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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Socially responsible human resource practices to improve the employability of people with disabilities

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Abstract

Although the employment of people with disabilities (PWDs) has been recognized as an important human right, it is seldom emphasized in current corporate social responsibility (CSR) practice. Based on experiences with a job training program in hospitality for people with intellectual disabilities or Down syndrome offered by a hotel in Hong Kong, this paper explores how socially responsible human resource (HR) practices can support the employment of PWDs. An A-B-C-D framework is proposed by the author to explore what business enterprises can contribute through HR strategy. Based on the results of interviews conducted with the hotel staff and social workers involved in the program, this study suggests that socially responsible HR practices can play an important role in improving the employability of PWDs by providing workplace accommodations, business-oriented settings, a caring attitude, and job demands, showing how CSR and PWD employment are intertwined.

KEYWORDS

corporate social responsibility, employment, people with disabilities, socially responsible HR practices, workforce diversity

1 | INTRODUCTION

The unemployment of people with disabilities (PWDs) is still a significant problem in many countries (e.g., Bureau of Labor Statistics of the U.S. Department of Labor, 2018). As unemployment may lead to social exclusion (Gallie, Paugam, & Jacobs, 2003), the lack of job opportunities for PWDs in the labor market implies that social inclusion is difficult to achieve (Fasciglione, 2015). Equal opportunities for PWDs in terms of access to jobs have increasingly attracted the attention of the international community. Article 27 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities states that PWDs should have “the right to the opportunity to gain a living by work freely chosen or accepted in a labor market and work environment that is open, inclusive and accessible to persons with disabilities.” One of the sustainable development goals set by 2030 by the United Nations is to “promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.” To turn these goals into reality, various parties, including the private sector, have

invested more effort into supporting the economic participation of PWDs.

Promoting diversity is one of the important items on the current corporate social responsibility (CSR) agenda (Ciocirlan & Pettersson, 2012; Yasser, Al Mamun, & Ahmed, 2017), and there is heightened awareness of the importance of socially responsible or sustainable human resource (HR) practices (Celma, Martinez-Garcia, & Raya, 2018; Diaz-Carrion, López-Fernández, & Romero-Fernandez, 2018; Simmons, 2003). However, the issue of PWDs' employment is still relatively less explored (Csillag, Gyori, & Matolay, 2018). In particular, the role of business enterprises in supporting the employability of PWDs has rarely been reported in a clear manner (Khan, Korac-Kakabadse, Skouloudis, & Dimopoulos, 2019).

Achieving legal compliance in HR practices is not enough to achieve diversity in the workplace. Anti-discrimination laws are one of the compulsory measures for monitoring corporate behaviors regarding workplace discrimination. However, as Markel and Barclay (2009) point out, it is insufficient to rely on legislation to address the

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unemployment problem of PWDs. It is worth noting that these legal requirements represent attempts to eliminate workplace discrimination rather than to encourage employers to employ PWDs (Nazarov, Kang, & von Schrader, 2015). A recent study (Kuznetsova & Yalcin, 2017) conducted in Nordic countries shows that anti-discrimination legislation does not have an obvious effect on facilitating business enterprises to employ more PWDs. Absurdly, fear of being sued may discourage employers from employing PWDs (Lengnick-Hall, Gaunt, & Brooks, 2001). A mandatory quota system for PWDs represents another important attempt to promote social inclusion. Unfortunately, this approach has had limited effectiveness in supporting PWDs (Lee & Lee, 2016; Nazarov et al., 2015), as some employers may choose to pay the fine instead of employing PWDs (Mori & Sakamoto, 2018).

As Fasciglione (2015) suggests, socially responsible HR practices should extend beyond fulfilling minimal legal requirements to developing CSR strategies to include PWDs in their workforces. The inclusion of PWDs has been recognized by the European Commission (2011) as a CSR issue. However, disability is still unfamiliar territory for many business enterprises (Fasciglione, 2015; Kaye, Jans, & Jones, 2011). Although the employment of PWDs has been included on the CSR agenda of some business enterprises, their intention is often to extend their public relations profile (Khan et al., 2019). Consistent with the liberal CSR discourse (Brejning, 2012), the benefits of these business enterprises are their major considerations for their CSR practice. Consequently, the emphasis is on what business enterprises gain rather than what benefits society can obtain.

The above brief review of the relationship between business enterprises and the employment of PWDs seems to suggest that reliance on mandatory measures is insufficient. Regarding nonmandatory measures, there is a need to operationalize socially responsible HR practices to support the employment of PWDs. Although the employment of PWDs and CSR should be closely related, the current literature on this relationship is limited (Csillag et al., 2018). The provision of workplace accommodations has been an often-discussed topic (e.g., Anand & Sevak, 2017; Bruyère, Erickson, & VanLooy, 2000), but there is limited knowledge concerning what business enterprises can contribute to improving the employability of PWDs (Khan et al., 2019; Kuznetsova, 2012). Against this background, it would be very helpful to identify and disseminate good CSR practices related to the employment of PWDs (Fasciglione, 2015). This article examines the possible role that business enterprises can play in improving the employability of PWDs based on experiences with a job training program in hospitality for PWDs in Hong Kong. A model is proposed as a theoretical framework for understanding what business enterprises can contribute to workplace diversity.

2 | A-B-C-D FRAMEWORK

A conceptual framework has been developed based on the literature and on the author's professional experience in vocational rehabilitation service. This A-B-C-D framework adopts a balanced view of what business enterprises can do to improve the employability of PWDs.

Rather than narrowly focus on the tolerance that should be given to PWDs, the framework highlights the challenges PWDs need to experience in order to improve. Below are four major elements that business enterprises can provide to support the employment of PWDs.

2.1 | Accommodations

The most common method discussed in the literature for helping PWDs remove workplace barriers is accommodations provided by employers. Accommodations refers to "modifications in the job, work environment, work process, or conditions of work that reduce physical and social barriers" (Colella & Bruyère, 2011, p. 478). As informed by the social model of disability (Shakespeare, 2006), the external environment should be changed to overcome disability. In a workplace setting, when employers can accommodate their staff members' impairment needs, the staff can become less disabled. Indeed, it is becoming increasingly clear that workplace accommodations provided by employers can effectively support PWDs in maintaining their jobs (Anand & Sevak, 2017). These accommodations, such as flexible work hours and modified equipment, may help promote a disability-friendly work environment, but this cannot be achieved without the support of the top management and HR staff (Bruyère et al., 2000). Likewise, the provision of accommodations needs the cooperation and understanding of other employees (McLaughlin, Bell, & Stringer, 2004).

2.2 | Business-oriented workplace

Mainstream enterprises can provide business-oriented workplaces for PWDs that facilitate social inclusion. Although a tailored approach based on PWDs' needs may sometimes be required, it is beneficial for PWDs to acquire market-relevant job skills rather than outdated skills. According to Lengnick-Hall et al. (2001), a lack of vocational skills that match the available jobs in the market is one of the main reasons that PWDs cannot get hired. Although many PWDs are now receiving training in sheltered settings, it is questionable whether the skills learned in these settings can be transferred to the real and competitive employment market (Galer, 2014). Without useful knowledge and skills for market needs, PWDs may be further excluded from the mainstream labor market. When they work in the open labor market rather than in segregated workplaces, they can come into contact with a real market and interact with various people in the community (Flores, Jenaro, Begoña Orgaz, & Victoria Martín, 2011). In this sense, mainstream enterprises may have an advantage over conventional sheltered workshops (and some social enterprises) run by nonprofits in terms of promoting social inclusion.

2.3 | Caring attitude

The caring attitude shown by employers and colleagues is important to PWDs. A caring work environment is positively associated with job performance for the general population (Fu & Deshpande, 2014), and this is true for PWDs (Baumgärtner, Böhm, & Dwertmann, 2014).

Such an environment is important, especially because a negative attitude towards disability is often considered a major barrier for PWDs to gain and maintain employment in society (McLaughlin et al., 2004). However, a study conducted in the United States (Bruyère et al., 2000) reported that attitudinal barriers towards PWDs are harder to remove than are physical barriers. Some PWDs are even bullied by their colleagues at work (Vickers, 2009). Without a supportive work environment, PWDs have difficulty maintaining their jobs in an open market (Shier, Graham, & Jones, 2009). To address the problem, promoting accurate knowledge about disability is important (Scior, 2011). Shier et al. (2009) highlight the importance of employer education. However, colleagues' attitude towards PWDs is missing from their suggestion. Top management's acceptance of PWDs is certainly essential, but it should be equally, if not more, important for PWDs to experience the acceptance of their colleagues in the workplace.

2.4 | Demands

PWDs can improve when they work towards meeting demands from their work supervisors. Hence, although employers should try to accommodate PWDs' limitations arising from their disabilities, they should not be indulgent of PWDs in the workplace. The negative consequences to self-esteem of lowered expectations for PWDs relative to others are illustrated by Sanders (2006). Levi (2006) also suggests that lowered expectations are a form of ableism, which may prevent PWDs from realizing their potential in the workplace. It is worth stressing that PWDs, like everyone else, are looking for challenges and job satisfaction. It is common for people to feel bored when they do not feel challenged (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). Tasks for PWDs in sheltered settings tend to be simple and repetitive (Migliore, Mank, Grossi, & Rogan, 2007), which may not be helpful for some PWDs in the long term. This situation may occur in the open labor market, especially when employers hire PWDs merely to fulfill legal obligations (Callus & Bonello, 2017). To take steps for improvement, employers should establish job requirements for PWDs that correspond to their abilities (Kocman & Weber, 2018).

3 | METHODS

3.1 | Context

This study was conducted in Hong Kong, where an employment quota system for persons with disabilities has not been adopted. In this sense, a genuine intention to help may be necessary for business enterprises to develop community investment initiatives to address the unemployment of PWDs in Hong Kong. Similar to many other societies, CSR has become a popular concept in Hong Kong. One major development was the launch of the Hang Seng Corporate Sustainability Index (HSSUS) in 2010. The job training program investigated in this study was conducted by a hotel with the support of a nonprofit organization. This hotel is owned by an international company that has been listed on the HSSUS with 29 other listed

companies that have demonstrated good performance in corporate sustainability in Hong Kong. The training program organized by the hotel aims to teach trainees (PWDs) the basic vocational skills needed for the hospitality sector, provide practical opportunities for trainees to learn essential skills and work attitude, and offer support to hotel colleagues so that they can engage and work with PWDs effectively. Ten persons with Down syndrome/intellectual disabilities were recruited and attended a 2-week training program and a 2-month job attachment offered in summer 2018. The hotel gave the trainees a basic understanding of the hotel's operation, and the trainees received basic knowledge and foundational skills for the hospitality industry. Training methods include mini-lectures, visits, role-plays, and demonstrations. The trainees had Down syndrome symptoms (30%) and mild intellectual disabilities (70%). There were six males and four females, ranging in age from 20 to 32.

3.2 | Participants

Ethical approval was obtained from City University of Hong Kong. To ensure the trustworthiness (Shenton, 2004) of the present study, two sources of data were gathered through individual interviews with four hotel staff and two social workers who were involved in this training program. All research participants were Hong Kong Chinese. Two male and two female frontline hotel staff members who were involved in the program as trainers and/or mentors were referred by the HR unit to attend the interviews. Two female social workers from the nonprofit organization also attended and were responsible for providing emotional support to the trainees during the training program. All interviews were conducted by a research assistant who is a registered social worker and has experience serving PWDs.

3.3 | Procedure

Informed consent was obtained from the participants before the interviews. Interviews with the four hotel staff members were conducted in the hotel. The interviews with the social workers were conducted in a service center of the nonprofit organization. Each interview lasted between 20 and 30 min, and interviews were guided by an interview schedule and informed by the literature review and the study objectives. All interviews were conducted in Cantonese. Questions were asked to solicit the hotel staff's role and experience in the program, such as "What is your overall perception of this training scheme?" and "What skills did you use in the training process?" The social workers were asked to describe the benefits the trainees obtained: "What benefits did the trainees get from participating in this training program?" and "How is this program different from other training programs?"

3.4 | Analysis

The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. The transcripts were written in Chinese and were then translated into English by the author. Themes were identified from the interviews and then given



to each participant by email to check whether these initial themes truly represented their thoughts (Koelsch, 2013). All of the participants agreed with the identified themes. The thematic analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to find and analyze meaningful units within all the data. The transcriptions were read individually by the author and the research assistant to identify initial codes. As the A-B-C-D framework was used as an “analytic lens” (Saldaña, 2013), the identified meaningful units were categorized into four types accordingly. Attempts were made to find possible counterevidence for the framework during the data analysis process.

4 | FINDINGS

The overall comments on the training program collected from the hotel staff and social workers were positive. The important role of the hotel as a business enterprise was described by the two groups, and evidence was found to support the A-B-C-D framework presented above.

4.1 | Accommodations

Although the abilities of the trainees were generally recognized by the hotel staff interviewed here, the staff reported that two levels of accommodations for the trainees were essential. The first level was special job arrangements offered by HR personnel. According to the hotel staff, special attention was paid to the work conditions arranged for the trainees. The staff reported that trainees' job duties were matched with their abilities, and shorter than usual working hours were arranged to accommodate their physical needs. One of the accommodations the staff highlighted was mentoring.

[Our] company's support was necessary. For example, in this program, I was assigned to supervise the trainees in my unit. There was a need to supervise them. It would be difficult if we just placed them here. (Anna, hotel staff)

Another level of accommodations concerned the way the staff members worked with the trainees. Some communication strategies they adopted when working with the trainees included speaking clearly and concisely when giving work instructions. More reminder messages were often required when they supervised the trainees in their units. One staff member reported that he gave instructions tactfully to the trainees, and they in turn performed better. He stated it was helpful to do the following:

Present the task as if it was not a big deal ... reminding them to do [a task] in a relaxed way. If we urged them to do a task, they would feel anxious. The alternative way was to seek them out to offer help someone in need ... in this way, they would be more willing, [and] happier to offer their help. (Calvin, hotel staff)

The accommodations the hotel staff made were acknowledged by the social workers we interviewed. One social worker, Fanny,

commented that the individual support provided through the mentoring scheme facilitated a suitable workplace for the trainees.

The workplace is good, and the staff was willing to teach and spend time with them. In the past, their workplaces demanded they be quick, without giving sufficient support. But in the hotel, a mentor was assigned to teach [each trainee] so that they could learn the instructions more easily. (Fanny, social worker)

4.2 | Business-oriented workplace

The 10 trainees were assigned job attachments in five different departments: stewarding, housekeeping, restaurant and bar, kitchen, and guest experience. The trainees had opportunities to work with other colleagues and serve various hotel customers. The hotel staff described the valuable work experience provided to the trainees.

[It was a] platform for them to have work opportunity, learn and interact with people. I think this was good. (David, hotel staff)

They might get lost if there was no such program in our society. What could they do? Their parents, for example, would hope that they can work with normal persons and do a normal job. This [experience] would be beneficial to the society and their whole families. (Calvin, hotel staff)

Social workers knew that their trainees usually had limited job exposure in the past. The trainees could mainly work in cleaning or catering services and had few opportunities to meet persons without disabilities. However, the social workers greatly appreciated the environment at the hotel.

In the hotel, the trainees were able to try different jobs ... including [jobs] in a room service that [the trainees] rarely did before, and in a customer experience unit, helping customers move luggage, giving presents and handling problems for the guests. These jobs are certainly new to our trainees. The work environment—the facilities—is so beautiful, and the staff were nice. One more thing is that the staff has a wide range of backgrounds, including foreigners, as this is a hotel, enlarging their social network, not being limited to trainees to trainees but trainees to staff. (Emily, social worker)

4.3 | Caring attitude

The hotel staff reported that they showed a caring attitude towards 23the trainees and treated the trainees in a friendly way. Although some accommodations were provided to the trainees, the hotel staff treated them as normal persons.

... getting along with them happily, and basically, [we] could become friends, chatting [with each other]; the atmosphere was positive. (Bonnie, hotel staff)

When asked what skills were used in working with the trainees, David said,

It was not necessary to do too much extra. Greeting them and showing concern for their work, keeping basic contact [with trainees] was okay. They are indeed simple-minded. When you care for them, they appreciate it. (David, hotel staff)

Being emotionally sensitive to the trainees was also reported as important. Bonnie described an experience handling a trainee's emotions that affected performance. When she found that a trainee was unhappy, she tried to explore why. The trainee did not admit the problem initially. However, Bonnie later realized that the trainee was upset about a particular job assignment. Although Bonnie still required the trainee to do the task, she talked with the trainee, allowing her to vent her feelings. According to Bonnie, the concern she showed to the trainee was helpful, and afterward, the trainee was able to perform better.

The attitude of the hotel staff was appreciated by the social workers. According to them, the caring attitude of the hotel staff was important for the success of the trainees in adapting to the work environment.

The staff are willing to teach, giving them opportunities, although they may learn slowly. The hotel staff were willing to spend time on them, teaching them again and again. They were willing [to do so], facilitating the improvement of the trainees ... Also, the atmosphere was good. Besides the supportive attitude shown by staff who supervised them, the trainees met other colleagues every day in the staff canteen, and the colleagues knew they were trainees, treating them in a friendly way. [That] made the trainees feel positive. (Fanny, social worker)

4.4 | Demands

The hotel staff reported that they required the trainees to develop good work habits. Although they accommodated some of the trainees' limitations, they were strict. Anna, a hotel staff member, mentioned that "everyone has a tendency to be lazy." For this reason, she stated that "it was necessary to be strict," especially with some trainees. Anna also pointed out that a trainee might be affected by other trainees. If a trainee found that another trainee did nothing all day, he/she may also become lazy.

The job demands placed on the trainees represent the beliefs the hotel staff held towards work, and they can be best illustrated by Bonnie's experience. A trainee felt unhappy because she had to handle used napkins in the restaurant. Although Bonnie knew that, she insisted on requiring the trainee to do this job because she wanted to

Let her to know this is our job duty, we need to do this. You cannot refuse the duty simply because you do not like to do it, piling up the unfinished task ... impossible! For example, after [customers] finish a meal in a restaurant, you do not like to do the washing up? It is impossible! You need to know this is a part of the job duties. (Bonnie, hotel staff)

The social workers reported that the job demands for the trainees came from the frontline hotel staff rather than from management. The trainees, for example, were required to follow instructions from supervisors rather than doing tasks using their own methods. They also had to be punctual and more independent after the initial adjustment period. The social workers considered these requirements beneficial for the trainees. When asked what benefits the trainees gained, Emily replied,

These are requirements in every work setting. These [fulfilling the requirements] mean an improvement in work. When they [the trainees] can meet the requirements most of the time, their confidence would

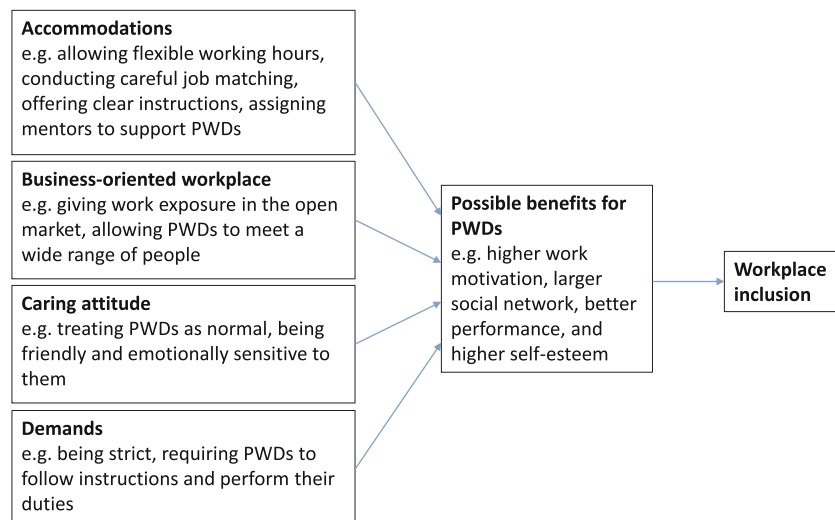


FIGURE 1 Contributing role of business enterprises towards workplace inclusion for people with disabilities [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]



be enhanced, realizing that "I can do it too". Just like other colleagues, [the trainees] can do what others do. (Emily, social worker)

Emily considered that fulfilling the job demands outlined by the frontline hotel staff to be crucial for improving the trainees' success rate in long-term employment. Thus, employment success relied on support from the frontline staff.

5 | CONCLUSION

5.1 | Discussion

Based on the results of our investigation, the relevance of the A-B-C-D framework is supported, highlighting what business enterprises may provide to facilitate an inclusive labor market (Figure 1). The findings seem to suggest that business enterprises play an irreplaceable role in improving the employability of PWDs. Rather than focusing on the business's interests in participating in the CSR initiative, the findings highlight the benefits gained by PWDs. Using the framework the author proposed, there are four major aspects business enterprises may offer: workplace accommodations, business-oriented settings, a caring attitude, and job demands.

Accommodations are frequently discussed in regard to what business enterprises can offer to address the disadvantages of PWDs. Accommodations are not merely concerned with modifications to work procedures and arrangements. McLaughlin et al. (2004) point out that other colleagues' cooperation in offering accommodations is crucial. This is especially the case for the training program under investigation in this study, as people with intellectual disabilities or Down syndrome often need to be accommodated through the use of accessible language during communication.

In addition to accommodations, much more can be contributed by making good use of the advantages of business enterprises. The findings seem to show that PWDs can benefit from working in business enterprises through the acquisition of market-relevant job skills. Although it was not reported by those interviewed here, the findings could suggest that the skills learned in a business enterprise may be more likely to transfer to other mainstream work settings than skills gained in segregated workplaces. In addition, the training program contributed to social exclusion, as the trainees had considerable opportunities to become "familiar with the wider community" (Brown, 2004, p. 19). These valuable inclusive experiences also allowed them to learn "soft skills" that will be helpful in their future career development (Sławińska & Villani, 2014).

It would be encouraging for PWDs to experience care shown by colleagues and supervisors in a mainstream workplace. Perhaps it is not uncommon for PWDs to experience care from their carers and social workers. However, care from the natural support network is often more important (Kiernan, 2000) and serves as proof of acceptance by mainstream society. This kind of positive experience, which

is less available in segregated workplaces, may encourage PWDs' social participation.

Although showing care towards PWDs is important, caring for them too much may be counterproductive (Callus & Bonello, 2017; Grossman & Magaña, 2016). Segregated workplaces have been criticized for being overprotective of PWDs (Campbell, Morgan, & Jackson, 2004), and this problem may occur in the workplaces of business enterprises. If a certain inappropriate behavior is allowed in the workplace, it may become a habit and be hard to unlearn later. Hence, a balanced approach should include establishing reasonable job demands for PWDs. In the long term, PWDs may become more independent and involved in the community.

5.2 | Theoretical implications

In line with "the social returns of CSR" (McWilliams, Siegel, & Wright, 2006, p. 6), the present study offers contributions to the body of knowledge related to CSR by considering how PWDs can benefit from business enterprises' CSR initiatives. This is important because CSR is rarely discussed in the context of PWDs' employment, especially in the Chinese context. The A-B-C-D framework proposed here allows us to systematically explore the issue and highlights the key strengths that business enterprises can contribute. By examining the experience of a hotel in organizing a job training program in hospitality, this article serves as a means of disseminating good CSR practices. The present study seems to suggest that business enterprises often play an irreplaceable role in supporting the employment of PWDs. Hence, the potential role of business enterprises in supporting PWDs' employment should be further examined.

5.3 | Managerial implications

It is noteworthy that there is a risk that PWDs would remain outside CSR practices, especially when managers focus on fulfilling the expectations of their stakeholders. PWDs as a disadvantaged group may be less able than others to voice their needs, and their needs may therefore be "out of sight, out of mind." The findings of the present study suggest that business enterprises should include the employment of PWDs on their CSR agenda and make concerted efforts to respond to the employment problem of PWDs (Markel & Barclay, 2009). A mechanism should be established for connecting PWDs and business enterprises so that the former can recruit suitable PWDs on a regular basis (Brostrand, 2006).

If the employment problem of PWDs is considered a social problem to be addressed, there is a need to examine whether PWDs can truly benefit from the relevant CSR efforts of business enterprises. Businesses' good intentions to support the employment of PWDs are not enough. Being overly accommodating of PWDs, for example, may do more harm than good in the long run in terms of the social inclusion of PWDs. Hence, careful assessments of PWDs and the implementation strategies of relevant work-related CSR projects are required.

To this end, business enterprises could develop these kinds of projects with nonprofit organizations that have expertise in serving PWDs.

The success of the CSR program under investigation relied not only on the willingness of top management but also on the involvement of frontline staff and middle management. This finding seems to suggest that a whole organization approach is required when launching this kind of work-related community investment project. Staff training should be provided to teach skills for communicating with PWDs and promote social inclusion (Brostrand, 2006).

5.4 | Limitations and future research

There are several limitations to the present study. Although both hotel staff and social workers were included in the study, the number of respondents was limited. Approximately four more hotel staff members were also significantly involved in the program, and it would certainly have been desirable to include them in this study. Unfortunately, they did not participate in the interviews due to their busy schedules. In addition, the study was based only on the experience of one job training program in hospitality for people with intellectual disabilities or Down syndrome offered in a Chinese context. Hence, the findings should be interpreted with caution. The practice-oriented research method offered an advantage for the present study in terms of generating practice-relevant insights, but the use of this method restricts the generalizability of the results (Koerner & Castonguay, 2015). Similarly, although a qualitative approach was suitable for the present study for exploring what business enterprises can contribute to workplace inclusion (Khan et al., 2019), quantitative study methods should be employed to measure the impacts of work-related CSR projects. More empirical evidence is necessary to demonstrate how CSR and PWD employment can be successfully integrated.

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