

## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

# BARRIERS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE PROFESSIONAL INCLUSION OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES IN THE TOURISM SECTOR IN THE PROVINCE OF ALICANTE

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The debate on accessible tourism needs to go beyond the traditional approach (limited to access to tourism services) and broaden to incorporate other issues, such as equal opportunities in tourism employment. In this study, inclusive tourism refers to both the production and consumption of tourism. Scheyvens and Biddulph propose a conceptual framework based on seven elements for inclusive tourism development, which they define as “Transformative tourism in which marginalized groups are engaged in ethical production or consumption of tourism and the sharing of its benefits” (2018: 392). Gillovic and McIntosh (2020) apply this theoretical framework to accessible tourism, understanding it as one of the cornerstones of inclusive tourism. The present study follows this model of analysis with an emphasis on the inclusion of people with disabilities as producers of tourism.

Research suggests that tourism businesses would benefit from the inclusion of workers with disabilities. The main barriers identified are a continued lack of willingness on the part of managers and the existence of stereotypes (Bengisu and Malta, 2011; Gröschl, 2012; Houtenville and Kalargyrou, 2012; Jasper and Waldhart, 2013; Kalargyrou 2014; Kalargyrou and Volis, 2014; Paez and Arendt, 2014). In addition to the reluctance observed in companies, there is also a lack of training in accessible tourism (Marcos and González, 2003; CRUE, 2017).

## 2. OBJECTIVES

The aim of this research is to identify the areas requiring action in order to increase the labour insertion of people with disabilities in companies and organisations in the tourism

sector. Specifically, it focuses on understanding the barriers faced by this group, paying attention to the points of view of: a) companies and entities in the tourism sector, and b) organisations and associations that support their social inclusion through employment. The research questions are: Does tourism employment have specific characteristics that make it more difficult for people with disabilities to find employment than in other sectors? What are the advantages and difficulties identified by companies when hiring people with disabilities? What actions need to be taken to overcome the barriers that are encountered? What role does training play in overcoming the barriers identified?

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

A qualitative study was carried out based on 34 semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted between January and May 2020 in the province of Alicante (Spain). In all cases, the statements were recorded, transcribed and analysed. The sample is made up of representatives of seven support organisations or associations for people with disabilities, 20 companies and institutions in the tourism sector and seven experts with extensive knowledge of the tourism economy or disabilities.

### **4. FINDINGS**

The key barriers identified regarding the labour insertion of people with disabilities in the tourism sector are: the severity of working conditions; the prejudices of companies when recruiting (which lead to people with disabilities being pigeonholed in low-skilled jobs); the projection of a public image that ostensibly should be associated with stereotypes that are incompatible with disabilities (out of concern for the effect they may have on customers); the lack of training for people with disabilities, especially in languages; and the difficulties in commuting to the workplace when it is located far from urban centres. These could all undermine a company's initial interest in finding workers who meet the required profiles. The fact is that the general consensus recognises the lack of sensitivity of the business community in general, and of the tourism sector in particular, towards the world of disability. In this respect, support organisations highlight that the recruitment of people with disabilities tends to be imposed by law and hardly ever occurs on a company's own initiative.

In addition to the difficulties mentioned above, there are other factors to be taken into account: short-term management (day-to-day pressure) means that companies (especially small ones) do not have time to think about the possibility of hiring people with disabilities; the perceived cost of training disabled workers; the costs of job accommodation; the excessive workload of human resources departments; failures in the inclusion chain (ranging from training to insertion itself, including guidance, support and capacity building); lack of knowledge of the job profiles and skills of people with disabilities; lack of information on tax benefits; lack of applicants for vacancies; and the perception of people with disabilities as not very versatile workers. In particular, there are two elements that together could constitute a very difficult barrier to overcome: 1) the perception of disabled workers as people with limited autonomy; 2) disabled workers' fear of rejection from their co-workers (due to prejudice or concerns that their presence would lead to an increase in their workload).

Although there is agreement that there is a lack of information on the advantages of hiring people with disabilities, the organisations, companies and experts consulted are to a greater or lesser extent aware that: 1) hiring people from this group provides employers with tax advantages (the larger the company, the more information it has on the subject, which is logical considering that from 50 employees upwards, Spanish legislation requires 2% of workers with disabilities must be hired); and 2) in public procurement, it may be a decisive factor deciding in a company's favour in the event of a tie in certain tenders. In fact, the main reason given by companies for hiring people with disabilities is that of receiving support in the form of tax incentives. In this respect, it should be noted that some interviewees emphasised the need to weigh up the tax breaks or other possible advantages of hiring the disabled person on the one hand, with the job performance of the disabled person on the other.

However, these advantages are not perceived as sufficient in themselves to encourage hiring. Going into more detail, further benefits to a company's competitiveness are mentioned. Among the organisations consulted, they highlight the fact that people with disabilities help organisations to have a "real vision" of accessibility, both in terms of the workers themselves and in terms of customers. Related to this issue, the consolidation of a good public image is also noted. Other potential benefits concern attracting talent, enriching a company's human capital and improving team spirit. Therefore, aside from tax benefits, the main advantage identified by companies and experts is the enrichment of the work environment. The increased empathy of people with disabilities is highly valued, as well as their commitment to work, their loyalty and their keenness to better themselves. In this sense, their ability to transmit these values to the rest of the staff is highly regarded. Thus, most interviewees affirm that diversity enriches the workforce and promotes a good working environment.

The experts interviewed point out that hiring people with disabilities can benefit a company's image. In their statements, this concept is mixed with the desire to set a good example for the rest of society, as well as valuing their own moral compensation. To a lesser extent, mention is made of the general enrichment of society, the improvement of the tourist destination and raising awareness among young people. It is also noted that disabled clientele may gain in trust by feeling treated with genuine empathy. However, there is also a persistent fear that a company's image is damaged when a person with a disability is in a customer service position.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The results presented are similar to those obtained in studies by Gröschl (2005, 2007), Houtenville and Kalargyrou (2012, 2015) and Kalargyrou *et al.* (2018, 2020) in the United States and Canada. That is to say, lack of disability awareness, lack of information, shortcomings in tourism education programmes and the characteristics attributed to jobs in the hospitality sector are the main reasons for the low recruitment of workers with disabilities.

The results show the need for more research attention to be directed at customer attitudes towards people with disabilities in tourism services. The relationship between satisfaction with the service provided and the participation of people with disabilities in the service may be positive, but employers still need to be convinced that this can be a competitive advantage. Including programmes to support the integration of people

with disabilities into the labour market as part of corporate social responsibility policies improves business competitiveness. Training is the way to find a good job, improve the quality of life and achieve independence and autonomy. To provide this, it is essential to improve communication between companies offering employment and educational and social integration support organisations.

In order for people with disabilities to access tourism as producers, the identified barriers must be overcome, especially the misinformation that affects society in general and the tourism business sector in particular. People with disabilities are needed to serve as role models and help place public awareness of abilities ahead of disabilities. People with disabilities and support organisations must have access to the spaces where decisions on tourism development are made, as well as to the areas where training and labour inclusion policies are decided. Therefore, it is necessary to analyse the views of people with disabilities regarding their experiences as employees in the tourism sector and their job expectations in the sector. This is undoubtedly a promising line of research.

The practical implications of this study focus on recommending public policies to promote responsible public procurement and encourage recruitment aids for people with disabilities aimed at breaking down dominant stereotypes. Public administrations need to work to enable companies to overcome the barriers they still face when hiring people with disabilities. There is also a need to improve the communication and connection between job vacancies, training and the labour market. In this respect, more information campaigns are needed to raise awareness and eliminate negative attitudes.

For people with disabilities, employment in the tourism sector opens up the possibility of improving their quality of life. Nevertheless, the benefits of this integration extend to the whole of society. If it wishes to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, the tourism system must commit itself to the development of inclusive tourism and consider the integration of people with disabilities into the labour market as one of the most important challenges it faces.