and is available at <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJCHM-02-2024-0204>.

**Title:** How Position Level, Hotel Classification, and Brand Category Affect Attitudes Towards Disabled Colleagues

**Purpose** – Due to the global labor shortage, the labor-heavy and high turnover hospitality industry is now recruiting from nontraditional sources. This study investigated the views of people in the hotel industry to better understand how people with disabilities can obtain jobs in the hotel industry and how they are treated.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The study employed a constructivist approach to grounded theory. Interviews were conducted with senior managers, middle managers, and line-level employees at both internationally branded and locally branded hotels and who worked at upscale and midscale hotels to tell their perspectives about recruiting and working with people with disabilities.

**Findings** – Senior managers showed positive attitudes towards hiring people with disabilities but lacked pragmatic considerations about their integration into teams. Middle managers were the most hesitant, primarily due to practical concerns about accommodating their workplace needs. Line-level staff at midscale hotels were more open to working with colleagues with disabilities compared to those at high-end properties.

**Originality/value** – Limited research has been conducted on the broad perspectives regarding workers with disabilities in the hospitality industry. The study reveals not only the impact of managerial level on managers' perspectives, but also how hotel class influenced the views of the co-workers and potential co-workers of people with disabilities. These distinctions not only help to advance our theoretical understanding of careers and hospitality labor markets but also inform operators on how to best integrate and recruit people with disabilities.

**Keywords:** inclusive workplace/ disabled worker/ position level/ hotel classification/ brand category

Article Type: Research paper

## 1. Introduction

The severe labor shortage in the hospitality industry has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. After surveying over 200 hotels, the American Hotel & Lodging Association revealed that 87% of the respondents encountered staff shortages (McKinsey & Company, 2023). Retaining experienced staff and recruiting new staff are both challenging nowadays. During the pandemic, some have the hotels implemented a furlough scheme for experienced staff to streamline their operations, however as the tourism business bounces back, the industry is struggling to bring back their furloughed staff (Kwok, 2022). This also creates challenges to hire new staff from a major part of the workforce, Generation Z as they prioritize freedom and well-being over work, which is incompatible with the labor-intensive characteristics of the hospitality industry (Kwok, 2022). The labor shortage is an issue that pre-dates the pandemic, but became a more salient issue during the economic recovery period after economies re-opened due to surging hospitality demand (Kwok, 2022). The recovery after the global pandemic caused by COVID-19, has created pressure on many hospitality employers to fill vacant positions, which may create the motivation for managers to look for nontraditional workers.

Individuals with various disabilities are potential employees in the labor-intensive hospitality sector, with many companies making efforts to hire and accommodate them. Marriott International has human resource policies of hiring people with disabilities and has found these employees often have a strong work ethic, concentration, and longer employee tenure than their counterparts (Houtenville & Kalargyrou, 2012). Hilton has a program called "DiversityInc's Hall of Fame" that aims to create an inclusive environment for all employees, including those with disabilities (Hilton, 2022). In addition, hiring people with disabilities can be seen as a strategy that has strengthened the public images of both Marriott and Hilton as inclusive and socially responsible employers (Gajjar & Okumus, 2018). Despite the hospitality sector's strides in hiring people with disabilities, it is still not as prevalent as it could be. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, people with disabilities have a labor force participation rate of 41.5%, compared to 77.8% for those without disabilities (ODEP, 2023). However, among the people in the job market, the unemployment rate for people with disabilities is beyond twice that of their able-bodied peers, 7.8%, compared to 3.3% (ODEP, 2023).

Literature in hospitality management has examined various challenges to hiring people with disabilities. Manoharan (2023) conducted a comprehensive literature review of the peer-reviewed papers published between 1990 and 2021 on the recruitment and retention of employees with disabilities in the hospitality industry. They discovered this kind of literature has not been thoroughly integrated to the greater hospitality canon to date, with just fewer than 5% of these articles focused on disability diversity (Manoharan, 2023). Typically, these publications have kept a concentration on specific types of disabilities in respective departments like Food & Beverage, along with their case studies (Lindsay et al., 2018). Additionally, amidst these studies, 64% are dominated by a common methodological approach, which was to collect qualitative data from senior management (Manoharan, 2023). The previous findings do not consider the attitudes regarding how other employees from other position levels, like middle management and line-level employees, feel about working with disabled staff.

In this regard, the extant literature has three major uncertainties that this study aims to supplement. The first of which, is most of the evidence on disabled workers in hospitality comes from the United States and Canada, with additional evidence from Western countries like the UK, Australia, and New Zealand, making our understanding of the phenomenon disproportionately grounded in

Western populations (Feerasta, 2017). To address this concern we collected data from mainland China, which has received little to no attention on the topic (Manoharan, 2023). The second, is to contrast senior managers' views on hiring and working with people with disabilities with that of managers and fellow colleagues from lower position levels. We argue that other colleagues including supervisors from middle management to line-level employees who directly work and collaborate with disabled staff, have valuable insights, and may view the phenomenon differently than senior managers. Finally, the extant literature has investigated disabled staff mostly from well-known hotel companies, such as Marriott International (Houtenville & Kalargyrou, 2012; Manoharan, 2023). Because large companies like Marriott have standardized human resources practices, we doubt that hotels from different classifications and brand categories would have different views on hiring and working with people who have a disability. Consequently, this study contrasts the perspective of managers from large international hotel companies with smaller independent properties to provide a comparative view of how hotel companies view disabled workers. The study examines three groups: 1) senior management (e.g., general managers (GM), human resources (HR) and department heads); 2) middle management (i.e., supervisors); and 3) fellow colleagues from both heart of house and front of house departments. Furthermore, this study compares each group from the hotel classification (upscale versus midscale) and brand category (international versus independent). The findings of all groups and their comparisons are salubrious to the industry both theoretically and practically.

## **2. Literature Review**

### ***2.1 Disabilities recruitment in the hospitality industry***

Disability refers to an imbalance between a person's physical characteristics and the characteristics of their surroundings. Depending on the disability type, individuals with different kind of disabilities can excel in a wide range of roles within the hospitality industry. For example, people with physical disabilities, like wheelchair or crutch users, can work in roles needing less physical effort, like call center or reservation agent (Lindsay et al., 2018). People with intellectual disabilities (e.g. down syndrome, or with an IQ score between 50 and 69) can work in roles that do not require complex decision-making, matching their abilities and skills (Feerasta, 2017). The possible job opportunities include housekeeping, laundry services, or food preparation. For those with mental health or learning disabilities, the hands-on tasks that involve clear instructions and allow for repetition and routine, such as simple cooking, maintenance or cleaning are feasible options.

While various disabilities can fit diverse hospitality roles, literature focuses narrowly on specific disability employment (Manoharan, 2023). Feerasta (2017) investigated how personal traits of intellectually disabled individuals working in restaurants contribute to successful employment. Stokar (2017) explored hiring and workplace accommodation for deaf individuals in food service, comparing it with other hospitality sectors. However, hospitality employers' attitudes towards hiring disabled people go beyond disability type, considering the image impact of visible or invisible disabilities. The term aesthetic anxiety describes a negative perception that people with visible disabilities would make one's business less appealing to customers, and result in prejudicial hiring decisions (Jasper & Waldhart, 2013). As revealed by Gröschl (2005), aesthetic anxiety refers to some employers having negative or even discriminatory beliefs about hiring people with disabilities, due to a belief that hiring those individuals could destroy the carefully curated

aesthetics of the hotel. Nonetheless, hotels have departments that are visible to customers, such as the front desk, and those that operate behind the scenes, such as call centers and housekeeping. Given this division of labor, it is vital for hotel management to consider how disabled individuals can contribute to individual and organizational success. For instance, how might concerns about aesthetics or other factors influence their approach to inclusive recruitment of individuals with disabilities?

## ***2.2 Considerations of working with disabilities in the hospitality workforce***

Hospitality scholarship has discussed the challenges of successfully integrating staff with disabilities into the operation. One stream of research has emphasized the need for organizational changes to integrate new staff who may function differently and face bias due to their condition. In order to foster greater acceptance of and willingness to support colleagues with disabilities, Jasper and Waldhart (2013) and Kwan (2020) mention the necessity of providing supervisory staff and colleagues with disability awareness training. The specific initiatives include pre-vocational support, such as teaching job-readiness and soft skills, safety training (Houtenville & Kalargyrou, 2015), and on-the-job coaching with on-going support for disabled staff (Kalargyrou, 2014). Yet, in the context of working with disabilities, discussions are highly related to capability, suggesting how staff with and without disabilities would work communally. Frequently, these studies share the common viewpoints from senior management, that relates to HR strategies (Manoharan, 2023).

However, a harmonious workplace with disabilities needs more than senior management buy-in. The Social Integration Theory (SIT) provides a framework for understanding how diverse groups can come together to form a more unified and inclusive society. The theory can be encapsulated as guiding principles that dictate the interactions and relationships between individuals and groups within the broader societal context (Riches & Green, 2003). It emphasizes the importance of norms, beliefs, and values in forming a collective consciousness, which is a shared way of understanding and behaving in the world. This shared consciousness unites individuals and fosters social cohesion. Hence, from the point of SIT, the co-workers including supervisors and fellow colleagues are vital to successful on-boarding and their considerations need greater discussion in the scholarly conversation. Through the exploration of hiring people with disabilities in hotels in Canada, Gröschl (2005) found that a lack of knowledge of how effective disabled staff can be, lack of communication between co-workers and disabled colleagues, stereotyping and stigmas about disabilities are common thoughts among colleagues. While Gröschl (2005) revealed these concerns about working with disabilities seem pertinent, his data mainly came from “Hotel Human Resources Professional Association”, that is again, from the senior management perspective. Within this scope, it remains unclear whether other colleagues, including supervisors, and co-workers are open to working with diverse disabilities, or if their views match the hotel’s philosophy and brand category.

## ***2.3 The impacts of hotel classification and brand category***

Hospitality researchers have applied Resource-Based View (RBV), to understanding the recruitment of staff with disabilities (Houtenville & Kalargyrou, 2012, 2015). The RBV suggests that a company's competitive advantage lies in its ability to utilize its resources and these resources should be worthwhile, uncommon, inimitable, and irreplaceable to provide a sustainable

competitive advantage (Kraaijenbrink et al., 2010). From the standpoint of RBV, human capital can be deemed as a prime resource of competitive advantage, which includes the experience, judgment, training, relationships, intelligence, and insights of a company. By possessing competitive human capital resources, company can enhance interpersonal relationships, foster a positive corporate culture, and improve its reputation among employees, suppliers, and customers (Gerhart & Feng, 2021). Within the suppositions of RBV, scholars have accepted the premise that larger and international companies are more active in disability recruitment, practices, and strategies. As argued by Bruyere et al (2006), larger firms with more resources can better support diversity and inclusion, whereas smaller ones not hire disabled individuals due to cost restrictions associated with their onboarding.

Based on RBV, the Job Demands-Resources model (JD-R) highlights the balance between job demands and resources in maintaining employee well-being and performance (Schaufeli, 2017). The JD-R model is a comprehensive approach that focuses on the equilibrium between job demands and resources, which is crucial for maintaining employee well-being and optimizing performance. Job demands refer to the physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of a job that require sustained physical or mental effort. Examples include workload, time pressure, and emotional demands. These demands can potentially lead to certain physiological or psychological costs, such as exhaustion or burnout (Schaufeli, 2017). Conversely, job resources are the physical, psychological, social, or organizational elements of a job that aid in meeting work objectives, lowering job demands and related costs, and promoting personal growth (Schaufeli, 2017). Examples of job resources include feedback, autonomy, and support from colleagues or supervisors. The JD-R model suggests that an imbalance, where job demands outweigh job resources, can lead to strain and health problems, such as burnout. Contrarywise, when job resources are sufficient to meet job demands, it can lead to high work engagement, job satisfaction, and improved performance.

Hence, both RBV and JD-R elucidate several competitive advantages of why large and international hotels (e.g. Hilton and Marriott) are more proactive in inclusive recruitment for people with disabilities (Houtenville & Kalargyrou, 2015). First, research has demonstrated a positive association between a supportive workplace, which fosters a sense of psychological safety, heightens employee engagement and subsequently is associated with a decrease in employee turnover (Houtenville & Kalargyrou, 2012, 2015). Supporting this, statistics reveal that in large hotel chains, employees with disabilities have significantly lower turnover rates at 6%, compared to their non-disabled counterparts, who have a turnover rate of 52% (Fredeen et al., 2013). Second, large and international hotel brands often prioritize their reputation and image, thus employing staff with disabilities can enhance their image as an inclusive and socially responsible company (Gajjar & Okumus, 2018). Third, there is a correlation between enhanced reputation and customer loyalty. By hiring inclusively, hotels can showcase a unique competitive advantage that is difficult for competitors to replicate (Houtenville & Kalargyrou, 2012). Consequently, hotels can reap numerous internal and external benefits from inclusive hiring practices.

While numerous studies have examined the proactive inclusive recruitment practices of large and international hotels, there is a lack of specific identification and discussion regarding hotel classification and brand category (Manoharan, 2023). This research is motivated by the unanswered questions surrounding attitudes and strategies towards hiring staff with disabilities in the hotel industry. Potentially, international midscale and upscale hotel brands may have different strategies for recruiting and programs to work with disabled staff; however, the views of their

senior managers, middle managers, and line-level team members may perceive the issue differently. Likewise, the independent (i.e., local) hotels or branded properties that are seldom discussed in the extant literature pertaining to their recruitment and work programs for people with disabilities will also be contrasted against their larger multinational peers. Therefore this study seeks to answer three fundamental questions regarding the hospitality labor force: 1) How do workers at all levels of the organization feel about recruiting and working with team members with disabilities; 2) What differences are there between peoples' perceptions of recruiting and working with people with disabilities between workers and managers at upscale and mid-scale hotels, and; 3) How do individuals' perceptions about recruiting and working with people with disabilities change between large international hotel brands and smaller brands and independent properties? Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework for this study.

### **3. Methodology**

This study uses a qualitative approach to deeply understand inclusive workplaces for disabled individuals in the hospitality industry. A similar approach has also been adopted by several researchers in examining how the needs of the disabled are a matter of concern in hospitality studies (Zhao et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2024). Understanding idiosyncratic experiences, attitudes, and motivations is particularly important when studying workers with disabilities as each set of circumstances is unique. As each disability is unique so to the social norms surrounding each condition meaning the experience of a mobility impaired individual in a wheelchair may be vastly different based on the society in which that person is working. Accordingly, grounded theory was used to explain the views of hiring and working with disabled staff from different perspectives in the organization. Grounded theory is a methodology designed to develop mid-level theories and clarify social actions for specific phenomena (Holton, 2007). In this context, grounded theory could aid in understanding the experiences and processes of hiring and working with disabled staff at various levels. This research also investigates how hotel type and brand category affect the advantages and challenges of employing disabled staff, and their interaction with factors like company culture, management practices, colleagues' attitudes, and legal and social contexts. The analytical technique employed was in the constructivist tradition developed by Mills et al. (2006) and advocated by Charmaz (2008).

#### ***3.1 Data Collection***

Adhering to the principle of theoretical sampling, which is integral to a grounded theory approach, this study utilized both purposive and snowball sampling methods (Creswell, 2012). Respondents were recruited from October to December 2023. Participants were drawn from the author's professional networks, and interviews were conducted until theoretical saturation was achieved, meaning no new insights were emerging from the responses. We interviewed individuals who were senior management, middle management, and line-level team members, from different hotel departments including both front-of-house and heart-of-house departments in Hong Kong. To preserve the anonymity of respondents' participation, respondents received pseudonyms. Table 1 presents the profiles of 57 respondents, including their hotel classification and brand category.

In the context of research methods using interviews for data collection, this conceptual framework (Figure 1) guides the structure of the interviews and the analysis of the data collected. In-depth

interviews were carried out via face-to-face, Microsoft Teams and over the telephone in the respondent's native languages. Around an hour was allotted for each interview. Data were collected via crafted semi-structured interviews consisting of open-ended questions. This structure allowed the interviewer to probe further into the responses, providing the interviewees with the opportunity to narrate their experiences, a key component to using a constructivist approach to grounded theory (the interview protocol is attached in the supplementary material). With participant approval, interviews were recorded, transcribed, and translated into English. We documented our process with field notes and memos alongside transcriptions, with initial coding notes kept on the transcript margins (Myers & Newman, 2007).

### **3.2 Data Analysis**

This study uses grounded theory to examine perspectives on employing and collaborating with disabled individuals across different hotel roles, types, and brands. Figure 2 presents a methodological procedure. This procedure hinges on thoroughness, ensuring interview transcripts are carefully reviewed and broken down for effective analysis (Kendall, 1999). The second focus is on inter-category relationships, setting criteria for category integration and refinement (Kendall, 1999). The aim is to develop a comprehensive theory that elucidates the relationships between these categories. Following the coding procedures suggested by Holton (2007), we first started the initial open coding line-by-line. While performing the initial coding of the interview transcriptions and memos, we managed to: 1) pinpoint the main elements in the data from the viewpoints of senior to middle management to colleagues, 2) clarify the importance of the points from the specific terms mentioned, 3) find ways to categorize the data, and 4) identify any gaps in the data for future theoretical sampling needs. After initial coding, focused coding was used to evaluate these codes. Using the "axial coding" technique, themes were identified from the literature on inclusive recruitment and working with disabled staff, leading to the discovery of core categories in the emerging theory (Kendall, 1999). We developed categories related to the causal conditions (i.e., disabilities recruitment concerns, competencies), strategies (i.e., training or accommodating strategies), intervening conditions (i.e., stereotypes, stigmas), and consequences (i.e., performance, productivity) to build the conceptual model of the data.

We used the constant comparative method in our analysis. Initially, we compared data to identify similarities and differences. In the axial coding phase, we integrated data to understand the dynamics of an inclusive workplace and related it to existing theories. Through these steps, we successfully grouped sub-categories into overarching themes (Holton, 2007). Table 2 displays the frequency of the mentioned themes. We also employed process analysis to ascertain the sequence and intensity of discussions about an inclusive workplace for individuals with disabilities. Table 3 further details the trustworthiness elements used in the study.

## **4. Findings**

### **4.1. General Findings**

During the recovery period after the COVID-19 pandemic, the hospitality industry is experiencing an acute labor shortage (Kwok, 2022) and challenges in recruitment for hospitality firms. In response to this labor shortage, all respondents agreed that hiring disabled staff not only helps to fill vacancies but also promotes a hotel's reputation with diversity and inclusion within the

industry. Despite all respondents being supportive that recruitment of people with disabilities is feasible, they all considered that disabled staff have certain limitations that affect productivity. A director of human resources of an international chain hotel stated:

“The limitations of disabled staff can vary greatly depending on the nature and severity of their disability. The most common limitations of disabled staff include physical, sensory, and cognitive. Meanwhile, whether hotels can accommodate them is another limitation, such as accessibility, professional knowledge about that kind of disability, and communication.” (P1).

Overall, respondents from international hotels (P1, P6, P7, P9, P11) have a more proactive approach and longer history of hiring disabled individuals than independent hotels. Diverse attitudes towards hiring and working with disabled individuals are observed in midscale or upscale hotels, depending on the employee's role and job nature (P1-P57).

## **4.2. Variations among hotels:**

### **4.2.1. *International versus Independent Hotels***

Respondents have provided several reasons why international branded hotels are more proactive, comprehensive, and aggressive in employing staff with disabilities compared to independent locally branded hotels. Management teams from international hotels have indicated that these brands often comply with CSR, global standards, and regulations. These may include diversity and inclusion policies that promote the hiring of staff with disabilities (P1, P4, P18, P19). A rooms division manager of an international branded hotel mentioned that:

“Our hotel group is an American multinational enterprise and was recognized as the first company for diversity across the hospitality industry. In Hong Kong, more than 15 years ago, we have been hiring staff with disabilities, we are renowned and experienced in this and have plenty of resources, like training, accessible facilities, and enough staff without concerns related to disabilities to support.” (P4).

Compared to international hotels, hiring staff with disabilities requires greater resources due to the lack of experience and corporate training and infrastructure that come with multinational companies. Independent hotels with more limited resources pursue a more conservative approach in inclusive recruitment (P7, P9, P11, P25, P31, P33). A senior human capital officer of an independent branded hotel explained the differences:

“I’ve been working in the hotel industry for 29-year. Previously, I worked in a French hotel group. I agree that this local brand hotel is not that active comparatively in hiring disabled staff. I think the main reason is the number of resources. There are various resources needed, e.g., training, and accessible facilities, job coaches or support staff. However, I don’t think the local brand hotels can afford all of these, we are short on regular staff in the meantime, not even can we have additional manpower to train or assist disabled staff.” (P11).

Considering the difference in resources, international and independent hotels have unique strategies for the percentage of disabled staff. Both agree that due to productivity limitations and the extra resources needed for disabled staff, the ratio should not surpass 10%. Specifically, international hotels find a ratio up to 10% appropriate (P1, P3, P5, P6, P17), while independent hotels deem a ratio less than 5% manageable (P29, P31, P33, P34).



### **4.3. Variations among hotel classifications and employee's position level.**

#### ***4.3.1. Senior management considerations of upscale versus midscale hotels***

Regardless of hotel brand category, senior managers of upscale hotels have adopted disparate strategies compared to midscale hotels when it comes to recruiting disabled staff. Mostly, the senior management of upscale hotels have a more pronounced commitment to CSR (P1-P6, P11-13). They not only hire more staff with different types of disabilities but are also open to implementing this approach across more departments and collaborate closely with non-profit organizations (NGOs). A director of talent and culture of an upscale hotel stated that:

“Recently, we hired a group of 5-6 staff with Down syndrome in the housekeeping team. All were introduced and trained by the local NGO. These employees are specifically responsible for bedding tasks, rather than the full range of duties typically assigned to housekeeping attendants. Our hotel is hiring staff with other types of disabilities, like people with mild mental disorder or ADHD to serve as waiter/waitress at our fine dining restaurant. We are pioneering this inclusive hiring approach among Hong Kong hotels, hoping to inspire others to recruit more staff with disabilities.” (P6).

Although senior managers of upscale hotels appear to be more proactive in inclusive recruitment than their counterparts in midscale hotels, managers of midscale hotels maintain positive and open attitudes toward the matter (P7-P10, P14-16). A director of HR of a midscale hotel stated that:

“Now, we have just one employee working at the kitchen for dish washing and she is deaf. Our hotel would consider hiring more other types of disabled staff to work, if they are capable of that position.” (P9).

When asked how the midscale hotel might implement such consideration into practices so staff with other types of disabilities would be employed and whether collaborating with local NGOs would be feasible, that director answered:

“Sounds a good idea! But we are not doing this now, if possible, I may raise this idea someday. So far, we hired disabled staff just based on their personal application and we haven't received many of these.” (P9).

Senior management of upscale and midscale hotels, despite their unique views on inclusive recruitment of disabled people, appear to agree that employing disabled staff would maintain the aesthetic public image. A director of social impact of an upscale hotel expressed:

“Although most of our disabled staff are now working in back offices, we don't think having staff with visual impairments to work in the front line, such as someone using a wheelchair working at reception or wearing a hearing aid at a restaurant would be a negative impact to our customers.” (P5).

Similar thoughts were expressed from a director of operations from a midscale hotel, she said:

“I think nowadays customers are well-educated. As long as our staff looks clean and well-groomed, it should be fine regardless of whether they are visually impaired or not.” (P16).

The senior management of both upscale and midscale hotels have a similar viewpoint regarding the legal aspects of employing disabled staff. All senior managers stated they have no concerns about the Disability Discrimination Ordinance in Hong Kong, which forbids discrimination, harassment, and vilification based on disability in various sectors, including employment (EOC,

2023). They are confident that if staff with disabilities are hired, all relevant parties, including colleagues and supervisors, will receive appropriate training and reminders about any legal issues. Consequently, senior managers from both upscale and midscale hotels have a positive outlook on workplace cohesion, thinking that supervisors and colleagues would get along well with colleagues with disabilities (P1-P4, P6, P7, P11, P14, P16).

#### ***4.3.2. Middle management considerations of upscale versus midscale hotels***

Hotel supervisors, regardless of brand category, generally support hiring disabled staff (P17-P34). They acknowledge that post-pandemic, such hiring can significantly address labor shortages and note that disabled staff are often more punctual, focused, and have lower turnover rates (P18, P23, P25, P32, P33, P34), benefiting daily operations. However, some express concerns from both internal and external perspectives (P17, P19, P21, P22, P25, P27, P32), with communication being a key issue for internal operations (P18, P19, P23, P27, P28, P31). A supervisor of laundry of an upscale hotel stated:

“In my department, we hired an attendant who is deaf and speech impaired. Her duties include washing and wrapping laundry items. I don’t care about her disabilities as long as she can handle all the tasks efficiently and she does! However, when there are some irregular tasks that need her help occasionally, like folding blankets, it’s hard to communicate with her.” (P27).

Besides the communication barrier, a supervisor of a call center at an upscale hotel indicated the internal limitations of accessibility and accommodation, he explained:

“Working in a call center, our staff don’t have to walk or face directly to customers, so I think any employees without communication problems are fine, regardless of their disabilities. Since we handle numerous calls daily, each call needs personal judgement, high communication, and language skills, so if someone has communication barriers, e.g., ADHD or intellectual disability, he/she is not practicable at all. However, if someone without a communication barrier is using a wheelchair or crutch, my concern is whether the office can accommodate that due to space considerations or any other accessible facilities are available or not, e.g., wheelchair path.” (P25).

Related to internal accessibility, an experienced supervisor of laundry working at a midscale hotel raised some concerns about flexibility, and stress management which are critical for individuals with mental or intellectual disabilities, she described:

“Before, I worked with 2 colleagues with mild intellectual disabilities. They were capable of handling ironing uniforms during low season at their designated tables. However, in the peak season, when we have much more uniforms that need to be handled, and with the same tables, the more uniforms made them stressed out. They don’t know how to be flexible in reconciling the more uniforms within their small tables and became emotional. Hence, I’d say only if the hotel is more spacious, having more resources like supporting staff, then hiring more disabled helps.” (P31).

Some supervisors, similar to stress management concerns, are particularly worried about mental disabilities and related risks, especially in work environments with hazardous objects (P17, P24, P29, P30). A supervisor of F&B operations of a midscale hotel illustrated:

“Besides productivity, some individuals diagnosed with mental illness are more of a concern for me. I heard that some people with mental illnesses, like antisocial personality disorder, schizophrenia or bipolar disorder may have violent behavior. These people sometimes cannot be identified from their appearance, and you never know when they might suddenly become dangerous. So, in terms of safety, I prefer ‘NO’ working with those, especially when we work in the kitchen, there are various kitchenware items that are sharp or hot.” (P30).

Many hotel supervisors, irrespective of the hotel's scale, share similar views on managing work and fostering workplace unity (P18-P21, P28, P31, P32). They are generally positive about supervising disabled staff, thanks to the support provided by the hotels. An assistant club lounge supervisor of a midscale hotel revealed:

“I think disabled staff, once employed, it means they can manage the job tasks required. I know there are several trainings related to communication, skills, and emotion about working with disabled colleagues. After training, I’m confident that I can be a role model, teaching disabled colleagues to pick up jobs at the beginning and showing the way to respect them mirrored by other colleagues. Thus, I think both staff with and without disabilities can work peaceably and efficiently under my supervision.” (P32).

However, in terms of guest facing activities, hotel supervisors from upscale and midscale hotels have similar conservative attitudes toward the aesthetics of the hotel (P19, P21, P23, P24, P28, P29, P30, P32, P34). The majority deem that whoever has a visible disability, such as wheelchair users, amputees, people with down syndrome or dwarfism are not appealing and even indecent from the customers’ perspective (P18, P19, P21, P24, P28, P29, P32). Therefore, individuals with visible disabilities, were not considered suitable for working in front line positions, e.g., reception, restaurants, lounge, and public areas. A front desk supervisor of an upscale hotel stated:

“Perhaps this is not a good idea to have visible disabled staff working at the front desk. As receptionists commonly have a professional image and appearance. It’s not a discrimination but it would be a concern from some customers’ perspectives.” (P28).

Expanding the concern of aesthetics from not just visual impression but overall hospitality image, a restaurant supervisor of a midscale hotel mentioned:

“Working in a restaurant is busy, you need to walk and talk quite a lot. So, although the disabled colleague can handle that physically, customers may not fully understand this from what they see and thus they may try not ask for help from those disabled colleagues. It ends up having a negative image of us or it intensifies other colleagues without disabilities and their workload.” (P29).

Briefly, supervisors hold both supportive and dissenting views regarding disabled staff at work. Compared to the mostly supportive views of senior managers, supervisors have more practical concerns and reservations about the aesthetics and hotel operations. Finally, there was no difference in views based on hotel classification.

#### ***4.3.3. Junior co-worker’s consideration of upscale versus midscale hotels***

Irrespective of hotel brand category, line-level nonsupervisory workers in both upscale and midscale hotels had different viewpoints than their managers regarding working with people who

have a disability. While senior managers of upscale hotels were optimistic and proactive in recruiting disabled staff, middle managers harbored more concerns depending on who was recruited and for what job. Participants from upscale hotels held vastly different attitudes than their managers (P35-38, P50). Most of the participants from upscale hotels were reluctant to work with disabled staff (P35-38, P46-P50). A guest services agent (club lounge) of an upscale hotel expressed the following:

“I have no experience working with disabilities and don’t wanna work with disabled colleagues at all, no matter in front of back office! For front office, I’m worried that customers would ask me ‘Why is your hotel so luxury but hires staff like that?’. I feel disgraceful when working with them in the public and personally, I don’t talk to them or even make friends with them.” (P36).

Expanding on the unsupportive view, an assistant working in food and beverage operations of an upscale hotel stated:

“Even though I work in the kitchen, preparing food and not seeing customers directly, I still don’t prefer it. I am concerned if they bring more workload to me due to their underperformance or if I would get hurt because of their mental disorder. I think they are totally different and hard to communicate with.” (P37).

Contrarily, co-workers from midscale hotels were generally more encouraging compared to their senior managers regarding working with disabled colleagues (P42, P44, P52-P54, P56, P57). Respondents of this group generally tend to encourage and view collaboration positively (P42, P44, P53, P54, P56). Despite not having solely positive views about working with disabled colleagues, co-workers from midscale hotels are inclined to being flexible instead of largely reluctant. For example, a junior cook of a midscale hotel said:

“Whenever the recruited colleagues can finish their duties, I don’t think they are different from us without disability. I have one experience working with a speech impaired individual, she has an absence of speech. I think she is helpful, sharing my duties and mitigating my workload, that’s good! Also, I don’t have much need to talk to her. My job is for simple food ingredients preparation, not much communication I need, so I don’t think anything is wrong with a disabled colleague.” (P42).

A front office trainee who also works in banquet operations of a midscale hotel also holds supportive attitudes, she answered:

“I need to handle customer enquiries regarding banquets. Sometimes through emails or meeting customers directly. If my disabled colleagues have no serious communication barrier, like an intellectual disability, I am fine working with them. I had a working experience with someone with a learning barrier. He took more time to pick up job tasks and worked slower. I understand that they may need more help, instruction, but I respect them as we are a team. Once he got familiar with the job, I am fine working with him.” (P54).

In a supportive way, a guest services assistant from a leisure department at a midscale hotel expressed her worry-free concern on aesthetics and she even considered having disabled colleagues would improve the hotel’s public image, by stating:

“My job is mostly facing customers. I think if disabled staff are hired, even if they have apparent disabilities, they are still capable of the jobs, so I don’t think the visible disability

really matters and thus customers would despise someone just because they are disabled. I'd even think, it is a positive image for us as our hotel is a socially responsible employer." (P56).

In summary, colleagues' attitudes towards disabled co-workers vary by hotel type. Junior staff in midscale hotels are more positive and synergistic than those in upscale hotels, while senior management in upscale hotels is more proactive than in midscale hotels.

## **5. Discussion and Conclusion**

The hospitality industry is acknowledging diversity and inclusion as both a social duty and a beneficial business approach. Previous literature has mostly included the viewpoints of senior managers on inclusive workplaces, and most of the relevant studies are based on large and internationally branded hotels (Manoharan, 2023). This study broadens the analysis of inclusive workplace issues by considering employees at different levels, hotel classification, and brand category. The findings provide valuable theoretical and practical insights for the hotel industry.

### **5.1. Theoretical Implications**

Applying grounded theory, this research generates a wide and in-depth understanding about inclusivity in the hotel workplace. In line with the framework of the RBV, we revealed various opinions and viewpoints that suggest managers and staff see some competitive advantages that support hiring disabled individuals, and they can help hotels with productivity and an improved image as an inclusive, pro-social employer (Houtenville & Kalargyrou, 2012, 2015). The RBV views human resources from a strategic perspective, suggesting that unique and valuable resources, such as an inclusive workforce, can provide a competitive edge, enhance a firm's reputation and alleviate labor shortages (Kraaijenbrink et al., 2010). From a RBV perspective, it is advantageous to recruit people with disabilities because they create competitive advantages for the organization. Previous studies have applied the same theoretical view of RBV on inclusivity in hotel recruitment practices (Houtenville & Kalargyrou, 2012, 2015). Adding a greater level of specificity and an in-depth analysis, this study highlights that these positive ideas are mostly from senior managers regardless of hotel class.

Similar to RBV, the JD-R emphasizes the importance of HR (Schaufeli, 2017). The JD-R highlights the balance between job demands and resources in maintaining employee well-being and performance (Schaufeli, 2017). It suggests that job demands (e.g., workload and emotional demands) should be balanced with job resources (e.g., support and feedback) to prevent burnout and promote engagement. Compared to RBV, JD-R is more specific and comprehensive in how it argues people with disabilities should be viewed not just from the contributions they bring to organizational outcomes, but the theory also discusses how to support and accommodate their needs (Chin et al., 2019). We observed that, compared to senior managers, middle managers think more along the lines of JD-R, given that supervisors review both job demands and job resources together and have both a wider set of considerations and a greater level of specificity in their considerations. The supervisors' view of aesthetic anxiety is an example. They review the aesthetic not only from the overall perspective but also go further into the department's nature and how it would be affected. Unlike senior managers, who tend to believe aesthetic anxiety is not an issue when having disabled staff in guest service roles, supervisors hold different and less inclusive views.

Compared to managers in general, the views of line-level team members were different and aligned more with SIT. The basic principle of SIT proposes that increased interaction and cooperation between diverse groups (such as disabled and non-disabled staff) can help diminish prejudice and discrimination (Riches & Green, 2003). This perspective echoes our findings. Junior staff who have had previous experience of working with disabled colleagues tend to show more promise than those who have not. However, SIT does not account for factors such as hotel classification (i.e., midscale and upscale) or brand category (i.e., international, and independent). This study introduces an additional consideration beyond personal experience, suggesting that the classification of a hotel as midscale or upscale influences how employees perceive working with disabled colleagues. Our findings indicate that employees from upscale hotels are generally more hesitant to collaborate with disabled colleagues. This suggests that an employee's self-esteem, expectations of the job requirements, and anticipation of guests' reactions, all of which are influenced by the hotel's classification, help to color the way employees view working alongside people with disabilities. We advocate that SIT is useful in explaining how personal experiences can shape judgments, but the influence of organizational and job context should also not be disregarded.

Figure 3 presents the overall theoretical results. It illustrates that senior and middle management, irrespective of hotel classification, share similar attitudes. In contrast, line-level members exhibit unique attitudes that align with their specific hotel classifications. The width of each arrow in the figure symbolizes the considerations and concerns of each position group, along with the associated underlying theory.

## **5.2. Practical Implications**

This study provides guidance on creating inclusive hospitality workplaces. It highlights concerns about disabled staff's abilities and emphasizes the need for hotels to stress competence in hiring. Offering disability awareness and sensitivity training can promote inclusivity.

Secondly, there were concerns about productivity. Merely comprehending the abilities of disabled staff is not enough; it aligns with the traditional adage that 'seeing is believing'. Therefore, we suggest that the development and implementation of policies that involve all employees would be beneficial. These policies should encourage open communication between management, co-workers across all levels, and employees with disabilities. Additionally, work-related communication, activities such as team-building can also help to build a sense of unity and cohesion among staff.

Organizations should create systems that recognize all employees' success, including those with disabilities. Rewarding attendance and consistency, where disabled employees often excel, can show their valued contributions. Meanwhile, disabled employees may face procedural challenges. For instance, maintaining clean workstations and allowing employees to manage their tasks can improve control and efficiency. Implementing diverse operational standards considering each staff's unique skills and challenges can optimize workforce potential and performance.

Workplace accessibility issues at workplaces can impact disabled employees' performance. Hotels should improve accessibility, including workspaces, beyond just ramps and lifts. After implementing these, disabled staff can be slowly integrated with other staff. Creating an inclusive

workplace requires time for adjustment. Management should consider accommodations like flexible hours and specialized equipment.

## **6. Limitations and Future Research**

A key constraint of this study is that it does not represent all midscale and upscale hotels, whether international or independent brands. The study's data was collected from a specific group of hotels and staff. It acknowledges potential discrepancies due to contextual and cultural differences, or the type of disability. Future research should consider these factors for a broader understanding of inclusive recruitment practices. It should also examine customer perceptions of employing disabled staff in different hotel types. The study encourages quantitative testing of its results to generalize findings and enhance theoretical understanding. It hopes to inspire more research on disabled staff and inclusivity, leading to beneficial strategies for both disabled individuals and hotel management.

## Reference

- Charmaz, K. (2008). Grounded theory as an emergent method. *Handbook of emergent methods*, 155, 172.
- Chin, T., et al. (2019). Career sustainability during manufacturing innovation: a review, a conceptual framework and future research agenda. *Career Development International*, 24(6), 509-528.
- Creswell, J. W. (2012). *Educational research*: pearson.
- EOC. (2023). Disability Discrimination Ordinance (Cap. 487) (DDO). Retrieved from <https://www.eoc.org.hk/en/discrimination-laws/disability-discrimination>
- Feerasta, J. (2017). Individuals with intellectual disabilities in the restaurant business: An exploratory study of attributes for success. *Journal of Human Resources in Hospitality & Tourism*, 16(1), 22-38.
- Fredeen, K. J., et al. (2013). Rethinking disability in the private sector. *Panel on Labour Market Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities*, 28.
- Gajjar, T., & Okumus, F. (2018). Diversity management: what are the leading hospitality and tourism companies reporting? *Journal of Hospitality Marketing & Management*, 27(8), 905-925.
- Gerhart, B., & Feng, J. (2021). The resource-based view of the firm, human resources, and human capital: Progress and prospects. *Journal of management*, 47(7), 1796-1819.
- Gröschl, S. (2005). Persons with disabilities: a source of nontraditional labor for Canada's hotel industry. *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, 46(2), 258-274.
- Hilton. (2022). Hilton Inducted into DiversityInc's Hall of Fame. Retrieved from <https://stories.hilton.com/releases/hilton-inducted-into-diversityincs-hall-of-fame>
- Holton, J. A. (2007). The coding process and its challenges. *The Sage handbook of grounded theory*, 3, 265-289.
- Houtenville, A., & Kalargyrou, V. (2012). People with disabilities: Employers' perspectives on recruitment practices, strategies, and challenges in leisure and hospitality. *Cornell Hospitality Quarterly*, 53(1), 40-52.
- Houtenville, A., & Kalargyrou, V. (2015). Employers' perspectives about employing people with disabilities: A comparative study across industries. *Cornell Hospitality Quarterly*, 56(2), 168-179.
- Jasper, C. R., & Waldhart, P. (2013). Employer attitudes on hiring employees with disabilities in the leisure and hospitality industry: Practical and theoretical implications. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 25(4), 577-594.
- Kalargyrou, V. (2014). Gaining a competitive advantage with disability inclusion initiatives. *Journal of Human Resources in Hospitality & Tourism*, 13(2), 120-145.
- Kendall, J. (1999). Axial coding and the grounded theory controversy. *Western journal of nursing research*, 21(6), 743-757.
- Kraaijenbrink, J., et al. (2010). The resource-based view: A review and assessment of its critiques. *Journal of management*, 36(1), 349-372.
- Kwan, C. K. (2020). Socially responsible human resource practices to improve the employability of people with disabilities. *Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management*, 27(1), 1-8.
- Kwok, L. (2022). Labor shortage: a critical reflection and a call for industry-academia collaboration. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 34(11), 3929-3943.



- Lindsay, S., et al. (2018). A systematic review of the benefits of hiring people with disabilities. *Journal of occupational rehabilitation*, 28, 634-655.
- Liu, A., et al. (2024). AI and supportive technology experiences of customers with visual impairments in hotel, restaurant, and travel contexts. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 36(1), 274-291.
- Manoharan, A., Hutchinson, C., Treuren, G. J. M., & Madera, J. M. (2023). Disability Employment in the Hospitality Industry: A Systematic Literature Review. *Cornell Hospitality Quarterly*, 0(0). doi:<https://doi.org/10.1177/19389655231214744>
- Mckinsey&Company. (2023). Three innovations to solve hotel staffing shortages. Retrieved from <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/travel-logistics-and-infrastructure/our-insights/three-innovations-to-solve-hotel-staffing-shortages>
- Mills, J., et al. (2006). The development of constructivist grounded theory. *International journal of qualitative methods*, 5(1), 25-35.
- Myers, M. D., & Newman, M. (2007). The qualitative interview in IS research: Examining the craft. *Information and organization*, 17(1), 2-26.
- ODEP. (2023). Disability Employment Statistics. Retrieved from <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/odep/research-evaluation/statistics>
- Riches, V. C., & Green, V. A. (2003). Social integration in the workplace for people with disabilities: An Australian perspective. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 19(3), 127-142.
- Schaufeli, W. B. (2017). Applying the job demands-resources model. *Organizational dynamics*, 2(46), 120-132.
- Stokar, H. (2017). Deaf workers in restaurant, retail, and hospitality sector employment: harnessing research to promote advocacy. *Journal of Social Work in Disability & Rehabilitation*, 16(3-4), 204-215.
- Zhao, Z., et al. (2023). Family travel among people with autism: Challenges and support needs. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 35(11), 3743-3763.