Gordon Institute of Business Science
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Social integration and its impact on the sense of belonging among visually impaired employees

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Abstract

While organisations increasingly commit to disability inclusion, many visually impaired employees continue to experience workplace isolation. Yet we know relatively little about how workplace structures, psychosocial safety, and belonging interconnect for visually impaired employees in African contexts. Most existing studies focus on employment rates rather than inclusion quality, and few examine how structural and relational factors interact to shape belonging.

This qualitative study explored how social integration shapes belonging amongst 28 visually impaired employees and organisational representatives in South African workplaces through semi-structured interviews analysed using reflexive thematic analysis.

The analysis revealed complex interactions between structural and psychosocial factors. Structural accessibility, including assistive technology, accommodation procedures, and meeting communication practices, fundamentally shaped integration, with 82% of participants reporting meeting communication barriers. However, accessibility alone proved insufficient. Identity safety, perceived acceptance, and freedom from microaggressions determined genuine belonging beyond mere presence.

These pathways interacted synergistically. Structural barriers created ceilings that psychosocial support could not overcome, whilst organisational culture moderated pathway effectiveness. Early career experiences set trajectories that accumulated over time. Intersecting identities compounded barriers beyond additive effects.

The findings suggest organisations must address both structural and cultural dimensions simultaneously through universal design, disability awareness training, leadership accountability, and co-creation mechanisms that position visually impaired employees as solution design partners.

Keywords: workplace inclusion, visually impaired employees, social integration, sense of belonging, accessibility, intersectionality, South Africa, Integrated Dual-Pathway Model

Declaration

I declare that this research project is my own work. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Business Administration at the Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other University. I further declare that I have obtained the necessary authorisation and consent to carry out this research.

Sindisiwe Ntombela **03 November 2025**

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List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Full Term
AT	Assistive Technology
ASR	Automatic Speech Recognition
CDT	Critical Disability Theory
CFIR	Consolidated Framework for Implementation Research
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
CRPD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
DEI	Diversity, Equity and Inclusion
DESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
EEA	Employment Equity Act
GIBS	Gordon Institute of Business Science
HRM	Human Resources Management
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IDPM	Integrated Dual-Pathway Model
IT	Information Technology
NLP	Natural Language Processing
PDF	Portable Document Format
POPIA	Protection of Personal Information Act
RE-AIM	Reach, Effectiveness, Adoption, Implementation, and Maintenance
RCT	Randomized Controlled Trial
ROI	Return on Investment
SA	South Africa
SEM	Structural Equation Modeling
SES	Socioeconomic Status
SIT	Social Identity Theory
SLA	Service Level Agreement
SROI	Societal-perspective Return on Investment
UA	Universal Accessibility
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
US	United States
VIE	Visually Impaired Employee
WCAG	Web Content Accessibility Guidelines
WHO	World Health Organization

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background and Context

Social integration in the workplace extends beyond mere physical presence (Aidla et al., 2023; Vilnai-Yavetz & Rafaeli, 2021). It involves active participation, psychological acceptance, and a genuine sense of belonging (Jung et al., 2022; Molin, 2020; Zabala et al., 2023). For visually impaired employees, this multidimensional process encompasses both their willingness to participate in social interactions and their perceptions of acceptance within peer and organisational networks (Yuan et al., 2023). Authentic integration is therefore complex, situated at the intersection of structural arrangements, organisational culture, and everyday interpersonal dynamics, each shaped by institutional support, societal attitudes, and individual psychological experience.

This study distinguishes three linked constructs. Social integration refers to (i) active participation in formal work tasks and informal interactions and (ii) the perception of acceptance and respect from colleagues and the organisation (Yuan et al., 2023). Belonging is the affective experience of being valued and authentically connected to the workplace community, felt through supportive daily interactions, bonds with colleagues, and identification with the organisation (Molin, 2020; Zimmerman et al., 2025). Inclusion denotes the policies, accommodations, and structural arrangements that enable equitable access. These operate in sequence: inclusive structures create the conditions for social integration, which, over time, cultivates a durable sense of belonging. The need to move from policy to lived inclusion becomes clear when we consider current employment patterns.

The scale of the challenge is evident in the numbers. In South Africa, an estimated 70% of working-age people with visual impairment are unemployed, highlighting the urgency of effective integration strategies (Moonsamy, 2025). Globally, only 27% of individuals with disabilities are employed compared to 56% of those without disabilities, with the widest gaps among women, indigenous communities, and rural populations (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2024). Age and gender exacerbate vulnerability, as older adults and women frequently encounter inferior health outcomes and diminished opportunities (Metanmo et al., 2025). However, employment statistics alone do not capture the quality of workplace life or the extent to which visually impaired employees feel authentically integrated into organisational communities.

Building on the scale of the challenge, this study asks how inclusion translates into social integration and, in turn, into belonging for visually impaired employees in South African workplaces. Policy compliance and physical accommodations may open the door, but they do not determine whether daily work feels connected, respected, and sustainable. What determines these variables are the everyday social dynamics, communication practices, relationship quality, and unwritten cultural norms (Bam & Ronnie, 2020). Accordingly, the study examines three mechanisms: (1) how communication strategies and assistive technologies shape day-to-day participation, (2) how interpersonal relationships and team behaviours foster or erode acceptance, and (3) how organisational culture and informal rules enable or block authentic belonging. The contribution is twofold: a clear framework linking accommodations, social integration, belonging, and practical steps managers can use to move beyond compliance toward workplaces where visually impaired employees genuinely thrive.

Workplace barriers, some visible, others hidden, shape these dynamics. Communication routines that rely on visual information and social interactions that presuppose sight can unintentionally exclude colleagues with visual impairments (Bam & Ronnie, 2020). The shift to digital and hybrid work has amplified this risk as organisations adopt new platforms without fully considering assistive-technology users, treating accessibility as an add-on rather than a foundational design principle. By situating these barriers within the three mechanisms above, the study links concrete fixes in communication and technology to stronger relationships and more inclusive cultures, clarifying how inclusion practices translate into felt belonging.

This digital divide manifests in inaccessible software interfaces, unclear communication protocols, and virtual collaboration tools that fail to accommodate diverse accessibility needs (Dahabi et al., 2024; Das et al., 2021). The consequences are both human and organisational: exclusionary practices depress productivity and morale, drive turnover, and forfeit the innovation that comes with diverse perspectives (Messaoudi et al., 2022; Rodríguez et al., 2023). Taken together, these patterns make a clear case for viewing inclusion through two lenses at once, employee experience and organisational performance, and for embedding accessibility as a foundational principle of work design rather than an afterthought.

1.2 Business context and organisational imperative

The case for workplace inclusion has moved beyond compliance to core strategy. Diversity and accessibility now function as levers of competitive advantage: when organisations implement accessible and flexible work practices, research links these efforts to enhanced productivity, stronger performance, and an enhanced reputation (Çivilidağ & Durmaz, 2024). In South Africa,

this imperative is both urgent and complex. A history of systemic exclusion coexists with a supportive legal framework for transformation. However, research reveals a troubling silence around disability, even within progressive movements' agendas, where racial integration has often overshadowed disability concerns (Evans, 2022; Wickenden, 2023). This marginalisation can render the experiences of visually impaired employees (VIE) invisible, distancing them from broader transformation efforts and masking their true organisational impact. Demographic realities further strengthen the strategic case for inclusion. Visual impairment (VI) is often imagined as affecting "others", yet evidence from the Eastern Cape, South Africa, indicates a 57.6% prevalence among adults aged 35+, with adults over 64 being 12 times more likely to develop VI (Mafuleka & Metsing, 2024). Common age-related conditions such as uncorrected refractive errors (38%) and cataracts (20%) emerge across working lifespans, suggesting that visual limitations are not an edge case but a predictable trajectory for many employees.

These trends argue for proactive accessibility: design systems, tools, and processes that anticipate future needs while addressing current ones. Rather than reacting with *ad hoc* accommodations, organisations that embed universal design create infrastructure that benefits everyone, improving day-to-day usability, supporting the social integration of VIEs, and strengthening overall workforce resilience. Firms that prioritise authentic inclusion also capture a broader value: increased innovation driven by diverse perspectives, better problem-solving, broader market access via a representative workforce, and greater adaptive capacity in changing environments (Ezeafulukwe et al., 2024; Foster et al., 2023; Westover, 2025). The business case thus blends moral imperatives and strategic advantages, positioning inclusive organisations for sustained success. Realising these gains, however, requires more than superficial accommodations. Cultural transformation is essential: ongoing disability education, awareness building at all organisational levels, and the integration of inclusive practices into everyday operations (Ezeafulukwe et al., 2024; Moonsamy, 2025). This means sustained leadership commitment and resource allocation not just at policy implementation but through continuous reinforcement. Despite growing consensus on the importance of inclusion, theoretical and practical gaps remain in achieving authentic integration for VIEs, underscoring the need for rigorous, context-aware research and implementation.

1.3 Theoretical Context and Literature Gaps

Despite growing scholarship on workplace disability inclusion, significant gaps persist, especially in our theoretical understanding of how VI shapes day-to-day workplace experiences. Dominant frameworks still prioritise policy compliance and individual accommodations rather than examining the broader social and cultural dynamics that shape inclusion for VIEs. Botha and Watermeyer

(2022) examined the impacts of organisational discourse and power dynamics on perceived status, agency, and a sense of belonging among individuals with visual impairments. Their research revealed that, while rehabilitation services provide valuable practical skills, people also experience significant drawbacks. Organisational practices and relationships send implicit messages about their worth and capabilities that can undermine their sense of agency and social standing. However, their focus rests largely on rehabilitation services rather than workplace settings. What remains unclear is how these discourses operate inside organisations, how they travel through routines, hierarchies, technologies, and informal norms to shape the inclusion (or exclusion) on the ground.

This discourse gap reflects a broader theoretical limitation in disability inclusion research. Policy-focused approaches offer important groundwork, but they often overlook the interpersonal and organisational dynamics that determine whether policies translate into genuine belonging. Current studies highlight the absence of robust theoretical models for the social side of workplace inclusion, how people communicate, build relationships, and navigate workplace cultures (Bam & Ronnie, 2020; Suresh & Dyaram, 2020). In SA, these questions are further complicated by intersectionality: VI intersects with race, gender, sexuality, disability status, age, religion, and socioeconomic status, producing distinct patterns of exclusion (Kubeka & Rama, 2020).

Against this backdrop, social integration remains a largely overlooked domain that holds significant promise for enhancing inclusive practices. (Yuan et al., 2023) demonstrates that integration depends on both an individual's readiness to engage socially and their perceived acceptance by colleagues. Yet much workplace research treats social integration as secondary, even though evidence suggests that emotional and peer support are among the strongest drivers of belonging. For example, a study of visually impaired bankers in India found that while technical fixes enabled access to systems, peer support, especially from other visually impaired colleagues, was more important for successful adaptation and authentic community (Jain & Sharma, 2018).

Emerging technologies add another, often overlooked, layer. Most assistive-technology studies focus on individual accommodations rather than on how these technologies reshape relationships, visibility, status, and communication at work. This is a missed opportunity, given advances in speech recognition and text-to-speech systems, which could significantly improve social interaction and reduce workplace isolation (Bhat, 2025; Kumar et al., 2024; Murugan et al., 2024). Emerging approaches such as acoustemology, also offer potential through personalised soundscapes that support identity recognition and enhance collaboration (Napolitano et al., 2024). The field lacks a theory explaining when and how such technologies foster (or hinder) social integration. Finally, the concept of belonging specifically requires further development for employees with VI. Lourens

(2020) revealed that many feel compelled to mask or alter aspects of themselves, undermining authentic experiences. Given the close linkage between belonging, engagement, retention, and job satisfaction, this issue represents a notable theoretical and practical gap. Taken together, these discrepancies in policy implementation, social integration, technological advancement, and a sense of belonging signify a critical under-specified domain. Addressing it will require a theory that: (a) connects institutional discourse to everyday interaction; (b) incorporates technology as a social actor in workplaces; and (c) centres intersectional South African realities so inclusion is not merely compliant but experientially authentic.

To address these gaps, this study synthesised four perspectives into a single integrated framework: the social model of disability (Forbes & Lourens, 2025), organisational behaviour (Castle, 2024), technological studies (Szekely et al., 2025), and intersectionality (Bassey et al., 2025). The social model redirects attention from individual "deficits" to organisational barriers and modifiable conditions for participation (Botha & Watermeyer, 2022). The organisational behaviour lens examines everyday dynamics, how communication patterns form, how relationship quality develops, and how network position shapes integration and belonging (Jain & Sharma, 2018; Yuan et al., 2023). Technology is treated not as neutral but as an active mediator: assistive tools shape visibility in meetings, patterns of communication, and opportunities for social participation (Ghafoor et al., 2024; Napolitano et al., 2024). Finally, intersectionality recognises that VI never occurs in isolation; in SA's post-apartheid context it intersects with race, gender, age, and class to produce markedly different experiences of inclusion (Kubeka & Rama, 2020; Lourens, 2020; Metanmo et al., 2025).

Together, these lenses integrate structural, relational, and technological dimensions of inclusion. The social model identifies organisational barriers and accommodations (structural level); relational dynamics explain how those accommodations enable or constrain everyday interactions and peer acceptance (relational level); and technology analysis shows how assistive tools mediate participation (technological level). Intersectionality cuts across all three, conditioning access to accommodations, the quality of relationships, and technology experiences in this context. This framework clarifies when and how organisational accommodations yield social integration and the conditions under which integration becomes authentic belonging, guiding both the study's design and its practical recommendations.

1.4 Research Problem Statement

This study examines the persistent gap between disability inclusion policies and the lived experiences of VIEs in SA. While substantial scholarship addresses inclusion through policy and accommodation (Kuurne (née Ketokivi) & Vieno, 2022; Reeves et al., 2023; Zimmerman et al., 2025), far less is known about how social integration processes the day-to-day navigation of relationships, norms, and organisational culture, which shape VIEs' sense of belonging. This gap has practical consequences. Organisations aiming for authentic inclusion beyond basic compliance need insight into the social dynamics that enable (or erode) engagement and belonging. Recent studies revealed that employees with VI often face barriers to full social integration, including the psychological pressure of "supercrip" stereotypes, which encourage masking and produce fragile, unstable forms of belonging (Lourens, 2020; Romo et al., 2023; Savin et al., 2024). In SA, these issues are compounded by a pervasive silence around disability: the priority given to racial transformation frequently sidelines disability concerns, leaving VIEs feeling marginalised. The result is a vicious cycle: without a robust theoretical foundation, organisations design inclusion strategies that address surface-level accessibility while overlooking the structural and interpersonal barriers that determine everyday participation. Moreover, VI intersects with race, gender, age, class, and other identities, creating complex patterns of marginalisation that most South African workplaces are not equipped to recognise or remedy (Kubeka & Rama, 2020; Metanmo et al., 2025).

What remains unclear are the mechanisms and conditions under which social integration fosters a genuine sense of belonging for VIEs in South African workplaces. Existing research has not fully addressed several questions: Which organisational practices spanning communication, technology, and accommodation enable or inhibit everyday social participation? In what ways do personal relationships and peer acceptance bridge the gap between compliant accommodations on paper and a lived experience of belonging? How does organisational culture amplify or dampen these dynamics? And how do intersecting identities (race, gender, age, and class) shape distinct pathways to integration and belonging in SA's context (Metanmo et al., 2025; Sibanda & Batisai, 2021)?

This study addresses these gaps through qualitative methods. Using in-depth interviews with VIEs and workplace observations, it will trace how concrete integration practices, communication protocols, accommodation approaches, peer interactions, and cultural norms shape daily experiences of participation and acceptance. The analysis will map the social processes that connect these practices to felt belonging and show how intersecting identities produce different routes to integration. A maximum-variety sampling strategy (across career tenure, organisational

settings, and intersectional identities) will capture diverse experiences. The outcome will be a practice-linked framework that connects integration mechanisms to belonging outcomes, alongside context-specific, actionable insights for South African organisations.

1.5 Research Objectives

This study investigates how social integration shapes the sense of belonging among VIEs in South African workplaces, with linked objectives that move from diagnosis to action. Beyond the primary aim, it will (i) identify organisational factors that facilitate or hinder integration, (ii) examine how employees navigate organisational cultures and everyday social dynamics, and (iii) analyse the role of interpersonal relationships in inclusion. An explicit intersectional lens will show how overlapping identities produce divergent experiences of integration and belonging (Kubeka & Rama, 2020).

Analytically, the study assesses (a) how accommodations influence social acceptance, (b) how communication strategies and assistive technologies shape daily participation and (c) how workplace culture can foster or hinder a genuine sense of belonging. It also challenges narratives that cast visually impaired individuals as passive recipients rather than active agents in their rehabilitation (Botha & Watermeyer, 2022). Practically, the work will specify targeted interventions to strengthen social integration, outline how organisations can enable authentic belonging without expecting performative “supercrip” displays and offer recommendations to remove both visible and invisible barriers to full participation. The ultimate goal is to translate findings into rights-based, enforceable policies that advance theory and deliver durable, real-world inclusion.

1.6 Scope and Delimitations

This study compares diverse South African organisations to examine how workplace cultures shape the inclusion of VIEs. It investigates how workplace design, communication practices, social interaction patterns, and organisational policies influence feelings of belonging and social integration, and it evaluates how assistive technology, accommodation strategies, and support mechanisms either promote or impede these processes. The analysis also applies an intersectional lens to understand how overlapping identities and individual characteristics condition inclusion experiences. The study is limited to workplace environments (not community or educational contexts), focuses specifically on VI (recognising other disabilities requires dedicated separate inquiry), and centres on social integration and belonging rather than productivity or career advancement, although related factors may emerge during data collection. Geographically, it is limited to SA, acknowledging context-specific legal, cultural, and organisational factors that may

constrain direct generalisation; nevertheless, its theoretical insights and methods are intended to inform inclusion efforts in similarly diverse contexts, pursuing transformation amid complex histories of exclusion.

1.7 Significance and Expected Contributions

This study addresses critical gaps in both the theory and practice of inclusion for VIEs in SA, offering contributions across four domains.

1.7.1 Theoretical contributions.

This research moves beyond policy- and accommodation-centric views to advance a multidimensional model of workplace inclusion that links social integration to felt belonging. It develops an empowerment-focused lens that challenges deficit framings and “supercrip” expectations, and it extends organisational behaviour theory by examining how inclusive leadership mediates the pathway from disability status to integration and, ultimately, authentic belonging.

1.7.2 Practical contributions.

Grounded in empirical evidence, this study specifies actionable strategies for creating psychologically safe and genuinely inclusive environments. It provides guidance for organisation-wide frameworks that address both the structural (policies, tools, processes) and cultural (norms, leadership, everyday interaction) aspects, and it offers targeted inputs for management training programmes and Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives tailored to the needs and strengths of VIEs.

1.7.3 Social contributions.

Through participatory methods, this study amplifies the voices of VIEs as collaborators rather than subjects, shifting the discourse from needs-only narratives to capabilities and contributions. Participants will inform research design, interpretation and dissemination, ensuring findings reflect lived realities. Findings are positioned to inform advocacy and policy development, foster public awareness, and challenge persistent misconceptions and stereotypes about VI in the workplace.

1.8 Expected impact

Beyond academic insights, this study delivers practical tools and frameworks that organisations can implement to improve social integration and belonging. By strengthening day-to-day inclusion, how people communicate, collaborate, and participate, the study aims to enhance quality of life, well-being, and professional fulfilment for VIEs and, in turn, enable fuller participation in the South African economy and society.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

Research on how VIEs experience social integration and belonging draws on varied theories and methods, yet findings remain inconsistent (Fulton et al., 2021; Ogedengbe et al., 2023; Raines et al., 2023). Much of this variability stems from differences in conceptualisation (what counts as integration *vs*. belonging), measurement (binary participation indicators *vs.* multidimensional scales), and analytic approaches across organisational and cultural contexts (Yuan et al., 2023). Some studies link perceived social support to stronger belonging (Aftab et al., 2025; Bhaskar et al., 2022), while others report conditional or null effects once contextual moderators, organisational culture, national policy frameworks, and individual psychosocial factors are considered (Ishida et al., 2025; X. Liu et al., 2025; Wu et al., 2025).

Looking beyond the individual level clarifies part of this puzzle. Organisational culture appears more consequential for belonging than physical workspace design alone (Dalessandro & Lovell, 2024). For employees with minority identity markers, cultural signals about who is heard, how decisions are made, and how difference is treated carry amplified weight (Arnett, 2023; Dalessandro & Lovell, 2023). Inclusive values foster acceptance only when they are embedded in daily practice, and formal policies inconsistently enacted rarely translate into felt connection (Bryer, 2020). From an empowerment standpoint, disability disclosure can be a strategic, agentic choice rather than a mere response to stigma, and instruments such as disability quotas may revalue disability within professional life (Richard & Hennekam, 2021). Yet supportive frameworks often coexist with interpersonal bias, eroding trust and complicating durable inclusion.

These tensions expose the limits of approaches focused narrowly on personal choices or institutional programmes. Critical Disability Theory (CDT) redirects attention to structural arrangements and ableist norms that produce disabling conditions regardless of individual identity work, helping explain why similar policies yield divergent outcomes across sociocultural settings (Brown & Finn, 2024; Mou & Albagmi, 2024; Marques et al., 2020; Yi & Moon, 2020). However, the structural account's traction is constrained by methodological weaknesses in the evidence base: small samples, heavy reliance on self-report, and limited psychometric validation undermine generalisability and causal inference (Yuan et al., 2023). CDT thus offers powerful analytic tools, but the empirical foundation remains incomplete.

This review highlights three gaps that justify focused study of VIEs. Impairment aggregation: pooling disability types obscures dynamics specific to visible AT use and its social meanings. Theoretical silos: Social Identity Theory (SIT) and CDT typically operate in parallel rather than in synthesis, masking how identity safety and structure jointly shape belonging. Method limitations: design, measurement, and power shortfalls prevent the development and testing of targeted,

context-sensitive interventions. Addressing these gaps requires systematic, culturally attentive research that distinguishes integration from belonging, explicitly models organisational culture and policy contexts, integrates SIT with CDT, and employs longitudinal, mixed-method designs to specify when, how, and for whom social integration reliably translates into authentic workplace belonging.

2.1 Theoretical and conceptual foundations

This review is anchored in SIT, which holds that people derive self-esteem and belonging from identification with valued groups (Kusku et al., 2022). SIT helps explain micro-level dynamics; how identity threat, stigma cues, and perceived in-group status shape the felt experience of belonging for VIEs. Yet SIT alone under-specifies the structural conditions that enable or block belonging: it privileges individual cognition and identity work while often bracketing power, policy, material design, and ableist norms. To address this blind spot, CDT was integrated, which foregrounds how organisational systems, technologies, and societal structures produce disabling environments (Ebrahim et al., 2022). In combination, the frameworks offer complementary lenses: SIT explains how belonging is psychologically constructed and threatened; CDT explains why identity processes may fail to translate into authentic inclusion when structures, technologies, or norms remain exclusionary. This synthesis supports a multi-level model linking structures (policies, tools, space), practices (communication, leadership, routines), and identities (disclosure, in-group signals) and predicts that without structural reform (CDT), the benefits of identification (SIT) face a structural ceiling.

2.1.1 Defining social integration and sense of belonging

Workplace social integration refers to the extent to which individuals are embedded in and connected through workplace networks, encompassing both the opportunity to interact (structural access) and the quality of those engagements (subjective experience) (Grosser et al., 2023; Tsounis et al., 2023; Vilnai-Yavetz & Rafaeli, 2021). For employees with disabilities, integration goes well beyond physical presence: it entails participation in formal and informal activities, collaborative project work, and the reciprocal exchange of social resources across the organisation (Teborg et al., 2024). Conceptually, it includes objective elements, for example, the frequency, depth, and centrality of interactions, and subjective elements, such as perceived acceptance and the sense that one's participation is meaningful.

By contrast, a sense of belonging is a more affective psychological state in which individuals feel accepted, valued, and connected within a group. Belonging often involves perceived alignment between personal and collective values (Seo, 2023) and therefore cannot be reduced to mere presence in group structures. The two constructs can diverge: employees may be structurally integrated (visible in meetings, assigned to teams) yet lack belonging when stereotypes or unaccommodated barriers limit authentic connection (Rahn et al., 2021). Conversely, employees can experience strong belonging within close-knit ties (e.g., remote or small-network contexts) even when their structural integration into wider organisational processes is limited.

Social identity perspectives add further nuance by proposing that people derive self-esteem from identifying with valued groups and from perceiving themselves as prototypical group members (Kusku et al., 2022). For VIEs, belonging is shaped by how disability figures within self-concept; when disability is incorporated as part of one's professional identity, employees tend to show greater resilience to labelling and are more likely to interpret workplace relationships as supportive (Brzykcy & Boehm, 2022). This identity-safety pathway helps explain why two employees with similar structural integration can report different levels of belonging.

Finally, these processes are conditioned by environmental context from the macro to the micro level: national frameworks and societal attitudes that signal which differences are legitimate, organisational policies and cultures that operationalise (or frustrate) inclusion, and day-to-day team interactions that either build trust or erode it through microaggressions and dismissive behaviour (Allen et al., 2021). Taken together, the literature supports treating social integration and belonging as related but distinct constructs: integration captures access and participation, while belonging captures affective attachment and identity safety. Both are necessary for durable inclusion, and both are shaped by the interplay of individual identity work and the structural and cultural conditions of the workplace.

2.1.2 Models of workplace inclusion

Workplace inclusion models differ in their assumptions, mechanisms, and levels of action, but converge on the goal of creating settings where differences are recognised and valued to enable full participation. At the micro (team/leader) level, inclusive leadership frameworks emphasise behaviours such as actively soliciting input, acknowledging divergent perspectives, and ensuring fair decision participation; these practices can prevent the collaboration drop-off sometimes observed in highly diverse teams (Ashikali et al., 2021). At the meso or macro level, structural models are centred on legislation and organisational policy infrastructure designed to advance under-represented groups. Evidence from disability employment programme indicates that such

policies can increase representation, but outcomes depend on implementation fidelity rather than policy presence alone (Shahin et al., 2020). Bridging these levels, organisational identification, “a perception of oneness with the organisation” that anchors individuals to shared purposes, explains why structural accommodations, without a corresponding psychological connection to organisational values, may fail to produce durable inclusion (Liu et al., 2023). In other words, policies create opportunity structures, but everyday leadership and culture convert those opportunities into felt belonging.

Accommodation models likewise span a continuum from identity-blind approaches (broad, universal adjustments) to identity-sensitive strategies (targeted supports for specific groups). When implemented inclusively, accommodations often confer spillover benefits for the wider workforce (Man et al., 2020). Critical perspectives, however, caution that conventional HR practices can reproduce systemic ableism. The social relational model of disability reframes routine procedures, return-to-work pathways, performance management, and compliance audits as potentially exclusionary when applied inconsistently across impairment categories or when cost containment eclipses recognition of employees’ skills and value (Sang et al., 2022). CDT extends this critique, shifting attention from individual adjustment to the institutional arrangements and cultural narratives that produce disabling conditions, even under formally compliant policies (Ebrahim et al., 2022).

The social support literature intersects with all of the above by showing how interpersonal resource exchanges from colleagues and supervisors’ buffer environmental stressors and foster belonging. Yet when support relies on informal goodwill rather than formalised systems, access and quality can vary by disability type, role, or unit, reintroducing inequities that structural policies sought to remove (Chumo et al., 2023). Effective inclusion typically requires alignment across structure (laws, policies, and accessible systems), practice (leader and team behaviours), and psychological climate (identification, safety, and belonging) (Mor Barak et al., 2022; Nishii & Leroy, 2020; Shore & Chung, 2022; Veli Korkmaz et al., 2022). The next section examines how these conceptual models appear in empirical studies and where gaps between theory and observed outcomes persist, highlighting the methodological constraints that limit current understanding of workplace integration processes.

2.2 Analysis of existing literature

This section synthesises empirical and theoretical work on social integration and sense of belonging for VIEs, distinguishing core constructs and mapping where results converge and why they diverge. We assess the quality of evidence (definitions, measures, methods) and surface key

moderators/mediators (culture, policy enforcement, leadership, accessibility climate, identity safety) that condition findings, using these insights to motivate the study's propositions and design.

2.2.1 Social integration of visually impaired employees

Research on social integration for VIEs spans both structural (policies, accessibility, work design) and psychosocial (identity, relationships, support) factors, with outcomes shaped by the wider social environment and specific organisational contexts (Brzykcy & Boehm, 2022). The strength and quality of ties across professional and personal networks strongly predict perceived support, yet these ties are constrained by accessibility gaps, stigma, and prevailing cultural norms. Evidence from adjacent settings underscores reciprocal dynamics between integration and support. Longitudinal work with visually impaired students shows that higher social integration predicts stronger close-friend support and vice versa, suggesting feedback loops that likely have analogues in workplaces where trusted professional relationships play a similar role (Yuan et al., 2023). Direct workplace studies are needed to confirm these dynamics; current employment research often relies on self-report and secondary datasets, limiting insight into mechanisms and overlooking the qualitative richness and power dynamics of organisational roles (Kim & Son, 2023).

Within organisations, workplace relationships and organisational culture play crucial roles in supporting employees with disabilities. Research shows that social support, particularly from supervisors, has strong evidence for facilitating continued employment and return-to-work outcomes (Jansen et al., 2021). Workplace relationships and organisational culture represent key practice clusters that significantly affect the performance, well-being, and sustainable employment of employees with disabilities (van Berkel & Breit, 2025). The quality of accommodations and supportive relationships, rather than simply providing assistive technology, appears to be critical for successful workplace integration (Wong et al., 2021).

Individual psychology and social context interact. Studies indicate a mutual relationship between self-esteem and perceived support; specifically, higher self-esteem can encourage outreach and positive construal of ambiguous encounters, whereas lower self-esteem can foster perceived exclusion even when objective participation is strong (Yuan et al., 2023). In parallel, the symbolic mastery of assistive tools (e.g., fluent screen-reader use) can reposition employees from being considered as dependent to adaptable, reshaping status within teams when this competence is visible to colleagues (Kumar et al., 2024). Policies and procedures act as either enablers or barriers depending on implementation. The social relational model highlights how ableist practices, including inaccessible online systems, constrain entry and early network formation, with lasting effects on integration (Sang et al., 2022). Required disclosure to obtain accommodations can also

trigger labelling dynamics that shape informal interactions and peer perceptions (Brzykcy & Boehm, 2022).

Targeted interventions show promise for improving relational outcomes, belonging, empowerment, and relationship quality even when narrow indicators of “community integration” do not shift immediately (Giummarra et al., 2022). For VIEs, gains in quality of life and self-efficacy may translate into greater willingness to participate when environmental cues signal authentic inclusion. These findings illuminate a central theoretical tension: SIT would predict that stronger relationships and self-efficacy enhance organisational identification, whereas CDT cautions that persistent structural barriers can cap or destabilise those gains if systemic ability remain unaddressed. Practically, both lenses are needed. Specifically, SIT explains how psychosocial resources produce perceived belonging, while CDT explains when those perceptions endure, namely, when structures and routines are inclusive. Finally, culture conditions integration pathways. Comparative research beyond employment indicates that peer, familial, and institutional supports operate differently across societies (Yuan et al., 2023). Within organisations, norms regarding collectivism *vs.* individualism, hierarchy acceptance, and legitimate interdependence shape voice, access to networks, and the social meanings attached to AT. From an SIT perspective, successful technology use can signal competence and in-group membership; from a CDT perspective, focusing on individual adaptation risks obscuring systemic barriers that preclude authentic inclusion regardless of personal mastery.

2.2.2 Factors influencing sense of belonging

Belonging in professional settings is shaped by interlocking individual, organisational, and societal factors. At the psychological level, the need to belong is a basic motive that varies across people; when repeatedly thwarted (e.g., via rejection or constrained autonomy), motivation to engage socially can diminish (Allen et al., 2021). The organisational context carries comparable weight. A sense of personal impact, seeing one’s input visibly influence outcomes, strengthens organisational identification and belonging, especially when peers and supervisors reciprocate with recognition. In contrast, low perceived influence and subtle exclusion from decisions can depress belonging even when formal integration measures exist. Social identity processes sit at the core of many belonging dynamics. When employees’ self-concepts align with valued organisational identities, belonging is more likely. For visually impaired staff, integrating disability into one’s professional identity (without internalised stigma) is associated with resilience to labelling and more supportive interpretations of workplace interactions, whereas stigma induces self-doubt and

ambiguous cues are more easily misread as exclusion, reducing belonging despite similar structural integration (Brzykcy & Boehm, 2022).

Structural accessibility is a parallel determinant. Procedural barriers, such as inaccessible application systems or poorly adapted information, both constrain participation and signal who the organisation considers a “normative” user, shaping early expectations of acceptance (Sang et al., 2022). These structures interact with micro-interactions: during technological disruptions, swift, matter-of-fact assistance from colleagues (e.g., narrating a slide deck while a screen reader reboots) can convert a potentially exclusionary moment into one that reinforces trust, underscoring that belonging is built cumulatively through everyday exchanges, not accommodations alone (Davies et al., 2025). Engagement in meaningful work also strengthens belonging. Providing resources to colleagues, sharing expertise, or advancing tasks that benefit others yields intrinsic satisfaction and a felt sense of being essential even when contributions are not high-profile or overtly social so long as they connect to shared goals (Haim-Litevsky et al., 2023).

The social embedding of AT is critical for durable inclusion. Guidance relationships and peer coaching help integrate tools (e.g., screen readers, tactile workflows) into team routines, improving proficiency and normalising technological differences within everyday collaboration (Garrick et al., 2024). A final consideration is theoretical balance. From an SIT perspective, visible competence and prosocial contribution are identity-affirming signals that reinforce in-group membership. CDT, however, cautions that over-reliance on individual effort risks reinscribing ableist expectations that disabled employees must continually over-perform to prove legitimacy unless structural barriers are addressed (Brzykcy & Boehm, 2022; Sang et al., 2022). Belonging emerges from the convergence of (i) motivation and self-concept, (ii) fair structures and accessible tools, and (iii) everyday interactional norms that convert participation into felt acceptance. Effective practice therefore pairs identity-safe climates and reliable communication with accessibility-by-default systems and socially embedded AT, ensuring that individual contributions translate into stable, shared membership.

2.2.3 Contradictory findings and their implications

Research on VIEs reveals a complex and often inconsistent relationship between social integration and a felt sense of belonging. Some studies report clear positive associations, for example, continuity of work-group identity predicting higher job satisfaction and lower loneliness during COVID-19 disruptions (Krug et al., 2021), while others show that high structural integration (attendance, team assignment) does not guarantee affective belonging when interpersonal cues signal marginalisation or devaluation (Janke et al., 2024; Rahn et al., 2021; Roberts, 2020). These

mixed findings suggest that integration and belonging are related but not interchangeable, and that context powerfully conditions the link between them. A substantial share of the inconsistency is methodological. Much of the literature relies on self-report measures vulnerable to recall bias and subjective interpretation, making it difficult to separate perceived inclusion from actual participation (Lira et al., 2022; Moradi & Møller-Skau, 2025; Schwab et al., 2020). Small samples are common in disability-focused workplace research, limiting power and obscuring subgroup effects; longitudinal studies face attrition as participants change roles or organisations, producing gaps in tracking and identification (Yuan et al., 2023). Even when sophisticated controls are applied, temporal ambiguity in cross-sectional designs prevents confident causal claims.

Findings are also context dependent. Cultural orientations shape how integration practices are experienced: in collectivist settings, genuine accessibility can amplify belonging, yet inaccessible tasks may heighten exclusion precisely because group cohesion is prized; in more individualistic contexts, weaker pressure to conform can protect distinct professional identities but may reduce opportunities for network-based inclusion (Seo, 2023). These contrasts expose limits of universal claims given that SIT may over-predict belonging where group identification is less salient, while CDT must account for how cultural values shape both the expression of ableism and resistance to it. Labelling and disclosure further complicate the picture. Disability labels can be empowering when disclosure occurs within strong inclusion policies and identity-safe climates but can also trigger stereotyping and avoidance in less supportive settings (Brzykcy & Boehm, 2022). Meanwhile, psychosocial mediators such as self-esteem and perceived support operate in reciprocal feedback loops where high self-regard can prompt outreach and benign interpretations of ambiguous cues, whereas low self-esteem can foster withdrawal, even under similar structural conditions (Yuan et al., 2023).

Finally, the effectiveness of inclusion initiatives hinges on cultural integration rather than technical provision alone. Mixed-methods work shows that comprehensive training covering unconscious bias, cultural competency, and concrete demonstrations of adaptive tools reduces stigma and reframes AT as standard workflow elements, helping to align practices with policy (Garrick et al., 2024). This helps explain why similar accommodation policies yield divergent outcomes across organisations. In short, contradictory findings reflect both real contextual variation and methodological limits (self-report bias, small or attriting samples, cross-sectional designs). Progress will depend on designs that distinguish participation from belonging, model cultural and interpersonal moderators, and track reciprocal dynamics over time, so we can specify when, how, and for whom social integration reliably translates into authentic workplace belonging.

2.3 Methodological limitations and challenges

2.3.1 Common research designs and their constraints

Research on how social integration shapes the sense of belonging among VIEs has relied heavily on cross-sectional surveys because they are efficient and low cost. While useful for mapping associations, these designs are inherently correlational and cannot adjudicate directionality or capture change. This makes it impossible to determine whether integration leads to belonging or belonging leads to integration or whether the relationship is reciprocal and mutually reinforcing over time.

Methodologically rigorous longitudinal approaches used in adjacent fields for example, cross-lagged panel models in educational settings (Yuan et al., 2023) remain comparatively rare in workplace research, leaving core mechanisms under-specified. Causal inference is further constrained by unmeasured confounding in field datasets (Krug et al., 2021). Even with statistical controls, temporal ambiguity persists when measurement waves are absent, and typical small samples erode statistical power, inflating Type I/II error and obscuring subgroup differences (Man et al., 2020). The predominance of self-report for both predictors and outcomes compounds these threats via common-method variance; moreover, binary or single-item indicators (e.g., yes/no participation; one-item belonging) lack reliability and fail to represent the multidimensional nature of inclusion experiences (Blau et al., 2023). As a result, some headline findings may be artefacts of method rather than evidence of underlying processes. Qualitative approaches such as interpretative phenomenological analysis and in-depth interviewing offer rich, context-sensitive accounts of lived experience that surveys miss. Yet their strengths come with trade-offs specifically, small, site-bound samples limit generalisability across sectors and cultures, and transferability depends on thick description rather than statistical inference (Charles, Gie, Musakuro, et al., 2023). Critically, the field still lacks measurement standardisation. Systematic reviews note inconsistent instruments and operational definitions for environmental facilitators/barriers (Shahin et al., 2020), and ongoing variability in constructs further impedes synthesis and cumulative knowledge building (Daniëls et al., 2025).

Taken together, the evidence base is hampered by design, measurement, and inference limitations: cross-sectional convenience designs blur causality; single-source self-reports inflate shared bias; small samples mask heterogeneity; and non-standard measures thwart comparison. A more credible trajectory will require longitudinal, mixed-method designs; multi-source data (e.g., accommodation turnaround times, participation in voluntary activities, peer nominations, supervisor ratings) to triangulate perceptions with behaviour; validated, multi-item scales with demonstrated

reliability and invariance; and clearer construct definitions that distinguish integration (participation, network position, access to information) from belonging (affective attachment, identity safety). Only then can the field move from suggestive correlations to explanatory models of how, when, and for whom social integration fosters durable belonging at work.

2.3.2 Measurement and definitional challenges

This subsection clarifies how “integration” and “belonging” are variously defined and measured, showing how inconsistent instruments and constructs manufacture apparent contradictions. We map preferred indicators and note where disability-context validation is still missing. Current research is hampered by inconsistent operationalisation of core constructs, producing apparent contradictions that likely reflect method artefacts more than true theoretical disagreement. Measures of social integration range from simple frequency counts of interactions to network-analytic indices of embeddedness and centrality, making cross-study comparison difficult (Nambisan et al., 2024; Yuan et al., 2023). Some studies rely on binary participation indicators, whereas others use multidimensional scales that assess relationship quality, perceived acceptance, and collaborative engagement. This heterogeneity obscures whether observed differences arise from real population variation or measurement divergence. Assessments of belonging are similarly heterogeneous: tools span single-item satisfactions to comprehensive instruments tapping emotional attachment, value alignment, and identity integration. Few have been validated in workplace disability contexts, raising doubts about sensitivity to challenges and specific to visually impaired employees. The common practice of adapting scales developed for other populations without psychometric re-evaluation (e.g., reliability, construct validity, invariance) compounds interpretation problems (Blau et al., 2023).

Underlying these measurement issues is definitional ambiguity. Integration is variously treated as structural participation, network embeddedness, or collaborative engagement, while “belonging” alternately denotes affective attachment, identity alignment, or global satisfaction. As a result, studies that claim to examine the same construct often investigate different phenomena (K.-A. Allen et al., 2021b; Covarrubias, 2023; Geurts et al., 2020). Together, fuzzy definitions and inconsistent metrics create substantial barriers to cumulative knowledge and theory building in this domain. Progress requires (i) clear construct boundaries that distinguish integration (access/participation, network position) from belonging (affective attachment, identity safety); (ii) context-validated, multi-item measures with reported reliability and measurement invariance for disability-relevant subgroups; and (iii) greater use of multi-source indicators (e.g., behavioural logs, network data, peer nominations) alongside self-report to align perceived inclusion with observed participation. These steps would reduce artefactual inconsistency and enable credible synthesis across studies.

2.3.3 Correlation vs causation challenges

Here we examine the limits of cross-sectional self-reports for causal claims and summarise designs capable of testing directionality and reciprocity (e.g., cross-lagged, quasi-experimental, within-person). The goal is to separate suggestive correlations from explanatory evidence. Distinguishing correlation from causation in the link between social integration and belonging among VIEs is difficult because most evidence comes from observational surveys (Brunes & Heir, 2020, 2022; H. Kim & Son, 2023; Zaheer et al., 2024). Such studies routinely find that VIEs who report greater integration also report stronger belonging, but they cannot determine directionality whether integration produces belonging or whether people who already feel included are more likely to seek and sustain broader connections (Kim & Son, 2023; Krug et al., 2021; Zaheer et al., 2024).

Longitudinal work in adjacent settings shows reciprocity between psychosocial factors, for example, self-esteem and perceived support influence each other over time (Yuan et al., 2023), implying that integration and belonging dynamics at work may be bidirectional rather than strictly causal in one direction. Several design features further cloud inference. Small samples inflate sampling error and make observed correlations fragile, particularly for subgroup analyses (Man et al., 2020). Attrition in longitudinal cohorts can bias results if those who remain differ systematically from those who exit (Yuan et al., 2023). Contextual heterogeneity also matters given that collectivist cultures, and visible participation may correlate strongly with belonging because of social pressure to harmonise, yet apparent inclusion can mask barriers to full engagement (Seo, 2023). Finally, labelling/disclosure is a plausible common cause: in climates supportive of disclosure, employees may both integrate more and feel they belong more not because one causes the other, but because shared antecedents (e.g., cultural acceptance norms) raise both outcomes (Brzykcy & Boehm, 2022).

To reduce mistaken causal attributions, future workplace research should (i) use longitudinal models that establish temporal ordering (e.g., cross-lagged panels, dynamic SEM) to test reciprocity; (ii) address confounding with within-person/fixed-effects designs, propensity methods, or marginal structural models for time-varying confounders; (iii) exploit quasi-experiments (difference-in-differences, interrupted time series, stepped-wedge rollouts) or randomised encouragement for inclusion interventions; (iv) triangulate multi-source measures objective participation logs, network data, and peer/supervisor ratings alongside self-report; and (v) conduct sensitivity analyses (e.g., attrition diagnostics, robustness to unmeasured confounding). These steps align evidence with the complex, potentially bidirectional nature of integration and belonging while strengthening the credibility of causal claims.

2.3.4 Ethical Considerations in Accessibility Technology

As ATs become more sophisticated, they generate substantial data about how employees work. Screen readers track which documents are accessed and for how long; voice recognition software records error rates and speech patterns; navigation aids log movement through physical and digital spaces. Whilst these data can help identify technical problems, they also create opportunities for surveillance that may disproportionately monitor disabled employees. This tension between functional necessity and privacy protection has received limited attention in disability employment literature, yet it raises critical questions about power, consent, and whether accommodation becomes a vehicle for control rather than empowerment.

The challenges intensify in multilingual contexts. AI-enabled tools like voice recognition systems often perform poorly for speakers whose accents or home languages fall outside training datasets. Research demonstrates that commercial automatic speech recognition systems exhibit significantly higher error rates for speakers from minoritised racial and linguistic groups, with some systems showing twice the error rate for Black speakers compared to White speakers (Koenecke et al., 2020). When systems record failed recognition attempts, they generate performance data that could be misinterpreted as user incompetence rather than algorithmic limitation. For VIEs working in their second or third language, this creates compounded vulnerability: accommodation tools may inadvertently document struggles rooted in linguistic exclusion, feeding existing stereotypes about capability.

Consent processes are rarely straightforward. Employees who require screen readers to perform essential functions face an inherent power imbalance: refusing organisation-provided tools may mean losing access to work systems entirely yet accepting them can entail agreeing to data collection over which they have little control (McDonnall et al., 2025). Research on AT developers reveals that many do not adapt privacy policies to accommodate users with cognitive or communication disabilities, despite acknowledging that such users may struggle to understand standard consent language (Lysaght et al., 2017a). Vendor contracts often permit usage analytics without specifying boundaries, and employees are seldom consulted before tools are procured. This contradicts disability rights principles of participatory decision-making.

Robust governance requires moving beyond compliance toward participatory frameworks. Data minimisation should ensure technologies collect only information necessary for functionality, defaulting to local processing rather than cloud-based logging. Consent must be genuinely voluntary, and accommodation should not be conditional upon accepting surveillance. De-identification protocols need rigorous enforcement, with aggregated reporting replacing individual-level dashboards. Role-based access should strictly limit who views logs: technical staff may

access data for troubleshooting, but managers should not routinely see usage patterns unless addressing specific accommodation requests.

Employee oversight mechanisms offer crucial accountability. Representative committees comprising disabled employees and union representatives could review vendor contracts, audit data practices, and recommend policy adjustments. Explicit prohibitions on using AT data for performance evaluation establish clear boundaries. As organisations adopt increasingly intelligent systems, regulatory frameworks must protect against surveillance disguised as support, recognising that accommodation users' privacy deserves protection equivalent to that afforded non-disabled colleagues (Aboulafia & Claypool, 2025).

2.4 Cross-cultural and contextual variations

This section examines how national culture, legal–policy regimes (and their enforcement), accessibility infrastructure, and organisational field conditions moderate the link between social integration and felt belonging. We contrast collectivist *vs.* individualist norms, high *vs*. low power distance, quota *vs*. complaint-driven systems, and mature *vs.* fragmented AT ecosystems, and consider intersectional identities that shape experiences across contexts. We conclude with implications for measurement equivalence and multilevel research design.

2.4.1 Comparative perspectives across countries

Cross-national comparisons show that the relationship between social integration and belonging for VIEs is highly contingent on socio-cultural norms, legal regimes, and organisational practice (Chhabra, 2020a; Manitsa et al., 2024; Ruin et al., 2023; Yuan et al., 2023) The same workplace structure can yield different outcomes depending on whether the context is more collectivist or individualist, operates under strict equality laws or relies on voluntary employer action, and the degree to which policies are implemented and enforced, not merely drafted. Legislative scaffolding varies markedly. Quota systems in parts of Europe mandate minimum disability hiring and can recalibrate employees' disclosure calculations by altering perceived risks and benefits; where such frameworks are absent, disclosure tends to hinge more on individual cost benefit assessments tied to accommodation needs and anticipated stigma (Richard & Hennekam, 2021). Thus, identical organisational policies can travel along different pathways depending on the national enforcement environment.

Access to AT is another key differentiator. Jurisdictions with proactive AT policies and funded training pipelines support smoother adoption across roles and impairment types, which in turn

facilitates collaboration and equal contribution. Elsewhere, fragmented procurement and complex approval processes push employees to self-provision tools, dampening integration and belonging (Marinaci et al., 2023). Beyond formal law, infrastructure and disability literacy matter. In some settings, limited physical/digital accessibility or low colleague awareness undermines acceptance despite anti-discrimination statutes an implementation gap most visible where policy has evolved reactively rather than through long-term strategy (Charles, Gie, & Musakuro, 2023). Cultural orientations amplify these effects: in collectivist contexts, genuine accessibility can powerfully enhance belonging, yet inaccessible tasks may heighten feelings of exclusion because group harmony norms magnify marginality; individualist settings may protect distinct professional identities but can also reduce opportunities for network-based integration (Seo, 2023).

Cross-national differences become sharper under intersectionality. Overlapping identities (e.g., gender, ethnicity) interact with VI to shape stereotype threat and opportunity structures (Rahn et al., 2021). Policy responses that treat disability as a single-axis issue miss compounded disadvantages. As R. H. Sharma et al. (2025) argue, moving beyond compliance toward genuine equity requires integrating intersectional needs directly into recruitment, performance evaluation, and accessibility policies. Interventions that succeed in one country may not generalise without contextual adaptation. Comparative work should specify cultural and legal moderators, report implementation fidelity, and distinguish structural levers (law, funding, AT procurement) (Weeks, 2021; Wiltsey Stirman et al., 2019) from psychosocial levers (leadership, identity safety) (Gordon et al., 2022; Kirby et al., 2021). Only by modelling these country-level contingencies can we explain when integration reliably translates into authentic belonging and why, across borders, identical policies often do not.

2.4.2 Cultural attitudes and their impact

Cultural attitudes toward disability strongly shape how inclusion is conceived, implemented, and felt by VIEs. These attitudes are historically contingent and evolve with social movements and prevailing values (Sawyer & Gampa, 2023). Where disability is framed primarily through a medical/deficit lens, inclusion tends to focus on “fixing” individual limitations; even without overt discrimination, this framing can reproduce segregation by locating the problem in the person rather than the environment. In contrast, societies that foreground interdependence and diversity are more likely to treat impairment as one characteristic among many (Puszka et al., 2022; Wickenden, 2023), normalising equitable participation and influencing organisational cultures through the stories told in media, education, and families.

Stratified and highly industrialised contexts often privilege narrow productivity metrics, casting disability as an obstacle to performance and increasing pressure to conceal differences or over-compensate to meet dominant standards (Dolan, 2023; Humphrys et al., 2022). In more community-based settings, with fluid social roles and broader notions of contribution, the same impairments may attract less stigma because they do not serve as sole identifiers (Babik & Gardner, 2021; Madyaningrum et al., 2021; Wickenden, 2023). These cultural logics travel into organisations, shaping recruitment expectations, performance evaluation norms, and the perceived legitimacy of accommodations.

Cultural views also condition labelling and disclosure dynamics (Atherton et al., 2023; Santuzzi et al., 2025). In communities with strong disability-pride movements and visible role models, openness can anchor positive identity and strengthen belonging; elsewhere, disclosure may activate negative stereotypes that limit opportunities and dampen engagement (Brzykcy & Boehm, 2022). Finally, whether organisations invest in accessibility often hinges on the prevailing moral frame: if disability is seen as a shared societal responsibility, resources flow toward inclusive systems; if it is treated as an individual problem, the burden falls on employees to self-manage. For practitioners and researchers, the implication is clear: design and evaluate inclusion strategies with cultural humility, making explicit the underlying frames about disability and aligning policies, performance standards, and everyday practices with a relational, rights-based view of participation.

2.4.3 South African context: Intersectionality and institutional frameworks

South Africa's legacy of apartheid, together with ongoing transformation efforts, creates a distinctive setting for workplace disability inclusion. In this context, VI intersects with race, language, and socioeconomic status to intensify barriers. The Employment Equity Act 55 of 1998, as amended by the Employment Equity Amendment Act signed in 2023 and effective from 1 January 2025, explicitly includes sensory impairments and adopts a social model framing of disability as arising "in interaction with various barriers" (Jefferson & Katz, 2024). Designated employers with 50+ employees must implement affirmative action for persons with disabilities alongside Black, Coloured, and Indian people, and women (Blair, 2025).

Intersectionality is essential to explaining these outcomes. National survey evidence shows that disability compounds with gender, age, and race, with Black women with disabilities facing the greatest exclusion (Moodley & Graham, 2015). Although non-disabled Black men experience worse employment outcomes than disabled White women, disabled Black women fare worst of all (Moodley & Graham, 2015). While the Constitution recognises intersectional discrimination and the

Employment Equity Act classifies beneficiaries by race, gender, and disability (Ramalekana & Mokgoroane, 2024), monitoring and enforcement seldom apply an intersectional lens leaving those at multiple axes of marginalisation substantively excluded.

Language dynamics further differentiate SA from Global North contexts. With 11 official languages, accessibility tools (e.g., screen readers and Braille materials) often default to English or Afrikaans, sidelining VIEs whose strongest literacy is in languages such as isiZulu or Sesotho (Sherry et al., 2024). This linguistic mismatch compounds VI, producing a dual exclusion in which both accommodation and language access must be negotiated. Trade unions add another layer: although roughly a quarter of the formal workforce is unionised, unions have been markedly less effective on disability advocacy than on racial and gender equity likely reflecting historical anti-apartheid priorities (Nxumalo, 2020). Together, these structural (access, technology) and psychosocial (identity safety, belonging) factors shape the everyday realities of VIEs in South African workplaces.

2.5 Organisational strategies and interventions

This section outlines organisation-level levers that translate intent into lived inclusion structural (accessibility-by-design, AT procurement/digital accessibility), relational (inclusive leadership, mentoring/sponsorship, network-building), and procedural (clear disclosure pathways, accommodation SLAs, flexible/hybrid practices). We prioritise evidence-informed interventions and specify implementation frameworks (e.g., RE-AIM/CFIR), evaluation designs (cluster RCTs, stepped-wedge, difference-in-differences), and metrics for adoption, fidelity, equity, and cost. We close by mapping these strategies to actionable checklists and governance routines that sustain gains over time.

2.5.1 Inclusive workplace design

Creating truly inclusive workplaces for VIEs requires aligning material infrastructure, organisational culture, and operational procedures. Accessibility should not be treated as a stand-alone retrofit but woven into everyday practice and the social meanings that shape integration and connection. Concretely, tactile floor indicators, high-contrast signage, glare-controlled lighting, and legible, navigable layouts must be paired with routines for upkeep and usability on a daily basis (Parker & Peterson, 2025; Teborg et al., 2024).

Research demonstrates that systematic organisational approaches are more effective than ad-hoc accommodations (Adjo et al., 2021; Van Laer et al., 2022), and that institutional commitment across

all organisational levels is essential for creating truly inclusive workplaces (Glade et al., 2020; Kersten et al., 2023). A pragmatic approach is therefore accessibility-by-design: embed accessibility criteria into planning, procurement, and IT/content standards rather than relying on ad-hoc fixes. Studies show that comprehensive organisational strategies must address various phases of the employee lifecycle (Kersten et al., 2023; Suresh & Dyaram, 2020), suggesting that designating trained accommodations coordinators with clear follow-up procedures and service expectations both streamlines requests and signals institutional commitment beyond individual goodwill.

Flexibility interacts powerfully with space and tools. When it avoids role segregation, flexible hours or location combined with accessible virtual collaboration can widen integration pathways. Yet flexibility cannot compensate for a hostile climate: hybrid arrangements may reduce exposure to microaggressions or, conversely, intensify isolation where spontaneous interaction is essential for belonging (Dalessandro & Lovell, 2024). The social environment is as critical as the physical one. Inclusion depends on norms that cultivate acceptance and appreciation of difference, reinforced by leadership behaviours that turn diversity statements into daily practice (Ashikali et al., 2021; Teborg et al., 2024). Skills-based training should equip teams to collaborate effectively with visually impaired colleagues, supportive, specific, and non-condescending so interactional quality matches infrastructural intent.

AT sits at the intersection of design and culture. Functionally, AT should be embedded in standard-issue devices or shared equipment hubs not segregated into “special” stations that mark users as other. Organisation-wide AT training normalises adaptive solutions and lifts team competence (Marinaci et al., 2023). Socially, AT acts as a mediator in collaboration: screen readers, magnification, and navigation aids shape how colleagues coordinate, delegate tasks, and respond under pressure (Kamaghe et al., 2020). Treating AT as a collective resource not a private fix helps integrate tools into workflow and identity-safe norms. Finally, digital accessibility is non-negotiable. Inaccessible platforms, documents, or meeting formats can exclude employees from core collaboration even when physical spaces and interpersonal relations are supportive, undermining participation despite formal policy commitments (Teborg et al., 2024). Robust inclusive design therefore aligns spaces, systems, and social norms so that access, participation, and belonging reinforce one another.

2.5.2 Policy and governance approaches for authentic inclusion

Effective support for VIEs requires integrating legal compliance, organisational accountability, and cultural change, not treating policy as symbolic. Without robust governance, formal commitments in strategic plans often decouple from day-to-day practice (Hummell et al., 2021). A credible

framework operates at two levels. At the macro level, national laws aligned with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) provide the foundation for inclusion mandates, but they must be monitored and enforced to matter (Saran et al., 2023). At the micro level, organisations need to translate these mandates into clear, low-burden procedures, structured accommodation workflows with service levels, accessible remote-work guidelines, and procurement standards that employees can actually navigate (McNamara & Stanch, 2021). When organisations provide appropriate frameworks, employees can successfully create accessible physical and digital workspaces and communication practices (Das et al., 2021). However, inadequate procedures create real barriers. (Bezzina et al., (2021) documented how policies relying exclusively on existing IT infrastructure without proper support workflows resulted in additional strain on both employees and systems. Organisations must therefore establish comprehensive procedures so employees can access support without encountering systemic obstacles.

Governance should be participatory, not top-down: include employees with disabilities on standing committees that co-design, review, and revise policies, ensuring decisions reflect the emotional and relational realities of work (Marinaci et al., 2023). Leadership practice is the cultural engine: leaders who connect individual strengths to team goals create conditions where diverse perspectives and AT use are framed as collective capability, not individual deficit (Sharma et al., 2024). To sustain this, embed awareness and skills training within leadership development so policies are interpreted beyond checklists, with attention to interpersonal impact. Finally, tie intent to accountability. Integrate disability-relevant inclusion metrics into ESG reporting, for example, accessible-by-design rates for spaces and systems, accommodation turnaround times, digital-accessibility compliance, and employee experience scores disaggregated by disability status (Ligorio et al., 2025; Parushina et al., 2023; Tagliaro et al., 2024; Vogelauer et al., 2020). Public, periodic reporting and internal audits keep implementation fidelity visible and actionable, moving the organisation beyond compliance toward durable, lived inclusion.

2.5.3 Training and awareness programs

Evidence suggests that training for inclusion of VIEs may need to be ongoing rather than a one-off event, though research on comprehensive multi-layered approaches remains limited. Training should aim to (i) improve employer attitudes and knowledge among sighted colleagues and (ii) potentially reduce the burden of constant self-advocacy experienced by VIEs (McDonnall & Antonelli, 2019). Generic diversity modules often miss disability-specific realities and can entrench misconceptions. In contrast, targeted content on AT, non-visual communication, and

wayfinding/environmental navigation corrects misunderstandings and increases day-to-day collaboration confidence (Marinaci et al., 2023).

Embedding training into organisational routines improves durability: refreshers at key career milestones (onboarding, role changes, leadership transitions) keep practices aligned with evolving tools and culture. Scenario-based learning with realistic cases that rotate perspectives between visually impaired and sighted roles builds empathy and surfaces hidden procedural barriers. Evidence shows direct contact produces greater attitude change than abstract instruction; involving visually impaired facilitators in design and delivery normalises disability expertise (Miyauchi, 2020). This must be done with care since participation should be voluntary, fairly compensated, and structured to avoid undue emotional labour. Crucially, awareness work must address the relational dimensions of AT use, not just the technical "how-to". As the Nordic Council of Ministers (2023) notes, technical explanations alone won't dismantle subtle biases; teams also need norms around conversation pacing with screen-reader users, spatial awareness for colleagues using navigation aids, and other micro-interaction skills. Training that integrates these interpersonal practices with technical competence turns accommodations from "special fixes" into standard team workflows.

Effective training should be continuous, with refreshers tied to key milestones rather than one-off sessions; it should prioritise disability-specific AT skills, non-visual communication, and navigation over generic awareness. Use scenario-based modules and direct contact with visually impaired facilitators (with safeguards for wellbeing and fair compensation) to build practical empathy. Teach the social use of AT pacing, turn-taking, and spatial norms not just the technical "how-to". Finally, measure uptake and impact (e.g., colleague confidence, AT collaboration norms, accommodation-request escalation rates) so learning translates into everyday practice.

2.6 Economic and business implications

This section translates inclusion into economic terms, outlining employer- and societal-perspective metrics ROI/SROI, incremental cost-effectiveness (e.g., cost per retained employee-year; cost per 1-point increase in belonging), and value pathways via retention, productivity, innovation, and risk reduction. We distinguish one-off *vs.* recurring costs (universal design, AT, training), specify time horizons and sensitivity analyses, and highlight how implementation fidelity and adoption rates determine whether benefits materialise or remain purely notional.

2.6.1 Cost-benefit analyses of inclusion programs

Evaluating inclusion programmes through a cost–benefit lens requires accounting for both direct financial outlays and harder-to-monetise social returns. On the cost side, organisations should

include expenditures on workplace accommodations, AT, and environmental modifications that enable equitable participation, for example, screen-reader licences, tactile/wayfinding systems, and accessible software platforms (Marinaci et al., 2023). Evidence also shows that some interventions such as targeted social-skills training are relatively affordable and time-efficient, indicating that low-cost, AT-enabled initiatives can deliver benefits that exceed their costs (Giummarra et al., 2022).

Benefits, however, extend beyond productivity. At the organisational level, improved representation and inclusive practices are linked to better team creativity and decision-making, outcomes that, while difficult to price precisely, are important for long-term competitiveness (Santilli et al., 2023). At the societal level, higher labour-market participation among people with disabilities reduces reliance on social protection, increases tax revenues, and can lower medical costs associated with unemployment-related health decline. From this perspective, investments in inclusive design and human-resource practices yield macroeconomic dividends by decreasing social-security expenditures and widening the available talent pool (Calderón-Milán et al., 2020). Programmes that prevent avoidable exits, for example, retention supports help mitigate these cumulative losses. Crucially, these benefits are contingent on uptake and implementation fidelity rather than symbolic compliance. Documented cases show that participation support does not necessarily inflate budgets when they are integrated intelligently into existing frameworks; in fact, efficiency often improves when inclusion efforts are embedded within standard human resources management (HRM) processes instead of being run as parallel, add-on programmes (Giummarra et al., 2022).

2.6.2 Impact on productivity and innovation

Studying how the employment of VIEs affects productivity and innovation requires attention to team composition, culture, and work design rather than impairment status *per se*. Quantitative comparisons in service sectors show comparable performance between employees with and without disabilities when support structures are effective, underscoring that capability translation depends on environmental configuration and climate, not diagnosis (Gulyamova et al., 2023). From a social-capital perspective, disability-inclusive hiring paired with reciprocal trust, information access, and decision-forum visibility can expand network ties and lift efficiency and market reach (Ebrahim et al., 2022). Yet diversity alone is not a guarantee: without inclusive norms that promote equitable voice, cognitive diversity can harden into fault lines that depress collaboration and outcomes (Ashikali et al., 2021).

Innovation benefits arise both directly through a broader repertoire of perspectives and indirectly, when integration practices raise baseline competence across teams. Adaptive technologies adopted initially for VIEs (e.g., screen-reader-friendly systems, disciplined document structure)

often improve workflows organisation-wide, including for sighted colleagues working in distraction-prone settings or with accessibility-conscious clients (Man et al., 2020). Conversely, procedural and infrastructural barriers can mute these gains: brainstorming formats that rely on unaided visual artefacts, inaccessible prototypes, or rapid uncaptioned demos exclude participation at the ideation stage, reducing both contribution opportunities and the team's creative search space an instance of informal exclusion highlighted in critical disability research (Sang et al., 2022).

Sustained innovation also hinges on retention. When inclusion is embedded in daily operations regular well-being check-ins, flexible role design, quiet/social spaces responsive to individual needs organisations preserve firm-specific human capital that compounds over time; high turnover, by contrast, erodes knowledge and drives replacement costs (Giummarra et al., 2022). Critically, many positive case reports do not fully address selection effects (innovative firms may also be those that invest in inclusion) or implementation fidelity (policies on paper *vs.* enacted practice). Stronger designs should test whether observed productivity/innovation gains persist after accounting for voice equity, accessibility of collaboration tools, and decision-rights for VIEs. At the macro level, improving employment integration is associated with lower socio-economic marginalisation and sector-wide productivity gains, as fuller utilisation of talent broadens the economy's problem-solving capacity (Charles et al., 2023). The critical takeaway is conditionality: productivity and innovation effects are positive when inclusion is real i.e., when workflows, tools, and governance enable equitable participation; they are attenuated or negative when inclusion is symbolic and everyday practices remain exclusionary.

2.6.3 Framework for economic evaluation

While the business case for disability inclusion is increasingly acknowledged, organisations still need structured frameworks to assess specific initiatives and guide resource-allocation decisions. Table 2.6.1 introduces an economic evaluation framework for workplace inclusion interventions, adapted from established cost–benefit analysis methods commonly applied in disability accommodation research (Solovieva et al., 2011).

Table 2.6.1: Economic Evaluation Framework for Workplace Disability Inclusion Initiatives

Component	Specification
Perspective	• Employer (direct costs/benefits) • Societal (tax revenue, reduced social grants)
Time Horizon	• Short-term: 1-2 years • Medium-term: 3-5 years

	• Long-term: 5-10 years
Cost Classes	• One-off: AT procurement, infrastructure modifications, training development • Recurring: AT maintenance, ongoing training, coordinator salaries
Outcomes	• Retention-years (number of employee-years retained) • Belonging scores (1-10 Likert scale) • Productivity metrics (% change from baseline) • Recruitment costs saved (Rand value)
Analytic Outputs	• ROI (return on investment) • SROI (social return on investment) • ICER (incremental cost-effectiveness ratio) • Cost per retained employee-year
Sensitivity Analyses	• Adoption rates (20%-80%) • Annual turnover (5%-25%) • Accommodation costs (±30%) • Productivity gains (0%-15%)

Note: This framework draws on Solovieva et al. (2011) and aligns with established cost-benefit analysis approaches in disability accommodation research.

Time horizons are critical: accommodations often require upfront investment, while benefits accrue gradually through retention and productivity gains. Distinguishing one-off from recurring costs supports realistic budgeting and clarifies how unit costs fall as shared infrastructure serves more employees. Sensitivity analyses can address uncertainty in adoption and turnover assumptions, pinpointing break-even thresholds where benefits equal costs. Evidence indicates that nearly half of workplace accommodations cost nothing, and most others involve only modest one-time expenditures (U.S. Department of Labor, 2023). Yet comprehensive economic evaluation frameworks that integrate financial metrics with psychosocial outcomes remain limited in the published literature.

2.7 Synthesis and integration of findings

2.7.1 Reconciling contradictory evidence

The synthesis of existing evidence surfaces fundamental tensions that help explain contradictory findings on belonging and integration for VIEs. SIT frames belonging as alignment between self-concept and a valued in-group prototype; when individuals perceive themselves as prototypical

members, they experience higher self-esteem and approach-oriented motivation (Kusku et al., 2022). This lens implies interventions that emphasise shared values, identity safety, and reduced status distinctions. CDT, by contrast, shifts attention from psyche to power and design, arguing that ableist norms and ingrained organisational practices produce disabling environments irrespective of individuals' identity work (Ebrahim et al., 2022). Under CDT, poor access, biased resource allocation, and exclusionary routines make authentic belonging unlikely, even if people report strong peer connection.

Reconciled, these perspectives suggest a dual-pathway model. Along a psychosocial pathway (SIT), self-esteem, coping strategies, and identity safety can generate perceived belonging even amid imperfect conditions. Along a structural pathway (CDT), accessibility, fair procedures, and inclusive work design determine whether that belonging is durable and transferable across roles and contexts. The two pathways interact: psychosocial resources can buffer structural gaps temporarily, but without structural improvement the resulting belonging is often fragile and contingent; conversely, structural fixes without identity safety can yield compliance without connection. This helps explain why studies sometimes find positive belonging in objectively exclusionary settings, or muted belonging in nominally accessible ones.

A second tension concerns labelling. From an SIT perspective, explicit identification as "disabled" can anchor solidarity and group-based resilience when supported by positive in-group narratives. In ableist climates, however, the same label can trigger stigma and role gatekeeping (Brzykcy & Boehm, 2022). The critical synthesis is contingency as labels empower within identity-safe, structurally inclusive climates, yet constrain within hostile or performatively inclusive ones. Finally, cultural dimensions shape both pathways: where harmony and hierarchy are prized, identity alignment with dominant norms may raise perceived belonging (SIT), while CDT reminds us that true inclusion still requires normative and structural change in how disability is valued and accommodated (Seo, 2023). The literature supports interventions that operate on both fronts: (1) identity-safe climates (shared values, inclusive leadership, stigma-reducing practices) to activate the psychosocial pathway, and (2) structural accessibility (universal design, fair resource allocation, enforceable procedures) to stabilise gains. Evaluation should separately track felt belonging and structural inclusion, anticipate their divergence, and test the cross-level mechanisms linking them.

2.7.2 Implications for theory development

Existing contradictions in the literature underscore the need for a more robust theoretical lens, one that attends to both individual psychological processes and structural conditions. Rather than privileging identity work on the one hand or barrier removal on the other, a multi-level framework is required that treats belonging as an emergent outcome of interacting factors namely personal

psychological resources (e.g., self-esteem, coping strategies, motivational orientation), interpersonal dynamics (peer relationships, leadership behaviours, social support networks), organisational structures (policies, accessible physical/digital environments, accommodation processes), and the broader cultural–institutional context (societal attitudes toward disability, legal frameworks, and norms around diversity). Approaches that isolate any single level risk missing the cross-level pathways through which everyday practices translate policy into lived inclusion.

This framework must also be temporal and intersectional. Longitudinal evidence indicates that social integration and belonging are bidirectional and dynamic, evolving as people and organisational contexts change; models should therefore incorporate developmental trajectories and feedback loops rather than assuming fixed relationships (Yuan et al., 2023). In addition, VI interacts with other identity dimensions such as gender, ethnicity, and age to produce distinct workplace experiences, making intersectionality a core design principle rather than an add-on (Rahn et al., 2021). Future theorising should explicitly model these overlapping identities and treat them as moderators of individual, interpersonal, and organisational pathways, ensuring that disability is not examined in isolation from the social worlds in which it is lived.

2.7.3 Integrated dual-pathway model

The study began with three strands, the social model of disability, intersectionality theory, and sense-of-belonging frameworks. Synthesizing insights across Sections 2.1–2.6 led to an Integrated Dual-Pathway Model (IDPM) that combines CDT with SIT. In this model, intersectionality operates as a cross-cutting moderator shaping the pathways between structures, identities, and belonging (P7).

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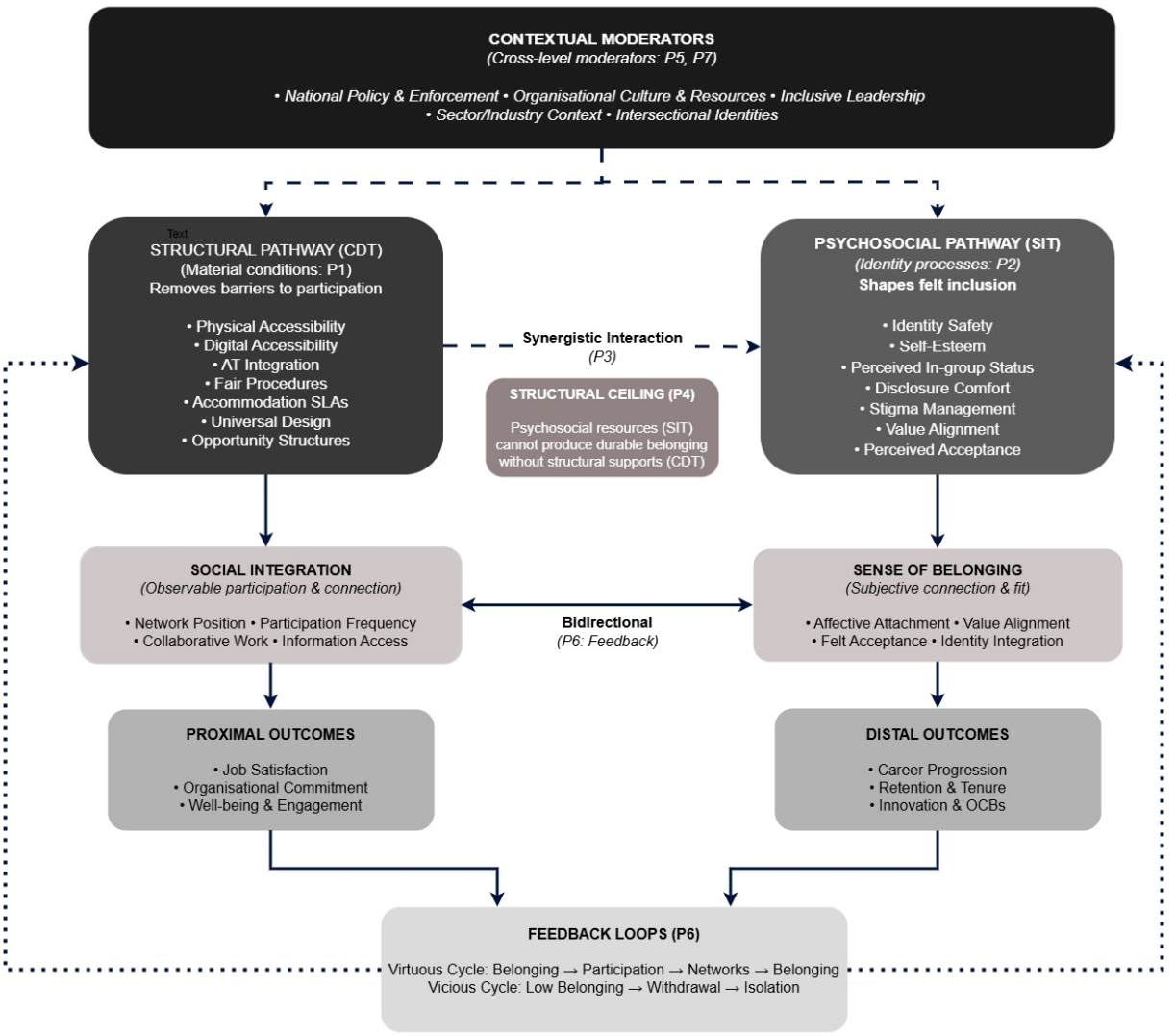


Figure 2.7.1. Integrated dual-pathway model of social integration and belonging for visually impaired employees.

The model integrates two complementary pathways to workplace belonging. The structural pathway (P1) involves accessibility, AT integration, and procedural fairness, which together enable social integration. The psychosocial pathway (P2) encompasses identity safety, self-esteem, and value alignment, fostering an internalized sense of belonging. These pathways interact synergistically (P3), with belonging strongest when structural conditions support integration and psychosocial conditions promote identity safety. However, the model anticipates a structural ceiling

(P4), where psychosocial resources alone cannot sustain belonging if structural barriers persist. Contextual factors such as leadership, policy, culture, and intersectional identities moderate both pathways (P5, P7). Finally, integration and belonging form a reciprocal feedback loop (P6), reinforcing each other over time and generating either virtuous or vicious cycles depending on the broader organisational context.

2.7.4 Research propositions

The IDPM yields seven propositions that will be examined qualitatively through in-depth interviews with VIEs and organisational representatives (Table 2.7.1). Rather than testing these propositions statistically, the study employs qualitative inquiry to illuminate the mechanisms, conditions, and contexts through which these dynamics unfold in lived experience clarifying how and why structural and psychosocial factors shape integration and belonging.

Table 2.7.1: Research Propositions for Qualitative Exploration

P	Proposition	Qualitative Focus
P1	Structural accessibility shapes integration	How do accessibility conditions (or barriers) affect participants' ability to participate in work activities and build professional relationships?
P2	Identity safety shapes belonging	How does feeling safe (or unsafe) about visual impairment affect participants' sense of belonging at work?
P3	Both pathways work synergistically	When and how do structural and psychosocial conditions work together or conflict? Can participants describe times when both aligned versus when one was present but the other missing?
P4	Structural ceiling limits psychosocial gains	Do participants report situations where relationships were supportive but structural barriers still prevented full belonging?
P5	Context moderates both pathways	How do leadership practices, policies, organisational culture, and national contexts shape integration and belonging experiences differently across settings?
P6	Integration and belonging reinforce each other over time	How have participants' integration and sense of belonging changed across their career? Do they affect each other through reinforcing cycles?
P7	Intersecting identities matter	How do race, gender, age, and socioeconomic background intersect with visual impairment to shape unique workplace experiences?

P1 explores how structural conditions (accessibility, assistive technology, accommodations, procedures) shape workplace integration.
P2 investigates how identity safety influences belonging through disclosure, acceptance, and value alignment.
P3 examines whether the pathways work synergistically or independently by comparing contexts where both align versus where one is strong, but the other is weak.
P4 tests the structural ceiling hypothesis, whether supportive relationships can sustain belonging when structural barriers persist.
P5 compares how leadership, policy, and culture moderate both pathways across different organisational contexts.
P6 traces temporal dynamics, mapping how integration and belonging reinforce (or erode) each other through virtuous or vicious cycles.
P7 investigates how race, gender, age, and socioeconomic background intersect with visual impairment to create distinctive inclusion experiences.

These propositions serve as an organising framework for qualitative inquiry while remaining open to emergent themes. Chapter 4 details how the interview protocol operationalises each proposition while preserving interpretive flexibility.

2.8 Longitudinal and developmental perspectives

This section considers how integration and belonging evolve over time, emphasising bidirectional feedback and critical periods such as onboarding, role transitions, disclosure events, and technology shifts. We highlight life-course patterns and cohort effects, and outline designs cross-lagged/latent-growth models, within-person analyses, and experience sampling that can capture time-varying mechanisms and separate short-term shocks from durable change.

2.8.1 Long-term outcomes of social integration

Longitudinal evidence suggests that the effects of social integration for VIEs are shaped by a three-way interplay among opportunity structures, psychological resources, and organisational context (Lubbers et al., 2021; Maué et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2024). Integration is not merely the maintenance of early gains; over time it can reconfigure career development, mental health, and felt legitimacy at work through reinforcing (or eroding) feedback loops (Brehmer & Strauser, 2023; Drake & Wallach, 2020). Positive early experiences equitable access to formal and informal work, visible contribution, and responsive accommodations tend to generate reciprocal obligations in teams and strengthen mutual reliability. When co-worker support is stable and DEI commitments

are enacted (not just stated), these dynamics can evolve into higher organisational citizenship behaviours, with recognition, engagement, and recognition cycles that compound over time.

Why gains unravel. Without procedural reinforcement, early wins are fragile. Studies of disability employment show that declines in accommodation access, leadership turnover, or reorganisations can stall or reverse integration benefits (Bezyak et al., 2025; Humphrey Lephethe Motsepe & Sheperd Sikhosana, 2025; Jansen et al., 2021). Importantly, employees socialised in supportive climates may downshift expectations and reduce discretionary effort when signals turn negative an early warning that belonging is eroding even if formal policies remain unchanged. This underscores a key critique of policy-only strategies: implementation fidelity and climate continuity are the binding constraints on durable inclusion.

Policy architecture as a moderator. Jurisdictional differences matter. Mixed-method evidence indicates that rights-based, proactive regimes (with anticipatory duties) yield more reliable translation of AT provision into sustained inclusion than reactive, complaint-driven systems (Sharma et al., 2025). In other words, the same organisational intervention can produce divergent trajectories depending on the enforcement environment, a reminder that program evaluation must account for policy context as a moderating variable.

Identity continuity across one's career course. Maintaining ties to valued work groups buffers transitions as employees who remain embedded in strong networks during departmental or technological change report less loneliness and more stable job satisfaction (Krug et al., 2021). Disclosure dynamics also have cumulative identity effects. In accommodating climates, disclosure can reinforce self-efficacy by integrating acceptance into everyday operations (Brzykcy & Boehm, 2022). In contrast, when disclosure cues trigger subtle stereotyping, and ambient stigma it can gradually depress self-esteem and withdrawal motivation, even when formal inclusion structures persist. Durable inclusion is a process, not a one-off achievement given it requires routines that sustain accommodations through change, leadership practices that stabilise supportive norms, and policy environments that reward proactive accessibility. Research and practice should therefore model and manage feedback loops (how support begets citizenship and vice versa), context moderators (policy regimes, reorganisations), and identity trajectories across career stages.

2.8.2 Developmental trajectories and career progression

Evidence suggests that VIEs' sense of social integration and belonging varies across the career life course. Early career is a formative period in which onboarding quality, the responsiveness of

accommodations, and the tenor of first-line relationships establish patterns that can persist for years, shaping access to information flows, confidence to disclose needs, and willingness to participate in informal networks. As employees move into the mid-career phase, transitions, new roles, teams, departments, or technologies create both risks and opportunities as such social networks must often be rebuilt and support needs recalibrated. Those who accrued social capital earlier typically navigate these inflection points more smoothly, leveraging mentors and prior collaboration ties to sustain participation. In later career, integration dynamics are complicated by age-related factors. Evidence on age stereotyping indicates that older workers may face compounded biases when ageist assumptions intersect with disability status, potentially undermining belonging (Rahn et al., 2021). At the same time, longer organisational tenure can buffer these risks by providing accumulated relationships, institutional knowledge, and insider credibility.

Across stages, progression appears to hinge less on technical competence alone and more on the quality of integration membership in informal networks, access to mentors and sponsors, and visibility on consequential projects. These relational assets function as gateways to stretch assignments and leadership development, whereas their absence can create “glass partitions” even in formally inclusive settings. Taken together, the literature points to a stage-sensitive, relational view of inclusion with career outcomes for VIEs depending on how accommodations, everyday practices, and network structures work in concert at different points in the career cycle. This underscores the need for longitudinal, intersectional research that tracks how integration builds (or erodes) over time and identifies the specific mechanisms, onboarding practices, mentoring architectures, sponsorship, and role visibility most strongly associated with durable belonging and advancement.

2.9 Future research directions

2.9.1 Methodological improvements

Future research should prioritise longitudinal, mixed-method designs that capture temporal dynamics and contextual nuance that cross-sectional studies cannot. Repeated quantitative measures (e.g., panel surveys, cross-lagged or latent-growth models) should be paired with qualitative waves (interviews, diaries) at key inflection points, onboarding, role changes, accommodation reviews to reveal mechanisms behind change. Where feasible, incorporate experience-sampling for near-real-time mood/belonging signals and link these to objective traces (e.g., meeting participation logs, accessibility checks on shared documents) under explicit consent

and governance. This moves the field from static snapshots to process evidence about how integration and belonging evolve.

To overcome the over-reliance on self-report, studies should adopt multi-source and multi-method measurement including structured observations of meetings and collaboration; organisational records such as accommodation request, turnaround times, participation in voluntary activities, accessibility compliance audits; and third-party assessments (peer nominations, supervisor ratings) of inclusion behaviours. Triangulating these sources reduces common-method bias and yields behavioural, as well as perceptual indicators. Pre-specifying a small set of objective outcomes, for example, time to workable accommodation, network centrality/brokerage in collaboration graphs, or rates of accessible content creates comparable benchmarks across studies.

Given typical small samples, researchers should pursue multi-site consortia and adequately powered, longer-term cohorts with harmonised measures and pre-registration. Attrition must be anticipated with retention protocols (accessible study materials, flexible contact modes, modest incentives) and addressed analytically (e.g., pattern-mixture or selection models, sensitivity analyses). Cross-cultural work is essential given that comparative designs should adapt instruments via translation/back-translation, establish measurement invariance (configural/metric/scalar) and test for differential item functioning, while modelling legal and cultural contexts explicitly with multilevel analyses. Together, these design choices will produce a cumulative, credible evidence base on how and under what conditions VIEs achieve durable social integration and felt belonging.

2.9.2 Theoretical development needs

The synthesis of existing evidence points to the need for integrative theoretical frameworks that hold individual psychological processes and structural organisational factors in view at the same time (Ganti et al., 2025; Goh et al., 2022; Sajjad et al., 2024). Rather than privileging either identity work or barrier removal, future theory should adopt multi-level models that specify cross-level mechanisms (structures and accessibility climate, inclusive leadership, felt belonging) and boundary conditions (role visibility, accommodation quality, policy salience). Methodologically sophisticated longitudinal approaches, such as those used in education research (Yuan et al., 2023) offer a template, but employment contexts possess distinct social dynamics that require dedicated theorising rather than direct importation.

Intersectionality must be embedded as a core design principle, not an add-on. Current evidence indicates that VI interacts with gender, ethnicity, age, and class to produce divergent trajectories of

integration and belonging, yet few studies theorise or test these interactions in depth (Bassey et al., 2025; Liew, 2021). Future frameworks should model intersectional identities as moderators of both structural and interpersonal pathways and establish when ostensibly universal levers (mentorship, inclusive leadership) work differently across groups. Finally, theory should be explicitly temporal: integration and belonging appear bidirectional and dynamic, with feedback loops and phase-specific effects across the career life course. Flexible models for example, cross-lag mediation, latent growth, or feedback systems are needed to capture how relationships evolve rather than assuming they are fixed.

2.9.3 Practical applications and policy implications

Future work should pivot from description to intervention science, testing specific, theory-linked strategies to enhance integration and belonging. Appropriate designs include cluster RCTs (unit/team randomisation), stepped-wedge trials (for staged roll-out), and quasi-experimental approaches such as difference-in-differences or interrupted time series when randomisation is infeasible. Trials should pre-register logic models that connect structural levers, relational levers, leadership levers, and technology levers to proximal mechanisms and distal outcomes. A participatory stance is essential. Involving VIEs as co-researchers through advisory panels, co-design sprints, and member-checking grounds questions and interpretations in lived realities rather than academic assumptions. Lived-experience mentors contribute not only formal know-how but also tacit strategies for navigating role-specific challenges, improving contextual fit and adoption (Kang et al., 2023). Studies should apply implementation-science lenses (e.g., RE-AIM/CFIR) to assess reach, adoption, fidelity, cost, maintenance, and equity, not efficacy alone, with planned heterogeneity analyses by intersectional groups.

Economic evaluation must be built in, not bolted on in order to specify the perspective (employer, public, societal), time horizon, and cost classes (one-off vs recurring; universal design vs individual accommodations). Report incremental cost-effectiveness, ROI/SROI, and sensitivity analyses to adoption and turnover assumptions. Finally, develop and validate practical tools organisations can actually use brief belonging pulse measures, accessibility audit checklists, accommodation turnaround dashboards, and peer-nomination/network indices ensuring psychometric quality (reliability, invariance) and clear guidance for ongoing audit-and-feedback. This shift from describing problems to testing, costing, and scaling solutions will produce actionable evidence leaders can use to invest in thorough, durable inclusion.

2.10 Conclusion

The literature depicts a multi-level landscape in which individual psychology, organisational structures, and cultural context interact to shape visually impaired employees' experiences of social integration and belonging. Structural provision, accessible environments and formal inclusion policies is necessary but insufficient: genuine belonging also depends on affective and relational dynamics such as mutual respect, recognition, and every day, trust-building interactions. Inconsistencies across studies are partly methodological. Heavy reliance on cross-sectional designs, small samples, and single-source self-reports limits causal inference and generalisability, helping to explain contradictory findings across settings. Stronger evidence will require longitudinal, mixed-method designs, multi-source measurement, and adequate statistical power.

Theoretically, SIT clarifies how identity threat and group membership shape felt belonging, while CDT exposes how power, design, and policy can enable or block inclusion. Taken together, they imply interventions must align identity-safe climates with structural accessibility, rather than privileging one domain. Cross-cultural work further shows that national policy regimes and societal attitudes condition outcomes, cautioning against one-size-fits-all prescriptions and underscoring the need for culturally sensitive strategies. At the organisational level, the most promising approaches are comprehensive including accessible physical/digital systems, inclusive leadership behaviours, participatory governance, and ongoing awareness and skill-building. These practices yield benefits productivity, retention, and innovation when implemented with fidelity and embedded in core HR/operations, not as peripheral initiatives.

Emerging longitudinal evidence suggests integration and belonging are dynamic and bidirectional, with early career experiences setting trajectories that can amplify or erode well-being and advancement over time. Future work should therefore prioritise intervention development and rigorous evaluation, pair quantitative tracking with qualitative process data, and use participatory approaches that centre the lived expertise of VIEs. Overall, creating workplaces where VIEs experience both integration and authentic belonging demands sustained commitment to redesigning systems and reshaping everyday culture. Transformation is achievable, but only through coordinated, evidence-based action that recognises the complex interplay of individual, organisational, and societal forces.

Chapter 3: Research Questions

3.1 Research questions development

The research questions reported in the were derived deductively from identified theoretical gaps and inductively from the study context, to capture the complex interplay between social integration processes and sense of belonging among VIEs in South African workplaces. Anchored in the IDPM (Chapter 2, Figure 1), which synthesizes Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Critical Disability Theory (CDT) the questions were structured around the model's seven propositions (P1–P7; Table 2.7.4) as an organising scaffold, while remaining open to emergent themes not anticipated by existing theory. This approach ensures that findings reflect both experiential dimensions (e.g., identity negotiation, interpersonal recognition, psychosocial safety) and structural conditions (e.g., policies, practices, accessibility, institutional culture) that enable or constrain authentic belonging. The questions also explicitly account for intersectionality recognizing that participants navigate disability alongside gender, race, and socioeconomic position and for SA's historical inequalities in education, employment, and infrastructure.

3.2 Primary research question

The primary research question guiding this study is: How does social integration shape the sense of belonging among VIEs in South African workplaces, and what organisational factors enable or constrain this process? Framed to centre the relationship between social integration as both process and outcome, this question treats integration not as a compliance metric but as a dynamic, relational phenomenon enacted through everyday interactions, structural arrangements, and cultural practices. It further recognises that belonging is neither automatic nor uniform; rather, it varies across individual circumstances, organisational cultures, and broader social conditions, thereby directing the study to interrogate both enabling and constraining organisational factors alongside lived experiences of inclusion and exclusion.

3.3 Sub-research questions

3.3.1 Workplace structures and integration experiences

This study asks, in what ways do workplace structures, cultures, and practices influence the social integration experiences of VIEs? We examine how physical environments and spatial design shape spontaneous interaction, how technological infrastructure and accessibility tools mediate routine work, and how communication protocols and meeting procedures affect participation in decision-making. We also analyse leadership behaviours and supervisory practices, as well as organisational hierarchies and informal networks, to identify mechanisms through which policies

and norms become lived experiences of inclusion or exclusion across individual, interpersonal, and systemic levels. Particular attention is paid to whether informal social circuits are accessible to employees with differing communication needs or mobility patterns, and to how these structural and cultural arrangements collectively facilitate or impede meaningful participation and a durable sense of belonging.

3.3.2 Intersecting identities and inclusion experiences

This study investigates how intersecting identities influence the workplace integration and belonging experiences of visually impaired employees? Applying an intersectional lens, the analysis explores how gender, race, age, and socio-economic background interact with VI to produce distinct patterns of inclusion and exclusion. We examine how industry-specific gender norms and disability stereotypes shape role allocation, career progression, and professional recognition; how racial identity mediates access to informal networks and mentorship, particularly salient in SA, where historical inequalities continue to structure opportunity; how socio-economic resources affect the availability and quality of ATs and participation in professional development; and how age influences assumptions about technological competence and career potential. Together, these dimensions reveal the mechanisms through which organisational cultures, policies, and everyday interactions differentially enable or constrain social integration and a durable sense of belonging for VIEs.

3.3.3 Mechanisms of belonging development

This study investigates the mechanisms that foster or undermine belonging among VIEs, with attention to how these processes vary across organisational contexts. Centring the psychological and relational dimensions of belonging, it examines how reciprocity and mutual recognition cultivate trust, legitimacy, and felt inclusion in everyday interactions; how the provision and timing of accommodations shape perceptions of genuine support versus tokenism; and how peer attitudes toward disclosure, assistance requests, and alternative working methods influence emotional well-being, professional confidence, and the formation of authentic workplace relationships. The analysis also considers how leadership behaviours, communication norms, and informal networks enable or impede connection, and whether development pathways and promotion criteria signal equal expectations for contribution and growth. Particular focus is placed on whether accessibility measures are integrated into routine practice or treated as exceptional, and on how opportunities for skill building and advancement challenge or entrench assumptions about capability. By tracing these mechanisms across different organisational settings, the study identifies the conditions under which belonging becomes durable and self-reinforcing versus fragile and marginalising, thereby clarifying actionable levers for inclusive culture change.

3.3.4 Organisational enhancement strategies

This study asks how organisations can enhance their practices to support authentic social integration and belonging for VIEs by translating empirical findings into contextually appropriate, evidence-based recommendations for South African workplaces. The analysis prioritises integration over compliance, identifying strategies that address both structural barriers and cultural attitudes: applying universal design principles that embed accessibility into everyday environments and workflows; implementing training and awareness initiatives that foster genuine attitudinal change by challenging unconscious bias and modelling inclusive behaviours; and developing policy frameworks that couple clear accountability for inclusion outcomes with flexibility to accommodate individual needs and preferences. It further emphasises leadership development that normalises inclusion as a core organisational value, and establishes ongoing, structured consultation and feedback mechanisms through which VIEs inform decision-making and continuous improvement. Together, these practices aim to convert accessibility from an exception to a norm, strengthen reciprocal recognition and participation, and sustain a durable sense of belonging across diverse organisational contexts.

3.4 Theoretical alignment and research coherence

These research questions operationalise the IDPM while remaining coherent with its seven propositions (Table 2). The primary question (Section 3.2) targets the model's core dynamic the relationship between social integration and belonging and the organisational enablers and constraints that shape it. The sub-questions map onto specific model components: Workplace structures probe the structural pathway (P1) by examining accessibility, AT integration, fair procedures, and opportunity structures, and incorporates contextual moderation (P5) by analysing how culture, policy, and leadership condition structural effects. Intersecting identities operationalises intersectionality (P7), investigating how race, gender, age, and socioeconomic background intersect with VI to pattern inclusion and exclusion across both pathways.

Mechanisms of belonging interrogates the psychosocial pathway (P2) through identity safety, perceived acceptance, and value alignment, while testing pathway interactions (P3–P4) and temporal dynamics (P6) to assess whether belonging depends on favourable structural and psychosocial conditions, and whether psychosocial resources face a structural ceiling under poor accessibility; and organisational enhancement synthesises evidence across propositions to generate practice recommendations that pair structural interventions (P1) with climate-building strategies (P2), adapted to context (P5, P7). This alignment ensures that the empirical inquiry addresses the model's theoretical gaps while preserving inductive openness to insights that refine, challenge, or extend the dual-pathway framework.

Chapter 4: Research Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter details the methodology used to examine how social integration influences the sense of belonging among visually impaired employees (VIEs) in South African workplaces. It first articulates the study's research philosophy and methodological approach, then describes the target population, sampling strategy, and data-collection instruments (e.g., interviews/surveys), followed by procedures for data collection and analysis. The chapter closes with the measures taken to assure quality and trustworthiness (reliability, validity/credibility), ethical safeguards, and acknowledged limitations, aligning with established guidance on research design and reporting (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Saunders et al., 2019).

4.2 Research Design

Guided by an interpretivist paradigm, this study assumes realities are socially constructed through interaction and lived experience, making it well suited to examine how VIEs understand social integration and belonging in South African workplaces (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). A qualitative, exploratory design was selected to generate rich, contextualised accounts rather than test predetermined relationships an approach warranted by limited local scholarship on visual impairment (VI) and workplace belonging (Patton, 2015; Saunders et al., 2019). Analytically, the study followed reflexive thematic analysis with an inductive orientation so patterns emerged from participants' narratives rather than being imposed a priori (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2020).

A multi-site, maximum-variation purposive sampling strategy recruited participants across organisation sizes (small–large), sectors (public, private, NGO), and roles to capture both setting-specific practices and cross-cutting inclusion dynamics. Two groups were included to enable data triangulation: (a) visually impaired employees and (b) organisational representatives involved in disability-inclusion efforts (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Inclusion criteria were current employment in South Africa (SA), self-identified VI (partial or total), and ability to participate in an interview in English or an accessible format; organisational representatives required direct responsibility for disability or inclusion policy/practice. A retrospective, cross-sectional time horizon captured experiences at one point in time; the sample was stratified by tenure into early-to-mid career (1–10 years, n = 10) and experienced (≥10 years, n = 8) to explore variation by career stage. Sample sufficiency followed the information power principle (Malterud et al., 2016), with recruitment continuing until new interviews added limited conceptual yield given study aim clarity and participant specificity.

Data were generated via semi-structured interviews (60–90 minutes), audio-recorded with consent, and accommodated for accessibility. An interview guide probed social integration, belonging, barriers/facilitators, and organisational practices, informed by the social model of disability and belongingness theory as sensitising concepts (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Oliver, 1990; Shore et al., 2011). Transcripts were anonymised and managed in qualitative software (ATLAS.ti). Analysis followed Braun & Clarke (2006) six phases with iterative coding, memoing, and reflexive team discussions; an audit trail documented analytic decisions.

To enhance trustworthiness, the study employed triangulation across participant groups and sites, peer debriefing, thick description, and maintenance of a reflexive journal (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Yardley, 2000). Participants could review short analytic summaries for member reflections to check resonance (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Pretoria's Research Ethics Committee through the Gordon Institute of Business Science, with informed consent, confidentiality safeguards, secure data storage, and options to withdraw without penalty. Limitations include potential recall bias inherent to retrospective accounts and constraints of a cross-sectional design for capturing temporal change; these are mitigated by multi-site breadth and tenure-based stratification.

4.2.1 Study Setting and Organisational Context

Fieldwork occurred within medium-to-large South African organisations (≥50 employees) in Gauteng and the Western Cape. These entities typically maintain formal HR structures, employment-equity plans, and some level of assistive-technology provisioning. Sectoral variation (public administration, financial/professional services, logistics/transport, NGOs) allowed examination of how regulatory exposure, resource availability, and legacy infrastructure condition accommodation processes and social integration. This contextualisation helps readers assess transferability to smaller or rural employers where resources and policy implementation may differ.

4.3 Population

This study targeted two clearly defined populations within South African workplaces and concentrated recruitment in Gauteng (Johannesburg–Pretoria) and the Western Cape (Cape Town), the country’s principal economic hubs with higher concentrations of medium-to-large employers and established employment equity infrastructures. This geographic focus increased the likelihood of locating organisations with formal disability-inclusion policies, assistive-technology

provision, and relevant managerial roles, while acknowledging an urban/large-employer bias that may limit generalisability to smaller or rural workplaces.

Primary population (VIEs). Participants were adults employed for ≥12 months in organisations with >50 employees (to ensure exposure to formal HR and inclusion processes). Inclusion criteria specified self-identified VI (partial or total) and routine use of assistive mobility (e.g., white cane, guide dog) and/or assistive technology (e.g., screen readers, magnifiers) to perform job tasks. Exclusion criteria were self-employment, temporary contracts <12 months, or roles not requiring independent task execution. This focus on employed individuals was deliberate: with a large share of working-age visually impaired South Africans unemployed (≈70% (Moonsamy, 2025)), sampling those sustaining employment supports the study aim of identifying organisational practices that enable integration.

Secondary population (organisational representatives). To triangulate perspectives, the study included staff directly responsible for or proximate to disability inclusion disability inclusion specialists, D&I professionals, HR practitioners, and line managers of VIEs drawn across sectors (e.g., financial services, transport/logistics, public sector, professional services). These participants offered insight into policy, resource allocation, job design, accommodation processes, and day-to-day supervisory practices.

Sampling frame and recruitment rationale. Organisations were purposefully selected for sectoral and size variation (public, private, NGO; small-to-large within the >50 threshold), with recruitment via HR/disability offices, professional networks, and disability organisations to reach both employee and managerial participants. This framing enhances maximum variation and supports transferability by capturing both site-specific practices and cross-cutting patterns of inclusion ((Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2015). Where relevant, definitions of VI align with international guidance to ensure conceptual clarity (World Health Organization, 2023).

4.4 Sampling Method

We employed purposive, maximum-variation sampling to capture heterogeneity in experiences of social integration among VIEs (Patton, 2015). Participants were selected to vary by type/severity of VI, sector (public, private, NGO), job role/seniority, organisation size, demographics, and tenure, with stratified purposive quotas for early–mid career (1–10 years) and ≥10 years' experience to probe career-stage differences. Recruitment proceeded via HR/disability offices, professional networks, and disability organisations, supplemented by criterion-based screening (current employment in SA, ≥12 months in role, use of assistive mobility/technology) and limited chain-

referral to reach under-represented subgroups (Palinkas et al., 2015). Sampling continued until information power/saturation was reached i.e., additional cases contributed minimal new conceptual insight given the focused aim, sample specificity, and high-quality, in-depth interviews (Malterud et al., 2016). This design prioritised breadth of perspective over numerical representativeness and is appropriate for interpretivist, exploratory inquiry.

Recruitment Process. Initial participants were identified through the researcher's professional network, with gatekeeper facilitation by the organisation's Human Capital (HC) division to minimise role-related influence and potential coercion. Prior to any contact, the HC team reviewed the study brief, research questions, consent materials (accessible formats available), and institutional ethics approval, and then distributed an opt-in invitation to eligible staff. HC subsequently provided only the contact details of individuals who had affirmed willingness to be approached, yielding 12 VIEs (7 with 1–10 years' experience; 5 with ≥10 years), after which the researcher initiated direct, individual outreach.

To broaden heterogeneity and approach the planned sample (target n = 28) while protecting autonomy and privacy, we employed snowball/chain-referral sampling: interviewed participants voluntarily suggested other eligible contacts, who were each approached independently by the researcher and given ≥1 week to consider participation before any follow-up. In line with SA's Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA, Act 4 of 2013), no additional contact information was solicited from employers or organisational databases, and managers/HR staff had no role in subsequent recruitment or scheduling. Recruitment ceased when information power/saturation was reached i.e., when additional interviews yielded minimal new conceptual insights at n = 18 (early–mid career n = 10; experienced n = 8), consistent with the study's focused aim and sample specificity.

Sample Size. The study initially targeted 12–15 interviews with VIEs and 8–10 with organisational representatives. After eight employee interviews, clear tenure-based divergences emerged: those with 1–10 years emphasised early accessibility and relationship-building, whereas those with ≥10 years discussed career progression and disability identity. To capture these distinct trajectories and reach analytic sufficiency, the sample was expanded to 28 participants: 18 VIEs (stratified into early–mid career, n = 10, and experienced, n = 8) and 10 organisational representatives. Recruitment continued until additional cases yielded minimal new insights, consistent with information power/saturation principles for focused, in-depth qualitative designs (Guest et al., 2006; Hennink et al., 2017; Malterud et al., 2016).

4.5 Unit of Analysis

The individual employee was the primary unit of analysis. We examined the lived experiences, meanings, and sense-making of VIEs and organisational representatives in relation to workplace integration and belonging, while analytically situating narratives within their organisational and relational contexts (e.g., policies, supervisory practices, team dynamics). This person-centred focus, coupled with attention to contextual influences, aligns with interpretivist inquiry and case-in-context reasoning in qualitative research (Miles et al., 2013; Yin, 2018).

Research Instrument

4.6.1 Introduction

Two semi-structured interview guides served as the primary instruments one for VIEs and one for organisational representatives each mapped to the research questions and sensitising concepts while preserving flexibility for probing and emergent themes (Braun & Clarke, 2020; Kallio et al., 2016). Guide development drew on disability-inclusive research practices and qualitative interviewing standards, with attention to plain-language wording, screen-reader compatibility, and culturally appropriate examples (Bigby et al., 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hughes & Paterson, 1997). Drafts were reviewed by the HC division for ethical clarity and accessibility and underwent iterative refinement informed by expert feedback and cognitive pre-testing principles to enhance question clarity and flow (Willis, 2012).

4.6.2 Pilot Testing

Two VIEs (not included in the final sample) participated in pilot semi-structured interviews to assess question clarity, accessibility, flow, and timing. Using cognitive interviewing/debriefing techniques (think-aloud and probing), we identified several compound or ambiguous items (Willis, 2012). Guides were revised to use plain-language stems, one construct per question, a clearer conversational sequence, and standardised probes/prompts aligned to the study's constructs (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Kallio et al., 2016). Accessibility refinements included providing screen-reader–compatible and large-print materials, offering remote or in-person participation, incorporating pacing and repeat-question options, and standardising environmental considerations (quiet setting, minimal visual distractions), consistent with disability-inclusive research guidance and WCAG 2.1 principles (Bigby et al., 2014; Hughes & Paterson, 1997; W3C, 2018). A brief

interviewer checklist and time checks were added to maintain the 60–90 minute window; pilot data were excluded from analysis but informed the final protocol.

4.6.3 Interview Guides

To ensure alignment with the research aims and sensitising concepts (social model of disability; belongingness), two parallel semi-structured interview guides were developed one for VIEs and one for organisational representatives each mapped to the study's research questions and analytic domains, with open-ended stems and targeted probes to support depth, comparability, and flexibility (Kallio et al., 2016; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

Semi-structured interview guide for visually impaired employees, organised around three research questions. The guide explored: (1) participants' current workplace experiences, including what stood out as particularly positive or challenging; (2) their sense of connection and belonging at work, with attention to moments of inclusion and exclusion; (3) the support, adjustments and accommodations their employers had provided; (4) barriers (whether social, physical or organisational) they had encountered; (5) how colleagues and managers engaged with them in day-to-day work; (6) opportunities they had to express their needs and give feedback about inclusion; (7) how other aspects of their identity, such as gender, race, age or background, shaped their workplace experience alongside their visual impairment; and (8) what changes would help them feel more included, supported and valued. Probes were designed to draw out concrete examples ('Can you share an instance when...') and to explore both the practices that enabled inclusion and the barriers that hindered it (Braun & Clarke, 2021c; Patton, 2015).

Semi-structured interview guide for organisational representatives, organised around three research questions mirroring those posed to employees. The guide's seven questions explored: (1) how the organisation approached inclusion for visually impaired employees, including specific policies, programmes or goals; (2) challenges the organisation faced in supporting visually impaired employees (such as physical spaces, resources, attitudes or awareness); (3) examples where inclusion or integration worked well and what contributed to that success; (4) how the organisation assessed or tracked the effectiveness of its inclusion efforts, including feedback loops, reviews or evaluation tools; (5) what training or awareness-raising activities were offered to staff about disability inclusion and how these were received and applied in practice; (6) whether visually impaired employees were consulted or involved when shaping inclusion strategies or policies and how the organisation responded to their input; and (7) what additional support, resources or changes would help improve inclusion for visually impaired employees. This parallel structure enabled direct comparison between organisational intent and employee experience.

Administration and accessibility. Both guides used plain-language wording and included prompts and probes to explore responses in greater depth where relevant. Materials were screen-reader compatible with large-print alternatives available; participants could choose remote or in-person interviews. Each interview opened with rapport-building and consent verification, typically lasted 60 to 90 minutes, and closed with an open invitation: 'Is there anything else you'd like to share?' (Bigby et al., 2014; Hughes & Paterson, 1997).

4.7 Data Collection Method

Semi-structured interviews were the primary method, balancing a consistent structure with flexibility for participants to narrate experiences in their own terms (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Kallio et al., 2016; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Interviews typically lasted 45–90 minutes (one extended to 150 minutes where participants wished to elaborate). After informed consent, participants chose their preferred accessible modality in-person, telephone, or Microsoft Teams supported by screen-reader-compatible materials, large-print options, and pacing/repetition on request, consistent with disability-inclusive practice and WCAG 2.1 principles (Bigby et al., 2014; World Wide Web Consortium, 2018).

Recording procedures were standardised and disclosed in advance: Microsoft Teams' built-in recorder for virtual sessions, a secure laptop recorder for telephone interviews, and (for in-person sessions) a primary digital recorder with a Teams-based backup. All sessions were audio-recorded with explicit permission, transcribed verbatim, de-identified, and checked for accuracy; field notes and reflexive memos documented contextual factors and researcher decision-making (Miles et al., 2013). Participants could review key excerpts for clarification (member reflections) to enhance credibility (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Data were encrypted, stored on password-protected drives, and managed in qualitative software (ATLAS.ti) under POPIA-compliant protocols.

To support methodological triangulation, we also analysed publicly available documents (e.g., diversity reports, ESG disclosures, accessibility statements, and disability-related guidance from organisations/industry bodies) selected for relevance and recency; no confidential internal records were accessed (Bowen, 2009). Incorporating multiple data sources enhanced contextual understanding and convergence with interview themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Yardley, 2000). Where interviews occurred remotely, we followed good-practice guidance for virtual qualitative data collection to maintain rapport, privacy, and data quality (Archibald et al., 2019).

4.7.1 Challenges Encountered in Data Collection

Recruitment Challenges. Initial outreach via formal disability-advocacy channels was unsuccessful: despite written commitments, a national organisation did not release contact details after multiple follow-ups over six weeks, and nine referrals from a disability-forum chairperson did not respond to invitations or reminders. This was mitigated by pivoting to purposive and chain-referral strategies through organisational gatekeepers and participant networks, using opt-in procedures to protect autonomy and privacy (Bonevski et al., 2014; Palinkas et al., 2015).

Several candidates particularly those in small organisations or niche roles where they were the only VIEs declined due to fears of deductive disclosure, even after detailed explanations of de-identification. In response, safeguards were strengthened (removal of quasi-identifiers, aggregation of role/sector where needed, use of composite examples for sensitive incidents) and participants were offered review of salient quotations prior to use (Kaiser, 2009). Some potential participants questioned whether academic studies lead to tangible change and therefore declined. The researcher addressed this by sharing a plain-language summary of aims, planned dissemination routes (organisational feedback brief, practitioner webinar), and limits of inference, and by inviting member reflections on emerging themes. One initially hesitant participant consented after four weeks of dialogue and review of revised consent materials. Collectively, these challenges extended the data-collection timeline by approximately eight weeks.

Sample Expansion. After the first eight interviews, interim reflexive thematic analysis indicated clear tenure-based divergence: employees with 1–10 years emphasised practical accessibility and early relationship-building, whereas those with ≥10 years articulated more nuanced dynamics of disability identity management, career progression, and long-term organisational commitment. To ensure each trajectory was sufficiently represented and to reach analytic sufficiency/saturation, we expanded the employee sample from the planned 12–15 to 18 and stratified by tenure (early–mid career n = 10; experienced n = 8), an adaptation consistent with purposive sampling's iterative logic and information power principles (Guest et al., 2006; Hennink et al., 2017; Malterud et al., 2016). The slight imbalance reflects the smaller available pool of long-tenured participants within participating organisations. This targeted expansion added approximately six weeks to the data-collection timeline but strengthened comparative analyses of early socialisation versus longer-term integration.

Technology and Accessibility Barriers. Coordinating interviews across modalities surfaced several accessibility and connectivity challenges. Two participants reported that the Microsoft

Teams interface was difficult to navigate with assistive technologies and requested telephone interviews; another participant who initially chose a voice call experienced poor network quality, and the session was successfully completed via WhatsApp audio. In two additional cases, unresolved technical issues on Teams necessitated same-day rescheduling to telephone calls. To mitigate disruption, we implemented contingency measures such as pre-call technology checks, provision of alternative platforms and dial-in options, and flexible rescheduling while ensuring all materials remained screen-reader compatible. These accommodations required additional coordination and extended the data-collection timeline by approximately two weeks, but improved accessibility and participation comfort.

Consent Form Accessibility Issues. Early testing revealed that the consent form was not fully compatible with screen readers: decorative line dividers and signature fields disrupted reading order, and inadequate heading structure and font sizing impeded navigation. One participant recommended using Microsoft Word's Accessibility Checker and avoiding PDF-only (Portable Document Format) distribution, noting that some PDFs are not reliably accessible without PDF/UA (Universal Accessibility) tagging. Another VI participant, interviewed late in the data-collection process, demonstrated how to insert accessible signature lines in Word; this knowledge would have simplified completion for earlier VI participants had it been discovered sooner. In response to these recommendations, the form was rebuilt in Word using proper semantic headings, simplified layouts (removal of non-essential lines/boxes), inclusion of accessible signature lines, increased base font size, and corrected reading order; the Accessibility Checker was run iteratively to resolve issues. To honour POPIA and ethical best practice, materials were then provided in multiple formats screen-reader-compatible Word, large-print, and audio and all enrolled participants received the revised documents with an invitation to ask questions or withdraw. No participants withdrew; however, the remediation and re-consent process extended the data-collection timeline by approximately two weeks. These adjustments align with established accessibility guidance and ethical standards for inclusive research documentation (ISO, 2014; South African Department of Health. (2014), 2014; W3C, 2018).

Transcription Challenges. The researcher used Otter.ai to produce preliminary transcripts. Accuracy was satisfactory for in-person interviews in quiet settings (~85–90%) but dropped for telephone and some virtual sessions with variable audio quality (~60–70%). Automated outputs also lacked reliable speaker diarisation for phone recordings, necessitating extensive manual correction. To preserve data quality, all machine transcripts were manually verified against the

original audio and edited for accuracy, with special attention to speaker attribution, technical terms, and proper nouns. Quality controls included a standardised transcript-cleaning protocol (verbatim conventions, timestamp checks), spot-check re-listens, and retention of audio-to-text audit trails; future sessions prioritised separate audio tracks and pre-call sound checks to improve ASR performance. These procedures align with best practice that treats automated transcription as a first draft requiring researcher validation to ensure analytic trustworthiness (Halcomb & Davidson, 2006; MacLean et al., 2004; Poland, 1995).

4.7.2 Documentary Data: Sampling and Analysis Procedures

Publicly available documents were sampled purposively to illuminate the organisational context surrounding VIEs' experiences. Eligible materials included annual/ESG reports, employment-equity disclosures, accessibility statements, disability policies/protocols, and guidance issued by sector bodies (e.g., industry associations). Documents were included if (i) produced within the last five years, (ii) referenced disability or workplace inclusion, and (iii) described policies, programmes, or metrics relevant to recruitment, accommodation, or culture. Confidential internal records were excluded. Documents were retrieved from organisational websites and public repositories, saved with source metadata (URL, publisher, year), and logged in a document register (title, organisation, sector, date, relevance notes).

A deductively led, inductively enriched content analysis was conducted in ATLAS.ti using a short a priori framework derived from the interview guides (policy commitments; accommodation processes; resourcing; implementation/accountability; monitoring & grievance; accessibility of ICT/physical environment), with inductive codes added for emergent practices or gaps. Salient excerpts were coded at the paragraph level, with analytic memos capturing contradictions between espoused policy and reported practice. Convergence and divergence tables were built per organisation/sector to compare documentary claims with interview accounts (employee and representative). Disconfirming evidence was retained and discussed during theme review. Documentary evidence was used to contextualise not override participants' accounts and to trace where policies plausibly shaped day-to-day experience.

4.7.3 Data Integration and Triangulation Strategy

Across sources, themes from VIE interviews, organisational-representative interviews, and documents were compared using a convergence matrix (convergent, complementary, divergent).

Across cases, sector and tenure contrasts were examined to test theme robustness. Divergences (e.g., formal policy vs. lived practice) were treated as analytically productive: they prompted re-reading of cases, checks against the audit trail, and, where appropriate, refinement of theme boundaries. Integration products (matrices, memos) are archived in the audit trail to support dependability.

4.8 Data Analysis

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) following Braun and Clarke's six, inherently iterative phases: (1) familiarisation; (2) generating initial codes; (3) constructing themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022). RTA was selected for its flexibility and fit with an interpretivist, inductive orientation to complex social phenomena (Campbell et al., 2021), while remaining sensitised rather than constrained by the Integrated Dual-Pathway Model outlined in Chapter 2.

The researcher engaged in early immersion by listening to audio, keeping field notes, and preparing verbatim transcripts (manually corrected after ASR pre-drafts). Transcripts were read repeatedly, with preliminary insights captured in analytic memos and a running audit trail (Miles et al., 2013). All 28 transcripts (18 visually impaired employees; 10 organisational representatives) were coded primarily inductively at the sentence/meaning-unit level, attending to semantic content and latent meanings. Descriptive codes (e.g., assistive technology use, physical access barriers) sat alongside interpretive codes (e.g., belonging, normative culture). In keeping with RTA, coding was conducted reflexively by the primary researcher; formal inter-coder reliability statistics were not employed, as they are misaligned with RTA's epistemology (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021c, 2022a). Coding and memoing were conducted in ATLAS.ti, using code groups, co-occurrence queries, and network views to organise excerpts and explore relationships. Comparative queries examined patterns across participant groups (employees *vs* organisational representatives) and tenure strata (1–10 years vs ≥10 years), supporting systematic cross-case analysis.

Codes were iteratively collated into candidate themes based on conceptual patterning and analytic significance rather than frequency alone. Themes were reviewed against the dataset for internal coherence and clear boundaries; some were merged, split, or discarded where warranted. Network diagrams aided sense-making and parsimony. To enhance credibility without reifying participants as arbiters of "accuracy", selected contributors engaged in member reflections on short theme summaries and illustrative quotations, focusing on resonance and blind spots (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Final themes were defined with explicit inclusion/exclusion criteria, mapped to research questions and propositions, and organised hierarchically (overarching propositions with

subthemes). The report (Chapter 5) presents themes with anonymised quotes (P01–P28) chosen to reflect both typical and deviant cases across groups and tenure. The unit of analysis for coding was the meaningful response segment, with links preserved to whole-interview context.

Trustworthiness was supported through an audit trail, rich description, peer debriefing with the academic supervisor, attention to information power/saturation logic established during sampling, and ongoing reflexive journaling about positionality and assumptions related to disability inclusion (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Malterud et al., 2016; Nowell et al., 2017). Analytic moves were documented from initial memos to final theme decisions to enhance transparency.

4.9 Reliability and Validity

Consistent with qualitative standards, the study framed rigor in terms of trustworthiness the qualitative analogue to reliability and validity drawing on Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tracy, 2010). Credibility refers to the truthfulness or believability of findings from the perspective of participants. It is established through strategies such as triangulation, member checking, and prolonged engagement to ensure the data accurately reflect participants' experiences (Lincoln & Guba 1985). Transferability concerns the extent to which findings can be applied or transferred to other contexts or groups. It is achieved by providing rich, "thick" descriptions of the research setting, participants, and context, allowing readers to assess applicability (Lincoln & Guba 1985; Shenton, 2004). Dependability parallel's reliability in quantitative research and refers to the stability and consistency of findings over time and across researchers. It is supported through an audit trail documenting research decisions, methods, and changes during the study (Lincoln & Guba 1985; Nowell et al., 2017). Confirmability addresses the objectivity or neutrality of findings, ensuring they are shaped by participants' voices rather than researcher bias. Reflexive journaling, audit trails, and triangulation help demonstrate confirmability (Lincoln & Guba 1985; Moser & Korstjens, 2017).

Credibility. We strengthened credibility through prolonged engagement with the field, methodological triangulation (employee and organisational interviews plus public documents), and member reflections in which willing participants reviewed preliminary themes for resonance (Kaiser, 2009; Smith & McGannon, 2018). Regular peer debriefs with research colleagues provided critical challenge, and a rolling set of analytic/reflexive memos documented assumptions, decision points, and alternative readings (Braun & Clarke, 2020; Miles et al., 2013).

Transferability. Rather than claiming statistical generalisability, we provide thick description of context, sampling logic, and participant characteristics to enable readers to judge applicability to

their settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Yardley, 2000). Maximum-variation purposive sampling across sectors, roles, and tenure helps demonstrate patterning across diverse cases (Patton, 2015).

Dependability. A comprehensive audit trail records sampling decisions, interview-guide iterations, coding frameworks, theme refinements, and rationale for analytic moves. Versioned ATLAS.ti project files (codebooks, memos, query outputs, network views) were archived to support procedural transparency and re-traceability (Nowell et al., 2017).

Confirmability. We pursued confirmability through sustained reflexivity about the researcher's positionality (sighted professional working in disability inclusion), explicit strategies to minimise deductive disclosure in a small population, and preservation of audio transcript audit links to show how claims derive from data (Kaiser, 2009; Poland, 1995). Interpretations prioritised participants' accounts while acknowledging the interpretivist, theory-sensitised stance (Braun & Clarke, 2020).

4.9.1 Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

As a sighted professional engaged in disability-inclusion work in SA, the researcher holds both insider proximity (familiarity with organisational processes and networks) and outsider distance (not a VIE). This positioning shaped access, rapport, and interpretive lenses. Anticipated advantages included credibility with organisational representatives and sensitivity to inclusion practices; risks included blind spots toward everyday accessibility frictions and normalising organisational rationales. To address these tensions, the study used (a) a reflexive journal documenting assumptions, emotional responses, and decision points from recruitment through analysis; (b) memoing after each interview to bracket a priori expectations; and (c) scheduled peer debriefs with the academic supervisor to surface alternative readings. During analysis, the researcher explicitly asked, "What would this look like from a participant-first, non-managerial frame?" before finalising codes/themes. Positionality statements were revisited at key junctures (pilot completion, mid-analysis, theme finalisation) and any analytic shifts were logged in the audit trail. This stance treats knowledge as co-constructed and situated, consistent with an interpretivist paradigm, while making visible the influence of the researcher's standpoint on design choices and interpretations.

4.11 Ethics of the Research Design

The study received approval from the Gordon Institute of Business Science Research Ethics Committee. Compliance with South Africa's POPIA (Act 4 of 2013) (South African Government,

2013)guided all data-protection and privacy practices. Participants received plain-language information sheets in accessible formats (screen-reader-compatible Word, large print, and audio). Consent was treated as continuous rather than once-off: the researcher explained aims, risks, and rights, invited questions, and reminded participants they could refuse any question, pause, or withdraw at any time without consequence. Written consent was preferred; verbal consent (audio-recorded with explicit permission) was offered where more accessible. Consent explicitly covered audio recording and the use of anonymised quotations (Department of Health, 2015; World Wide Web Consortium, 2018).

Pseudonyms were applied at transcription; quasi-identifiers (e.g., organisation names, job titles, niche roles, locations) were generalised or removed to mitigate deductive disclosure, a known risk in small professional communities (Kaiser, 2009). These risks were explained during consent, and reporting used aggregation or composite vignettes when necessary. Recognising the power dynamics and communication barriers faced by VIEs, recruitment excluded managers from direct contact to avoid coercion. Interviews followed trauma-informed and participant-led practices (control over pace, opportunity to skip topics, breaks as needed), with information on employee-assistance and advocacy services available if distress arose (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007; Harris & Fallot, 2001). All study materials and procedures were designed with accessibility as a primary criterion (World Wide Web Consortium, 2018, 2024).

Audio files and transcripts were stored on encrypted, password-protected drives with access restricted to the researcher and supervisor; the key file and consent records were stored separately. A documented data-management plan specified purpose limitation, minimal data collection, and secure transfer. In line with institutional policy, data will be retained for 10 years and then securely destroyed. Given the researcher's professional role in disability-inclusion work, safeguards included gatekeeper-mediated, opt-in recruitment, clear separation of research and employment relationships, and a reflexive journal to document assumptions and decision points (Finlay, 2002).Peer debriefing with the academic supervisor provided independent scrutiny of ethical and analytic choices. Participants were invited to review the representation of their contributions prior to public dissemination supporting ethical reciprocity and accountability (Tracy, 2010).

4.10 Study Limitations

Purposive and snowball strategies, though appropriate to the aims, may over-represent individuals more connected to the researcher's networks or to disability-advocacy circles, introducing potential sampling bias (Patton, 2015). Because only currently employed participants were eligible, the study

could not capture experiences of those facing barriers to entry or who exited employment, creating a survivorship bias that may understate the most negative experiences salient in a context where an estimated ~70% of working-age visually impaired South Africans are unemployed (Moonsamy, 2025). Future work should include unemployed and transition-stage participants and diversify recruitment beyond professional networks (e.g., registries, community organisations).

All participants were based in Gauteng and the Western Cape and worked primarily in medium–large organisations with formal inclusion structures. Findings therefore reflect relatively resource-rich, urban settings and may not transfer to smaller firms or rural provinces where economic conditions, infrastructure, and policy implementation differ. Thick description is provided to aid reader judgement, but comparative studies across provinces, sectors, and organisation sizes are warranted (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Reliance on retrospective self-report introduces risks of recall bias (Bergen & Labonté, 2020) and social desirability bias, particularly among organisational representatives who may emphasise positive practices (Grimm, 2010; Nederhof, 1985). Triangulation with public documents mitigated but did not eliminate these risks; future designs could add observation, diaries, or artefact analysis to strengthen convergence.

The cross-sectional design captures experiences at a single point, limiting insight into change over time in belonging and integration. Although tenure-based stratification offered contrastive perspectives, longitudinal interviews or ethnographic follow-ups would better illuminate trajectories and turning points. Accessibility revisions (e.g., consent-form remediation), platform issues, and extended recruitment compressed analysis time and may have shaped depth of inquiry. With one participant who had speech difficulties, the researcher used frequent paraphrasing to ensure accuracy; while ethically appropriate, such interactional scaffolding can subtly influence phrasing and emphasis. Use of an audit trail, verbatim transcription checks, and member reflections sought to contain these effects (Poland, 1995; Smith & McGannon, 2018). The researcher's standpoint as a sighted professional in disability-inclusion work is both a resource (access, prolonged engagement) and a limitation (potential interpretive blind spots). Reflexive journaling, peer debriefing, and attention to deductive disclosure risks were used to enhance confirmability, yet interpretations remain situated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Finlay, 2002).

4.11 Conclusion

This chapter detailed an interpretivist, qualitative exploratory methodology used to examine how social integration shapes the sense of belonging among VIEs in SA. Semi-structured interviews

with 18 VIEs and 10 organisational representatives, complemented by documentary analysis and managed in ATLAS.ti, generated rich, comparative insights into workplace integration dynamics. The design centred participants as co-creators of knowledge: accessible materials, flexible interview modalities, and participatory checks on emerging themes were integral to ethical practice and analytic credibility. Although recruitment hurdles, accessibility adjustments, and a sample expansion to ensure thematic sufficiency extended timelines, these challenges prompted reflexive refinement of procedures and broadened the diversity of perspectives captured. Rigor was supported through maximum-variation purposive sampling, triangulation across data sources and participant groups, reflexive thematic analysis with an audit trail and peer debriefing, and careful attention to confidentiality and potential vulnerability in small professional communities. Collectively, these strategies provide a transparent and trustworthy foundation for the next chapter, which presents the thematic findings and identifies organisational practices that facilitate or hinder belonging and inclusive work environments.

Chapter 5: Findings

5.1 Introduction

This chapter reports findings from 28 participants: organisational representatives (n = 9; P01–P09), employees with 1–10 years' tenure (n = 10; P10–P19), and veteran employees with 10+ years' tenure (n = 9; P20–P28). Table 5.1.1 summarises participant characteristics (group, regional location, and visual-impairment status). Unless otherwise stated, quotations are attributed by participant ID and group. Results are organised by the study's research questions and the major themes that emerged from the analysis.

Table 5.1.1: Participant Demographics

Participant ID	Group	Region	Visual Impairment
P01	Organisational Representative	Gauteng	Yes
P02	Organisational Representative	Gauteng	Yes
P03	Organisational Representative	Gauteng	No
P04	Organisational Representative	Gauteng	Yes
P05	Organisational Representative	Gauteng	Yes
P06	Organisational Representative	Western Cape	Yes
P07	Organisational Representative	Gauteng	No
P08	Organisational Representative	Gauteng	No
P09	Organisational Representative	Gauteng	No
P010	Employee (1-10 years)	Gauteng	Yes
P011	Employee (1-10 years)	Gauteng	Yes
P012	Employee (1-10 years)	Gauteng	Yes
P013	Employee (1-10 years)	Gauteng	Yes
P014	Employee (1-10 years)	Gauteng	Yes
P015	Employee (1-10 years)	Gauteng	Yes
P016	Employee (1-10 years)	Gauteng	Yes
P017	Employee (1-10 years)	Gauteng	Yes
P018	Employee (1-10 years)	Gauteng	Yes

P019	Employee (1-10 years)	Western Cape	Yes
P020	Employee (10+ years)	Western Cape	Yes
P021	Employee (10+ years)	Gauteng	Yes
P022	Employee (10+ years)	Gauteng	Yes
P023	Employee (10+ years)	Gauteng	Yes
P024	Employee (10+ years)	Western Cape	Yes
P025	Employee (10+ years)	Western Cape	Yes
P026	Employee (10+ years)	Gauteng	Yes
P027	Employee (10+ years)	Gauteng	Yes
P028	Employee (10+ years)	Western Cape	Yes

5.1.1 Participant profile and results roadmap

As shown in Table 5.1.1, most participants (24/28; 86%) self-identified as visually impaired. All employees reported visual impairment (VI). Among organisational representatives, five reported VI and four reported no VI (P03, P07, P08, P09). Participants were drawn primarily from Gauteng (21/28; 75%), with additional representation from the Western Cape (WC, 7/28; 25%), reflecting the concentration of formal-sector employment in major metropolitan areas while retaining some geographic diversity.

The analysis indicates that workplace integration operates through dual pathways. Structural accessibility (P1) and psychosocial safety (P2) interact synergistically (P3) to shape day-to-day inclusion. Even when both pathways align, a structural ceiling (P4) constrains advancement opportunities. These dynamics are moderated by organisational context (P5), shift across career stages (P6), and are compounded by intersecting identities (P7). Findings are presented descriptively, allowing participants' accounts to illuminate each proposition. Theoretical interpretation is reserved for Chapter 6.

5.1.2 Mapping propositions to research questions

Table 5.1.2 maps how each proposition addresses the three research questions, indicating whether propositions provide primary evidence (directly and substantially address the research question) or secondary insights (provide supporting or contextual information).

Table 5.1.2: Proposition-Research Question Alignment Matrix

Proposition	RQ1: Social Integration & Belonging	RQ2: Workplace Aspects & Improvements	RQ3: Intersecting Identities
P1: Structural Accessibility	●●● Primary	●●● Primary	—
P2: Identity Safety	●●● Primary	●● Secondary	—
P3: Synergistic Interaction	●●● Primary	●●● Primary	—
P4: Structural Ceiling	●● Secondary	●●● Primary	—
P5: Contextual Moderators	●● Secondary	●●● Primary	—
P6: Temporal Reinforcement	●●● Primary	●● Secondary	—
P7: Intersectionality	●● Secondary	●● Secondary	●●● Primary

●●●*Primary = Proposition directly and substantially addresses this RQ*

●● *Secondary = Proposition provides support or contextual insights*

Table 5.1.2 illustrates how each proposition aligns with the three research questions, demonstrating the comprehensive coverage of the Integrated Dual-Pathway Model. While some propositions primarily address specific research questions, all propositions collectively contribute to understanding workplace inclusion for visually impaired employees.

This mapping reveals several patterns. Research Question 1 (Social Integration and Belonging) receives primary contributions from structural accessibility (P1), identity safety (P2), synergistic interaction (P3), and temporal reinforcement (P6), demonstrating that belonging emerges through multiple interconnected mechanisms. Research Question 2 (Workplace Aspects and Improvements) receives primary contributions from all propositions except P2 and P7, reflecting participants' emphasis on structural and contextual barriers requiring organisational intervention. Research Question 3 (Intersecting Identities) is primarily addressed through P7, though intersectional dynamics moderate experiences across all propositions. Table 5.1.3 summarises the seven propositions that organise the sections that follow (5.2–5.8).

Table 5.1.3: Research Propositions Overview

Proposition	Title	Description
P1	Structural Accessibility Shapes Social Integration	Structural accessibility (physical, digital, assistive technology) creates foundation for workplace participation and social integration
P2	Identity Safety Shapes Belonging	Psychosocial safety and freedom from stigma enable authentic self-presentation and organisational identification
P3	Synergistic Interaction Between Pathways	Belonging emerges from alignment between structural and psychosocial pathways; misalignment limits belonging
P4	Structural Ceiling Limits Psychosocial Gains	Structural barriers establish ceiling on belonging regardless of psychosocial support levels
P5	Contextual Moderators	Leadership practices, policies, organisational culture, and training quality moderate both structural and psychosocial pathways
P6	Temporal Reinforcement	Integration and belonging reinforce each other over time through cumulative cycles across onboarding, transitions, and career stages
P7	Intersectionality and Compounded Disadvantage	Visual impairment intersects with race, gender, age, and language to create unique and compounded exclusion experiences

5.2 Proposition 1 - Structural Accessibility Shapes Integration

Proposition 1 posits that structural conditions accessibility infrastructure, assistive technology, reasonable accommodations, and organisational procedures shape workplace integration. Evidence across all 28 participants indicates that structural accessibility is necessary but not sufficient it enables participation, but its impact depends on implementation quality and its interaction with psychosocial safety (P2) and organisational context (P5).

5.2.1 Technology as an Enabler and Barrier

Assistive technology (AT) emerged as the most critical structural lever. When provided proactively, with training and responsive support, it enabled independence and dignity. When delayed,

withheld, or poorly supported, it amplified exclusion and eroded confidence. Organisational representatives described features that normalised independent navigation and routine tasks:

"*having lifts that have accessibility in terms of a visually impaired person being able to take themselves to the 10th floor without being accompanied because then the lift speaks back to them and, [….] having Braille on our microwaves, which then gives them freedom that they can go have lunch alone. They don't always have to go ask someone because they need help with the microwave. So it actually just helped them be more independent and not depend on us and which is the one of the things*". [P08, Org rep]

The phrase "have lunch alone" captures accessibility's everyday impact on autonomy. These accommodations enabled forms of independence that sighted colleagues often take for granted, and participants noted that when such features were embedded systemically rather than added reactively, independence became routine rather than exceptional. Where procurement, configuration, or help-desk support lagged, participants reported resignation and self-doubt:

"*As I said, I have sent emails, and I still got those on my laptop somewhere. I did send emails regarding the problems on the system, and they don't even respond, So I just deal with what I have*". [P020, Veteran 10+]

P20's resigned acceptance points to learned helplessness arising from organisational unresponsiveness the issue is relational as much as technical.

"*I felt like, Oh my God, what did I put myself into? I doubted myself for a while there because I was like, OK, it's going to be difficult because we work with a lot of systems*" [P016, Employee 1–10y]

P016's account shows how structural barriers can be internalised by employees as self-doubt rather than recognised as organisational deficits. Digital inaccessibility was the most pervasive structural obstacle described across accounts. Table 5.2.1 summarises the primary categories of digital accessibility barriers and their day-to-day impacts (e.g., legacy systems incompatible with screen readers; inaccessible documents, portals, and forms; authentication flows without accessible alternatives; inconsistent accessibility in collaboration platforms; and procurement/permissions bottlenecks that delay licenses and device replacements). These

patterns set the stage for Section 5.3, which examines how structural supports interact with psychosocial safety (P2) to produce or undermine felt inclusion (P3).

Table 5.2.1: Digital Accessibility Barriers and Their Impact

Barrier Category	Specific Issues Reported	Impact on Work	Participants Reporting (n)
Communication Platforms	Video without captions, inaccessible meeting software (Teams, Zoom), cannot access buttons, cannot share screen, visual collaboration tools	Exclusion from meetings and collaboration, delays in task completion, dependency on colleagues for meeting participation	P01, P03, P04, P07, P011, P013, P014, P15, P016, P017, P018, P019, P020, P022, P023, P024, P025, P026, P027, P028 (n=20)
Proprietary Software	Screen reader incompatibility, unlabelled buttons, keyboard navigation failures, systems not compatible with assistive technology (JAWS, NVDA)	Cannot perform core job functions independently, challenging work experience, need for workarounds	P01, P07, P011, P012, P015, P019, P022, P024 and P027 (n=9)
Document Formats	PDF images without OCR, inaccessible spreadsheets, visual presentations, scanned documents cannot be read	Cannot access critical information independently, delays in completing tasks, dependency on colleagues	P007, P011, P015, P018, P023, and P028 (n=6)

Based on transcript analysis of all 28 participants, Communication Platforms showed the strongest evidence, with 20/28 (71.4%) reporting barriers. This was followed by Proprietary Software (9/28; 32.1%) and Document Formats (6/28; 21.4%). By contrast, Database Systems (4/28; 14.3%) and Web Applications (1/28; 3.6%) yielded insufficient evidence to warrant separate reporting; these incidents were not carried forward as standalone categories and, where relevant, were subsumed

under other digital barriers. Table 5.2.1.1 summarises these categories and corresponding counts. These prevalence patterns contextualise the qualitative accounts in Section 5.2.1 and set up the interaction with psychosocial safety in Section 5.3 (P2).

5.2.2 The Accommodation Implementation Gap

How accommodations were implemented signalled organisational commitment. Several participants described requests denied on trivial or administrative grounds, suggesting that accessibility was treated as discretionary rather than routine.

"*maybe I'm presenting an award ceremony, and I've requested a script in advance, and everybody just says, 'don't worry, there's an autocue', which I can't see. Or it's in an environment where I'm doing a voiceover, and I've requested a script in font size 16, specifically because I have a visual impairment, and they give me one size 10 to save paper [….] I read closer, so that means I'm moving my head from one side of the page to another, which takes me longer"* [P05, Org rep]

Here, a reasonable accommodation (larger font or advance script) is denied to "save paper" or deferred to an inaccessible autocue, producing unequal outcomes in the name of "sameness." The default to uniform treatment positions accommodation as a special favour rather than a levelling mechanism.

Beyond outright denials, accommodation delays proved particularly harmful for employees with progressive impairments. P025's experience exemplifies how bureaucratic timelines ignore deteriorating conditions:

"My eyes have been deteriorating. I've applied for [a] replacement [...] magnifying device three years ago. I got it two weeks ago." [P025, Veteran 10+]

P025's three-year wait was not an isolated incident. P017 experienced similar delays:

"I joined in January. I got my stuff in July. That's like six months [...] In this case costs maybe 20-30K for an organisation the size that's nothing that's lunch money." [P017, VIE 1–10y]

Even after approval, implementation faced bureaucratic obstacles:

"*It's still a matter of finding the right people to also knock on to actually install this and get it to work. OK, because we'll say, oh, this policy and all that policy and is this appropriate, is this approved, is that approved? Who needs to approve this so we can unlock that feature that you can actually use your software?"* [P017, VIE 1–10y]

The three-year delay forced P025 to escalate beyond formal channels entirely:

"I followed all the correct procedures. Got all my wellness cases, case numbers, and every time and nothing happened. I couldn't get feedback from everybody at wellness... I jumped over all of their heads. Went to the [Group's Executive], within one month, I got my approval" [P025, Veteran 10+]

The approval that materialised within one month of executive involvement reveals that the barrier was not resource scarcity but systemic inertia within the formal accommodation pipeline.

Beneath these procedural failures lies a more fundamental problem: the presumption that visually impaired employees must conform to organisational norms rather than organisations adapting to accommodate diverse ways of working.

"*So it's obviously the issues that person having to adapt to the sighted world, the sighted way of doing things, rather than the person being able to talk to what needs to be discussed, and the type of person being able to adapt to using auditory mode of receiving that information*." [P02, Org rep]

P02 articulates a one-directional burden: VIEs are expected to adapt to "the sighted way of doing things", rather than organisations adapting workflows to multiple modalities (e.g., auditory).

The failure to consult VIEs during design and rollout reflects a persistent pattern in both public and organisational policy: accessibility treated as an afterthought rather than a design principle. P01 described how this played out in a national policy change:

When discussing the South African Reserve Bank's introduction of new currency notes in 2021, P01 explained that blind individuals had learned to identify money by established tactile and pattern cues over time; altering those cues without adequate consultation or transition support disrupted everyday transactions and independence. [P01, Org rep]

This example illustrates how system-level changes, when made without direct input from affected users, can erase learned access strategies and reproduce exclusion, a pattern mirrored in organisational accommodation practices that treat accessibility as optional. Some organisational

representatives recognised this pattern and sought to embed accessibility earlier in the decision-making process:

"The question should be, is it accessible? So I spoke to [...] I said [..] listen [..], we're bringing on new vendors all the time, and then we exacerbate our problem if we don't ask if it's accessible. So can we in our procurement strategy or Procurement Standard say all systems should be accessible. [...] But I think I need to go a step further and go to the architectural board to say how do you ask that question when people are bringing you new solutions" [P07, Org rep]

P07's intervention illustrates a shift from reactive accommodation to anticipatory design: embedding accessibility questions in procurement standards and architectural review processes addresses exclusion at its source, before new systems entrench barriers. This upstream approach contrasts sharply with post-implementation accommodation requests, which position accessibility as remediation rather than standard practice.

These accounts show that even where structural tools exist (P1), implementation discretion and non-consultative design undermine impact unless reinforced by psychosocial safety (P2) and organisational standards (P5). Where accommodations are reliable and routine, they synergise with supportive climates (P3); where they are *ad-hoc*, they contribute to perceptions of a structural ceiling (P4).

5.2.3 Physical Environment and Spatial Navigation

Physical accessibility was as consequential as digital accessibility. Participants described how planning assumptions, way finding supports, and space-use policies either enabled or undermined independence.

Planning assumptions and default exclusion.

Event and facilities planning often presumed universal ability to navigate independently:

"*[…] people would arrange things and they obviously go on the assumption that everybody that's going to participate in said event are able to get there*." [P028, Veteran 10+]

The phrase “obviously go on the assumption” signals able-bodied normativity where accessibility is overlooked because planners assume everyone can navigate the space, resulting in default exclusion.

Anticipatory orientation vs ad hoc workarounds.

In contrast, some organisations invested in proactive supports during transitions:

"*For instance, first of all, getting them a mobility instructor that is going to help them navigate the building because they were at the academy, now they are in the organisation*." [P08, Org rep]

Mobility training during onboarding represented anticipatory accommodation, systematically addressing spatial learning rather than leaving navigation to informal, *ad-hoc* assistance.

Reliance on assistive features and the cost of failure.

Seemingly minor features (e.g., elevator voice announcements) were described as critical orientation cues; their failure produced cascading barriers:

"*How am I going to know now I'm on 5th floor? And then the lift goes and then it stopped on three. Maybe someone called it on floor three and then I was like, ah, maybe I'm on five. As I was about to go out, luckily, there was someone in the lift who said 'No, it's not floor five, it's floor three'*…." [P015, VIE 1–10y]

When announcements malfunctioned, employees faced navigation dilemmas with safety implications, replacing certainty with guesswork and new dependence on bystanders. Reports from multiple participants (e.g., P15, P12) suggest systematic maintenance gaps, indicating that accessibility features require ongoing monitoring and rapid repair, not one-off installation.

Changing access points without re-orientation.

Alterations to primary entrances disrupted established, memorised routes:

"*It's no longer a challenge, but it was a challenge before. When we started work, we were using the nearest gate, and the main entrance gates have now changed. The mobility trainer had trained us using the first gate when going to the office*…" [P015, VIE 1–10y]

Here, prior orientation ("the person was training us") built independence that was erased overnight by gate relocation. The interim period "it was a problem for me" entailed renewed reliance on others until informal re-learning occurred, reflecting a missing re-orientation response from the organisation.

Space-use policies (hot-desking) and social knock-ons.

Flexible seating undermined spatial predictability and everyday collaboration:

“*Sometimes I will be in the office, but it will be difficult for me to go to certain individuals because I will not know where exactly they are sitting on that particular day*.” [P015, VIE 1–10y]

P017 elaborated on the cognitive mapping required for physical navigation:

"*I need to know where you are in my space. If you move from point XY in the column space [...] I know maybe with time and training your voice patterns, your ambiance and be able to identify you. But if I am looking for you, I'm gonna first go to point XY*." [P017, VIE 1–10y]

Hot-desking policies require VIEs to continuously rebuild mental maps of colleague locations, adding cognitive labour to routine interactions. In contrast, digital environments eliminated this barrier entirely:

“And I don't need to go and find where you are because you just. You know a button on my screen.” P017, VIE 1–10y]

"I can do it much easier online because I know you just click away and my computer can talk to me. So if wherever you are, wherever you move on my computer, I can use my computer to find you. Click the button and say, Hi, what's up?" [P017, VIE 1–10y]

The stark difference between physical and digital navigation reveals how office design choices create unnecessary barriers.

Beyond the physical barrier (locating colleagues), P15 described social misattribution (being perceived as aloof) and the advocacy burden required to negotiate fixed seating, turning a basic accessibility need into a discretionary exception.

Temporary works and communication gaps.

Short-notice maintenance introduced unexpected hazards on memorised routes:

“*Sometimes if there are changes especially on the outside you just come one morning, and your part is blocked then you don't know where to go and how […]. It kind of hits you by surprise*.” [P012, VIE 1–10y]

Even with broadcast updates (e.g., WhatsApp messages), reversals and timing changes created confusion rather than clarity. For employees who rely on route memorisation, unannounced or poorly signposted diversions convert routine commutes into risk assessments, with choices between unsafe improvisation, waiting for assistance, or missing work. Physical environment

factors (P1) shaped daily inclusion alongside digital tools, but their impact hinged on reliable maintenance, change communication, and consultative planning. Where these were present, structural supports synergised with psychosocial safety (P2) to enhance independence (P3); where they were absent, they reinstated dependence and fed perceptions of a structural ceiling (P4).

5.2.4 Capability Assumptions Encoded in Structures

Structural barriers do more than impede tasks; they encode and communicate assumptions about capability. When accommodations are denied, delayed, or stigmatised, organisations implicitly signal doubt about disabled employees' competence, shifting responsibility from system design to the individual.

"*They have preconceived ideas of who you are and what you are capable of*." [P028, Veteran 10+]

These "preconceived ideas" often originate in accessibility design choices. When organisations fail to provide or maintain accommodations, non-participation is attributed to personal limitation rather than systemic failure, reinforcing a deficit view.

"*It's like a similar finding the lawyer. She got blind at the age of 28 […] very intelligent lady as well, and she then went and studied and done a law degree, and now she cannot even get employment, let alone any environment*." [P02, Org rep]

Here, high demonstrated capability (completion of a law degree) coexists with complete exclusion from employment, illustrating how structural barriers can generate the very "evidence" used to justify capability doubts. This creates a vicious cycle: inaccessibility depresses opportunity, which is then read as proof of incapacity, legitimising further exclusion. These accounts show that even when structural tools exist (P1), the implementation climate (P2) shapes how capability is read and valued. Where supports are reliable and routine, capability is validated (synergy, P3); where accommodations are discretionary or stigmatised, capability is questioned, contributing to a perceived structural ceiling (P4).

5.2.5 Meeting Communication Barriers

Beyond digital systems, routine meeting practices also functioned as structural barriers. Visual content shared on-screen without advance circulation prevented visually impaired participants from fully engaging with presentations and discussion. Evidence from 23/28 participants (82%) across all groups identified this as the most widespread structural barrier in the study (Table 5.2.2)

Table 5.2.2: Distribution of Meeting Communication Barrier Mentions by Participant Group

Participant Group	Participants Who Mentioned	Total in Group	Percentage
Organisational Representatives (P01-P09)	6 (P01, P02, P04, P05, P06, P07)	9	67%
VIE 1-10 years (P10-P19)	9 (P10, P11, P12, P13, P14, P15, P16, P17, P18)	10	90%
VIE 10+ years (P20-P28)	8 (P21, P22, P23, P24, P25, P26, P27, P28)	9	89%
TOTAL	**23**	**28**	**82%**

Note: Based on transcript analysis across all participant groups.

Prevalence and types of meeting barriers

The widespread nature of this barrier affecting more than eight in ten participants shows how routine meeting practices can systematically exclude VIEs. Reports were high across all groups: employees (1–10y): 9/10, 90%; veteran employees: 8/9, 89%; and organisational representatives: 6/9, 67%. These patterns suggest extensive exposure to exclusionary practices over time, with particularly high reporting among employees.

Types of meeting barriers (see Table 5.2.3). Participant accounts clustered into six recurring categories: 1) Presentations/screen-shares without advance circulation of materials; 2) graphs and other visual data without verbal description, creating participation gaps; 3) small fonts and low-contrast slides/images that are difficult to perceive or parse with assistive technology; 3) live demonstrations without prior practice files, limiting real-time engagement; 4) formal settings that inhibit clarification (e.g., reluctance to request description in senior forums); and 5) Untimely or inaccessible post-meeting materials, preventing review and follow-up.

Table 5.2.3: Categories of Meeting Communication Barriers

Barrier Type	Participants	Description	Impact
Presentations without advance materials	P01, P02, P04, P05, P06, P07, P11, P15, P16, P17, P18, P21, P27	PowerPoint slides/presentations shown during meetings without sharing beforehand	Cannot prepare, follow content, or contribute equally
Screen sharing without description	P01, P02, P04, P05, P06, P07, P011, P13, P015, P016, P023, P028	Content shared on Teams/screen without verbal description during sharing	Miss visual information in real-time
Graphs and visual data undescribed	P01, P02, P04, P05, P06, P07, P011, P022, P025	Charts, trends, data displayed visually without alternative access or explanation	Cannot analyse data others "immediately pick-up"
Live demonstrations without preparation	P01, P02, P04, P05, P07, P11	Real-time demonstrations VI employees cannot follow without prior practice	Excluded from hands-on learning
Town halls and large meetings	P02, P011	Formal presentations with standardized (inaccessible) formats	Systematic exclusion from organisational communication
Small font/text size	P01, P04, P05, P06, P011, P015	Text too small to read from distance or on shared screens	Physical inability to access written content

Note: Based on qualitative analysis of barrier descriptions across 24 participant interviews.

Participant experiences of exclusion in meetings.

Large, presentation-heavy meetings often excluded visually impaired employees by relying on undisclosed visual content, small fonts, and no verbal description. Beyond information loss, participants reported psychological burden associated with requesting access.

“[...] where I felt excluded mainly in like large [...] meetings, like town halls [...] they have a set way of doing things [...] they don't think about our visually impaired colleagues [...] Have images they will have very small font and they're not even willing to describe what is on what they're displaying, and you sometimes miss the message or you miss the data that they're trying to show.” [P011, VIE 1–10y]

P011’s phrase “miss the message or miss the data” captures how inaccessible practices create content gaps that affect both work quality and decision-making. The observation that colleagues are “not even willing to describe” visuals shows how exclusion operates through omission description is treated as an add-on rather than a baseline.

Psychological cost of requesting access.

“[...] I was kind of. Scared [...] to ask them. But at the end of the day, I had to sit down and be like. No, no. But I can't suffer. They don't understand that I'm suffering. And then if I don't make them understand, they will not think for me.” [P015, VIE 1–10y]

P015 frames accessibility as personal responsibility “they will not think for me” and describes the fear of asking for basic access. The phrase “I can't suffer” reflects an invisible burden when meetings proceed without accessible materials.

Organisational recognition of barriers.

Organisational representatives acknowledged the issue while revealing tensions in how barriers are understood particularly in senior or formal settings.

“[...] when it comes to meetings [...] people showing slides, a lot of eye contact, a lot of facial expressions, all of which visually impaired people [...] are not able to pick up and restrict the inclusion [...] other people can be looking at a graph that is presented on a screen and immediately picks up [...] the trends and the challenges and the gaps, where [the VI employee is] sitting in a room [...] where somebody can't be telling you [...] when there's [senior leadership] and everyone in that room [...]” [P02, Org rep]

P02’s image of “sitting in a room” captures presence without access. Formality “when there’s [senior leadership]” constrains real-time clarification, compounding exclusion.

“[...] any meeting, any presentation [...] somebody is going to be presenting a presentation that is going to be full of graphs [...] but need to have it in advance. Otherwise [...] the person [is] still going to be explaining, and it might be causing a distraction to the rest of the meeting.” [P02, Org rep]

The solution advance materials is clear, yet the framing of live description as a “distraction” positions accessibility as disruptive rather than as a shared responsibility of presenters.

“[...] sending them information that we are going to demonstrate that example on their laptop as well on time so that they can practice it before you can go and do it, live with other colleagues on the board room [...]” [P01, Org rep]

P01 extends this to live demonstrations: providing on-time materials enables practice beforehand, converting attendance into genuine participation.

Positive accommodation practices

Some participants reported proactive, low-friction adjustments that normalised access.

“[...] they've been very accommodative because if it's a thing that needs to be shared on teams, they will always ask [...] before the meeting. So my manager will share it before the meeting and ask if they need to adjust the font or anything.” [P16, VIE 1–10y]

Consistent pre-meeting sharing and format checks “will always ask” turned potential barriers into routine inclusion without requiring employee self-advocacy. Meeting accessibility illustrates the P1–P2 interplay: structural practices (advance materials, verbal description, font/format) underpin psychosocial safety (confidence to contribute). Where practices are proactive and reliable, they synergise with inclusive climates (P3); where absent, they reinforce withdrawal and heighten perceived structural ceilings on influence (P4).

Meeting barriers - cumulative impacts

Meeting barriers operated beyond momentary inconvenience. Missing “the message or the data” created cumulative knowledge gaps that affected work quality, advancement opportunities, and organisational belonging. The burden of repeatedly requesting access while feeling “scared” to do so depleted psychological resources and reinforced outsider status. When accessibility depended on individual advocacy rather than organisational practice, visually impaired employees spent energy securing access that sighted colleagues devoted to work.

Table 5.2.4: Key Impacts of Meeting Communication Barriers

Impact	Participants	Description
Miss critical information	P11, P02	*"Miss the message or miss the data"* - information gaps affecting work quality
Presence without participation	P02, P11	Physical attendance in meetings whilst unable to access content others process immediately
Invisible suffering	P15	Colleagues unaware of exclusion: *"They don't understand that I'm suffering"*
Self-advocacy burden	P15, P11	Fear of requesting access*: "I was kind of scared [...] to ask them"*
Positioned as disruption	P02	Accessibility requests framed as *"causing a distraction to the rest of the meeting"*
Cannot interrupt in formal settings	P02	Unable to request clarification *"when there's [senior leaders] and everyone in that room"*
Excluded from hands-on learning	P01	Cannot follow live demonstrations without advance preparation
Systematic organisational exclusion	P11	Standardised meeting formats *("set way of doing things"*) that exclude by design

Note: Based on qualitative analysis of impact descriptions in participant interviews.

5.2.6 Environmental design barriers

Physical environments encoded capability assumptions through design choices that undermined navigation and independence. Participants described barriers insignage, transport, and consumer product design that extended beyond the workplace into daily life.

Signage inaccessibility.

"*Sometimes there would be, um, signage, but it's small. It's up there. I'm not a very tall person, so you know, then I can't see it. So now I have to, um, ask people, where is this place, where is that place?"* [P028, Veteran 10+]

“It’s up there” signals a placement and font-size norm optimised for sighted navigation, producing forced dependency (“I have to ask people”).

Transport infrastructure.

“*So it's a matter of using public transport and sometimes it's difficult like you know, like I use the [...] train then you have difficulty to [...] try and figure out OK. What is the sign saying or [...] what time is the next train coming [...]”* [P027, Veteran 10+]

Unreadable station signage and displays created uncertainty before work begins, making the commute itself a barrier to employment access.

Product design exclusion.

“*Like when you buy, um, milk for instance, I forever have to ask other people [...] like dairy products in general. I forever have to ask other people 'cause I can't see [...] it has like a brown packaging and then [...] the stamp that they used to put the date on is black [...] I can't see the contrast between black and brown, so [...] It's an issue for me.”* [P028, Veteran 10+]

Low-contrast expiry stamps produced perpetual dependency for routine tasks. These broader environmental barriers drain time and energy, affecting punctuality, performance, and the psychological bandwidth available for work. Organisations that focus solely on in-office adjustments risk overlooking how extra-organisational design choices shape daily participation.

5.2.7 Social communication barriers

Structural barriers also surfaced in everyday communication norms, where visual gestures and non-specific language excluded by default. Visual impairment fundamentally altered the nature of workplace communication. P017 explained the scale of information loss:

"*We know from conversational research that 80%, which is an 80% of conversation, is actually conducted by body language and by non-verbal means. As a person with a disability, I may lose out of all of that, which leaves me with between 20 and 30% of the conversation."* [P017, VIE 1–10y]

This substantial loss of communicative input required compensatory strategies and created barriers in routine workplace interactions.

***Directional* communication without verbal specificity.**

"*Now you get there and somebody shows you, gives you directions, but now they're saying, oh, just go there and [...] they're pointing. They're not using their words to say go straight, turn left and then at the second door turn right or you know, something like. That and things like that makes you feel excluded."* [P028, Veteran 10+]

"They're not using their words" highlights how pointing replaces precise verbal description, producing avoidable exclusion.

Screen-based assumptions.

"They have to tell me, OK, click here, click that." [P016, VIEs 1–10y]

"can't come to a person another colleague and say can you show me how they do those because they are typically going to go click here, click there, click this. And as a person with a disability, I'm not necessarily [able to] follow you [...] on the screen." [P017, VIE 1–10y]

Demonstratives ("here", "that") presume a shared visual reference; accessible practice requires naming elements and locations (e.g., "Click the Submit button in the top-right"). These patterns appear interpersonal but are systematic across contexts. Treating accessible communication as baseline professional practice rather than a special accommodation reduces constant self-advocacy ("please don't point; describe the location") and improves collaboration efficiency.

Compensatory social labour.

Beyond immediate communication barriers, the loss of visual information required extensive preparation for social interactions:

"*I can't look at Tom and say, oh, I see you wearing a whatever shirt. Or oh, you have XYZ on your own desk screen or whatever to act as a conversation starter. How do I do that prep work? [...] I need to be reinvested in the conversation in order to have the conversation."* [P017, VIE 1–10y]

The phrase "reinvested in the conversation" captures the cognitive and social labour required before interaction even begins, work that sighted colleagues perform instantaneously through visual scanning.

5.2.8 Summary of Structural Findings

Structural accessibility shapes integration but functions as a double-edged sword: when technologies and procedures are proactively provided, maintained, and explained, they enable routine independence; when delayed, neglected, or poorly supported, they generate new barriers and dependence. The quality and reliability of accommodations varied markedly by organisational commitment where practices were standardised and monitored, participants described seamless participation; where accommodations were discretionary, participants reported delays, workarounds, and lost autonomy.

Structural choices also encode assumptions about capability. Denied or stigmatised accommodations implicitly question competence, creating self-fulfilling cycles in which inaccessibility depresses performance opportunities and is then misread as evidence of individual limitation. Across accounts, the burden of adaptation fell asymmetrically on VIEs, who were expected to adjust to “the sighted way of doing things”, rather than organisations adapting systems, spaces, and workflows to multiple modalities. Taken together, these findings show that P1 is necessary but not sufficient: structural supports realise their value only when paired with psychosocial safety (P2) and consistent implementation (P3), and their absence or fragility contributes to perceptions of a structural ceiling (P4). The next section examines how the implementation climate and day-to-day interactions (P2) amplify or undermine these structural effects.

5.3 Proposition 2 - Identity Safety Shapes Belonging

Proposition 2 proposes that psychosocial safety shapes belonging. Whereas P1 examined whether employees could participate, P2 investigates whether they felt they belonged. Results indicate that belonging is fragile and contingent on daily micro-interactions the small cues from colleagues and managers that signal welcome, respect, and ease of participation. Participants most often described dynamics in informal spaces (e.g., group tasks, ad-hoc collaboration, and social moments) where accommodations were assumed rather than planned.

5.3.1 Exclusion in Everyday Social Activities

Belonging was undermined by subtle exclusions in routine activities that build workplace community especially when accommodations for participation in group tasks were absent or ad hoc.

“*For example, everybody must break into groups, and a person with a visual impairment does not have the relevant type of guide, or is alone, it's going to be very difficult for that*.” [P02, Org rep]

This scenario is not formally discriminatory, yet the structural absence of support (e.g., no designated guide, no planned pairing) produces social isolation. The phrase “or is alone” captures the moment when others cluster naturally while the VIE stands apart, eroding the sense of belonging that informal activities are meant to foster.

“*[be]cause honestly, I'm only starting to be independent now, where I can work alone and not call people constantly for help*.” [P016, VIE 1–10y]

P16’s admission conveys vulnerability: “call people constantly for help” signals sustained dependence that undermines autonomy and belonging. The relief in “I'm only starting to be independent now” indicates that dependency was burdensome not only practically but also socially shaping how safe and included one feels in everyday interactions. These accounts show that psychosocial safety (P2) is distinct from, yet intertwined with, structural access (P1): even when participation is technically possible, belonging can falter without planned inclusion in everyday social practices. Where micro-interactions are attentive and predictable, they synergise with structural supports (P3); where they are neglected, they contribute to perceptions of a structural ceiling (P4).

5.3.2 Microaggressions and Ambient Stigma

Psychosocial safety was eroded by everyday microaggressions subtle behaviours that communicate devaluation and difference. Participants framed these as frequent, cumulative, and impactful regardless of intent.

"*that is exactly what people do. They judge, they come with their unconscious bias and they go [...] oh, look at that person. They're different to me.."* [P018, VIE 1–10y]

The repetition conveys relentlessness: these are not isolated incidents but daily indignities that accumulate. The phrase “look at that person” captures objectification being observed as spectacle rather than recognised as a colleague. These assumptions sometimes extended to basic cognitive capacity:

"[...] somebody actually told me once, Oh, I thought you were dumb. So yeah, [....] it's hurtful sometimes when people just say whatever comes to mind, not taking into account [...] that you're a person and you have feelings." [P028, Veteran 10+]

The conflation of visual impairment with intellectual disability reveals how deeply stigma operates. P021 elaborated on this widespread misconception:

"*they look at visual impairments... as if they [are] intellectually disabled as well*" [P021, VIE 1-10y].

Although P018 describes this as “unconscious bias”, participants emphasised that intentionality is irrelevant to impact.

The cumulative effect of these daily encounters creates what P022 described as an environment where *"it's very insensitive to be making jokes about such like situations... it's really inhumane"* [P022, VIE 1-10y].

These microaggressions extended beyond workplace interactions into public spaces, revealing how disability visibility invites uninvited commentary even during personal moments. P014 recounted an incident that illustrates the pervasive nature of these assumptions:

"*I was taking a picture with [a colleague]. She was giving my walking stick [away]. I call my walking stick my eyes. She was giving my eyes away to [another colleague] to say no, no, we don't want it in the picture. So the lady who was passing by was like, why are you being fooled? It's a stick. Take a picture. [...] She [colleague] knows that on my pictures I don't want my stick. Not unless I want it purposefully because maybe I want to use my picture [for] something else. I am visually impaired and I don't need my stick to prove my [...] visually impairment."* [P014, VIE 1-10y]

The intrusive nature of such encounters was echoed by P010, who described how curiosity often manifested as invasive questioning:

"Don't come here like, oh, how do you see? How do you? And at the end of the day, you can see that I'm producing results and you start asking me like this [...] don't do that. [...] you're gonna […] me off." [P010, VIE 1-10y]

This stigmatising visibility created a paradox: to access necessary accommodations, VIEs had to disclose their impairment, yet disclosure itself invited the differential treatment they sought to avoid. P03 observed this tension:

"*In terms of the stigma from anyone, existing colleagues, line managers, well a lot of them are found say[ing] that you know, I still want to be treated the same as everybody who's able bodied*." [P03, Org rep]

Employees navigated a narrow path between requesting needed support and avoiding being marked as requiring 'special treatment':

"When I ask for help... I don't want special treatment" [P025, Veteran 10+]

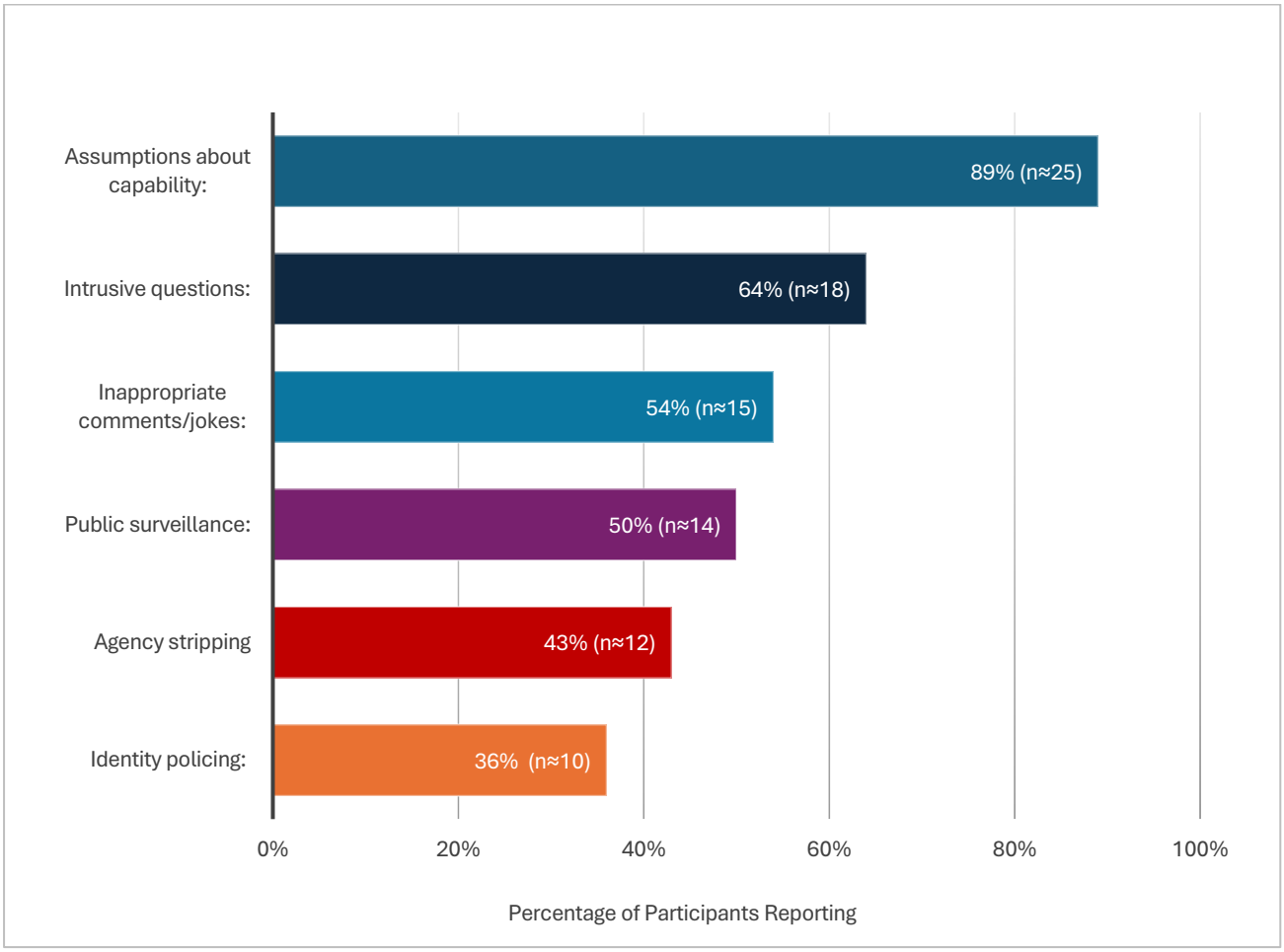
P03 noted that this fear of differential treatment directly influenced disclosure decisions:

"*So some people are reluctant to declare because they feel like they'll be treated differently, which is one of the main things."* [P03, Org rep]

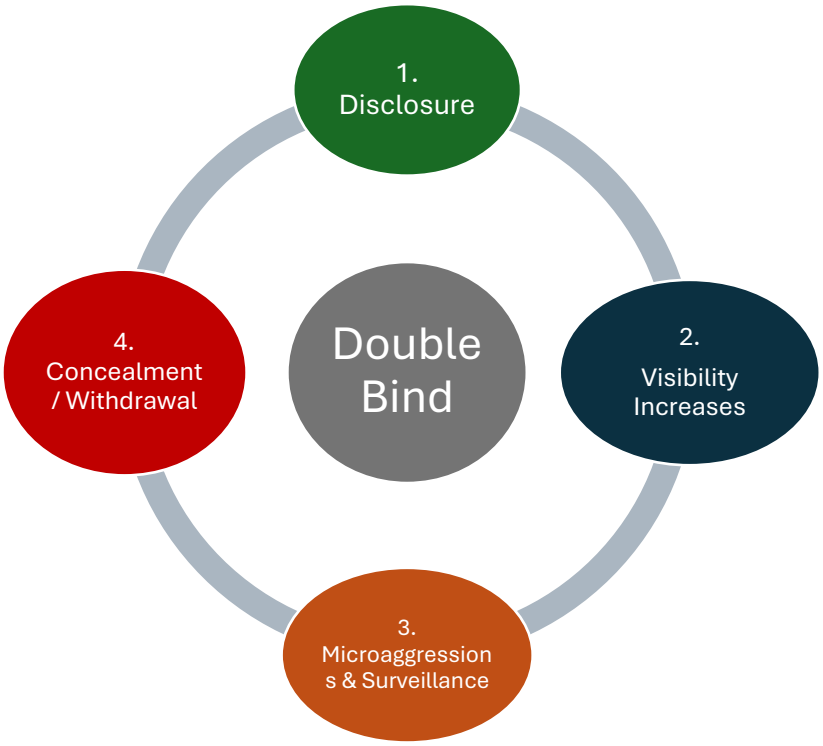
This desire to be "treated the same" reveals a paradox: VIEs seek normalcy without stigma whilst also requiring accommodations that differ from standard practice.

Anticipated differential treatment deterred disclosure, creating a double-bind: employees must disclose to access accommodations but risk stigma by doing so. The resulting double-bind of visibility without belonging or belonging without the tools to participate makes psychosocial safety particularly fragile. Figure 5.3.2 synthesises the microaggression patterns documented above into an integrated framework.

Panel (a) - Types of Microaggressions Experienced



Panel (b) - The Disclosure-Stigma Cycle



Panel (c) - Impacts of Ambient Stigma

PSYCHOLOGICAL
Emotional exhaustion
Hypervigilance
Reduced self-efficacy

PROFESSIONAL
Career hesitancy
Reduced visibility
Self-censorship

SOCIAL
Isolation
Relationship strain
Belonging erosion

Figure 5.3.2: Microaggressions and Ambient Stigma Framework

Figure 5.3.2 synthesises the microaggression patterns into an integrated framework. Capability assumptions were the most pervasive form (89%), followed by intrusive questions (64%) and inappropriate comments (54%). P014's photograph incident exemplifies public surveillance and identity policing, whilst P010's experience shows how intrusive questions persist despite demonstrated results. The disclosure-stigma cycle (panel b) creates a structural trap where employees must disclose to access accommodations but visibility invites surveillance. The impacts (panel c) compound across psychological, professional, and social domains.

5.3.3 Supportive Relationships as Protective Factors

Supportive relationships especially with attentive managers functioned as buffers against ambient stigma, providing predictability, advocacy, and a sense of being seen. "*I feel that if people with disabilities have [...] the right support in terms of a system, like a guide, etc, they would be more easily included, because they would then be seen with someone who does not have a visual impairment, and more easily approachable through that person, because people find it difficult because of the eye contact and everything else that is missing..."* [P02, Org rep]

Intermediary support lowered interaction barriers where colleagues "find it difficult" without visual cues. While effective, reliance on intermediaries underscores a cultural gap: true inclusion aims for confident direct interaction alongside structural supports.

"*I spoke to the area head who knew about my condition, and she was very supportive up until she was recently transferred. So, she was one person who will forever check up on me. If there was one person whom I knew once in a week, she will just check-up. And you can imagine it's somebody who's even higher […] who sees me*." [P022, Veteran 10+]

Consistent check-ins from a senior leader signalled legitimacy and care, offsetting the strain of day-to-day microaggressions. Yet participants also noted the precariousness of relying on individual goodwill: when advocates leave or are transferred, the informal support infrastructure can disappear. These patterns show that psychosocial safety (P2) is distinct from structural access (P1): even when participation is technically possible, belonging depends on everyday interactions and reliable relational support. Where supportive relationships are sustained, they synergise with structural measures (P3); where absent, they heighten the sense of a structural ceiling (P4).

5.3.4 Academic and professional objectification

Participants' willingness to engage in this study was not guaranteed. P04 articulated the harm caused by extractive research approaches that have historically characterised disability studies:

"*Attitude of academia and research and people in academic institutions is they treat us like specimens and extractions*." [P04, Org rep]

"*That is why I've ended up not really getting into these research interviews, because I feel they are very extractional."* [P04, Org rep]

"*Is there a budget or a consideration of honouring an expert for their research [...] it's also knowledge which can't be studied, which is, in its own, a really priceless, valuable asset." [P04, Org rep]*

"I know that your heart is in this... and I'm all for heart centred leaders." [P04, Org rep]

P04 described extractive research practices that treat lived experience as data rather than expertise. This devaluation extended beyond research participation to academic institutions more broadly. P017 described how inaccessible educational pathways created insurmountable barriers to professional development:

"*That's almost impossible. Because if I'm going to go to an organisation, pick whatever university or institution you like, are they going to be accessible?"* [P017, VIE 1–10y]

"[…] you register for a module and then have to deregister because it's going to take three months to get your work for [a] six-month module, it's not really practical, right?" [P017, VIE 1–10y]

The financial burden of accessibility fell on individuals rather than institutions:

"If I'm going to go to the bank for funding, to organisation funding, or bursaries and so forth, are they going to be able to cater for the concerns of the disability? Because if I need special books, if I need the books rewritten or re-prepared? Who covers that? Where does that time, money, energy work come from?" [P017, VIE 1–10y]

Academic institutions' failure to provide timely accessible materials forces VIEs to choose between career development and futile advocacy, effectively gatekeeping professional progression. Recognition and fair compensation reframe participation from charity to expert consultation and foster reciprocity.

5.3.5 Summary of Psychosocial Findings

Psychosocial safety shapes belonging, which emerged as fragile vulnerable to microaggressions and subtle exclusions in informal spaces. Belonging requires active cultivation through predictable, supportive relationships, not merely the absence of harm. The ongoing double-bind between wanting normalcy and needing accommodation creates persistent tension that organisations must navigate deliberately.

5.4 Proposition 3 - Synergistic pathway interaction

Proposition 3 posited that structural and psychosocial pathways interact synergistically rather than operating independently. Evidence confirmed this interaction but revealed a critical asymmetry: when both pathways align, they create virtuous cycles of inclusion; when misaligned, structural barriers dominate and psychosocial support cannot compensate.

5.4.1 When both pathways align - virtuous cycles

When organisations embedded accessibility while fostering inclusive culture, participants described reinforcing effects.

"*My organisation [...] having lifts that have accessibility [...] having Braille on our microwaves [...] training for them, knowing that we need to get assistive technology... to include the Blind Academy in the process in order for them to guide us*." [P08, Org rep]

P08's account demonstrates how structural features (e.g., Braille, accessible lifts, assistive technology) and psychosocial practices (training, consultation, partnership) can work in tandem. The phrase "include the Blind Academy to guide us" exemplifies participatory inclusion, where consultation becomes part of organisational design. Together, these actions create virtuous cycles, accessibility enables participation, participation fosters relationships, and relationships generate advocacy for further accommodations.

Multiple participants described how supportive team environments amplified the impact of technical accommodations:

"My team has been for the most part really amazing. They've been supportive, they've been willing to listen and ask and say, OK, what [do] you know, go and try this out." [P017, VIE 1–10y]

"*Within all the divisions that I've been with, they've been accommodating in terms of providing things like larger screens […] they got special software for me to zoom in and out on the computer.*

So in terms of my current role, I don't really have any issues […] Our department is electronic, so there's no physical documents that I need to read." [P027, VIE Veteran 10+]

P27 explicitly links supportive teams with accessible technology, showing that alignment between the two pathways reinforces inclusion and reduces everyday friction.

5.4.2 When pathways misalign - structural dominates

When structural barriers persisted despite positive relationships, inclusion faltered. Participants often described being formally included but socially withdrawn due to persistent barriers.

"*I don't really socialise all that much anymore, but for the most part, I'm included [….] I did send emails regarding the problems on the system, […] I just deal with what I have."* [P020, VIE Veteran 10+]

P020 claims inclusion ("for the most part, I'm included") yet describes withdrawal and resignation ("I just deal with what I have"). This illustrates how unresolved structural failures erode belonging despite a supportive social climate.

"*I never get discriminated against […] in my environment, because the people that I work with, I have the support system in the first place. I think the people that are working with me know my capabilities [...] But there I ended up at the switchboard situation [...] our assistance is not properly capable for handling our software [...] Our systems keep us a little bit back."* [P025, VIE Veteran 10+]

P025's experience highlights that psychosocial support cannot override poor infrastructure. Despite collegial respect and encouragement, inadequate systems "keep us a little bit back", demonstrating that structural deficits ultimately determine participation limits.

5.4.3 Transition points reveal interaction dynamics

Career transitions further illuminated the interplay between pathways. When structural preparation was inadequate, onboarding became extended and stressful.

"*So, my training period had to be extended cause of the learning and me having not being able to body the regular way, you know. So, they had to extend my training period a bit. I think it was by two months or so."* [P016, VIE 1–10y]

P016's extended training period stemmed from a mismatch between standard processes (designed for sighted employees) and her access needs. The additional "two months or so" underscores the cost of unplanned accommodation.

"*Those psychometric tests were not accessible. None of us with the vision impairments could finish it [...] It made me feel in the time that maybe that will impact my onboarding process or [...] the 12-month plan that was created for my first 12 months at work."* [P011, VIE 1–10y]

P011's experience shows that inaccessible onboarding tools produce anxiety and uncertainty about career progression. When both pathways fail to coordinate during transitions, VIEs face prolonged disadvantage that delays integration.

5.4.4 Summary of synergistic findings

Evidence supports P3. Structural and psychosocial pathways interact synergistically, producing virtuous cycles when aligned. However, the interaction is asymmetric: when pathways misalign, structural barriers dominate, and psychosocial support cannot compensate. This asymmetry underscores that structural accessibility is a foundational prerequisite for psychosocial belonging and sustained inclusion.

5.5 Proposition 4 - The structural ceiling

Proposition 4 tested whether supportive relationships could sustain belonging when structural barriers restricted advancement. Findings revealed that even within positive psychosocial climates, structural ceilings curtailed career progression irrespective of competence or motivation.

5.5.1 Leadership exclusion despite inclusion rhetoric

The most striking finding was the systematic exclusion from leadership roles. Several participants observed that organisations espousing inclusion nonetheless excluded disabled people from governance.

"*I was with somebody that has been a seasoned board member […] he said, I sat on multiple boards. I have never sat on a board that had a person with a disability, no matter how inclusive their company said they were and for as long as you don't have a person with a disability at decision-making level, you're still going to settle, so the short response to that is, I would want to see people with disabilities at the highest level of decision making in corporate and in government."* [P05, Org rep]

P05's statement exposes performative inclusion, where public commitments to diversity exist without representation in decision-making. The absence of disabled people at governance levels sustains a structural ceiling: entry-level participation is permitted, but leadership access remains blocked.

5.5.2 Qualification without opportunity

Participants described disconnections between credentials and advancement. High qualifications did not guarantee employment or progression. As one organisational representative noted, even an intelligent law graduate “cannot even get employment.” Among those employed, restructuring often reinforced marginalisation.

“*We got thrown into this [...] somebody at operations head office decided, okay, these three disabled people [...] they didn't even ask us. On Thursday, we got the message that we had to start on Monday on the call centre without our systems being in place*.” [P025, Veteran 10+]

P025’s narrative “they didn’t even ask us” reveals how decisions affecting disabled employees are frequently made without consultation. Her reassignment from a client-facing role to a call-centre post represents downward mobility, not career progression, and illustrates how restructuring can reinforce ceilings rather than dismantle them.

5.5.3 Preconceived capability doubts as gatekeeping

Assumptions about capability served as gatekeeping mechanisms, constraining advancement even when performance was strong.

“*When I first started there was a lot of shock from people from my colleagues cause they had never seen someone who's really [visually impaired] [...] Are you gonna cope? It's very high pressure. Are you gonna be able to do this?”* [P016, VIE 1–10y]

Colleagues’ questions “Are you gonna cope?” reflect a priori doubt rather than evidence-based assessment. These doubts were compounded by performance systems that failed to account for accessibility barriers. P017 explained:

"If you don't have the necessary support, necessary access, [if] the system isn't necessarily accessible, how do you perform accordingly and make sure that your performance rating is reflective of your situation? Because your situation may handicap you substantially, which handicaps the team as a mid to poor perhaps performance." [P017, VIE 1–10y]

Performance ratings became measures of environmental accessibility rather than individual capability.

P017 described being the primary problem-solver in his team:

"*If there's any issues they know I'll probably find that the answer, will have the answer. If there's bugs, I'm probably the first person to find the bugs in the system because I have to know how to figure it out for myself."* [P017, VIE 1–10y]

But despite functioning as a de facto team leader and primary troubleshooter, P017 still faced questions about capability.

Another participant highlighted how exceptional performance was still framed as “proof” of capability:

“*COVID has actually proved that we're capable of delivering excellent jobs. I mean work and stuff like that.” [*P010, VIE 1–10y]

P010’s statement implies that capability must be continually demonstrated to overcome scepticism, showing that default assumptions of incapacity persist even in the face of strong evidence.

“the level of remoteness, it's easier to communicate and engage with people on the computer. OK? I don't need to know where they are. Yeah, because of my condition” [P017, VIE 1-10yr]

Remote work revealed that many perceived capability limitations were in fact environmental barriers masquerading as individual deficits.

5.5.4 Capability acknowledged, opportunities constrained

Some participants noted that organisations acknowledged competence yet limited opportunities due to structural or procedural constraints.

“*There's not too many opportunities because yes, we can do a lot of things, but also there need to be some accommodations [...] and some departments cannot accommodate you in ways that you need to be accommodated for*.” [P016, VIE 1–10y]

P016 acknowledges “we can do a lot of things” but notes that departmental capacity for accommodation determines opportunity access. Similarly:

“*You're already putting me at a disadvantage because you're already not believing in me. I can do it. You just have to give me a chance, give me a fair chance to do it and also believe that I can do it and just give me the support that I need*.” [P026, VIE Veteran 10+]

P026’s plea for “a fair chance” highlights how advancement opportunities are withheld not because of capability gaps but because of organisational disbelief and absent structural support.

5.5.5 Progression barriers and career stagnation

The structural ceiling was reinforced by the concentration of disabled employees at entry levels, which created financial barriers to advancement:

"*And the other reality is because of the people with disabilities are most likely going to be interns or bottom level employees…”* [P017, VIE 1–10y]

The result was decades-long stagnation:

"Real progression from people with disabilities is almost non-existent, even if they do have good intentions, because of the barriers still yet to face. We've had people in the roles for over 15 years with no progression, no anything." [P017, VIE 1–10y]

Entry-level salaries cannot support the assistive technology and educational resources needed for progression, creating a cycle where position determines access to advancement tools.

Participants expressed concern about career stagnation and the need for continuous self-upskilling to counter limited mobility.

“*We might be blind, but our mates are not blind. So, we need to upscale and upscale and upscale so that they don't stay in the same position as they entered after five years or three years.”* [P010, VIE 1–10y]

The emphasis on “upscale and upscale and upscale” reflects the additional burden placed on VIEs to prove ongoing relevance, while their non-disabled peers progress through standard career pathways.

5.5.6 Absence of disability data and accountability

The structural ceiling was reinforced by organisations' failure to collect and report disability-disaggregated data. P017, serving as disability forum chair, described persistent efforts to obtain basic metrics:

"*You're barely getting actual solid reporting. As a forum chair, I've been trying to push to get solid reporting that tells me you have spent so much on people with disabilities. For your skills spent, for your employment spent, for your this spend [...] And I don't care if the number is 0. Give me the number because then we can say we have the targets. We know what the environment looks like and if there's no targets, there will be no effort [...] You don't know what you don't know, and if you at least put a zero there, you know that you don't have any. You're at least gone and looked on the ground and said, here's our findings.*" [P017, VIE 1–10y]

The absence of baseline data prevented organisations from identifying patterns, setting meaningful targets, or measuring progress. P017's phrase "you don't know what you don't know" captures how the lack of measurement systems obscures systemic exclusion.

5.5.7 Summary of structural ceiling findings

Evidence strongly supports P4. Structural ceilings limit advancement despite positive relationships and demonstrated competence. Leadership exclusion contradicts disability rights principles such as “nothing about us without us”. Qualifications alone do not overcome systemic barriers; capability doubts persist as gatekeeping mechanisms independent of performance. Positive psychosocial climates cannot override structural advancement barriers. Even when competence is acknowledged, organisational constraints restrict progression, and cumulative exclusion leads to resignation and stagnation. The absence of disability-disaggregated data allows these patterns to remain invisible and unaddressed.

Table 5.5.6: Organisational Accessibility Approaches

Organisation Type	Accessibility Approach	Accommodation Process	Employee Experience
Leading Organisations	Proactive: Accessibility audits, vendor requirements, dedicated budgets	Streamlined approval, designated contacts, follow-up	High independence, positive belonging, career advancement

Mid-Range Organisations	Reactive: Address issues after reported, inconsistent implementation	Case-by-case decisions, manager-dependent, variable timelines	Moderate access, depends on manager support, advocacy needed
Poorly Performing Organisations	Neglectful: Minimal accommodation, accept inaccessibility as inevitable	Bureaucratic barriers, long delays, inadequate budgets	Chronic struggles, forced dependency, career constraints

5.6 Proposition 5 - Contextual moderators

Proposition 5 proposed that organisational context moderates both pathways. Evidence from multiple participants shows that leadership practices, training design, consultation mechanisms, and cultural norms powerfully shape whether structural access (P1) and psychosocial safety (P2) translate into day-to-day inclusion.

5.6.1 Training quality over training existence

Training that is experiential, interactive, and applied supported inclusion; once-off, virtual, and awareness-only sessions felt performative and had limited behavioural impact.

"*I must say that all the awareness training sessions that I have seen within this organisation have happened on a virtual platform, which makes it very difficult when you're doing training on disability on a virtual platform, because you understand the theory, but you're not so you're not learning, you're just listening*." [P02, Org rep]

P02 critiques a delivery format that promotes passive reception ("just listening") rather than active learning undermining effectiveness regardless of content.

"And it comes down to an additional support of the company. So if there's additional like mandatory training in our organisation, it's a regulated company, you'd have to have certain mandatory training. But a lot of that's not accessible" [P017, VIE 1-10yr]

This revealed a fundamental contradiction: organisations delivered disability awareness training whilst their own mandatory compliance training remained inaccessible to disabled employees. Even when training was accessible, its impact remained limited:

"*It will be a once off thing where they ask you to come and speak... people have this aha moment where they realise their own bias. And once you've realised you have a bias, it's up to you to do something about it*." [P05, Org rep]

P05 describes momentary insight without sustained practice or accountability performative inclusion rather than capability building.

5.6.2 Co-creation versus imposed solutions

Effective contexts featured co-creation, where VIEs shaped accommodations; imposed solutions underperformed.

"*Give the managers the opportunity to interview them, ask them any questions that will help the manager set them up for success*." [P08, Org rep]

Participatory needs assessment positions managers to "set VIEs up for success", signalling organisational responsibility for enabling conditions.

"*It's important to not do that reasonable accommodation without consulting the end user*." [P019, VIE 1–10y]

P019 underscores a core design principle: accommodation decisions must involve end users; unilateral choices risk poor fit and wasted effort.

"if you sit and you see what that person, not all disabled person work the same way, not their needs is different from individual to individual" [P025, VIE 10+y]

Without consultation, even well-intentioned accommodations risk being ineffective or inappropriate, as disability experiences and needs vary considerably across individuals.

5.6.3 Leadership modelling and accountability

Visible leadership belief and consistent follow-through model expectations, create accountability, and can unlock performance; absence of monitoring reduces inclusion to box-ticking.

"*When you have management that believes in you and then supports you and then thinks that you are so wonderful, then you become wonderful because you would never want to disappoint. I work three times as hard as anybody else, but I feel like I'm just working for 15 minutes of the day because I'm having so much fun doing it. Because giving back to people who's giving so much to me is such a privilege*." [P026, VIE Veteran 10+]

P026 attributes award-winning performance to visible belief and trust.

"*No one has ever puts it up. There's no checking that, oh, hey, how are you doing? So far, are you coping? There's no checking whatsoever. It's like most organisations just tick a list, just tick a box. And once they tick the box, then it's by Felicia*." [P010, VIE 1–10y]

P010 highlights the absence of ongoing monitoring, reducing inclusion to compliance.

"*You're training people, you know, who are your immediate managers when the executives themselves are unaware. And if they are unaware, they're not going to ensure that it's enforced or implemented."* [P023, Veteran 10+]

Without executive awareness and ownership, initiatives lack enforcement and continuity. To address these gaps, some organisations institutionalised accountability through formal structures:

"[...] we encourage all the designated group to come up with their representatives that will go and engage with each group or community or constituency towards their interest here at a working environment, because at the end of the day, we've got a different forums that sits and engage towards the best practice [...] towards what need to be done to accommodate" [P01, Org rep]

"There's a disability and inclusion forum in each business unit and then the group decides on *[...] what are we focusing on, what are the challenges, what can we push for the year? And then those goals are sort of cascaded into the different departments. And then each diverse inclusion forum has an executive sponsor. So, we have somebody who sits in Exco. So if we have any issues, that's the person that we can approach and then that person can escalate it and maybe even take it all the way up to group if need be*." [P02, Org rep]

Formal forums with executive sponsors created clear escalation routes (issues up) and goal cascades (priorities down), moving inclusion from managerial discretion to organisational process.

"*I challenge you to develop a framework to measure impact for diversity and inclusion*." [P09, Org rep]

Participants called for measurement frameworks to shift from aspiration to accountability over time.

5.6.4 Organisational culture beyond policies

Cultures oriented to commitment (values, engagement, care) translated policy into practice; compliance-only cultures felt superficial and unhelpful.

"*I know that we do have some courses around inclusion, but I think it's part of compliance, but it's not very exciting. I think it's more it just feels more like a tick box. It doesn't feel like it's done in a way that's helpful*." [P07, Org rep]

"*We've got to do it also with a little bit more heart. I think that's such a big thing, the relating to rather than just meeting the tick box kind of experience is very important*." [P018, VIE 1–10y]

Where inclusion was a lived value, participants reported engagement and belonging; where it was a tick-box, they reported fatigue and limited impact.

5.6.5 Summary of contextual findings

Evidence supports P5. Organisational context moderates both pathways: training quality matters more than existence; co-creation outperforms imposition; leadership modelling and accountability convert intent into practice; and culture determines whether policies live or languish. Context operates through leadership behaviours, training design, consultation, and values and can amplify (synergy, P3) or mute (structural ceiling, P4) the impact of P1/P2.

5.7 Proposition 6 -Temporal reinforcement

Proposition 6 proposed that integration and belonging reinforce each other over time through cumulative cycles. Evidence shows temporal dynamics at multiple scales onboarding, transitions, and tenure with early experiences shaping long-term trajectories.

5.7.1 Early-career vulnerability and onboarding quality

Early career is a critical period: onboarding that assumes visual observation prolongs dependence; redesigned, hands-on onboarding accelerates independence.

"*So most of the colleagues immediately, when they offer them the that particular opportunity, they expect them […] to run by themselves within a week, which is, according to me, is not possible"* [P01, Org rep]

Unrealistic expectations (independence "within a week") mismatched the time needed to learn accessible workflows, build support networks, and navigate spaces exacerbating early-career vulnerability.

"*the buddying situation does not work for us. So it's like I have to sit with someone and I have to be in control of the PC and they have to tell me, OK, click here, click that. And that takes much longer than someone who's just sitting and observing and then going to do that on their own, on their own."* [P016, VIE 1–10y]

P016 explains why observation-based learning excludes; kinaesthetic, verbal, task-owned learning is required and takes longer without redesign. Visual demonstrations remain inaccessible even when colleagues attempt to help:

"[…] can't come to a person another colleague and say can you show me how they do those because they are typically going to go click here, click there, click this. And as a person with a disability, I'm not necessarily follow you to [moving] your muscle on the screen" [P017, Veteran 10+]

Without accessible training methods, the path to independence extended significantly:

"*Yeah. So I haven't been here for too long. I think this is like only my second year this year. So yeah, I'm only now getting the hang of things. It has taken me pretty long […] I'm only starting to*

be independent now, where I can work alone and not call people constantly for help." [P016, VIE 1–10y]

This prolonged onboarding period created psychological effects beyond practical dependence. Participants questioned whether organisations were genuinely prepared to support them:

"*It did. Initially it made me question if you know absolutely the organisation is ready to receive people with our type of disabilities. It made me worry. Will we be accommodating?" [P011, VIE* 1–10y]

The combination of extended dependence and uncertainty manifested as reluctance to participate fully:

"*at the beginning […] we had a lot of engagements […] I was afraid […] to ask […] to come up with the suggestion. And then my manager was like, I want you to speak in meetings […] And for me I would be like yes, I want to do this, but I'm afraid."* [P015, VIE 1–10y]

However, where managers actively invited participation and accommodations were provided proactively, integration proceeded more smoothly:

"*So fortunately most companies they try to accommodate me. I make it clear […] I'm visually impaired, I need a screen, an extra screen to work on […] I don't need a lot of things."* [P010, VIE 1–10y]

Participants describe extended dependence, uncertainty about readiness, and the psychological cost of early silence mitigated when managers invite participation and accommodations are clear and timely.

5.7.2 Career transitions as critical junctures

Transitions (onset or progression of impairment, upward moves, and internal mobility) are high-risk periods where supports can be disrupted.

Onset/progression.

"*When I started the job […] it was in the early stages of me losing my eyesight […] and and and it was devastating because I really, really, really wanted this job so...." [P26, Veteran 10+]*

"the first time it happened […] Everything was just black. And I started crying […] I thought, ok, now I really can't see. I've lost my eyesight. It's, it's done, it's over." [P026, Veteran 10+]

The onset or progression of impairment whilst employed created both practical and emotional crises, requiring rapid adjustment and organisational support.

Upward progression.

Career advancement introduced a different risk: accommodations reframed as unfair advantage.

"*what happens is […] inclusion exists when they arrive […] But as soon as somebody begins to start progressing […] Then people tend to forget that, hey, this person's disabled […] Then reasonable accommodation becomes favouritism because now you become competition."* [P023, VIE Veteran 10+]

"*you're not somebody who requires reasonable accommodation because […] we have an idea of disabled people only operating at this level […] when you compete with us at our level […] you'd find people trying to pick on why this person is being accommodated."* [P023, VIE Veteran 10+]

Internal mobility.

Lateral moves disrupted established support networks. P022 regretted transferring from a protective team:

"*I'm even beating myself up to say why did I even transfer? […] I felt like I was home. Before any client could even say anything, somebody would be jumping to protect me*." [P022, VIE Veteran 10+]

In contrast, P021 described how time and familiarity had built effective support in a previous role:

"*It became manageable, because now the people around me knew that I had a visual impairment […] I started chairing meetings […] and people knew how to assist, and I just needed to coordinate it."* [P021, VIE Veteran 10+]

Transitions require re-education of teams, continuity of accommodations, and psychosocial support to prevent regression.

5.7.3 Mid-career stagnation

Mid-career patterns split between stagnation (denied progression despite competence) and resignation (accepting marginal roles), often prompting formal recourse.

“*for the second time I applied for a post […] I wasn't even shortlisted […] So, I put a grievance*” [P021, VIE Veteran 10+]

Others responded to unsustainable demands by retreating from ambitious roles:

“*I had to change a career due to the fact that I was visually impaired […] I wanted to be demoted because […] it was just too demanding*.” [P022, VIE Veteran 10+]

"at some stages, I was aspired to be a person that works in [a client-facing] line, because I'm good with people... but ja" [P025, VIE 10+y]

“*if you're disabled and if you're visually impaired, that does not happen. […] it's like you're here to comply with a number […] we get boxed in there […] then it takes a toll on you […] and then you tend to switch off.”* [P023, VIE Veteran 10+]

Mid-career thus became a period of either active resistance through formal grievances or gradual disengagement, with both responses reflecting sustained exclusion from progression pathways.

5.7.4 Veteran VIE employees - marginalisation or resilience

With sustained support, veterans built resilience and mastery; without it, long service coexisted with outdated tools and withdrawal. Some veterans described sustained inclusion and equal treatment. P026, with 20 years in role, emphasised collegial support and meaningful work:

“*I've been in the role for 20 years […] my colleagues […] have a very good support.”* [P026, VIE Veteran 10+]

“*I prefer coming to the office […] the job role that I have […] is very responsible […] it will really feel too lonely for me to do that.”* [P026, VIE Veteran 10+]

“*for the years my mindset changed […] They treat me exactly the same. We do the same things they would*.” [P026, VIE Veteran 10+]

Similarly, P027 reflected on successful adaptation:

“*I've actually learned to adapt to working with the impairment*.”[P027, VIE Veteran 10+]

However, other veterans with comparable tenure described neglect and stagnation. Two switchboard operators with over three decades of service reported outdated technology and delayed access to basic tools:

“*I've been a switchboard operator ….] for 34 years […] they did provide me with software and hardware, but the stuff is outdated, so I've got to improvise.”* [P020, VIE Veteran 10+]

“*I'm now working as a switchboard operator for 35 years […] I only start using e-mail since 2019 […] I've received a lot of support and understanding from my colleagues [...]”* [P024, VIE Veteran 10+]

"I have a colleague [who sits] next to me [who] is totally blind. He doesn't have the aspirations to do anything more... Some don't have the aspiration" [P025, VIE 10+y]

Veteran experiences thus varied considerably across participants and organisations.

5.7.5 Cumulative cycles - virtuous and vicious

participation gives belonging) or vicious cycles (pity gives withdrawal gives invisibility gives reduced advocacy).

Virtuous cycles.

P026 described how belief and inclusion strengthened participation:

“*they would consider my [...] visibility […] it made me very, very strong […] they still believed in me [...]”* [P026, Veteran 10+]

P022 recalled a previous team where proactive support created psychological safety:

“*in the previous branch […] I felt like I was home. […] somebody would be jumping to [protect me].”* [P022, VIE Veteran 10+]

Vicious cycles.

In contrast, pity-based responses triggered withdrawal:

“*when people start feeling sorry for you […] that's when you start withdrawing […] once you are included, you are included in everything that they do.”* [P026, Veteran 10+]

“*I don't want the pity party. I want the same way you are going to treat my [sighted colleagues].”* [P016, VIE 1–10y]

Passive inclusion (providing a desk without ongoing engagement) reinforced invisibility:

“*Just don't just put us in a chair behind the desk and then forget about us* […]” [P026, Veteran 10+]

P022 emphasised that compliance-focused inclusion missed the relational foundation of belonging:

"*we tend to speak about the numbers, but we forgetting about the people […] a happy employee equals a happy customer."* [P022, VIE Veteran 10+]

These accounts illustrate how initial organisational responses compound over time, either building confidence and participation or producing withdrawal and marginalisation.

Over time, organisations set in motion virtuous cycles (consideration gives confidence, gives

5.7.6 Summary of temporal findings

Evidence supports P6. Integration and belonging co-evolve through reinforcing cycles. Early-career onboarding quality shapes trajectories; transitions (onset/progression, advancement, internal moves) create acute vulnerability; mid-career brings risks of stagnation; and veteran outcomes diverge between resilience and withdrawal, depending on cumulative support.

5.8 Proposition 7 - Intersectionality and compounded disadvantage

Proposition 7 proposed that intersecting identities create exclusion experiences that single-axis frameworks miss. Evidence shows how age, race, gender, language, and socioeconomic status interact with visual impairment to produce compounded disadvantage or, in some cases, complex negotiations of identity and opportunity.

5.8.1 Age and disability intersection

Age-limited programmes and compliance-driven learnerships often misalign with disabled candidates' trajectories.

"*the internship programs, are not inclusive, because they will tell you the age limit is 35 but what if I lost my vision at 14? I've literally lost all those years […]"* [P014, Org rep]

"*Most organisations […] take people for […] BEE scoring […] one year you out. Imagine you're at age of thirty-five and you're still doing these learnerships […] we need to work like 10 times harder than anyone else*." [P010, VIE 1–10y]

5.8.2 Race, gender, disability, and capability assumptions

In racially and gender-homogenous environments, disability intersected with race and gender to heighten scrutiny and tokenisation which some participants actively resisted.

"*I'm a woman of colour […] in a very white male dominated environment […] I fight for everything. […] I'm not a charity case […] I can do it extremely well and nothing is going to stop me. Not my color, not my disability."* [P026, VIE Veteran 10+]

"*I'm black, I'm a woman and I'm disabled […] I fit under every single category, but I don't think it has affected me in any way or maybe, yeah."* [P016, VIE 1–10y]

"*people fail to realise that the act sees disability as a category and it's not aggregated. They try to aggregate it and say […] only want […] coloured disability."* [P023, Veteran 10+]

"*I'm about to do my talk […] the challenges and complexity of being a black woman with albinism in South Africa […].* [P05, Org rep]

5.8.3 Language and disability compounding

Linguistic defaults created dual exclusion where language barriers intersected with accessibility needs.

"*they prefer to speak in their home Afrikaans language […] Even though you have expressed that you do not understand. […] It now forces me to get assistance from other Afrikaans speaking people*." [P011, VIE 1–10y]

5.8.4 Socioeconomic status and disability

Personal finances shaped access to assistive technology; where organisations did not invest, employees improvised.

"*All boils down to financial implications. […] Assistive technology […] is expensive […] You cannot put a value to the gift of sight*." [P019, VIE 1–10y]

"*my doctor said I needed to get some magnifying... but they're also expensive to buy […] So most of the time what I do is I'll go to the printer. I scan the ID […] I scan it and I zoom it from my machine and then I continue*." [P022, VIE Veteran 10+]

5.8.5 Summary of intersectionality findings

Evidence supports P7. Single-axis policies miss compounded barriers produced by age limits, tokenising compliance, language defaults, and cost barriers. Intersectional challenges require intersectional solutions combining structural investment, inclusive communication, and career-stage-appropriate opportunities.

5.9 Summary of findings

This chapter presented findings organised by seven propositions. Across *Sections 5.2–5.8*, evidence supports all propositions while revealing key nuances: **P1.** Structural accessibility shapes integration and is a double-edged sword: enabling when supported, disabling when neglected; implementation gaps expose priorities; structures can encode capability assumptions. **P2**. Psychosocial safety shapes belonging; belonging is fragile, vulnerable to microaggressions and subtle exclusions; it requires active cultivation, not merely absence of harm. **P3**. *Synergy.* Structural and psychosocial pathways interact; when aligned, they create virtuous cycles; when misaligned, structural barriers dominate. **P4.** *Structural ceiling*. Advancement is constrained despite competence and supportive climates; leadership exclusion persists; relationships cannot overcome structural barriers. **P5.** *Context*. Training quality matters more than existence; co-creation beats imposition; leadership modelling and accountability are pivotal; culture determines policy-to-practice translation. **P6.** *Time*. Integration and belonging reinforce over time; early onboarding shapes trajectories; transitions are high-risk; veterans show resilience or resignation depending on cumulative support. **P7.** *Intersectionality.* Race, gender, age, language, and socioeconomic status compound disadvantage; single-axis frameworks miss these dynamics. Table 5.9.1 consolidates these findings, indicating the primary discovery and the strength of evidence for each proposition.

Table 5.9.1: Summary of Key Findings by Proposition

Proposition	Key Finding	Support Level
P1: Structural Accessibility	Structural accessibility shapes integration as double-edged sword; technology enables when supported, disables when neglected; structural barriers encode capability assumptions	Strong
P2: Identity Safety	Psychosocial safety enables belonging; stigma undermines integration; belonging is fragile and	Strong

	requires active cultivation through supportive relationships	
P3: Synergistic Interaction	Optimal belonging requires both pathways; when aligned create virtuous cycles; when misaligned structural barriers dominate	Strong
P4: Structural Ceiling	Structural barriers establish hard limits on advancement; psychosocial support cannot overcome inaccessible systems; qualification does not overcome systemic barriers	Strong
P5: Contextual Moderators	Leadership practices, training quality, organisational culture, and policies moderate both pathways; accountability mechanisms critical for implementation	Strong
P6: Temporal Reinforcement	Integration and belonging reinforce over time through cumulative cycles; early onboarding quality shapes long-term trajectories; transitions create vulnerability	Strong
P7: Intersectionality	Race, gender, age, language, and socioeconomic status intersect with visual impairment to create compounded disadvantage; single-axis policies inadequate	Strong

Evidence distribution by participant group

While all propositions received strong empirical support, the sources of evidence varied by participant role and tenure. Table 5.9.2 maps contributions across organisational representatives (P01–P09), VIEs (1–10 years; P010–P019), and veteran VIEs (10+ years; P020–P028), highlighting where perspectives converged or diverged. In broad terms, organisational representatives most often spoke to policy intent, procedures, and resourcing; early-tenure VIEs described onboarding, day-to-day access, and emerging belonging; and veterans reflected on progression, ceilings, and long-run sustainability of accommodations. Together, these vantage points triangulate the propositions and surface role-specific patterns that inform the Discussion.

Table 5.9.2: Evidence Support Across Participant Groups

Proposition	Key Evidence	Participant Groups Citing	Support
P1: Structural Accessibility	Digital inaccessibility prevented work completion; accessible systems enabled independence; accommodation gaps revealed organisational priorities	All participant groups (OR, VIE 1-010, VIE 10+)	Strong
P2: Identity Safety	Stigma undermined belonging despite accessibility; supportive culture enabled authentic inclusion; microaggressions threatened belonging	Primarily employees (VIE 1-010, VIE 10+); some OR perspectives	Strong
P3: Synergistic Interaction	Optimal belonging required both pathways; misalignment limited integration; virtuous cycles when aligned	All participant groups	Strong
P4: Structural Ceiling	Psychosocial support could not overcome inaccessible systems; structural barriers absolute; advancement blocked despite competence	Primarily employees (VIE 1-010, VIE 10+); some OR observations	Strong
P5: Contextual Moderators	Leadership commitment determined implementation; training quality shaped outcomes; culture influenced policy translation	All groups, especially OR for organisational context	Strong
P6: Temporal Reinforcement	Early onboarding quality shaped trajectories; cumulative cycles over time; transitions created vulnerability periods	All participant groups across tenure categories	Strong
P7: Intersectionality	Age, race, gender, language, socioeconomic status compounded with disability;	Primarily employees (VIE 1-010, VIE 10+); some OR observations	Strong

	intersecting barriers require intersectional solutions		

These findings highlight both the complexity of workplace inclusion and the pathways for organisational improvement. They demonstrate that meaningful inclusion requires simultaneous attention to structural and psychosocial dimensions, supported by contextual sensitivity and an awareness of intersecting identities. Chapter 6 builds on these results to explore how organisations can translate these insights into strategy and practice, addressing structural and psychosocial barriers in tandem to create sustainable, equitable inclusion.

Chapter 6: Discussion of Results

6.1 Introduction

This chapter extends the findings from Chapter 5 by examining workplace inclusion for visually impaired employees (VIEs) through the lens of seven core propositions. It evaluates how the evidence supports, refines, or challenges the theoretical positions outlined in the literature review, using the Integrated Dual-Pathway Model (IDPM) as the organising framework while incorporating emergent themes from the analysis. Particular attention is paid to intersectional dynamics and institutional context how race, gender, language, socioeconomic status, and organisational systems shape the way inclusive policies are enacted and experienced. In doing so, the chapter moves beyond policy intent to identify the specific design choices and day-to-day practices that enable (or hinder) a genuine sense of belonging for visually impaired employees in South Africa. The chapter concludes by synthesising insights across propositions, highlighting overarching patterns and drawing out their implications for theory development and organisational practice.

6.2 Proposition 1: Structural Accessibility Shapes Integration

6.2.1 Technology and Procurement: Anticipatory Design vs. Retrofit

The first proposition argues that structural conditions accessibility infrastructure, assistive technology (AT), accommodation procedures, and physical environment design fundamentally shape workplace integration for VIEs. Evidence in this study strongly supports that claim while adding nuance about implementation quality, organisational commitment, and the capability assumptions embedded in routine practices. It also surfaces underexamined barriers: systematic exclusion in meeting communication, environmental design failures, and social communication habits that presume sightedness. These patterns are consistent with Critical Disability Theory's (CDT) view that disability is produced by environments rather than individual deficits, and extend it by showing how exclusion is reproduced through every day defaults (e.g., visual-first slides, whiteboards, and gesture-based directions) that pass as "professionalism."

AT illustrates the dual potential and risk of structure. When provision, configuration, and training are timely and competent, AT enables ordinary independence (Das et al., 2021). When delayed, piecemeal, or unsupported, it creates new dependencies that VIEs may internalise as personal shortcomings. This duality helps reconcile mixed findings in the literature: "technology-as-liberation" studies typically examine mature, well-supported deployments, whereas frustration-

focused studies often capture under-resourced rollouts and weak help-desk capacity. The procurement case (P07) is instructive: by requiring accessibility evidence upstream, organisations avoid technical debt from inaccessible platforms, aligning with accessibility-by-design guidance and reducing reliance on costlier, incomplete retrofits (Ashikali et al., 2021; World Wide Web Consortium, 2024). In short, the literature is confirmed but also conditioned: technology works when ecosystems work.

This conditioning has particular salience in South Africa. First, multilingual workplaces interact with speech and language technologies that perform unevenly across accents and languages, elevating the risk that "accessible" tools still exclude in practice (Koenecke et al., 2020). Second, socioeconomic inequality affects the capacity to self-provision or backstop organisational shortfalls with personal devices and private support, amplifying the impact of accommodation delays for lower-SES employees. Third, accessibility gaps outside the office transport, signage, product labelling spill into work as fatigue and planning overhead, reinforcing workplace disadvantage even when in-office policies look compliant (World Health Organization & United Nations Children's Fund, 2022). These contextual dynamics help explain why formal policies may exist yet lived access remains fragile: implementation discipline, not policy text, separates success from failure.

Accommodation processes therefore need to be judged on time-to-relief and user effort, not only on eventual resolution. Protracted denials or opaque ticketing systems that reset context at each handoff do more than slow task completion; they also foster learned helplessness, depressing help-seeking and experimentation even after fixes arrive. This psychological pathway rarely centred in accessibility audits clarifies why culture-only initiatives cannot "relationship their way out" of structural gaps: goodwill cannot restore missing information control or tool control required for performance. The implication is practical and testable: embed accessibility into procurement and governance (conformance evidence, sandbox testing, contractual remediation), codify meeting accessibility protocols as quality standards (advance materials, narration of visuals), and resource helpdesks with AT expertise. In environments where these operational disciplines are routine, CDT's critique is answered at the source; where they are absent, exclusion is normalised despite policy intentions.

6.2.2 The Accommodation Implementation Gap: From Policy-on-Paper to Practice-in-Use

Despite broad agreement on effective practices, meeting barriers persist. Circulating advance materials and verbalising visuals would reduce the need for disruptive live description, yet these practices are rarely institutionalised as quality standards. The gap between known solutions and routine adoption indicates that accessibility is still framed as special accommodation rather than a baseline of professional practice (Ashikali et al., 2021). In CDT terms, exclusion is reproduced through every day defaults fast, highly visual formats that appear neutral but systematically sideline VIEs.

A concrete illustration underscores the implementation failure. In case P025, a three-year delay in providing the required accessibility tool forced continued work with inadequate support as vision deteriorated. Such timelines do more than inconvenience: they compound disadvantage, signal low organisational priority, and shift adaptation costs to the employee. Formal channels complete with case numbers and a wellness workflow yielded neither outcomes nor feedback; executive escalation produced approval within one month. Systems designed to guarantee equity can, in practice, depend on discretionary power to deliver it. From an implementation-science perspective, the existence of a process matters less than time-to-relief and accountable ownership.

Meeting analysis shows the scale of the challenge: 82% of participants reported systematic exclusion linked to undisclosed visual content. Five recurrent barriers emerged: (1) presentations without advance materials; (2) live demonstrations without verbal description; (3) whiteboard/flip-chart reliance; (4) dependence on non-verbal cues; and (5) informal side conversations. These practices create information gaps, impose costly self-advocacy, depress career visibility, and signal marginal belonging. They also explain why awareness training alone underperforms unless accessibility protocols are codified as defaults (agenda templates that require advance decks; facilitation scripts that prompt description), diffusion stalls.

The accommodation gap is not only operational; it is psychological. Repeated denials, opaque ticketing, and context resets at each handoff foster learned helplessness, lowering expectations and suppressing help-seeking even after fixes arrive. This pathway often missing in task-centric audits extends accounts of hidden labour and impression management (Man et al., 2020; Lourens, 2020) and clarifies why later improvements may fail to restore engagement when trust has been spent. In multilingual workplaces and high-inequality settings, delays are magnified and capacity

to self-provision is uneven. Converting policy into lived access requires: (a) embedding meeting accessibility into quality assurance (advance materials, real-time narration, defined facilitation roles); (b) measuring systems by time-to-relief and user effort, not just resolution rates; and (c) assigning clear process ownership with escalation paths that do not depend on executive favour.

6.2.3 Meetings and Communication: Why "Simple Fixes" Don't Spread

Structural barriers extend beyond office walls: inaccessible transport signage constrains job access; low-contrast product labelling increases daily dependence; and visual shorthand in directions ("go that way", "click here") embeds sighted assumptions into routine interaction. These cross-context frictions accumulate into sustained disadvantage. Many remedies are low-cost verbal specificity and basic contrast/formatting standards materially improve inclusion (Brzykcy & Boehm, 2022; Charles, Gie, & Musakuro, 2023).

Multilingual settings mean that speech technologies and recognition systems often underperform for non-dominant accents, undermining "accessible" tools in practice (Koenecke et al., 2020). Uneven public-space accessibility adds planning overhead and fatigue that spill into work (World Health Organization & United Nations Children's Fund, 2022). Meetings crystallise the institutional mechanism. Although simple practices are widely known circulating slides in advance, narrating visuals 82% still reported exclusion. Diffusion stalls because fast, highly visual formats are coded as "professional", while accessibility is framed as discretionary courtesy. This aligns with CDT: power is exercised through design defaults, not only explicit rules, which is why exclusion persists post-training (Ashikali et al., 2021). The boundary condition is practical and testable: unless accessibility protocols are codified as quality standards embedded in agendas, facilitation scripts, and post-meeting artefacts they remain optional and brittle. In South Africa's multilingual, high-inequality context, codification is not merely best practice; it is the operational lever that converts formal policy into reliable access (Ashikali et al., 2021; Koenecke et al., 2020; World Health Organization & United Nations Children's Fund, 2022).

6.2.4 Environmental and Social-Communication Design: Everyday Vision Assumptions

Hot-desking without orientation, low-contrast signage, and shorthand directions like "just click here" exemplify ambient design biases that shift adaptation costs onto VIEs (Brzykcy & Boehm, 2022; Charles, Gie, & Musakuro, 2023). Small, zero-budget changes precise verbal directions, consistent

wayfinding cues, high-contrast templates deliver disproportionate gains, showing that many barriers persist more from norms than cost, while extra-work barriers in transport, wayfinding, and product labelling spill back into work as fatigue and planning overhead (World Health Organization & United Nations Children's Fund, 2022; World Health Organization & World Bank, 2011). Physical environments also encode capability assumptions about a "typical user": inaccessible signage, unannounced construction, and decontextualised hot-desking protocols create navigation barriers and signal that disabled employees were not considered in design, which then gets misread as individual limitation rather than organisational design failure. These patterns endure because accessibility-by-design remains aspirational rather than embedded in routine operations (Ashikali et al., 2021; Yuan et al., 2023). In South Africa given legacy building stock, uneven enforcement of wayfinding standards, and multilingual settings that can misalign signage and assistive technologies the highest-leverage remedies are also feasible: codified orientation for hot-desking and office moves, standardised high-contrast multilingual signage, and verbal-first interaction norms in shared spaces, turning awareness into operational discipline.

6.2.5 Structural Burden Asymmetry: The "Second Job" of Accessibility

Participants' accounts of constant troubleshooting, educating peers, and negotiating workarounds substantiate prior claims about hidden labour (Man et al., 2020) and impression management (Lourens, 2020). The analysis specifies the conditions that amplify this burden: unclear process ownership, rotating vendors that fragment responsibility, and ticketing systems that reset context at each handoff. The result is a compounding opportunity cost time spent maintaining access is time not spent creating value, which depresses visibility, slows progression, and quietly penalises those who must continually "make the system work" for basic participation. This structural burden asymmetry shows that, despite policies intending to shift responsibility to organisations, VIEs still shoulder primary duties for identifying barriers, advocating for accommodations, troubleshooting AT, and devising ad hoc workarounds when formal provisions fail. In line with Lourens (2020), and extending critiques of accommodation-led approaches, these adaptive strategies consume time, energy, and social capital that could otherwise support core work, effectively creating a second job of accessibility management. The implication is clear, authentic inclusion requires more than providing accommodations; it demands redesigning systems so that access is stable by default. Otherwise, the ongoing labour needed to sustain access erodes belonging, reinforces difference, and sustains disadvantage even in organisations that appear compliant.

6.2.6 Theoretical Implications: Structural Primacy, Three Mechanisms

Taken together, four strands procurement, practices, places, and burden support CDT's claim that disability is produced by environments rather than individual deficits (Ebrahim et al., 2022; Marques et al., 2020). The evidence specifies three mechanisms through which structural inaccessibility shapes integration: (1) capability signalling, (2) burden asymmetry, and (3) exclusion normalisation. Capability signalling occurs when delays or denials of accommodations tacitly communicate doubt about disabled employees' legitimacy; design choices thus position sightedness as the "default" and disability as exceptional (Brown & Finn, 2024; Man et al., 2020; Yi & Moon, 2020). Burden asymmetry shows that accommodation models often reassign cognitive and emotional labour to VIEs, who must diagnose barriers, self-advocate, and troubleshoot tools while organisations resist minor design changes at odds with inclusive design principles that distribute responsibility across the system (Ashikali et al., 2021; Yuan et al., 2023). Exclusion normalisation is most visible in meetings: 82% of participants reported systematic exclusion linked to undisclosed visual content, yet accessible alternatives were framed as "distractions", revealing how visual-majority defaults become institutionalised in routines, metrics, and investments that privilege visual communication. These mechanisms explain why relationship-level goodwill, while helpful, cannot offset infrastructure that withholds participation; organisations cannot "relationship their way out" of structural failures.

Multilingual workplaces and non-dominant accents challenge speech and recognition accuracy, so "accessible" technologies can still exclude in practice; socioeconomic inequality limits the capacity to self-provision assistive tech when organisations delay or underfund accommodations; and uneven enforcement of accessibility in public spaces (transport, signage, wayfinding) adds fatigue and planning overhead that spills into work, compounding disadvantage (Koenecke et al., 2020; World Health Organization & United Nations Children's Fund, 2022). In this setting, upstream interventions (accessibility-conformant procurement with testable criteria and remediation obligations), codified meeting protocols (advance materials, narrated visuals), and environmental standards (high-contrast, multilingual wayfinding; orientation for hot-desking and office moves) operate as the levers that convert policy intent into lived access. Conceptually, the findings extend CDT by showing that structural barriers work not only through physical inaccessibility but also via encoded assumptions, unequal labour distribution, and normalised practices; practically, they confirm the primacy of the structural pathway in the IDPM accessibility infrastructure sets the floor and ceiling within which psychosocial belonging can either flourish or falter (Ashikali et al., 2021; Yuan et al., 2023).

6.2.7 Cross-Context Patterning and South African Distinctiveness

International research consistently shows that implementation, not policy availability, determines inclusion outcomes: accommodation gaps persist across settings with varying regulatory strength (Chhabra, 2020b; Manitsa et al., 2024; Richard & Hennekam, 2021; Ruin et al., 2023). European cases demonstrate that even robust frameworks underperform without operational disciplines defined ownership, time-to-relief metrics, and codified meeting and procurement standards supporting the view that formal policy is necessary but insufficient. South African organisations with explicit equity commitments nonetheless displayed substantial practice failures, mirroring other transformation contexts where aspirational texts coexist with unchanged routines (Evans, 2022; Wickenden, 2023).

What is distinctive in South Africa is the intersectional pressure profile: historical inequities, multilingual workplaces, and socioeconomic variation shape both exposure to barriers and the capacity to self-provision assistive technology (Gordon et al., 2022; Kirby et al., 2021; Wickenden, 2023). Language functions as both a communication barrier and a marker of institutional exclusion amplifying accessibility challenges where ASR/NLP tools underperform for non-dominant accents (Koenecke et al., 2020). Against this backdrop, the procurement-level accessibility intervention documented here is notable and exportable: embedding accessibility criteria in vendor selection shifts organisations from reactive accommodation to anticipatory design, preventing the accumulation of inaccessible systems (Das et al., 2021). This upstream move directly answers CDT's critique that accessibility is too often treated as remediation rather than standard practice provided, critically, that organisations sustain implementation fidelity rather than relying on policy declarations alone.

6.3 Proposition 2: Identity Safety Shapes Belonging

6.3.1 Informal Social Life: Omission as a Mechanism of Exclusion

Participants described exclusion by omission team events in upstairs venues, visually dependent games, and last-minute notices shared as screenshots or image-heavy posts. These practices add specificity to SIT's claim that identity threat is enacted in everyday micro-contexts: as access to the informal organisation narrows, social capital narrows, and belonging falters. The pattern matters precisely because no overt hostility is required; sight-centric rituals function as a gatekeeping device while remaining legible as "normal fun." Evidence strengthens the proposition that

psychosocial safety identity safety, perceived acceptance, freedom from stigma, and value alignment fundamentally shapes belonging, but also shows its fragility in the face of microaggressions and ambient stigma (Brzykcy & Boehm, 2022; Kusku et al., 2022). The analysis extends prior work by detailing disclosure stigma (accommodations require disclosure, but disclosure can trigger competence doubt), the contingent role of intermediaries (allies who broker social entry yet create dependence when inclusion is not institutionalised), and academic/professional objectification beyond the workplace (being treated as research "subjects" rather than knowledge partners), which undermines trust in "awareness" activities (Amado et al., 2013; Cobigo et al., 2012; Lysaght et al., 2017b; Santuzzi et al., 2025).

Multilingual communication means informal coordination often occurs in home-language chats or voice notes that assistive tools handle unevenly, widening the participation gap; transport and safety constraints can limit after-hours socialising unless activities are planned with accessibility and mobility in mind; and transformation pressures can miscode accommodation requests as special treatment if disability equity is not normed alongside race and gender agendas. Seemingly neutral choices venue selection, activity design, posting channel and format, thus produce cumulative consequences: diminished visibility, reduced invitations, anticipatory withdrawal that may be misread as disinterest, and a chilling effect on future disclosure (Yuan et al., 2023; Ashikali et al., 2021). The implication is practical and testable move from ad-hoc goodwill to institutionalised social accessibility (shared planning checklists, format-flexible invitations, explicit narration norms in group chats and meetings), so that psychosocial safety is a property of routines, not the personality of a few champions.

6.3.2 Microaggressions, Disclosure, and Performing Normalcy

The double bind of needing to disclose to access accommodations while fearing stigma echoes Brzykcy & Boehm (2022) and Santuzzi et al. (2025), and the present analysis extends this by showing that successful performance does not inoculate against capability doubt. As visibility rises (e.g., promotion, public-facing roles), so does surveillance, meaning the same disclosure that enables tools and adjustments can trigger renewed scrutiny. P010's experience reinforces that demonstrated competence offers no protection from microaggressions. Even when colleagues can clearly observe someone "producing results", they still feel entitled to ask intrusive questions about how the work gets done. P010's frustration, "you can see that I'm producing results and you start asking me like this", reveals a painful reality: proving competence does not eliminate differential treatment. Stigma operates independently of evidence.

This finding supports stigma theory's prediction that discrediting attributes override other information (Link & Phelan, 2001). In the context of visual impairment, competence does not recalibrate assumptions. It generates curiosity. "How do you do that?" becomes a perpetual question, positioning the employee as spectacle rather than colleague. Each success paradoxically renews rather than resolves doubt.

This helps reconcile mixed findings on the “benefits” of disclosure: it helps only where identity-safe norms already exist and are enforced in daily practice.

The microaggressions documented in Chapter 5 reveal how disability transforms personal choices into public matters subject to stranger intervention. P014's photograph incident illustrates this dynamic: when her colleague held her walking stick out of frame at P014's request, a passing stranger intervened, assuming P014 was being deceived. What should have been a simple moment between colleagues became an opportunity for public judgment. P014's statement, "I don't need my stick to prove my visually impairment", captures her resistance to performing disability for others' comfort rather than presenting herself on her own terms. This extends "performing normalcy" theory (Nario-Redmond et al., 2019) by showing the performance is about defending self-determination against constant external policing. The walking stick becomes what Goffman (1963) termed a "stigma symbol”, but P014's case reveals that even when individuals actively manage their presentation, others reassert control by demanding visible markers of disability.

Supportive relationships attentive managers and disability peers do buffer stigma through regular check-ins, advocacy, and legitimacy signalling (Brzykcy & Boehm, 2022; Yuan et al., 2023). Yet goodwill is structurally fragile when champions move on, the informal scaffold collapses. Intermediary support (colleagues who “translate” norms or pre-empt barriers) can ease entry but also spotlights cultural gaps; sustainable inclusion requires confident direct interaction, not permanent intermediation. In South African settings, where multilingual communication and uneven accessibility can magnify misfires, these dynamics are sharper: relationship-based fixes help, but only institutionalised norms format-flexible communication, routine narration of visuals, clear escalation for microaggressions convert psychosocial safety from a person-dependent favour into an organisational property.

6.3.3 Supportive Relationships: Buffering Without Guarantees

Allies and attentive managers can buffer stigma and threat (Yuan et al., 2023), but the protection is fragile when support is personalised rather than institutionalised advocates move, priorities shift, and gains evaporate. This cautions against over-reliance on “champions” and underscores the need to embed role-independent accessibility routines (format-flexible communication, codified

meeting protocols, clear escalation paths) so inclusion persists regardless of individual turnover. A related pattern of epistemic injustice appears in extractive research practices that treat lived experience as raw data rather than expertise: participants report feeling like “specimens”, with little compensation or reciprocity. Such objectification positions disabled people as subjects, not knowledge producers, discouraging participation and reproducing power imbalances that workplace inclusion efforts claim to remedy (Schippers et al., 2025; Ymous et al., 2020). Recognising lived experience as expertise through co-design, fair remuneration, and shared authorship shifts knowledge production from extraction to partnership.

6.3.4 Academic/Professional Objectification: Beyond the Workplace

Participants’ accounts of extractive research broaden the scope of belonging beyond the workplace. Belonging is shaped not only by organisational routines but also by knowledge-production practices that can objectify the very people organisations claim to include. P04 described being approached as sources of “data” for others’ career gain without compensation, reciprocity, or recognition echoing critiques of epistemic injustice in disability research (Pierre et al., 2021; Rolin, 2025; Stone & Priestley, 1996; Ymous et al., 2020). Being treated as “specimens” rather than knowledge partners deters participation, erodes trust in “awareness” activities perceived as performative, and reproduces power imbalances across institutional domains (universities, professional bodies) that sit upstream from workplace cultures.

This pattern has direct implications for inclusion theory and practice. First, it clarifies why psychosocial safety is required to convert structural access into genuine affiliation: where people anticipate objectification, access yields only compliant presence, not belonging. Second, it reframes “participation” as co-production: authentic engagement requires recognising lived experience as expertise, with fair remuneration, shared authorship, and decision-making power in design and dissemination. Finally, it signals that inclusion must extend beyond accommodation to transform adjacent systems of validation and knowledge, so that disabled professionals are positioned as peers rather than perpetual subjects (Mayer et al., 2025; Ndlovu, 2019; Schippers et al., 2025).

6.4 Proposition 3: Synergistic Interaction (and Its Asymmetry)

The third proposition holds that structural and psychosocial pathways interact synergistically rather than independently, with belonging strongest when they align and weakest when they diverge.

Evidence supports this claim but also reveals critical asymmetry: when pathways align, they generate virtuous cycles of participation and connection; when they misalign, structural barriers dominate and interpersonal goodwill proves insufficient. This helps reconcile mixed findings in the literature that appear to pit “culture change” against “infrastructure”: the answer is both and in order (Ashikali et al., 2021; Das et al., 2021). In South Africa, the asymmetry is sharpened by multilingual communication, uneven public accessibility, and SES variation, which raise the cost of navigating structural gaps and reduce capacity to self-provision stopgaps; as a result, culture-only improvements decay quickly without operational disciplines in procurement, meetings, and onboarding.

6.4.1 When Pathways Align: Why the Gains Compound

Co-designed accommodations were associated with higher engagement, supporting reinforcing cycles (Krug et al., 2021; Yuan et al., 2023): structure enables participation; positive interactions follow; request costs drop; employees volunteer for higher-visibility work. Mechanistically, participatory design improves technical fit (structural) and communicates respect (psychosocial); leader modelling of accessible presentation formats simultaneously delivers practical access and normalises accommodation (Yuan et al., 2023). Early “wins” then reset norms and expectations, matching transfer research that shows early successful experiences disproportionately shape subsequent behaviour. Aligning pathways during onboarding is especially high-leverage where assistive tech setup, language accommodations, and transport constraints require longer ramp-up. Organisations that front-load accessible tools, format-flexible communication, and explicit narration norms create compounding returns over time lower rework, better retention, and wider internal sponsorship (Rahn et al., 2021).

6.4.2 When Pathways Misalign: Why Structure Dominates

Warm teams cannot grant access to core workflows if systems are inaccessible; psychosocial resources can buffer frustration, but they cannot restore missing information control or tool control required for performance (Ashikali et al., 2021; Das et al., 2021). Two patterns are common: Compensatory dynamics colleagues informally provide descriptions or share materials early. These arrangements depend on individual goodwill and collapse with turnover, workload spikes, or team changes (Aftab et al., 2025; Bhaskar et al., 2022). Structural ceiling effects even with supportive managers, inaccessible advancement practices (e.g., visual-heavy assessments, travel-dependent roles) cap progression (Man et al., 2020). In both cases, employees shoulder a double burden: navigating barriers while maintaining relationships with well-meaning but powerless colleagues. In multilingual South African teams, misalignment is further intensified when ASR/NLP

tools underperform for non-dominant accents and when after-hours socialising is constrained by transport and safety, narrowing informal integration channels that might otherwise buffer stress.

6.4.3 Theoretical Implications of Pathway Interdependence

The evidence documents three interaction patterns reinforcing cycles, compensatory dynamics, and structural ceiling effects that refine integration theory by specifying how pathways amplify or constrain one another. First, aligned pathways produce reciprocal causality (access, positive interaction, more access), not merely additive effects (Yuan et al., 2023). Second, compensation is time-limited: interpersonal support cannot substitute for system access and often masks urgency, delaying structural fixes. Third, ceilings persist when psychosocial safety precedes structure; inclusive cultures still produce exclusion when fundamental barriers remain unaddressed. The implication is practical and sequencing-sensitive interventions must prioritise structural access (procurement standards, meeting protocols, AT-literate support desks), then embed psychosocial norms (identity-safe communication, active sponsorship) so that culture amplifies rather than substitutes for infrastructure.

6.4.4 Virtuous Cycles When Pathways Align

Accessible infrastructure enables full participation; authentic relationships follow; advocacy and sponsorship grow; investments continue a flywheel that strengthens belonging over time (Krug et al., 2021; Rahn et al., 2021). Two design levers are central: Participatory accommodation design co-creation improves functionality and signals dignity; Leader modelling visible use of access-friendly practices (advance materials, narrated visuals) sets norms fast. Because early experiences have outsized effects, onboarding is the critical window planning AT setup before day one, timetable realism, and format-flexible training convert first-month friction into first-month momentum.

6.4.5 Structural Dominance When Pathways Misalign

When structure lags culture, belonging plateaus: supportive colleagues cannot override inaccessible platforms, and identity-safe teams cannot fix exclusionary processes (Ebrahim et al., 2022; Botha & Watermeyer, 2022; Oliver, 1990). In practice, that means measure accommodation systems by time-to-relief and user effort, not just resolution, codify meeting accessibility (agenda templates requiring advance decks; narration prompts; accessible artefacts) and contract accessibility upstream (conformance evidence, sandbox testing, remediation timelines). In the

South African setting where multilingual communication and inequality magnify the costs of delay these operational disciplines are the difference between policy and lived access. Pathways interact, but not on equal terms. Structure sets the floor and ceiling for participation; culture determines whether participation becomes durable affiliation. Designing for alignment and sequencing interventions accordingly turns isolated fixes into compounding gains.

6.5 Proposition 4: The Structural Ceiling

The fourth proposition contends that structural barriers create advancement ceilings that psychosocial support and strong performance cannot overcome. The evidence supports this claim, revealing patterned exclusion despite qualifications, positive appraisals, and supportive relationships. Organisations espouse diversity while maintaining all-sighted leadership pipelines; capability doubts are recast as “practical concerns” (e.g., highly visual strategy work, travel-heavy client roles), which rationalise gatekeeping as prudence rather than recognise it as structural discrimination. This contradicts South Africa’s disability rights framework and equality jurisprudence (Ramalekana & Mokgoroane, 2024) and aligns with CDT: leadership is often coded for sightedness through design defaults rather than explicit rules (Brown & Finn, 2024; Yi & Moon, 2020).

6.5.1 Leadership Myths and the “Indispensable but Unpromotable” Trap

Recognised competence without promotion reflects classic tokenism and role entrapment (Sang et al., 2022). The contribution here is to isolate sightedness-coded leadership tasks highly visual strategy sessions, whiteboard-centric facilitation, travel-dependent client work that operate as non-negotiable gateways. CDT helps explain why these practices are treated as inherent to “real leadership” rather than redesignable workflows. The implication is not to lower standards, but to decouple standards from unnecessary visuality: require outcomes (analytical rigour, client impact, governance quality), not the visual means (on-the-fly whiteboarding, rapid slide mark-ups) through which those outcomes are often expressed.

6.5.2 “Prove Yourself Again”: Performance Doesn’t Retire Stigma

Advancement triggers a surveillance threshold as roles become more public, accommodations are reframed as “privileges”, and the demand to re-audition legitimacy intensifies (Brzykcy & Boehm, 2022; Santuzzi et al., 2025). This drains bandwidth, discourages risk-taking, and helps explain voluntary plateaus rational choices within biased evaluation regimes. The pattern extends SIT

accounts by showing that success does not inoculate against capability doubt; visibility can amplify it (Arnett, 2023; Kusku et al., 2022).

6.5.3 Structural Mechanisms in South African Context

Three mechanisms make the ceiling particularly sticky: Capability signalling: Delays/denials of accommodations even for senior work communicate doubt about professional legitimacy, reinforcing ableist leadership assumptions (Man et al., 2020). Process design: Promotion artefacts (interviews, assessment centres, board presentations) remain visual-first, privileging performative sightedness over substantive leadership criteria. Pipeline risk management: The “too valuable to promote” logic traps high performers in operational roles, producing career stagnation that benefits the organisation’s short-term continuity while suppressing individual progression (Sang et al., 2022). South African features sharpen these effects. Multilingual workplaces and uneven accessibility in travel/venues complicate client-facing expectations and board-level rituals; intersectional histories mean that women and employees from historically disadvantaged racial groups can face multiplicative scrutiny, where disability, race, and gender combine to heighten capability doubt (Gordon et al., 2022; Kirby et al., 2021). In such cases, advancement processes that rely on informal sponsorship and visibility events risk reproducing compound bias unless redesigned.

6.5.4 From Ceiling to Criteria: What Needs to Change

The findings extend CDT by showing that structural barriers operate through status hierarchies and routine artefacts, not only through physical inaccessibility (Brown & Finn, 2024; Yi & Moon, 2020). Authentic inclusion therefore requires: Criteria reform which specifies outcome-based leadership standards and provide access-equivalent modalities (e.g., narrated strategy artefacts, accessible virtual boards, advance materials as default). Assessment redesign replaces visual-performance proxies (whiteboard tests; rapid slide edits) with evidence of leadership impact, deliberation quality, and stakeholder outcomes. Process accountability tracks advancement by disability status and intersectional position; audit whether accommodations are present and timely in assessment stages; require accessible formats for all candidates by default. Role architecture: Debundle “leadership = travel + on-site visibility” by using hybrid client engagement models and accessible facilitation protocols that do not conflate sightedness with influence.

6.5.5 Intersectional Notes on Stagnation

Although not universal, notable cases show intersectional compounding. For example, a woman of colour in a male-dominated environment described having to “fight for everything”, indicating that race–gender–disability intersections can heighten scrutiny and raise the effort required merely to stay at parity. In another case, aspirations for client-facing roles aligned with interpersonal strength but were blocked by unremediated accessibility barriers in those functions illustrating ceilings unrelated to capability or interest, and underscoring why process redesign, not individual resilience, is decisive (Koenecke et al., 2020; Ashikali et al., 2021). Structural ceilings persist when leadership is defined through visual-first practices, when accommodations are slow or discretionary, and when risk logics prioritise continuity over mobility. Psychosocial support can ease strain but cannot lift ceilings set by design. Decoupling standards from visuality, embedding accessible assessment and presentation norms, and holding processes to time-to-relief and default accessibility metrics are the levers that translate rights into mobility consistent with South Africa’s constitutional and statutory commitments (Ramalekana & Mokgoroane, 2024).

6.6 Proposition 5: Context as the Engine of Implementation

The fifth proposition holds that organisational context leadership practices, implementation discipline, training quality, and cultural norms moderates both structural and psychosocial pathways to inclusion. The evidence strongly supports this: nominally similar policies and accommodations produced divergent outcomes depending on accountability, execution, and participation. In short, policy content is necessary, but operational discipline who owns what, how fast relief arrives, and how learning is embedded determines whether inclusion is lived or merely stated (Bryer, 2019; Dalessandro & Lovell, 2024).

6.6.1 Culture as Infrastructure: Accountability, Commitment, Participation

High-functioning cases shared three traits: named ownership, metrics with consequences, and clear escalation; weak cases relied on discretionary effort and goodwill. Notably, resource level was less predictive than resource discipline: some resource-constrained organisations delivered because inclusion was framed as non-optional operations, not philanthropy (Bryer, 2019; Dalessandro & Lovell, 2024). Accountability structures (SLA targets, leadership KPIs, quarterly audits) routinised accessibility and reduced variance. Commitment orientation mattered: commitment cultures treated accessibility as professional duty; compliance cultures treated it as minimum legal coverage, reproducing policy–practice gaps (Gordon et al., 2022; Kirby et al., 2021).

Participatory governance (“nothing about us without us”) improved solution quality and signalled respect, shifting disabled employees from passive recipients to design partners (Ashikali et al., 2021; Wickenden, 2023).

6.6.2 Training That Transfers: Experiential, Applied, Accountable

“Once-off awareness talks” failed for predictable reasons: no practice, no feedback, no accountability (Fixsen et al., 2005). Evidence showed format effects: passive virtual sessions encouraged listening rather than doing, which is especially misaligned when teaching visual-access challenges (Marinaci et al., 2023; L. Sharma et al., 2024). Training only worked when it: Included experiential components (narrating visuals, running accessible meetings); embedded application tasks with follow-ups; and tied to manager modelling and consequences. Otherwise, training devolved into performative inclusion detached from daily routines.

6.6.3 Co-Creation vs. Imposition: Better Fit, Better Signals

Co-design outperformed unilateral fixes for two reasons made explicit by the data: Technical fit employees hold irreplaceable workflow knowledge, reducing misspecification and rework; Dignity signalling consultation communicates value and autonomy, which itself fosters participation (Davies et al., 2025; Sherry et al., 2024). Even a technically sound solution can fail if delivery demeans the user; conversely, co-created solutions travel better across role changes because ownership is shared.

6.6.4 Leadership and Realistic Onboarding Horizons

Leaders set the norms; middle-manager heroics cannot compensate for systemic gaps (Liu et al., 2023; Sharma et al., 2024). Expecting VIEs to “watch-and-learn in a week” mis-specifies the task. Effective onboarding is a design problem, not a capability test: it requires hands-on control, verbalised procedures, staged AT setup, and time horizons that reflect reality (World Health Organization & United Nations Children’s Fund, 2022). Why timelines matter. Judging performance before AT is configured and orientation completed creates spurious “capability doubts”, seeding vicious cycles that later fixes struggle to reverse. Modality mismatch. Observation-based buddying suits sighted learning; VIEs need kinaesthetic, verbal, stepwise instruction with accessible artefacts. Policy to practice. Make extended onboarding explicit and valued (not remedial), link milestones to AT readiness, and build transfer plans so accommodations and know-how follow

during role moves (Kang et al., 2023). Multilingual communication, uneven public accessibility, and SES variation amplify the costs of delay and the risks of relying on individual champions. This makes the above levers ownership, SLAs, co-creation, experiential training, and realistic onboarding not optional enhancements but the mechanisms that convert policy into lived access.

6.7 Proposition 6: Temporal Dynamics and Cumulative Cycles

The proposition that integration and belonging evolve through cumulative cycles with early experiences shaping long-term trajectories finds strong support. Temporal dynamics operate at multiple scales: onboarding, role/technology transitions, and multi-year career arcs. Across these scales, small early frictions compound into durable disadvantage, while early wins generate reinforcing gains (Yuan et al., 2023; Krug et al., 2021). In South Africa, multilingual communication, uneven public accessibility, and socioeconomic inequality amplify both risks and returns, raising the cost of delays and reducing capacity to self-provision temporary fixes.

6.7.1 Why Early Experiences Matter Disproportionately

Path dependence explains diverging careers among similarly qualified employees. First-month frictions delayed AT setup, inaccessible induction materials, and visually coded first meetings seed self-doubt that persists even after technical competence arrives. Participants described early uncertainty (“Is this organisation ready for people like me?”) and inhibition (reluctance to ask questions or speak in meetings) that managers later had to unwind. The common “watch-and-learn in a week” model mis-specifies onboarding for VIEs: observation-based buddying keeps control with the sighted trainer and suppresses hands-on mastery. Effective onboarding is a design problem: provide task ownership on day one, narrated procedures, staged AT configuration, and explicit time horizons that reflect the true learning curve. Prevention beats remediation: once doubts sediment, later fixes face trust deficits that a single tool or training cannot repair (Ashikali et al., 2021; Yuan et al., 2023).

6.7.2 Transitions as Risk Points

Team moves, restructures, and technology upgrades often reset both tools and trust. Informal know-how about accommodations is team-specific; when people change roles, accommodation knowledge seldom transfers, creating avoidable dips in performance and belonging. This helps reconcile why some long-tenured VIEs thrive (accumulated social capital) while others disengage (accumulated fatigue). Transitions therefore require continuity management, portable

accommodation records, advance access to new systems, and briefings (with consent) that avoid re-litigating legitimacy. In South Africa, travel and safety constraints can narrow networking at precisely the moments when new social ties are needed, making planned, accessible transition support especially important.

6.7.3 Cumulative Advantage/Disadvantage: Emotional Valence Matters

The data add an affective layer to cumulative models (Giummarra et al., 2022): Recognition, confidence, participation, more recognition (virtuous cycles), Pity, withdrawal, invisibility (vicious cycles). Identical resources can yield different outcomes depending on how support is framed. Where accommodations are legitimated as standard professional practice, employees lean in; where they are framed as favours, employees self-limit to avoid surveillance or backlash. One participant observed a colleague abandoning advancement after repeated obstacles an illustration of aspiration erosion through repeated micro-failures. These patterns extend cumulative advantage theory into disability inclusion: trajectories reflect organisational routines more than individual characteristics, reinforcing CDT's emphasis on environments over deficits.

6.7.4 Theoretical and Practical Implications

Belonging is dynamic and path-dependent. Three mechanisms stand out: (1) onboarding foundations that set early trajectories; (2) transition vulnerabilities that expose reliance on relationships, routines, and timely accommodations; and (3) accumulated resilience or erosion shaped by the emotional tone of support. Practically, organisations should: Treat onboarding as infrastructure (AT ready pre-start; narrated, hands-on training; extended time-to-autonomy as an explicit, valued plan). Build portable accommodations and transition playbooks so support and legitimacy travel with the employee. Monitor time-to-relief and user effort for accommodation requests; first impressions carry outsized weight. Attend to framing: normalise accessibility as quality, not charity, to keep cycles virtuous (Ashikali et al., 2021; Yuan et al., 2023). Bottom line, organisations cannot defer investment and expect integration "to settle". Early support, protected transitions, and dignifying frames are the levers that convert initial conditions into durable belonging especially in South Africa, where contextual frictions magnify the costs of getting the first months wrong.

6.8 Proposition 7: Intersectional Dimensions

6.8.1 Mechanisms Not Lists: Multiplicative Stigma, Resource Amplification, Invisibility

This proposition is strongly supported. Rather than treating race, gender, age, language, and class as additive “risk factors”, the analysis identifies mechanisms through which intersections qualitatively change experience. First, multiplicative stigma surfaces where stereotypes overlap, for example, older women with visual impairment face “past-their-prime” and ability doubts simultaneously (Metanmo et al., 2025; Sharma et al., 2025). Second, resource constraint amplification means lower-SES employees cannot buffer organisational failures by self-provisioning assistive technology (AT), transport, or private technical support, widening gaps even within the same employer (Gulyamova et al., 2023, 2024). Third, institutional invisibility occurs when disability is deprioritised under racial-equity drives or collapsed into B-BBEE scoring, reducing disability to a compliance add-on rather than a distinct equity axis (Evans, 2022; Wickenden, 2023).

Language adds a technical layer: speech and language technologies can underperform for non-dominant languages and accented speech, compounding communication barriers and forcing reliance on intermediaries (Koenecke et al., 2020). Context-specific identities matter too. Albinism complicates presentation because appearance and visual impairment co-occur, attracting racialised beauty norms alongside disability stigma an under-examined within-category variation the field should treat as analytically distinct. South African features multilingual workplaces, legacy inequalities, and compliance-driven hiring pathways therefore shape both exposure to barriers and capacity to cope, reinforcing the need to model mechanisms rather than merely enumerate identities (Kubeka & Rama, 2020; Rahn et al., 2021; Gordon et al., 2022; Kirby et al., 2021).

6.8.2 Implications for Design and Governance

Intersectionality here changes the problem definition and, with it, the design brief. Procurement must test for language/locale performance in ASR/NLP and screen vendors for accessibility across dominant and non-dominant language settings (Koenecke et al., 2020). Mentoring and sponsorship should be structured to address race–gender–disability dynamics explicitly rather than presuming generic support will transfer (Rahn et al., 2021; Moodley & Graham, 2015). Programme eligibility rules (e.g., age-caps at 35) should be audited for unintended exclusion of people with late-acquired impairments or disrupted educational timelines. Monitoring and reporting should track intersectional outcomes (e.g., promotion, pay, time-to-relief for accommodations by disability × gender × race) rather than single-axis metrics that mask compound patterns (Gordon et al., 2022; Sharma et al., 2025; Wickenden, 2023).

6.8.3 Language and Disability Compounding

Linguistic practices can create dual exclusion. When teams revert to home languages despite expressed non-understanding and when sighted colleagues rely on visual cues to compensate VIEs lose both the linguistic channel and the visual backup. This produces double dependency: on others for translation and on assistance to access that translation. Performance limits in recognition/synthesis tools for non-dominant languages reinforce this pattern, especially salient in South Africa's multilingual workplaces (Koenecke et al., 2020).

6.8.4 Socioeconomic Status and Technology Access

SES structures the AT safety net. Where organisations under-invest, higher-income employees can self-fund devices, purchase private support, and maintain backups, buffering system failures; lower-income employees cannot, creating uneven reliability and differential vulnerability within the same policy regime (Gulyamova et al., 2023). Seemingly neutral rules (standard lead times, device refresh cycles) therefore reproduce class stratification unless accompanied by rapid-relief pathways and loaner pools. This also shapes behaviour: some employees quietly self-accommodate to avoid being labelled "difficult", while others must choose between repeated advocacy and operating without adequate tools an inequity in both outcomes and voice. Intersectionality is not an add-on; it is the operating condition under which inclusion succeeds or fails. Designing for mechanisms multiplicative stigma, resource amplification, and institutional invisibility translates directly into practice: language-aware procurement, intersectional mentoring and monitoring, eligibility reforms that fit disrupted timelines, and SES-sensitive AT provisioning. In South Africa's multilingual, high-inequality context, these levers are essential to move from nominal inclusion to workable inclusion.

6.9 Synthesis and Theoretical Integration

Findings across all seven propositions collectively support and refine the IDPM, showing how structural and psychosocial dimensions interact to shape workplace belonging. Structural accessibility establishes the conditions for participation; psychosocial safety determines whether that participation becomes durable and identity-affirming. In this hierarchy, culture cannot compensate for missing infrastructure, yet structure without belonging yields hollow participation. Interventions must therefore prioritise robust structural foundations while nurturing psychological safety that sustains engagement (Ebrahim et al., 2022; Yuan et al., 2023).

6.9.1 Structural Foundation and Psychosocial Amplification

Inclusion is architected through leadership, training, consultation, and cultural orientation, not policy text alone. Empirical contrasts show that organisations with moderate policies but disciplined implementation outperform those with extensive but weakly executed frameworks (Shahin et al., 2020; Chumo et al., 2023). Structural reliability enables participation; psychosocial climates then amplify or dampen its effects.

6.9.2 Context as Active Shaper Rather than Passive Background

Implementation context mediates every pathway. Leadership accountability, participatory governance, and realistic onboarding convert abstract commitments into lived access. The South African evidence underscores that policy quality is eclipsed by execution quality: equity plans without operational discipline reproduce exclusion under new language.

6.9.3 Temporal Accumulation and Path Dependency

Integration evolves cumulatively. Early experiences especially onboarding and first-year support establish trajectories that later interventions struggle to alter (Krug et al., 2021; Davies et al., 2025). Virtuous cycles of competence and recognition build confidence; neglected beginnings trigger self-doubt and withdrawal. Sustained commitment, not episodic reform, determines whether investments compound or decay.

6.9.4 Intersectionality as Analytical Necessity

Single-axis frameworks obscure how race, gender, class, language, and age intersect with disability to shape workplace experience. South African data show compounded disadvantage where structural inequality meets organisational inattention: age-based programme caps, linguistic bias in digital tools, and SES-linked access gaps (Moodley & Graham, 2015; Rahn et al., 2021). These findings extend intersectionality theory by identifying mechanisms multiplicative stigma, resource amplification, and institutional invisibility that generate qualitatively distinct barriers (Gordon et al., 2022; Sharma et al., 2025). Monitoring and intervention design must therefore integrate intersectional analytics rather than treat them as add-ons.

6.9.5 Synthesising Insights Across Propositions

Four theoretical contributions emerge: 1) Structural pathway primacy. Accessibility infrastructure sets ceilings that culture cannot raise. CDT is extended by showing that power operates through design defaults that normalise sightedness (Brown & Finn, 2024; Yi & Moon, 2020).

Psychosocial pathway distinctiveness. Identity safety enables authentic engagement; stigma or micro-exclusion nullify structural gains (Kusku et al., 2022). Temporal system dynamics. Belonging is iterative and path-dependent; transitions and leadership changes reveal hidden dependencies (Yuan et al., 2023). Intersectional complexity. Multiplicative stigma, resource constraint amplification, and institutional invisibility require integrated not competitive equity strategies (Gordon et al., 2022; Kirby et al., 2021). Collectively, the IDPM is empirically affirmed but refined: structural access remains the necessary condition, psychosocial safety the sustaining mechanism, temporal reinforcement the trajectory logic, and intersectionality the contextual modifier that determines reach and fairness.

6.9.6 Contributions to Existing Debates

This study advances five debates in organisational disability research: Theoretical integration demonstrating how CDT and SIT operate in complement structure enabling, identity validating. Intersectionality providing mechanism-level evidence from South Africa where historic inequality and multilingualism intensify compound barriers. Policy versus implementation showing that inclusion hinges on delivery infrastructure, not textual compliance. Temporal perspective introducing longitudinal logic to a literature dominated by cross-sectional accounts. Participatory design documenting co-creation as both technical and psychosocial practice that transforms accommodation from remedy to norm.

6.10 Conclusion

Across seven propositions, the evidence demonstrates that structural accessibility, psychosocial safety, organisational context, temporal dynamics, and intersectional complexity combine to shape the lived integration of VIEs. The findings sharpen the IDPM: Structural foundation with psychosocial amplification access enables, identity-safe norms sustain (Ebrahim et al., 2022; Yuan et al., 2023). Asymmetric interdependence culture cannot compensate for missing access; structure alone cannot yield belonging. Temporal sensitivity early conditions and transitions demand deliberate protection (Krug et al., 2021). Intersectional specificity mechanisms, not categories, must guide design (Moodley & Graham, 2015; Rahn et al., 2021). The practical question shifts from “Is there a policy?” to “Do our organisational defaults create participation

without fragile workarounds?” Authentic inclusion requires aligning these four dimensions into a single system where accessibility is baseline, identity safety is routine, time is an asset, and diversity of identity is a design principle rather than a compliance metric.

Chapter 7: Conclusions And Recommendations

7.1 Why This Research Matters

This research examines how social integration shapes workplace belonging for visually impaired employees in South Africa. The study addresses an urgent yet under-researched problem: whilst 70% of working-age people with visual impairment remain unemployed in South Africa, even those who secure employment often experience marginalisation rather than genuine inclusion (DESA, 2024; Moonsamy, 2025).

The research reveals that two pathways determine inclusion outcomes: structural accessibility (assistive technology, physical environments, accommodation processes) and psychosocial safety (freedom from stigma, microaggressions, and social exclusion). Critically, these pathways interact asymmetrically. Supportive relationships cannot compensate for inaccessible systems, but accessibility alone does not guarantee belonging. Culture cannot replace missing infrastructure; infrastructure without supportive culture produces compliance rather than belonging (Ashikali et al., 2021; Das et al., 2021).

In post-pandemic, digitised workplaces, accessibility decisions either scale inclusion or scale exclusion. When organisations design systems for visual-majority users, they normalise barriers that fundamentally constrain disabled people's participation. This research provides evidence-based guidance for organisations seeking authentic inclusion whilst advancing theoretical understanding of how structural and psychosocial factors interact across time and intersecting identities.

7.2 South Africa's Distinctive Context

Three contextual dimensions shape disability inclusion in South African workplaces: legislative foundations, transformation tensions, and persistent inequality.

Legislative foundations - The Employment Equity Act (1998, amended 2025) adopts a social model of disability, defining it as arising "in interaction with barriers" rather than from inherent limitations, a framing that shifts responsibility from individuals to organisational environments. (DLA Piper, 2024).

Transformation tensions - Organisations face competing pressures to address historical racial exclusion whilst simultaneously advancing gender and disability equity. Even organisations with explicit equity commitments often marginalise disability concerns, demonstrating the need for

integrated approaches that address multiple axes simultaneously rather than treating them as competing priorities (Evans, 2022; Wickenden, 2023).

Persistent inequality - The historical segregation in education has created skill gaps that limit job opportunities, especially for Black South Africans. Economic inequality makes things worse, as people with lower incomes often can't afford to buy assistive technology on their own. Language plays a dual role: it can bring people in or push them out since assistive technology often struggles with speakers of non-dominant languages and those with non-standard accents (Gordon et al., 2022; Koenecke et al., 2020 Wenzel et al., 2023).

7.3 What this study adds

Prior research established that structural barriers impede employment whilst workplace culture shapes belonging, yet four critical gaps remained.

Pathway interaction.

Most research examined structural accessibility or organisational culture independently rather than investigating how they interact. This separation obscured crucial questions: Do pathways operate independently or synergistically? Can strong interpersonal support compensate for structural failures? This research reveals that when structural accessibility is lacking, no amount of interpersonal support can compensate, whilst psychosocial safety enables employees to engage authentically in ways that accessible infrastructure alone cannot provide.

Temporal dynamics - Most research used cross-sectional methods that only looked at single moments in time, missing how a sense of belonging evolves throughout different career stages. This lack of a time perspective obscured important patterns related to when people integrate, how early experiences influence them, and what happens during transitions. This study explored integration from the onboarding process to veteran status, showing how those early experiences shape paths that build up over time.

Intersectional complexity - The majority of studies treated disability as the primary identity factor, neglecting how disabled employees also navigate intersecting identities such as race, gender, age, socioeconomic status, and language. This narrow view missed important overlapping issues. This research highlights three key ways that stigma operates. First, there's multiplicative stigma, where stereotypes work together to create stronger effects; second, resource constraint amplification, which shows how socioeconomic status can make barriers even tougher; and third, institutional invisibility, where some issues related to equity get overlooked while others take the spotlight.

Contextual specificity - It's worth noting that most international research focuses on Europe and North America, which have different policies and cultural attitudes. This geographical concentration limits generalisability to contexts like South Africa with distinctive transformation imperatives, multilingual dynamics, and apartheid legacies. This research provides contextually grounded evidence about how these South African realities shape inclusion patterns.

7.4 Methodology in brief

The research used a qualitative approach focused on real-life experiences while ensuring a thorough analysis. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 28 people, including 19 visually impaired workers at different stages of their careers and 9 representatives from organisations. This sample size enables theoretical saturation whilst remaining manageable for intensive analysis.

Including organisational representatives alongside disabled employees enabled triangulation, revealing gaps between policy intentions and implementation realities whilst documenting structural barriers that employees might normalise after prolonged exposure. Reflexive thematic analysis strikes a balance between applying established theories and being open to new insights. This approach allows unexpected findings such as the fact that 82% of participants faced communication barriers to emerge while still engaging thoughtfully with existing frameworks.

The interpretivist approach sees knowledge as something developed through the interaction between researchers and participants, rather than something that can be objectively discovered. This view treats participants as experts about their own experiences and recognises the researcher's role in analysing theoretical elements. This perspective is especially suitable for studying belonging, which is a deeply personal psychological state that needs to be understood through how individuals interpret their own experiences.

7.5 Key Findings

The research examined seven propositions about how integration shapes belonging. Each received empirical support, though with important qualifications that advance theoretical understanding.

7.5.1 Proposition Findings

Proposition 1: Structural accessibility shapes integration.

Finding: Supported with critical qualification. Structural accessibility functions as a double-edged sword. When technologies and accommodations are provided proactively, maintained adequately,

and implemented consultatively, they enable routine independence. However, when delayed, inadequately supported, or implemented without consultation, they generate new barriers. The research revealed that 82% of participants experienced meeting communication barriers, whilst 71% reported digital accessibility challenges. Most significantly, accommodations were often denied on trivial grounds, delayed bureaucratically, or provided without proper training.

Proposition 2: Identity safety shapes belonging.

Finding: Strongly supported. Identity safety proves necessary though insufficient for belonging. Daily micro-interactions (colleagues' tone, inclusion in informal socialising, freedom from ambient stigma) determined whether participants experienced authentic belonging or merely structural presence. Exclusion from informal social activities emerged as pervasive. Microaggressions ranged from capability doubt to infantilisation to ambient pity. Critically, even employees with excellent structural accommodations reported belonging erosion when psychosocial safety deteriorated.

Proposition 3: Pathways interact synergistically.

Finding: Supported with asymmetry specification. When pathways align, virtuous cycles emerge: proactive accommodations signal competence assumptions, enabling positive interactions that reinforce belonging, which increases advocacy for better supports. However, when pathways misalign, structural barriers dominate. Supportive relationships cannot compensate for inaccessible technology or exclusionary meeting practices. This asymmetry reveals hierarchical interdependence: structural accessibility creates conditions under which psychosocial safety can flourish, but psychosocial support cannot substitute for structural access.

Proposition 4: Structural ceilings limit advancement.

Finding: Strongly supported. The research documented a pervasive "upward progression paradox" whereby employees maintained positive relationships and received performance recognition yet faced systematic exclusion from leadership opportunities. Capability assumptions encoded in leadership selection criteria, expectations of presence at visual-heavy strategy sessions, and unstated preferences for "fitting the leadership mould" created structural ceilings invisible to policy audits. These barriers persisted even when individual managers advocated for advancement.

Proposition 5: Context moderates pathway effectiveness.

Finding: Strongly supported with mechanism specification. Context operates as active architect rather than passive moderator. Formal policies prove inert without implementation cultures that translate commitments into practice. Four contextual dimensions proved critical: training quality

(hands-on practice and ongoing support, not merely awareness sessions); co-creation versus imposition (employee consultation produced better-fit solutions); leadership modelling and accountability (visible executive engagement and consequences for non-compliance); and organisational culture (inclusion as assumed practice rather than special programme).

Proposition 6: Temporal dynamics create cumulative cycles.

Finding: Strongly supported. Integration evolves through reinforcing cycles where early experiences exert disproportionate influence. Positive early experiences established virtuous cycles of competence demonstration and relationship building, whilst negative early experiences initiated vicious cycles of capability doubt and social withdrawal that compounded over time. Career transitions emerged as critical junctures where established accommodations and relationships often failed to transfer. Veteran employees exhibited bifurcated outcomes: sustained belonging through accumulated social capital or progressive marginalisation through benefit erosion.

Proposition 7: Intersectionality creates compounded challenges.

Finding: Strongly supported. Intersectionality proves analytically necessary rather than supplementary consideration. Four intersection patterns emerged: age-disability misalignment (youth programmes excluded disabled applicants whilst disability programmes assumed mid-career entry); race-gender-disability compounded scrutiny (participants from historically disadvantaged groups faced multiplicative capability doubt); language-disability double dependency (operating in non-primary languages compounded navigation challenges); and socioeconomic-technology stratification (personal device affordability determined accommodation effectiveness).

7.5.2 Cross-Cutting Insights

Four integrative insights advance theoretical understanding beyond individual propositions.

Structural pathway primacy. Accessibility infrastructure establishes participation ceilings that psychosocial support cannot overcome. Inclusive cultures without accessible infrastructure produced exclusion; accessible infrastructure with developing cultures enabled belonging foundations. This challenges approaches that prioritise cultural change whilst neglecting infrastructure investment.

Implementation determines outcomes. Organisations with strong policies but weak implementation cultures produced worse outcomes than organisations with modest policies but

strong implementation accountability. This suggests that disability inclusion research and practice must attend closely to the gap between policy articulation and operational reality.

Temporal accumulation requires early intervention. Inclusion outcomes reflect accumulated experiences rather than current conditions alone, with early experiences exerting disproportionate influence through path dependency. Organisations have limited windows for establishing positive trajectories; early neglect initiates vicious cycles difficult to reverse through later remedial interventions.

Intersectionality demands multi-dimensional analysis. Intersecting identities create distinctive experiences that cannot be understood through single-axis frameworks. Disability inclusion initiatives that fail to incorporate race, gender, age, and socioeconomic analysis will miss critical barriers and perpetuate compounded disadvantage.

7.6 Theoretical Contributions

This research advances understanding across five domains.

Structural pathway primacy in dual-pathway models. The finding that structural accessibility establishes ceilings that psychosocial support cannot overcome specifies hierarchical relationships between pathway types. Prior research treated structural and interpersonal factors as parallel contributors with unclear interaction patterns (Ashikali et al., 2021; Yuan et al., 2023). This research demonstrates that organisations cannot compensate for accessibility failures through cultural warmth or supportive relationships. The mechanism operates through participation constraints: when fundamental barriers prevent task completion, interpersonal acceptance proves moot.

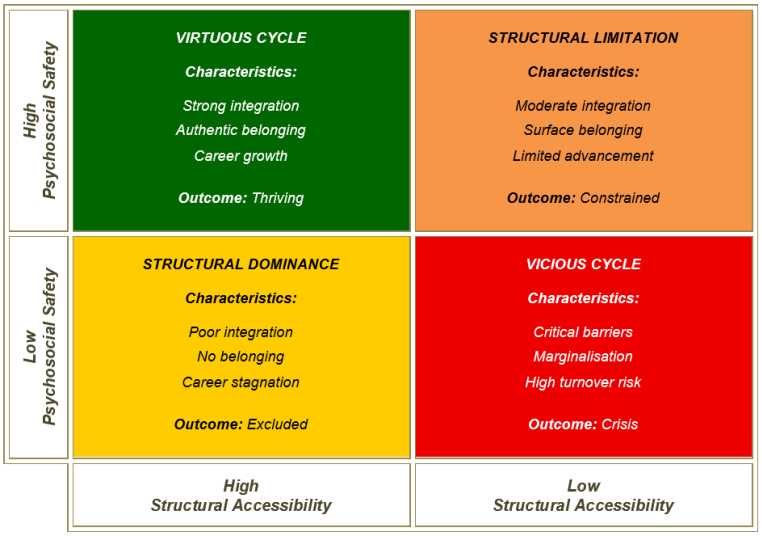


Figure 7.6.1: Pathway Interaction Matrix: Combined Effects on Belonging

Note: Colour intensity indicates outcome severity. The matrix demonstrates hierarchical pathway interaction: structural accessibility (horizontal axis) sets participation ceilings that psychosocial safety (vertical axis) cannot overcome, whilst psychosocial safety determines whether structural access translates into authentic belonging or mere compliance.

As Figure 7.6.1 demonstrates, when both pathways align (virtuous cycle), employees experience strong integration, authentic belonging and career growth. The critical asymmetry emerges in misalignment scenarios: high psychosocial safety cannot compensate for low structural accessibility (vicious cycle), whilst high structural accessibility without psychosocial safety produces exclusion (structural dominance). These finding challenges organisational approaches that prioritise cultural change whilst neglecting infrastructure investment.

Intersectionality mechanisms. The research advances intersectionality theory beyond descriptive acknowledgement to specify three mechanisms: multiplicative stigma (stereotypes combine synergistically), resource constraint amplification (socioeconomic status compounds barriers by limiting private accommodation procurement), and institutional invisibility (transformation frameworks prioritise some equity axes whilst marginalising others). These mechanisms move beyond identity category enumeration to examine interaction processes (Gordon et al., 2022; Sharma et al., 2025).

Policy-practice gap specification. The finding that formal policies prove insufficient without implementation cultures challenges policy-centric approaches. Three cultural dimensions moderate policy effectiveness: accountability structures that routinise accessibility; commitment versus compliance orientation that frames inclusion as equity imperative versus regulatory requirement; and participatory governance enabling disabled employees to influence accommodation design (Bryer, 2019; Dalessandro & Lovell, 2024).

Temporal system dynamics. The research advances integration theory by revealing how belonging evolves through reinforcing cycles. Integration requires substantially longer than organisations typically assume, operates through positive or negative reinforcing cycles that compound over time, exhibits vulnerability during career transitions, and produces divergent long-term patterns based on cumulative experience quality. This temporal perspective challenges stage-based models assuming uniform progression (Yuan et al., 2023).

Participatory design principles. Co-created accommodations produced better fit and adoption than unilaterally designed solutions. Participation enhances solution quality through contextual knowledge incorporation and psychological acceptance through respect signalling. This shifts from charitable to rights-based framing, positioning disabled people as partners possessing expertise

warranting consultation rather than passive recipients requiring organisational solutions (Ashikali et al., 2021; Wickenden, 2023).

7.7 Practical Recommendations

Beyond theoretical contributions, this research provides actionable guidance for organisations seeking authentic inclusion. Recommendations target four stakeholder groups with specific interventions grounded in empirical evidence.

7.7.1 Senior Leadership: Strategic Commitment and Accountability

Leaders must move beyond aspirational commitments to operational accountability. First, they should designate disability employment specialists with explicit authority and resources rather than assigning inclusion as additional responsibility to overburdened staff. Second, establishing quarterly accessibility audits examining accommodation turnaround times, meeting accessibility compliance, and technology procurement standards creates systematic monitoring mechanisms. Third, incorporating disability inclusion metrics into leadership performance evaluations creates personal accountability for outcomes. Fourth, mandating participatory design protocols requires disabled employee consultation before finalising accommodation decisions, policy changes, or technology implementations. Finally, dedicating recurring resources to assistive technology, accommodation implementation, and accessibility infrastructure maintenance signals that inclusion constitutes operational requirement rather than discretionary project.

The evidence demonstrates that formal accountability transforms abstract values into operational reality. Without metrics, responsibility assignment, and consequences, inclusion initiatives remain discretionary and vulnerable to resource pressures (Bryer, 2019; Dalessandro & Lovell, 2024).

7.7.2 Human Resources and Diversity Professionals: Implementation Systems

HR professionals must build systematic implementation infrastructure translating policies into daily practices. This begins with streamlining accommodation request processes by establishing clear workflows, reasonable timelines (maximum 10 working days for standard requests), and single-point-of-contact accountability. Proactive accommodation planning during recruitment and onboarding prevents delays that undermine early integration. Developing accommodation libraries that document proven solutions for common roles accelerates implementation and reduces reinvention whilst establishing institutional memory. Peer mentorship programmes pairing newly hired disabled employees with veterans provide both practical guidance and social support during vulnerable transition periods. Regular accessibility audits examining physical spaces, digital

systems, and communication practices identify barriers before they exclude. Finally, embedding accessibility requirements in procurement policies by mandating vendor demonstrations of accessibility compliance before software selection prevents inaccessible technology accumulation.

Training proves necessary but insufficient without cultural transformation. Organisations should move beyond awareness training emphasising disability etiquette to experiential learning that examines how exclusion operates through seemingly neutral practices like meeting formats and communication defaults (Ashikali et al., 2021).

7.7.3 Managers and Team Leaders: Daily Practice Implementation

Managers translate organisational policies into team practices, making their commitment critical for authentic inclusion. Implementing structured meeting accessibility protocols provides concrete, actionable steps: circulating materials 48 hours in advance, verbally describing visual content, and establishing an "accessibility check" as a standard agenda item normalise accommodation as routine practice. Creating psychologically safe team climates requires actively normalising accommodation requests, discussing accessibility openly in team meetings, and addressing microaggressions immediately when observed. Designing inclusive social activities demands consulting disabled team members about venue accessibility and activity feasibility rather than making assumptions about what works. Providing specific, behaviour-based performance feedback avoids capability assumptions based on accommodation needs whilst enabling meaningful development conversations. Finally, advocating for disabled team members' advancement through nominating them for high-visibility projects and addressing barriers in advancement processes counters systemic gatekeeping.

Manager support proves critical for day-to-day integration yet cannot compensate for systemic accessibility failures. Managers should focus on controllable team practices whilst advocating systemically for infrastructure improvements when structural barriers emerge (Aftab et al., 2025; Bhaskar et al., 2022).

7.7.4 Disabled Employees and Advocates: Strategic Action

Whilst organisations bear primary responsibility for inclusion, visually impaired employees can strengthen their position through strategic action. Documenting accommodation requests and responses establishes an evidence trail should escalation become necessary. Connecting with other disabled employees enables the exchange of practical knowledge, emotional support, and collective advocacy. Identifying supportive allies (colleagues who demonstrate genuine

commitment, whether disabled or not) provides guidance and amplification. Disclosure decisions require careful navigation: the benefits of accessing accommodations and reducing the burden of constant impression management must be weighed against potential stigma and doubts about one's capabilities, with organisational climate shaping this calculation. Finally, negotiating accommodations rather than accepting first offers, proposing alternatives when initial solutions fail, and requesting consultative implementation rather than unilateral design improves solution quality.

Self-advocacy proves necessary yet burdensome given accommodation implementation gaps. Disabled employees should prioritise their wellbeing by setting boundaries around advocacy labour and recognising when organisational climates prove irredeemably hostile despite individual efforts.

7.8 Research Limitations

Several limitations warrant acknowledgment.

Design limitations. The qualitative design prioritises depth over breadth, providing rich understanding of mechanisms but limiting statistical generalisation. The cross-sectional retrospective design captures experiences at single points in time rather than tracking changes longitudinally. Whilst career-stage stratification provided temporal perspective, prospective longitudinal research would strengthen understanding of how integration evolves.

Sample limitations. The sample focused on currently employed individuals in medium-to-large organisations in urban Gauteng and Western Cape. This excludes experiences of those who left or never entered employment, smaller organisations or rural contexts, and different provincial dynamics. The findings may over-represent relatively successful integration experiences compared to population patterns.

Scope limitations. The research focused specifically on visual impairment rather than examining disability broadly. Whilst this enabled depth, it limits direct transferability to other impairment types. Some findings likely apply across disabilities, but others (particularly concerning assistive technology and informal interaction) may differ substantially for different impairments.

Intersectionality limitations. Despite explicit attention to intersectionality, the sample included limited representation of certain intersecting identities. Deeper exploration of specific intersectional positions would strengthen understanding. The research did not deeply examine sexuality, religion, or other identity dimensions.

Subjectivity. The research represents participant and researcher interpretations rather than objective measurement. Whilst this aligns with research aims and epistemological positioning,

findings reflect subjective meaning-making processes. Triangulation across employee and organisational representative perspectives partially addresses this limitation.

7.9 Future Research Directions

Nine critical directions would advance theoretical understanding and practical application.

Longitudinal designs tracking employees at six-month intervals for three to five years would test causal relationships and document trajectory evolution, revealing how early experiences shape long-term outcomes and examining how reinforcing cycles operate over time (Yuan et al., 2023).

Intervention studies that use cluster randomised controlled trials or stepped-wedge designs can help test strategies tied to theories, providing clearer causal evidence than what we have from current observational studies. Some promising approaches include co-creation protocols, structured accountability systems, hands-on training, and making sure accessibility requirements are met at the procurement stage (Das et al., 2021).

Comparative research examining physical mobility impairments, invisible disabilities, and neurodevelopmental disabilities would clarify general versus disability-specific inclusion mechanisms, revealing which mechanisms generalise and which prove disability-specific.

Intersectionality depth studies employing intersectionality-focused sampling would illuminate whether and how experiences differ across identity configurations, advancing understanding beyond this study's initial documentation (Gordon et al., 2022; Sharma et al., 2025).

Organisational culture measurement development and validation would enable large-scale survey research examining culture-outcome relationships, comparative research identifying high-performing organisations, and intervention evaluation quantifying cultural change (Bryer, 2019).

Economic analyses quantifying inclusion investment returns would provide business case evidence, calculating incremental cost-effectiveness ratios and estimating return on investment whilst acknowledging that equity imperatives operate independently of economic justifications.

Technology and AI research examining computer vision, natural language processing, and speech recognition advances would inform technology-mediated inclusion strategies whilst investigating algorithmic bias risks and surveillance concerns (Koenecke et al., 2020).

Unemployment and transitions research examining barriers preventing workforce entry, employment transition processes, and small business contexts would inform policy interventions addressing systemic employment barriers beyond organisational-level inclusion efforts.

Implementation science applications examining reach, adoption, fidelity, maintenance, and equity would strengthen practical translation whilst identifying implementation barriers at policy, organisational, manager, and employee levels (Das et al., 2021).

7.10 Concluding Reflections

This research examined how social integration shapes workplace belonging among visually impaired employees in South Africa, revealing that authentic inclusion requires far more than formal policy compliance or basic accommodation provision. It demands sustained organisational commitment to embedding accessibility into infrastructure and culture, genuine psychosocial safety that validates diverse identities, leadership practices that model inclusive behaviours, implementation fidelity that translates policy into practice, and intersectional approaches that address compounded disadvantage.

The findings reveal both challenges and possibilities. Challenges include persistent implementation gaps, structural advancement barriers despite competence, belonging fragility in face of microaggressions, systematic meeting communication exclusion, and intersectional disadvantage that current approaches fail to address. Yet possibilities emerge in organisations where structural accessibility enables participation, supportive relationships create safety, leadership practices foster culture, and participatory approaches centre employee expertise. These exemplars demonstrate that authentic inclusion is achievable.

With substantial portions of working-age populations with disabilities unemployed globally and in South Africa, effective workplace inclusion constitutes both human rights imperative and economic necessity. Organisations that implement authentic inclusion benefit through improved retention, enhanced innovation, expanded talent pools, and strengthened reputations whilst advancing social justice.

Theoretically, the research advances understanding by demonstrating how structural accessibility and psychosocial safety operate as hierarchically ordered dimensions rather than parallel pathways, with structural accessibility providing necessary foundation upon which psychosocial processes build. This integrated perspective suggests that effective inclusion strategies must address both dimensions whilst recognising their different roles and timing requirements.

Perhaps most fundamentally, the research centres voices and experiences of visually impaired employees as active agents rather than passive recipients. Participants demonstrated remarkable resilience, creativity, and strategic navigation of complex systems. They articulated clear insights about what enables and constrains belonging. They offered sophisticated analyses and practical

suggestions. This expertise and agency deserve recognition and institutional support. Organisations that harness such expertise through genuine participatory approaches benefit from improved solutions whilst communicating respect and value.

The path toward authentic workplace inclusion requires fundamental transformation in how organisations understand and enact accessibility: from compliance to commitment, from accommodation to universal design, from individual adjustment to systemic change, and from deficit narratives to recognition of capability. This research illuminates that path whilst acknowledging the distance yet to travel.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Consistency Matrix

Research Questions	Literature Review	Data Collection Tool	Analysis
1. In what ways does social integration affect visually impaired employees' sense of belonging in the workplace?	• Social integration framework: Structural and psychosocial dimensions (Marinaci et al., 2023; Yuan et al., 2023); Psychological belonging and workplace dynamics (Roberts, 2020; Phillimore, 2020); Self-esteem and support relationships (Brzykcy & Boehm, 2022); Workplace inclusion theory (Blau et al., 2023)	Semi-structured interviews (VIE); Document review	Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2020); Comparative coding
2. What aspects of the workplace help or hinder this integration, and how can organisations improve these conditions to create more inclusive environments?	• Leadership and inclusive culture (Shore & Chung, 2021); Assistive technology barriers (Marinaci et al., 2023; Koenecke et al., 2020); Organisational design (Zallio & Clarkson, 2021); Workplace integration practices (Yuan et al., 2023; Brzykcy & Boehm, 2022); Innovation and adaptive technologies (Man et al., 2020)	Semi-structured interviews (VIE & ORG); Document review	Thematic analysis; Cross-case comparison
3. How do intersecting identities (such as gender and race), and the way individuals understand and express their disability identity, influence their experiences of inclusion and belonging in the workplace?	• Intersectionality and compounded exclusion (Bhaskar et al., 2022; Pandey et al., 2021); Identity construction (Wu et al., 2024); Cultural and contextual factors in SA workplaces (Yuan et al., 2023; Koenecke et al., 2020); South African context (Botha & Watermeyer, 2022; Kubeka & Rama, 2020)	Semi-structured interviews (VIE); Thematic reflections	Thematic analysis with identity-focused coding; Intersectional analysis

***VIE** = Visually Impaired Employees

****Org Rep** = Organisational Representatives

Appendix 2: Consent Form

[Accessible versions available: Large print, Audio, Digital]

Gordon Institute of Business Science
University of Pretoria

Informed Consent Form

Study Title:

Social Integration and Its Impact on the Sense of Belonging among Visually Impaired Employees in South African Workplaces

Researcher Name:

Sindisiwe Ntombela

Researcher Supervisor Name:

Andre Vermaak

Purpose of the Study:

You are invited to participate in a research study exploring the experiences of visually impaired employees and organisational representatives regarding workplace inclusion and belonging. Your participation will help identify challenges and best practices for improving workplace inclusion.

Procedures:

- You will be asked to participate in an interview or focus group lasting approximately 60–90 minutes.
- With your permission, the session will be audio-recorded for accuracy.

- Participation is voluntary, and you may skip any question or withdraw at any time without penalty.

Confidentiality:

- Your responses will be kept confidential and de-identified in all reports.
- Data will be securely stored (encrypted, password-protected) and only accessible to the research team.

Your Rights:

- Participation is voluntary.
- You may withdraw at any time without giving a reason.
- You may request a summary of the study findings.

Contact Information:

If you have any questions about the study or your rights, please contact:

Student Researcher: Sindi Ntombela, 21835218@mygibs.co.za, 0716221476

Research Supervisor: Mr. Andre Vermaak, andrepv@mweb.co.za

Consent Statement:

- I have read (or had read to me) the information above.
- I understand the purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits of the study.
- I consent to participate in this research.

X _____ _____

Signature Date

Appendix 3: Interview Guide for Visually Impaired Employees

Interview Guide: Organisational Representatives

Introduction: Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. This interview is confidential and voluntary. You're welcome to skip any question or stop the interview at any point.

Research Question 1: In what ways does social integration affect visually impaired employees' sense of belonging in the workplace?

1. How does your organisation approach inclusion for visually impaired employees?
    - *Follow-up:* Are there particular policies, programmes, or goals in place?
2. Can you share an example where inclusion or integration worked well?
    - *Probe:* What do you think contributed to that success?

Research Question 2: What aspects of the workplace help or hinder this integration, and how can organisations improve these conditions?

3. What challenges has your organisation faced in supporting visually impaired employees?
    - *Prompt:* These could involve physical spaces, resources, attitudes, or awareness.
4. How does your organisation assess or track the effectiveness of its inclusion efforts?
    - *Prompt:* Are there feedback loops, reviews, or evaluation tools?
5. What additional support, resources, or changes would help improve inclusion for visually impaired employees?
    - *Prompt:* Are there any gaps or areas still needing attention?

Research Question 3: How do intersecting identities and disability identity influence experiences of inclusion and belonging?

6. What training or awareness-raising activities are offered to staff about disability inclusion?
    - *Probe:* How are these received and applied in practice?
7. Are visually impaired employees consulted or involved when shaping inclusion strategies or policies?
    - *Prompt:* How does the organisation respond to their input?

Closing: Is there anything else you'd like to add about your organisation's approach to inclusion or your reflections on workplace culture?

Appendix 4: Interview Guide for Organisational Representatives

Interview Guide: Organisational Representatives

Introduction: Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. This interview is confidential and voluntary. You're welcome to skip any question or stop the interview at any point.

Research Question 1: In what ways does social integration affect visually impaired employees' sense of belonging in the workplace?

1. How does your organisation approach inclusion for visually impaired employees?
    - *Follow-up:* Are there particular policies, programmes, or goals in place?
2. Can you share an example where inclusion or integration worked well?
    - *Probe:* What do you think contributed to that success?

Research Question 2: What aspects of the workplace help or hinder this integration, and how can organisations improve these conditions?

3. What challenges has your organisation faced in supporting visually impaired employees?
    - *Prompt:* These could involve physical spaces, resources, attitudes, or awareness.
4. How does your organisation assess or track the effectiveness of its inclusion efforts?
    - *Prompt:* Are there feedback loops, reviews, or evaluation tools?
5. What additional support, resources, or changes would help improve inclusion for visually impaired employees?
    - *Prompt:* Are there any gaps or areas still needing attention?

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    - *Probe:* How are these received and applied in practice?
7. Are visually impaired employees consulted or involved when shaping inclusion strategies or policies?
    - *Prompt:* How does the organisation respond to their input?

Closing: Is there anything else you'd like to add about your organisation's approach to inclusion or your reflections on workplace culture?