International Journal of Instruction *January 2027 ● Vol.20, No.1*
e-ISSN: 1308-1470 ● www.e-iji.net *p-ISSN: 1694-609X*
pp. 487-506

Article submission code: 20260416092022
Received: 16/04/2026 Revision: 23/07/2026
Accepted: 02/08/2026 OnlineFirst: 01/10/2026

A Pilot Disability Awareness Training Program for Employers: Effects on Attitudes, Disability Representations, and Hiring Intentions

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This study examined the effects of a pilot disability awareness and information program for employers in Romania. The intervention was designed to improve employers' attitudes toward people with disabilities (PwD), hiring intentions toward PwD, and representations of disability. A pretest–posttest design was used with 75 employers working in recruitment-related roles in a large commercial company. Participants completed measures of attitudes toward PwD, hiring intentions toward candidates with different types of disabilities, and representations of disability before the intervention and three weeks later. Results indicated significant improvements in overall attitudes toward PwD and hiring intentions, as well as an increase in endorsement of the social model of disability and a decrease in endorsement of the medical model; no significant changes were found for the spiritual model. These findings suggest that even a relatively brief training intervention may support more inclusive employer perceptions and behaviors toward the PwD within the labor market. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

Keywords: disability, employers, attitudes, hiring intentions, pilot intervention, inclusion

INTRODUCTION

Although people with disabilities (PwD) represent one of the largest minority groups, whose rights are protected by law globally, these individuals still face obvious or subtle discrimination in the workplace (Baldridge et al., 2015; Lindsay et al., 2023). Inclusion in the labor market provides individuals with a context in which they can identify their abilities and talents, recognize and accept their limits through self-awareness, and develop by continuously acquiring new skills (Marsay, 2014). On the European level, rates among PwD remain significantly lower than those of individuals without disabilities in 2022; approximately 54.3% of PwD aged 20 to 64 in the EU were employed. In comparison, the employment rate for those without disabilities in the same

Citation: Pachita, I. C., & Ghergut, A. (2027). A pilot disability awareness training program for employers: Effects on attitudes, disability representations, and hiring intentions. *International Journal of Instruction*, *20*(1), 487-506.

age group was 72.1% (European Commission: Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion and Human European Consultancy, 2025).

Despite the inclusion policies implemented by European Union member states, research reveals numerous barriers to the inclusion of PwD (Van Der Zwan & De Beer, 2021). On the one hand, physical and structural barriers (Lindsay et al., 2018; Morwane et al., 2021), such as assistive and adaptive technologies and a modified physical environment, impede PwD's access to opportunities in the labor market (Aroonsrimorakot et al., 2020). On the other hand, extensive research indicates that attitudinal barriers are frequently identified as a major obstacle to the inclusion of PwD on the labor market (Nagtegaal et al., 2023; Olsen, 2024; Papakonstantinou & Papadopoulos, 2020). These barriers are portrayed in the specialized literature as negative attitudes and stereotypes toward PwD (Mahasneh et al., 2023; Naberushkina et al., 2021) in their roles as employees, stemming precisely from a focus on their limitations rather than on the skills they possess and can leverage in the workplace (Vilela et al., 2017). Similarly, it has been shown that a lack of experience, knowledge, and contact with PwD (Bredgaard & Salado-Rasmussen, 2021; Díaz et al., 2026; Nagtegaal et al., 2023) leads to a vision based more on stereotypes and to a greater reluctance to hire PwD.

Previous research suggests that these barriers can be mitigated by implementing workplace training interventions to manage disability in professional settings, which can improve employers' attitudes and hiring intentions toward PwD (Chang et al., 2019; Kaye et al., 2011; Kulkarni et al., 2018; Rudstam et al., 2013). Extensive research has emphasized that interventions, such as education and awareness about disability in the context of diversity, represent a strategic approach to optimizing organizational dynamics and reducing prejudice (Paluck, 2006). Similarly, it has been shown that these training programs develop motivations, competencies, and skills for effective and respectful interaction with members of diverse groups, delivered in the form of awareness programs, diversity promotion, education for diversity, and workshops on disability topics within organizations (Bezrukova et al., 2012; Pendry et al., 2007).

However, evidence on the effectiveness of disability awareness interventions remains limited, especially in Eastern European organizational contexts, where labor market inclusion of PwD is still developing (Phillips, 2012; Polishko & Zelinskyi, 2025). Within the Romanian context, there are many legislative initiatives to improve disability inclusion (Birau et al., 2019; Bungau et al., 2019), but, to our knowledge, there is a gap in training strategies aimed at promoting disability and diversity within organizations, particularly grounded in empirical findings. Thus, in response to this need, the present study aims to explore the changes in attitudes toward PwD and representations of disability, as well as the hiring intentions toward PwD, through the implementation of a pilot training program designed to increase awareness and knowledge regarding disability among employers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Models of Disability and Employment

The way disability is conceptualized and socially represented plays an important role in shaping attitudes and organizational practices regarding the inclusion of PwD (Barnes & Mercer, 2010). In organizational settings, these disability models are not merely abstract frameworks; they shape how employers interpret work ability, accommodation, and inclusion. Over time, several theoretical perspectives explained the nature of disability and its implications for social participation. From a medical perspective, disability is conceptualized as a biological abnormality or issue that distinguishes individuals and necessitates treatment, preferably through medical intervention (Renirie, 2026). Moreover, the medical paradigm situates disability within the individual, highlighting a perspective of tragic identification with the condition (Beaudry, 2016). Another important perspective on defining disability is the social model, which emerged in response to the medical model. The social model defines disability as a social construct (Brilmyer & Lee, 2023), emphasizing that people can be disabled by society through environmental, attitudinal, and participation barriers (Goodley, 2001). Lastly, the spiritual model argues that disability is perceived as divine retribution for specific transgressions committed by the individual or their family (Pardeck et al., 2012), as well as being caused by the lack of adherence to moral and religious norms (Retief & Letšosa, 2018). Within the context of employment, the conceptualization of disability can affect employers' perceptions of PwD's abilities, limitations, and potential contributions in the workplace. Medical model perspectives focus on individual impairments and functional limitations, whereas the social model emphasizes the impact of social and organizational barriers that may hinder the participation of PwD (Barnes & Mercer, 2010; Shakespeare, 2013).

Thus, these conceptualizations can affect employers' perceptions of disability and their readiness to offer work opportunities to those with disabilities (Breen & Forwell, 2021). Although there are voices in the organizational field that perceive PwD as having employment potential, Kulkarni et al. (2018) highlight that representations of disability remain anchored in the medical model, and the stigma associated with disability persists, highlighting the need for awareness and sensitization programs. From this viewpoint, examining representations of disability can be essential for understanding employers' perceptions of PwD (Marques et al., 2020) and for identifying ways in which training interventions might foster more inclusive attitudes towards disability (Barnes & Mercer, 2010; Roca-Hurtuna et al., 2021).

Employers' Attitudes toward PwD and Hiring Intentions

Employer attitudes represent one of the most frequently examined factors influencing the employment opportunities of PwD. Attitude is characterized as a "*disposition or tendency to respond with some degree of favorableness or unfavorableness to a psychological object.*" (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2011, p. 76); thus, the scholarly literature regards them as more immediate precursors to inclusive behavior than stereotypes. The theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991) argues that attitudes are critical determinants of intention, as they transform fundamental beliefs into a comprehensive evaluative

position that dictates behavior. Furthermore, according to the ABC model (Eagly & Chaiken, 2007), the concept of attitude, which reflects an individual's subjective evaluation of an entity, is structured around three major components: cognition, affect, and behavior (Eagly & Chaiken, 2007). Regarding cognitions, these involve the beliefs, opinions, thoughts, and ideas of a person associated with PwD, while affects highlight the positive or negative emotional reactions toward these individuals (Stolte et al., 2017). In employment contexts, these attitudes may influence how employers evaluate the abilities and workplace integration of PwD, thereby shaping hiring intentions and inclusion practices.

The Role of Inclusion and Diversity Training Programs for Employers

The importance of informing and raising awareness about disability in organizations is supported by the fact that many of the obstacles faced by PwD in their employment inclusion stem from negative attitudes, generated either by individuals' knowledge gaps (Wang et al., 2021), or by socio-cultural experiences (Antonak & Livneh, 2000). Learning from an affective perspective aims at shaping and evaluating attitudes and beliefs regarding diversity (Bezrukova et al., 2012), exploring participants' implicit attitudes and stereotypes. From a behavioral perspective, the aim is to improve individual skills in developing and managing an inclusive work environment through behavioral changes based on actual positive examples of disability management in the workplace (Bezrukova et al., 2012; Holladay & Quiñones, 2008). Finally, the cognitive component involves the transmission of essential knowledge about diversity and disability and the development of a deeper understanding of their impact on relationships and performance within the organizational context (Bezrukova et al., 2012). Therefore, in developing information and awareness programs aimed at improving attitudes toward disability, it is necessary to address knowledge gaps and provide models of best practices and success in the inclusion of PwD (Barney, 2011). Additionally, in shaping and delivering effective training programs, the inclusion of experiential approaches is highlighted, a hands-on learning method that focuses on the practical application of diversity-related concepts in real-life organizational situations (Kaye et al., 2011; Lucena-Rodríguez et al., 2025), by engaging participants in group discussions based on specific situations and problems, developing feasible solutions, while exploring their own stereotypes and prejudices (King et al., 2010). At the same time, in designing training programs, the literature highlights that the use of the principles of the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991) can provide a conceptual framework for an intervention aimed at producing behavioral change at the individual level (Stolte et al., 2017). By addressing knowledge gaps, challenging stereotypes, and providing practical examples of inclusive practices, such programs may contribute to more positive employer attitudes and stronger hiring intentions toward PwD.

The Present Study

Prior research has established that employers' attitudes, stereotypes, and lack of knowledge regarding disability influence their hiring intentions toward PwD (Khayatzadeh-Mahani et al., 2020; McKinney & Swartz, 2021; Vornholt et al., 2018) and that proper training in this regard could bring beneficial changes (Hunt & Hunt,

2004; Kulkarni et al., 2018). However, there is a gap in the examination of the effectiveness of such training programs that aim to challenge attitudes toward PwD and representations of disability. Therefore, this study aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of a pilot diversity education program designed to provide information and raise awareness among employers, with the purpose of reducing attitudinal barriers to the employment of PwD. The study adopted a pretest–posttest design with the aim of exploring changes in attitudes, representations about disability, and hiring intentions toward PwD. As a pilot study conducted in Romania, through its novelty, the study aims to contribute to the expansion of the literature on the employment inclusion of PwD by offering an empirically tested framework for implementing a structured training intervention in organizations.

Based on the existing literature, we proposed the following hypotheses:

H1: There will be a significant difference in employers' attitudes toward PwD before and after participating in the intervention program, i.e., attitudes recorded after the intervention program will be more positive compared to those reported before the intervention.

H2: There will be a significant difference in hiring intentions toward PwD before and after participating in the intervention program, i.e., there will be an improvement in hiring intentions toward PwD after the intervention program compared to those reported before the intervention.

H3: There will be a significant difference regarding employers' representations of disability before and after participating in the intervention program, i.e., they will report a higher level of social representations of disability after the intervention program compared to those reported before the intervention.

METHOD

Participants and Procedure

The sample consisted of 75 employers aged between 23 and 56 years (M = 32.52; SD = 7.99). Of the total participants, 43 were female (57.3%), and 32 were male (42.7%). Regarding education level, 52 participants (69.3%) held a bachelor's degree, while 23 (30.7%) held a master's degree. Participants reported work experience ranging from 1 to 36 years (M = 10.43; SD = 7.71). Regarding the participants' status, they were human resources managers responsible for recruitment at a large commercial company, with a portfolio of job offers across various fields of activity that require both qualified candidates across different professions and unqualified candidates. The inclusion criteria were active involvement in recruitment and selection processes and the ability to participate in the entire program.

We employed a single-group pretest–posttest intervention design. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling within the organization. At the pre-test, 83 employers participated; at the post-test, 75 of the initial participants responded, resulting in a retention rate of 90.4%. The questionnaires were administered in Romanian via Google Forms, having been translated following the recommendations

regarding the backward method (Beaton et al., 2000; Hambleton & Zenisky, 2010; Maneesriwongul & Dixon, 2004). The initial translation and back-translation were performed independently, discrepancies were discussed, and wording was refined for clarity and contextual appropriateness before administration. At the pre-test, questionnaires were completed at the beginning of the intervention. The post-test measurement was completed three weeks after the intervention. All participants received the informed consent form, which stated that participation was voluntary, that they could withdraw at any time, and that data would remain anonymous and be used for the present research. Participants entered a personal code during the pre-test phase, which they also used during the post-test phase, thereby enabling a test-retest comparison while maintaining anonymity. At the same time, given that the intervention program was conducted online, a set of confidentiality rules was established and communicated for the duration of the training sessions; i.e., recording the training was not permitted, nor were screenshots during the presentations. The research, conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of the 2013 Helsinki Declaration, received approval from the Ethics Board of the authors' affiliated university.

Measures

Attitudes toward PwD were measured using the Work for People with Disability scale (Nota et al., 2014). The scale consisted of 10 items (e.g., "*Do you believe that the likelihood of a person with a disability fulfilling their tasks properly is.").* which are measured on a 7-point Likert scale, where the indicators receive different labels depending on the wording of the item (e.g., *1 – not at all likely/not at all/very low and 7 – very likely/very much/very high*). High scores indicate more positive attitudes of employers. In the present sample, internal consistency was good for both the pre-test (Cronbach's $\alpha = .77$) and post-test (Cronbach's $\alpha = .98$).

Hiring intentions toward PwD were measured using a four-item willingness-to-hire scale adapted from an existing instrument, developed by Grześkowiak et al. (2021). The questions adressed four types of disabilities: physical, visual, hearing, and intellectual. Evaluations for each type of disability are conducted by answering the question *How willing would you be to hire people with the following disabilities in your company?*, using a Likert scale from 1 to 4, where 1 = *definitely no* and 4 = *definitely yes*. High scores indicate strong hiring intentions toward PwD, and the analysis can also be conducted for each disability individually. Internal consistency in the present sample was good both for pre-test (Cronbach's $\alpha = .76$) and post-test (Cronbach's $\alpha = .98$).

Representations of disability were assessed using the Conceptions of Disability Scale (Leite & Lacerda, 2018), which comprised twenty statements describing different representations of disability and portraying the medical, social, and spiritual models of disability. For each statement, the respondent selected a single response option on a Likert scale from 1 to 5, where 1 = *total disagreement* and 5 = *total agreement.* Higher scores on each dimension indicated stronger endorsement of that disability model. In the present sample, internal consistency was good for both pre-test (Cronbach's $\alpha = .81$) and post-test (Cronbach's $\alpha = .99$).

The Structure of the Training Program

The training program was based on the findings of previous research aimed at demonstrating the effectiveness of intervention programs in various cultural contexts (Chang et al., 2019; Kaye et al., 2011; Kulkarni et al., 2018; Rudstam et al., 2013). Starting from the realities of the Romanian labor market and structuring the training approach based on aformentioned recommendations in the literature, the training program had three main objectives: (a) implementing training sessions to provide employers with a knowledge base about disabilities for employment inclusion; (b) raising awareness among employers about the need for the employment inclusion of PwD as a key element of their social inclusion and quality of life; (c) evaluating the program's effectiveness through positive changes in representations, attitudes toward PwD, and their hiring intentions toward PwD (Ninan et al., 2020). The intervention consisted of a single 3-hour online workshop structured into five modules, using interactive and participatory methods to promote active learning. These methods consistently built on participants' knowledge, perceptions, and curiosity while encouraging them to share their experiences and insights throughout the sessions (Carvalho-Freitas & Stathi, 2017). Even though the program was delivered online, active participation was ensured through group activities in breakout rooms, reflective questions, and invitations to share personal experiences, as well as brainstorming activities using platforms designed to engage the entire group (e.g., Mentimeter, AnswerGarden). Moreover, participants were required to keep their webcams on throughout the working sessions, precisely to increase engagement and active participation.

The workshop was delivered by the researcher who had experience in disability inclusion and organizational training. The program included the following sessions: Session 1 – Understanding Disability – aimed at sharing personal perceptions regarding disability; defining disability and clarifying the difference between impairment, disability, and handicap; disability models; myths and misconceptions about disability; Session 2 – steps in creating an inclusive organizational culture – where aspects regarding the importance of inclusion and diversity, the benefits of hiring and retaining PwD in the company, and strategies for building inclusive policies and practices were addressed; Session 3 - legislative considerations, accessibility, and workplace adaptations – focusing on a comprehensive analysis of the legislation regarding the employment of PwD, responsibilities and obligations; accessibility and adaptations – identifying needs and implementing solutions; best practice models, identifying resources and support for employers in inclusion; Session 4 – interaction and effective communication - addressing aspects related to unconscious bias in interactions with PwD; labeling vs. positive language; tips for interacting with PwD aimed at eliminating potential fears; Session 5 – success stories and reflections - group discussions on real scenarios and problem-solving methods; presentation of success models regarding employes with disabilities; addressing participants' questions, curiosities, and any concerns.

FINDINGS

To evaluate the normality of the distributions, we calculated the Skewness and Kurtosis values (Table 1). All Skewness values fell within the -2/2 range, and Kurtosis values fell within the -7/7 range, indicating normality (Byrne, 2013; Hair, 2010). The statistical analyses were performed using SPSS software, version 26.

Table 1
Descriptive statistics

Variables	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Attitudes toward PwD pre-test	36.33	5.66	0.02	-0.88
Attitudes toward PwD post-test	37.23	4.93	1.51	-0.88
Hiring intentions toward PwD pre-test	13.27	3.41	0.23	-0.34
Hiring intentions toward PwD post-test	13.71	3.00	0.56	-0.35
Disability representations pre-test	55.53	11.07	0.26	0.21
Disability representations post-test	56.96	10.23	0.34	-0.06

First, we hypothesized that there would be a significant change in employers' attitudes toward PwD after participating in the intervention program. Results supported H1, indicating a modest but statistically significant increase in employers' attitudes toward PwD following the intervention (Table 2). More specifically, employers reported significantly more positive attitudes toward PwD at post-test *(M = 37.23, SD = 4.93*), compared to the level of attitudes recorded before *(M = 36.33, SD = 5.66), t(74) = -5.14, p < .001, 95% CI [-1.23; -0.54]*. The effect size indicated a medium effect (*d = 0.60*; Cohen, 1988).

Table 2
T-Test – paired samples – attitudes toward PwD

	Pre-test		Post-test				
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*t(74)*	*P*	*d (Cohen)*
Attitudes toward PwD	36.33	5.66	37.23	4.93	-5.14	< .001	0.60

**p < .001, N=75*

Within the intervention program, we primarily focused on four categories of disabilities. From this perspective, we aimed to examine both the overall level of hiring intentions toward PwD, as addressed in the program, and, more importantly, to gain a clearer understanding of the prospects for employment inclusion for different disabilities. Additionally, we sought to investigate potential changes in hiring intentions toward specific disabilities, including physical, visual, auditory, and intellectual disabilities. For H2, results indicated a significant difference in employers' hiring intentions toward PwD before and after participating in the intervention program (Table 3). More specifically, employers reported a significantly higher level of hiring intentions toward PwD after participating in the information and awareness program, regarding overall hiring intentions toward PwD *(M = 13.71, SD = 3.00)*, compared to the level of intentions recorded before *(M = 13.27, SD = 3.41, t(74) = -4.61, p < .001, 95% CI [-0.63; -0.25]*, with a medium effect size *(d = 0.53).* Regarding the analysis of pre- and post-test differences across various types of disabilities addressed in the intervention program, significant differences were observed for each disability between the two

measurement points, although the effect sizes were small. In this regard, the hiring intentions toward PwD individuals with physical disabilities recorded the largest differences between the pre-test *(M = 3.92, SD = 1.01) and post-test (M = 4.07, SD = 0.87), t(74) = -2.98, p = .004, 95% CI [-0.24; -0.05],* while the hiring intentions toward PwD individuals with intellectual disabilities recorded the smallest difference.

Table 3
T-Test – paired samples – hiring intentions toward PwD

	Pre-test		Post-test				
Hiring intentions toward PwD	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*t(74)*	*P*	*d (Cohen)*
Overall	13.27	3.41	13.71	3.00	-4.61	< .001	0.53
Physical disabilities	3.92	1.01	4.07	0.87	-2.98	.004	0.35
Visual disabilities	3.29	1.16	3.41	1.05	-2.24	.028	0.26
Auditory disabilities	3.63	1.11	3.73	0.97	-2.62	.010	0.29
Intellectual disabilities	2.43	1.19	2.49	1.14	-2.29	.024	0.24

**p < .001, N=75*

Furthermore, within the intervention program, we approached disability by bringing its social conceptualization to the forefront, emphasizing the limitations of PwD's participation and involvement in social life when they encounter social environments that are often unprepared for effective inclusion and normalization. From this perspective, we aimed to enhance understanding of the social model of disability, as it is linked to shifting attitudes toward disability (Bogart et al., 2022). Thus, to test H3, we examined changes in endorsement of the social, medical, and spiritual models of disability.

For representations regarding disability from the social model perspective, a significant increase was recorded post-test *(M = 32.28, SD = 5.48),* compared to the pre-test measurement results *(M = 31.41, SD = 5.95), t(74) = -4.67, p < .001, 95% CI [-1.23; -0.50]*, with the effect size being medium *(d = 0.54)*. Representations regarding disability from the perspective of the medical model showed a significant decrease after participation in the intervention program *(M = 14.02, SD = 3.69)*, compared to the first measurement *(M = 14.40, SD = 3.86), t(74) = 3.73, p < .001, 95% CI [0.17; 0.57]*, with a small-to-moderate effect size *(d = 0.44)*. Regarding the spiritual model, no significant differences were recorded, with the overall mean being low from the first measurement (Table 4).

Table 4
T-Test – paired samples – representations of disability

	Pre-test		Post-test				
Representations of disability	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*t(74)*	*P*	*d (Cohen)*
Social model	31.41	5.95	32.28	5.48	-4.67	< .001	0.54
Medical model	14.40	3.86	14.02	3.69	3.73	< .001	0.44
Spiritual model	9.72	4.13	9.65	3.85	1.00	.321	-

**p < .001, N=75*

DISCUSSION

The present study examined the effect of a pilot information and awareness program regarding disability among employers. Overall, the findings supported H1 and H2 and partially supported H3. Employers reported more positive attitudes toward people with disabilities, stronger hiring intentions, and a greater endorsement of the social model of disability after participating in the intervention. These findings suggest that even a relatively brief disability awareness program can contribute to changing employers' perceptions in organizational settings.

We considered a series of variables that have often been reported in the existing literature as having an essential role in hiring intentions toward PwD, i.e., attitudes toward PwD and representations of disability based on different models of these (Burke et al., 2013; Marques et al., 2020). One of the program's objectives was to improve attitudes toward PwD, with results indicating a significant difference in employers' attitudes before and three weeks after participating in the intervention program (H1). Participants in the intervention program were provided with an extensive amount of content emphasizing the skills of individuals behind the disability label (Hall, 2008), thereby fostering more favorable attitudes toward PwD as prospective employees (Nota et al., 2014; D. D. Unger et al., 2002). This finding reinforces conclusions in the specialized literature that link an insufficient amount of information and awareness of disability to the perpetuation of more negative attitudes (Chan et al., 2002; Hunt & Hunt, 2004). Previous findings have shown that employees often rely on limited knowledge or indirect experience when evaluating the work competencies of PwD (Kaye et al., 2011; Nagtegaal et al., 2023; D. Unger & Kregel, 2003). The observed improvement in attitudes may also be interpreted through the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991). According to this framework, changes in underlying beliefs regarding disability may lead to more favorable attitudes, which subsequently influence behavioral intentions. Thus, providing structured information and examples of successful inclusion may help shift attention from perceived limitations toward competencies and workplace contributions.

Additionally, another key element of the intervention program focused on changing employers' perceptions of disability (H3), addressing a part of the social model that describes disability in terms of social participation and employment inclusion (Amado et al., 2013; Chennat, 2019). In this regard, findings highlighted that through exposure to specialized and coherent information about disability, employers gained a deeper understanding of disability in the context of social and employment inclusion, addressing in the post-test phase representations that were more based on placing disability in the social context and less as an insurmountable condition of the person. This change to the social model of disability is relevant because it changes how people see disability from being a personal problem to being caused by issues pertaining to the environment and organizations (Bingham et al., 2013). Within the workplace, this point of view may prompt employers to consider changes and adopt more inclusive practices rather than focusing solely on the perceived limitations of people with disabilities (Otieno, 2023; Tompa et al., 2022).

One final aspect we considered in implementing the pilot intervention program was the extent to which such a program could improve hiring intentions among PwD (H2). The intervention program addressed aspects related to the benefits of employment inclusion of PwD and the implementation of an inclusive culture in terms of increasing corporate social responsibility, and it also provided accurate information about disabilities, with the aim of eliminating prejudices (Hall, 2008). Thus, another finding of our study was that employers reported higher hiring intentions toward PwD after participating in the intervention program, particularly for individuals with physical disabilities, but least for people with intellectual disabilities. A possible explanation of why employers may be more likely to hire people with physical disabilities than people with intellectual disabilities is that they believe that individuals with physical disabilities will find it easier to adapt to the workplace and be more productive (Kocman et al., 2018; Sevak & Khan, 2017). Prior studies indicated that employers frequently view physical disabilities as more readily accommodated via environmental modifications (Bell & Klein, 2001), while intellectual disabilities are occasionally linked to increased ambiguity concerning job performance or support requirements (Nota et al., 2014; Russinova et al., 2014). Although the effect sizes were generally small to moderate, the findings suggest that even brief training interventions may contribute to gradual changes in employers' attitudes toward PwD, representations of disability and hiring intentions toward PwD. Finally, our overall findings suggest that relatively short-term information and awareness programs, which aim at providing support, training, and information on disability inclusion, can enhance organizations' readiness to undertake employment inclusion initiatives for PwD and to commence the process of fostering an inclusive organizational culture rooted in the appreciation of diversity (Araten-Bergman, 2016; Burke et al., 2013; Kaye et al., 2011).

LIMITATIONS

Despite the strengths of our study, it is necessary to highlight some of its limitations. First, our study relied exclusively on self-report measures, which are susceptible to social desirability bias (Adams et al., 1999). Furthermore, the study employed a single-group test-retest design without a control group, which limits the ability to draw strong causal conclusions regarding the effectiveness of the intervention. At the same time, for this pilot intervention, the participants were recruited from a single organization, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other organizational settings. In this regard, future studies may also consider applying the intervention program involving participants from various companies. Another limitation may be the relatively short time between pre-test and post-test measurements; future studies may consider examining whether the observed changes in attitudes toward PwD, representations of disability, and hiring intentions toward PwD are maintained over longer periods. In addition, the study involved a pilot implementation of the training program, which was conducted on a relatively small sample and for a shorter period of time, which suggests the need or replication with a larger and more diverse sample, as well as implementing more training sessions over a longer period to achieve more significant changes. At the same time, the intervention program was delivered online, with all employers participating in a single group at the same time, which may have reduced the level of

interaction and engagement compared to on-site delivery in smaller groups. Therefore, future studies could attempt to replicate this intervention program in an on-site setting, organizing participants into smaller groups to allow for a higher level of interaction between participants and the facilitator.

IMPLICATIONS

From a theoretical standpoint, our findings contribute to the existing literature regarding the inclusion of PwD on the labor market, highlighting how coherent information and exposure to structured learning processes regarding disability can improve employers' attitudes toward PwD, the endorsement of the social model of disability, and more favorable hiring intentions toward PwD. The increase in the endorsement of the social model of disability and the decrease in the medical model suggest that training interventions can shape employers' representations of disability within organizational settings. In this regard, our findings add to the theoretical frameworks which highlight the importance of social and organizational contexts that may shape the employment opportunities for PwD. Additionally, our findings contribute to research on diversity and inclusion interventions by providing empirical evidence that awareness and information programs can influence employers' attitudes and hiring intentions. Although previous studies have suggested that educational initiatives may help reduce stereotypes and increase openness toward disability inclusion (Hunt & Hunt, 2004; Kulkarni et al., 2018), empirical evidence from real organizational contexts remains relatively limited, particularly in Eastern European settings. By examining these processes in a Romanian organizational environment, the present study contributes to a better understanding of disability inclusion in labor markets that have received less attention in the existing literature.

From a practical perspective, our findings suggest that awareness and information training programs may represent a useful starting point for promoting disability inclusion within organizations. Such initiatives may help employers develop a more accurate understanding of disability, challenge their stereotypes about disability in the workplace, and encourage more inclusive perspectives on the employment of PwD. The results also underline the importance of focusing on human resource professionals and managers involved in recruitment processes, as their perceptions and decisions can directly influence employment opportunities for people with disabilities. Finally, the differences observed across types of disabilities indicate that employers may feel more comfortable hiring individuals with certain disabilities, such as physical disabilities, compared with others. This pattern has also been noted in previous research and may reflect concerns related to workplace adaptation or perceived job performance. These findings point to the importance of future awareness and training initiatives that address misconceptions about different forms of disability, particularly intellectual disabilities, in order to support more inclusive hiring practices**.**

CONCLUSIONS

The present study examined the effects of a pilot disability awareness and information program among employers, focusing on attitudes toward PwD, disability representations, and hiring intentions. The findings showed that participation in the program was associated with more positive attitudes toward PwD, a stronger endorsement of the social model of disability, and increased hiring intentions toward PwD.

Overall, the results supported H1 and H2 and partially supported H3. Employers reported significantly more positive attitudes toward PwD following the intervention, supporting H1. Hiring intentions toward PwD also increased significantly across all disability categories examined, supporting H2. Regarding H3, participants reported greater endorsement of the social model of disability and lower endorsement of the medical model after the intervention, whereas no significant changes were observed for the spiritual model of disability, indicating partial support for the hypothesis.

The implementation of this pilot program within organizations in Romania, is a relevant, evidence-based starting point for initiating actions to improve employers' attitudes towards PwD, as well as for providing employers with accurate information and support through training in inclusive practices and cultures. This study highlights several practical implications that are particularly necessary in the context of the low employability rate among PwD in Romania, where there is a clear need for training and information about disability in social and employment environments.

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