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RESEARCH ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

Hybrid Regulation and Employer Signalling of Disability Inclusion in UK Job Adverts

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ABSTRACT

In liberal market economies, the role of employers in shaping equality regulation has become increasingly prominent, leading to the emergence of new hybrid forms of employer-driven state and joint regulation that are reshaping the institutional architecture of equality. This study assesses the relationship between these hybrid regulatory forms and the inclusion of disability-inclusive hiring and retention practices in job adverts. As an example of employer-driven state regulation, we examine the UK's Disability Confident scheme, which is co-produced with employers and invites participating organisations to seek certification to signal their disability-inclusive practices. As an example of employer-driven joint regulation, we examine organisational employee disability networks, which have become increasingly prominent in the context of declining trade union representation. Drawing on demand-side microdata from 132,456 UK job adverts, we found that some (but not all) practices were more commonly included in adverts posted by Disability Confident organisations and by organisations with employee disability networks, but even in these cases such practices were included only infrequently. The findings raise questions about whether employer-driven hybrid regulatory forms are associated with substantive organisational practice or are primarily a form of symbolic signalling to external stakeholders.

1 | Introduction

In her influential article published in *Human Resource Management Journal*, Dickens (1999) proposed a framework comprising a three-pronged approach to addressing labour market inequality. This assigned distinct yet complementary roles to the state (via the enforcement of equality standards through legislation); employers (via the business case for equality); and joint regulation (via trade union pressure to uphold equality standards). Her framework has become a cornerstone for understanding the institutional architecture of equality regulation in liberal market economies.

While Dickens' framework remains influential, the institutional context in which it operates has changed considerably. In the

time since its development, the role of employers within the regulatory environment has become more prominent, while the role of the state and trade unions has declined (Piore and Safford 2006). As a result, there is now greater overlap (and increasingly blurred boundaries) between the framework's three prongs. This has led to the emergence of new hybrid forms of regulation, including employer-driven state regulation, which involves employer co-production of equality initiatives with government; and employer-driven joint regulation, which involves employer promotion of internal employee networks alongside (or in place of) traditional union representation.

Greater employer engagement in the regulatory environment might be viewed as a positive development, given its potential to

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Practitioner Notes

- What is currently known?
 - Labour market inequality has traditionally been addressed through state and employee regulation, and joint regulation with trade unions.
 - In the contemporary context, employers are increasingly shaping the regulatory landscape, resulting in the emergence of hybrid forms of equality regulation.
- What the paper adds
 - This study offers a systematic examination of two hybrid forms of equality regulation in the UK: employer-driven state regulation (as illustrated by the government's Disability Confident scheme), and employer-driven joint regulation (as illustrated by employee disability networks).
 - Drawing on analysis of 132,456 job adverts, the study found that Disability Confident organisations and organisations with employee disability networks were more likely to include some (but not all) disability-inclusive hiring and retention practices in job adverts.
 - However, even in these instances, the overall frequency with which these practices were included in job adverts remained low, suggesting that employer-driven hybrid regulatory forms do not consistently translate into observable employer practices.
- Implications for practitioners
 - Employers should ensure that their engagement with Disability Confident and employee disability networks is reflected in the adoption of substantive disability inclusion practices, and that these practices are clearly signalled in job adverts, otherwise they run the reputational risk that their engagement with these regulatory forms will be viewed as diversity washing.
 - HR practitioners should systematically audit job adverts to ensure disability-inclusive practices are consistently and clearly communicated to jobseekers.
 - Policymakers should ensure that employer involvement in co-producing state regulation does not dilute regulatory ambition. This would involve strengthening Disability Confident certification to include robust accountability mechanisms and outcome-based criteria.
 - Policymakers should consider implementing statutory rights for employee disability networks to be consulted on equality issues, and rights to paid time off for network leaders to perform their roles.

increase organisational buy-in to diversity and inclusion. Yet there are also reasons for caution. Dickens' (1999) framework is based on the premise that state and joint regulation are necessary because employer regulation alone is insufficient to ensure more diverse organisations, given that not all employers will engage positively with the business case for diversity. This raises concerns that employer involvement in co-designing hybrid state and joint regulation may be motivated by a desire to create diluted regulatory forms that enable organisations to give an

impression of upholding diversity commitments to external stakeholders without implementing substantive organisational change. Such dynamics may result in the proliferation of symbolic diversity initiatives that do not result in meaningful structural transformation (Triana et al. 2021).

However, little prior research has examined the implications of these new hybrid regulatory forms. Focusing on disability-related inequality, this paper addresses this research gap by exploring the disability-inclusive practices included in 132,456 job advert postings on the UK government's *Find a Job* website. We evaluate whether such practices are more commonly included in adverts posted by organisations with Disability Confident certification (as an example of employer-driven state regulation) and organisations with employee disability networks (as an example of employer-driven joint regulation) than in those posted by organisations not engaging with these regulatory forms. We focus on disability given that disabled people experience persistent disadvantage in employment rates and workplace experiences (Bruyère 2019; Hoque et al. 2018; M. K. Jones 2016; M. Jones et al. 2021; L. Schur et al. 2009). Job adverts provide valuable data given they offer a demand-side window into employer behaviour (Hershbein and Kahn 2018; Ridgway et al. 2024; Romanko and O'Mahony 2022), including how employers signal disability inclusion to prospective applicants (Kurtzberg and Ameri 2024).

We examine the inclusion in job adverts of both hiring practices (alternative formats, reasonable adjustments, guaranteed interviews, Access to Work, and remote or hybrid working) and retention practices (enhanced sick pay, group income protection, employee assistance programmes, and healthcare plans). Such practices are central to addressing disability disadvantage and are likely to be especially salient to disabled applicants; hence, organisations committed to disability inclusion would be expected to offer and signal them in their job adverts (Department for Work and Pensions 2024; Erickson et al. 2013; Phillips et al. 2019).

As such, this study contributes to HRM scholarship in three ways. First, responding to calls for greater attention to disability within HRM scholarship, and specifically to arguments that disability remains insufficiently visible in research on organisational diversity and inclusion (Colella and Boehm 2026), it provides a novel evaluation of whether employer engagement with employer-driven state and joint regulatory forms is associated with signalling disability inclusion in job adverts. Second, it contributes to debates on the symbolic versus substantive nature of employer inclusion efforts (Triana et al. 2021). Third, it responds to calls for research that draws on observable demand-side evidence rather than self-reported survey and interview data (Beatty et al. 2019) in examining the regulatory drivers of disability inclusion.

2 | Hybrid Forms of Equality Regulation

Below we examine the dynamics of employer-driven state and joint regulation and consider whether these hybrid regulatory forms are likely to be associated with the signalling of disability-inclusive hiring and retention practices in job adverts, or instead operate primarily as symbolic gestures of inclusion.

2.1 | Employer-Driven State Regulation

State regulation has traditionally played a central role in advancing workplace equality. Even in liberal market economies in which employers have historically influenced how regulations are interpreted and enacted (Edelman et al. 1992), state regulation can exert normative pressure that encourages employer adoption of new equality policies and structures (Dobbin and Sutton 1998).

However, in recent years this normative pressure has increasingly been channelled through hybrid employer-driven forms of state regulation, within which employers have a central co-design role. This co-design could augment the impact of such regulation by ensuring it is business-friendly in nature, thereby increasing organisational willingness to engage with it and facilitating the diffusion of practices. Supporting this argument, research indicates that employer involvement in the design of equality initiatives increases the likelihood of employers internalising policy goals and adopting substantive practices, while reducing the risk of superficial compliance (Dobbin and Kalev 2022; Edelman et al. 1992).

Yet employer involvement in the co-design of state regulation also raises concerns about diluted regulatory ambition and weakened enforcement. Triana et al.'s (2021) review of 60 years of HRM research highlights a persistent gap between employer rhetoric and actual diversity practice, with employers often prioritising initiatives that function as symbolic gestures rather than drivers of substantive reform (Levi and Fried 2025). Reflecting this, employers have frequently responded to stakeholder pressure by introducing 'empty shell' equality policy statements that signal compliance while leaving underlying practices unchanged (Hoque and Noon 2004). If such responses extend to the co-production of state regulation, this may result in hybrid schemes that encourage symbolic compliance while leaving structural barriers unaddressed (Moore et al. 2017). Consistent with this, employer lobbying for exemptions in UK age discrimination legislation resulted in provisions that legitimised age-biased practices, highlighting the risk that employer participation in regulatory design may dilute the transformative potential of equality regulation (Sargeant 2006).

To examine the implications for disability-inclusive practice of employer-driven state regulation, we focus on a policy initiative that is emblematic of this form of regulation—the UK government's Disability Confident scheme. Launched by then Prime Minister David Cameron in 2016, the scheme aims to 'give employers the skills, techniques and confidence they need to recruit, retain and develop disabled people' (Department for Work and Pensions 2019). Employers secure certification, which they display on their websites and job boards, by committing to actions such as 'communicating vacancies' to disabled people and ensuring 'inclusive and accessible recruitment' (Department for Work and Pensions 2023b). The scheme has three levels: Level 1 'Committed' (the scheme's entry level); Level 2 'Employer'; and Level 3 'Leader', with higher levels denoting escalating commitment to disability inclusion (Business Disability Forum 2025; Department for Work and Pensions 2023b). By January 2024, over

19,000 organisations had achieved certification, covering approximately 11.5 million employees (Personnel Today 2024)—just over one-third of UK employees (ONS 2024). Approximately three-quarters of Disability Confident organisations are at Level 1, while only 3% are at Level 3.

Employer involvement in the Disability Confident scheme's governance structure is substantial, making it an archetypal example of employer-driven state regulation. A Business Leaders Group comprising 16 large private sector employers oversees the scheme's management and development to ensure it 'is meeting the needs of businesses and disabled people in the UK' (Department for Work and Pensions 2023b). However, while employer co-production of the scheme might help ensure employer buy-in, it may also have implications for the strength of regulatory oversight. In particular, it is likely responsible for the limited scrutiny to which organisations seeking certification (or re-certification) are subject. At Levels 1 and 2, employers simply need to self-declare that they have adopted a selection of disability-inclusive employment practices from an approved list to secure certification, with renewal every 3 years only requiring them to confirm these practices remain in place. At Level 3, applications undergo an external validation process, suggesting greater scrutiny; yet the robustness of this process remains uncertain, as these validations are conducted by another Level 3 peer organisation, rather than by an independent inspectorate.

Against this backdrop, empirical research has begun to assess whether Disability Confident certification is associated with improved employment outcomes for disabled people. Regarding this, consistent with the aforementioned arguments regarding limited scrutiny, Hoque et al. (2024) find barely any differences between certified and non-certified organisations in the prevalence of disabled people in their workforce or in disabled people's experience of work across all the scheme's levels. In relation to disability-inclusive hiring and retention practice adoption, the UK government's evaluation suggests that certified employers report adopting practices such as offering workplace adjustments during hiring, targeted recruitment, and occupational health provision (Department for Work and Pensions 2023a). However, in the absence of a control group within this evaluation, it remains unclear whether these practices are more prevalent among certified than non-certified organisations.

Therefore, our first aim is to examine whether disability-inclusive hiring and retention practices are more likely to be included in job adverts posted by Disability Confident organisations than in those posted by non-Disability Confident organisations. Job adverts provide a particularly appropriate setting in which to observe these dynamics, as they represent employer-controlled signals of organisational practice directed at external stakeholders. We analyse Level 1 ('Committed') and Level 2 ('Employer') organisations separately from Level 3 ('Leader') organisations, given that the additional validation associated with Level 3 certification suggests it may be more strongly associated with the inclusion of substantive practices in job adverts. Our analysis of these matters represents the first systematic comparison of observable employer practice between Disability Confident and non-Disability Confident organisations.

2.2 | Employer-Driven Joint Regulation

Joint regulation, as originally conceived within Dickens' (1999) framework, refers to consultation and negotiation between employers and trade unions on workplace inequality-related matters, including in relation to the organisation's recruitment-related practices. However, in recent years, employers have reconfigured the nature of joint regulation by endorsing internal employee networks and framing them as mechanisms for employee participation in the development of inclusive practices.

Central to understanding the growth of such networks is the decline in trade union influence due to lower union recognition (especially in the private sector), and decreased employer willingness to negotiate with unions on equality issues (Hoque and Bacon 2014). This vacuum was originally filled by civil society organisations and grassroots self-organised groups (Osterman 2006; Piore and Safford 2006), which over time became institutionalised as internal employee networks—also known as employee resource groups, affinity groups, or company employee networks (Colgan and McKearney 2012; Douglas 2008). Initially focused on race, these networks now encompass a broader spectrum, covering women, disabled employees, and LGBTQ+ employees. The CIPD (2023) recommends that employers establish and support such groups as part of a proactive EDI strategy and to improve diversity in recruitment.

However, the extent to which employee networks influence organisational inclusion strategies remains contested. On the one hand, consistent with Freeman and Medoff's (1984) collective voice-institutional response model, Colgan and McKearney (2012) argue that these networks can function as meaningful channels for employee voice. Unlike workplace union representation, employee networks often operate at corporate level, which creates opportunities for engagement with senior decision-makers who might then share information and attend network meetings, thereby gaining first-hand insight into the concerns of marginalised groups. Networks are also frequently represented on equality committees and consulted on recruitment, retention, workforce composition, and grievance procedures (Colgan and McKearney 2012, 368). This provides opportunities to influence the design of disability-inclusive hiring and retention practices, and the communication of these practices in job adverts.

On the other hand, Briscoe and Safford (2010, 43) argue that employee networks risk being co-opted by employers, thereby becoming a form of 'tempered radicalism' with limited capacity to instigate substantive reform. Consistent with their status as an employer-driven form of joint regulation, such co-option may arise because networks typically lack the financial resources, legal protections, consultation rights, and the rights to employer-funded facility time afforded to unions (Briscoe and Safford 2010), with their ability to function relying instead on employer support. However, employers may be more willing to support networks that align with corporate priorities rather than those they perceive as adopting a more adversarial stance (Friedman and Craig 2004, 795). As a result, networks may face constraints in their ability to encourage the adoption and signalling of disability-inclusive hiring and retention practices.

Despite growing interest in employee networks, empirical evidence on their organisational impact remains limited (Welbourne et al. 2017). Existing research has focused primarily on individual-level outcomes, such as the influence of networks on members' career progression (Friedman and Craig 2004). For example, women's networks have been shown to provide informal mentoring that contributes to increased female representation in management (Dobbin and Kalev 2022). There is comparatively less evidence on their influence on organisational practices, although Briscoe and Safford (2008) show that grassroots LGBT networks have successfully secured same-sex partner benefits.

Therefore, in developing the evidence base, our second aim is to examine whether disability-inclusive hiring and retention practices are more likely to be included in job adverts posted by organisations with employee disability networks than in those posted by organisations without such networks. Our analysis is novel given that little prior research has explored the relationship between networks and observable employer practice (in our case the signalling of disability-inclusive practices in job adverts). Also, while prior studies have focused on gender, ethnicity, and LGBTQ+ employee networks, no prior research has focused on disability networks.

3 | Data and Measures

This study draws on a rich yet underutilised source of demand-side microdata on job adverts—the UK government's *Find a Job* platform. Our dataset comprises all 132,456 job adverts available on the platform as of 1 August 2024,¹ offering a comprehensive snapshot of vacancies in England, Scotland and Wales that is updated daily with employer-uploaded vacancy details. The platform enables jobseekers to search and apply for current full- and part-time vacancies. Jobcentre Plus advisers and work coaches encourage Jobseeker's Allowance claimants, including disabled claimants, to use the platform to fulfil their 'claimant commitment' to actively seek employment. Building on recent scholarship using job adverts to examine recruitment communications and equality (Ridgway et al. 2024), our analysis leverages this database to assess the prevalence of disability-inclusive recruitment and retention practices included in job adverts.

Job adverts offer three main advantages as a data source for EDI research. First, they are salient to jobseekers, as they signal organisations' likely inclusivity. Second, it is possible, using platforms such as *Find a Job*, to analyse the whole population of job adverts listed on the platform, rather than a sample, thereby enhancing representativeness (although it should be noted that *Find a Job* may not be fully representative of the labour market, as it does not typically include executive roles). Third, job adverts provide publicly observable demand-side data on how employers communicate inclusion practices, thereby offering a more robust basis for analysis than policy statements or manager self-reports, which may reflect aspiration or social desirability bias rather than actual organisational practice. Statements in job adverts are likely to reflect actual practice given that employers risk reputational damage and loss of

employee trust if they advertise inclusive practices that are not subsequently implemented. Accordingly, our focus on job adverts responds to calls for EDI research to draw on observable demand-side evidence (in this case regarding how employers signal inclusion in recruitment processes) rather than relying on self-reported data (Beatty et al. 2019).

To conduct our analysis, we web-scraped all jobs from the *Find a Job* platform and employed text-mining techniques to systematically identify whether each advert included indicators of hybrid regulation and disability-inclusive practices. Specifically, we coded for the presence of: Disability Confident certification; employee disability networks; disability-inclusive hiring practices; and disability-inclusive retention practices. Relevant search terms were identified through a detailed review of job descriptions, thus ensuring that the measures capture variation in employer terminology and phrasing.

3.1 | Independent Variables

3.1.1 | Disability Confident

Organisations posting vacancies on *Find a Job* are invited to indicate whether they hold Disability Confident certification, and this is systematically appended to the end of each job description. Disability Confident organisations are directed by the Department for Work and Pensions to use the *Find a Job* platform, which is promoted as ‘a free to use resource, with a Disability Confident jobs filter, so jobseekers can find inclusive companies’ (Department for Work and Pensions 2023b). We text-mined job descriptions for the term ‘Disability Confident’ to identify certified organisations, including organisations that had not explicitly confirmed their status when posting jobs. To identify Level 3 ‘Leaders’, we searched for ‘Disability Confident Level 3’ and ‘Disability Confident Leader’. We created a three-level categorical variable coded as: 1 = non-Disability Confident organisations (mean = 0.832); 2 = Disability Confident Level 1 or Level 2 organisations (mean = 0.152); 3 = Disability Confident Level 3 organisations (mean = 0.016).

3.1.2 | Employee Disability Networks

We identified the presence of employee disability networks by text-mining job adverts for the terms ‘employee network’, ‘staff network’, and ‘employee resource group’, along with combinations such as ‘employee network’ with ‘disabled’ or ‘disability’. Each captured advert was manually reviewed to confirm whether it referred to a disability-specific or multi-strand network that explicitly included disability. We constructed a dichotomous variable coded as: 1 = advert includes an employee disability network; 0 = advert does not include an employee disability network (mean = 0.012).

This mean value suggests that the prevalence of such networks is very low, thereby raising questions about the extent to which structural changes to joint regulation have been realised in practice. However, the measure captures only disability-focused networks rather than employee networks more broadly. Moreover, employers’ job adverts may be more likely to include networks that are particularly visible and active; hence, some employers may have less active disability networks that they do

not mention. Accordingly, the measure is likely to capture a subset of relatively salient networks, providing a conservative test of their association with the practices included in job adverts.²

3.2 | Dependent Variables—Disability-Inclusive Hiring Practices

As outlined above, the disability-inclusive hiring practices we explored were alternative formats, reasonable adjustments, guaranteed interviews, Access to Work, and remote or hybrid working. Table 1 reports the means of these dependent variables expressed as percentages. These percentages are notable, as they indicate that these practices were only very infrequently included in job adverts.

3.2.1 | Alternative Formats

We text-mined adverts for the terms ‘alternative format’, ‘easy read’, ‘braille’, and ‘large print’ to create four dichotomous variables (1 = practice included; 0 = practice not included) for: large print; braille; easy read; alternative formats. These variables capture the availability of accessible recruitment materials as an important inclusion marker (Department for Work and Pensions 2023b; Maneethai and Johnson 2024).

3.2.2 | Guaranteed Interview

Adverts that offered a guaranteed interview for disabled applicants were coded as: 1 = guaranteed interview; 0 = otherwise. Guaranteed interviews for disabled applicants who meet the minimum criteria for the role are widely promoted and are a key requirement for Disability Confident certification (Business Disability Forum 2024; Department for Work and Pensions 2023b; Scope 2022). To identify nuanced phrasings, we submitted job descriptions to OpenAI’s GPT-4o-mini model via Application Programming Interface (API), which leverages natural language understanding capabilities (Bandi et al. 2023;

TABLE 1 | Percentage of job adverts including each disability-inclusive hiring and retention practice.

Disability-inclusive hiring practices	
Large print	0.1%
Braille	0.1%
Easy read	0.05%
Alternative formats	0.2%
Guaranteed interview	1.1%
Reasonable adjustments	3.0%
Access to work	0.1%
Remote or hybrid working	4.1%
Disability-inclusive retention practices	
Enhanced sick pay	1.8%
Group income protection	0.3%
Employee assistance programmes	9.4%
Healthcare plans	2.8%

Note: $N = 132,456$.

OpenAI 2023). Setting the temperature to zero ensured consistent classification by prioritising the most probable output. Manual validation of all 1536 flagged cases confirmed 1520 true positives after rechecking false positives and borderline cases. This hybrid approach, combining algorithmic screening with human verification, supports high construct validity and minimises classification error.

3.2.3 | Reasonable Adjustments

Adverts that included the term 'reasonable adjustment' were coded as: 1 = reasonable adjustments; 0 = otherwise. This variable indicates employer willingness to accommodate disabled applicants, consistent with statutory obligations under anti-discrimination law (Blanc 2020; Department for Work and Pensions 2023b). Reasonable adjustments are associated with improved employment and retention outcomes for disabled people (Anand and Sevak 2017; Chandola and Rouxel 2021; L. Schur et al. 2014), and their inclusion in job adverts serves as a proactive signal of accessibility. Such signalling is consequential, given that requesting adjustments without prior employer endorsement can negatively influence employer perceptions of applicant suitability (Hazer and Bedell 2000). Failure to signal willingness to accommodate can also deter disabled people from disclosing their disability or applying for a role.

3.2.4 | Access to Work

Adverts that referenced the government's 'Access to Work' scheme were coded as: 1 = Access to Work; 0 = otherwise. Access to Work is a government-funded programme through which disabled individuals can apply for financial support to cover workplace adjustments and related costs that go beyond those mandated by the Equality Act 2010. Although the scheme is accessed by individuals rather than employers, employers play an important role in facilitating its use (e.g., through awareness, cooperation, and administrative support), and its mention in job adverts signals organisational openness to using external support for disability inclusion. Prior research suggests that employer awareness of Access to Work is associated with greater confidence in hiring disabled candidates, while signalling its availability in job adverts increases the likelihood that disabled jobseekers will apply (Department for Work and Pensions 2018).

3.2.5 | Remote or Hybrid Working

Adverts that included the terms 'remote work', 'hybrid working', or 'work from home' were coded as: 1 = remote or hybrid working; 0 = otherwise. This variable captures whether employers offer location flexibility, which can mitigate barriers related to commuting and physical access for disabled individuals (Hoque and Bacon 2022; L. A. Schur et al. 2020).

3.3 | Dependent Variables—Disability-Inclusive Retention Practices

As outlined above, the disability-inclusive retention practices we explored were enhanced sick pay, group income protection, employee assistance programmes, and healthcare plans. As with hiring practices, Table 1 indicates that retention practices were also only infrequently included in job adverts.

3.3.1 | Enhanced Sick Pay

Adverts that included the terms 'enhanced sick pay' or 'sick pay' were manually reviewed to create a dichotomous variable coded as: 1 = enhanced sick pay; 0 = otherwise. Enhanced sick pay exceeding the statutory minimum is associated with improved employee retention, reduced presenteeism, higher return-to-work rates, and better health outcomes (Adams-Prassl et al. 2023; Kwon et al. 2022; UK Government 2008). Its inclusion in job adverts may signal a commitment to employee wellbeing, which is particularly important for disabled workers who might require extended recovery periods or greater flexibility in absence management.

3.3.2 | Group Income Protection

Adverts that included the terms 'income protection', 'income protection insurance', or 'permanent health insurance' were manually verified to create a dichotomous variable coded as: 1 = group income protection; 0 = otherwise. This variable captures employer provision of long-term financial support for illness or injury, which is associated with greater economic stability and improved health outcomes for disabled employees who may experience prolonged absences from work due to chronic illness or injury (Thorpe et al. 2020).

3.3.3 | Employee Assistance Programme

Adverts that included 'employee assistance programme', 'employee assistance', or 'employee assistance scheme' were manually verified to create a dichotomous variable coded as: 1 = employee assistance programme; 0 = otherwise. These programmes typically provide confidential counselling, psychological support, and practical workplace guidance, contributing to improved employee wellbeing and more inclusive work environments (Long and Cooke 2023; Stevenson and Farmer 2017).

3.3.4 | Healthcare Plans

Adverts that included the terms 'healthcare plan', 'company health insurance', 'private medical insurance', 'healthcare benefits', 'healthcare insurance', 'medical benefits', 'private healthcare cash plan', 'health cash plan', or 'discounted healthcare' were manually verified to create a dichotomous variable coded as: 1 = healthcare plan; 0 = otherwise. Healthcare plans improve access to treatment and healthcare satisfaction, particularly for disabled employees, by lowering financial barriers and enabling timely medical care (Shashikumar et al. 2024).

As noted above, references to disability-inclusive hiring and retention practices in job adverts, as demonstrated in Table 1, were consistently limited. Given that job adverts constitute a primary channel through which employers signal inclusion commitments to prospective applicants, and considering the persistent disadvantage faced by disabled people (Bruyère 2019; Hoque et al. 2018; M. K. Jones 2016; M. Jones et al. 2021; L. Schur et al. 2009), this might be viewed as concerning.

However, these measures are likely to understate the actual prevalence of such practices. This is for several reasons. First, employers may favour generic EDI statements over specific disability-related signals to enhance organisational attractiveness

to a wider applicant pool. Second, employers may exhibit caution in signalling specific inclusion practices to avoid raising expectations that these practices will be universally available, especially where implementation depends on local-level managerial discretion (Kurtzberg and Ameri 2024). Third, the absence of institutionalised expectations or regulatory requirements to disclose specific practices may encourage more generic forms of signalling. Conversely, where practices are expected of all employers by law (e.g., reasonable adjustments), employers may not perceive the need to communicate these practices explicitly. Fourth, job adverts are subject to space and attention constraints, leading employers to prioritise practices they consider most salient or strategically valuable. Prior evidence suggests that EDI-related content is often de-emphasised in such communications in favour of indicators of organisational success (Hooper 2026).

As such, the prevalence figures reported in this study should be interpreted as conservative lower-bound estimates of actual practice adoption. Despite this, as the online job vacancy literature argues (e.g., Hershbein and Kahn 2018; Romanko and O'Mahony 2022; Tsvetkova et al. 2024), job adverts can be considered reliable signals of the practices the employer considers it salient and strategically important to communicate to jobseekers in seeking to influence their perceptions of the organisation's trustworthiness, supportiveness and commitment to inclusion (Kurtzberg and Ameri 2024). Given this, even if limited reference to disability inclusion practices in job adverts underestimates the actual use of these practices, it nevertheless suggests that employers do not consider it a strategic priority to communicate the existence of such practices to prospective job applicants.

3.4 | Control Variables

To isolate the effects of Disability Confident certification and employee disability networks on the signalling of disability-inclusive practices from the effects of broader labour market heterogeneity, we included a comprehensive set of control variables in our regression models that hold constant structural and organisational characteristics that may influence the inclusion of disability-inclusive practices in job adverts (e.g., Gasper et al. 2020). The controls are as follows.

3.4.1 | Log of Organisation Size

Organisational size is positively associated with the provision of disability-inclusive practices (Bacon and Hoque 2022). A size control was constructed by matching public sector employers to government databases, charities to returns filed with the Charity Commission, and private sector employers to publicly available company records (e.g., Companies House filings and employer websites). The natural logarithm of organisation size was used to correct for skewness and stabilise variance.

3.4.2 | Standard Occupational Classification

Each job was assigned a three-digit Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) major group code using the UK Government's SOC 2020 index. Coding was performed using OpenAI's API. Where the API returned ambiguous or non-numeric outputs, these were manually reviewed and coded accordingly.

3.4.3 | Annual Salary

Fourteen annual salary brackets were defined, ranging from under £5000 to over £100,000, with an additional category for adverts lacking salary data. Python scripts extracted numerical salary values from structured fields specifying hourly, daily, weekly, monthly, or annual rates. These were converted to annual equivalents using standard multipliers (e.g., hourly rates $\times 40$ hours per week $\times 52$ weeks per year; monthly rates $\times 12$). For unstructured or ambiguous entries, the OpenAI API was used to extract salary information from 'salary', 'additional salary information', and 'job description' fields. Where employers provided salary ranges, the mid-point was used to calculate annualised estimates. Manual verification was conducted for entries with missing or inconsistent salary information.

3.4.4 | Standard Statistical Region

The Standard Statistical Region (SSR) for each job advert was determined by extracting the postcode's first two characters using the OpenAI API. These were matched to a reference file linking postcode prefixes to SSR codes and coded as a categorical variable from 0 to 12. Pseudo-codes were used for non-English regions (e.g., Wales, Scotland, and other locations) and null values were assigned to missing or unidentifiable location data. Manual resolution was applied to unmatched cases.

3.4.5 | Sector

Sector (public, private, voluntary) was coded by text-mining for the term 'charity' to identify voluntary sector organisations, and by matching against 23 predefined keywords to capture public sector organisations (e.g., 'civil service', 'NHS', 'council', 'university', 'British Army'). All remaining cases were classified as private sector.

3.4.6 | Working Hours and Contract Type

Working hours were coded using Python as: 1 = full-time roles, 2 = part-time roles, 3 = either full- or part-time roles, based on structured fields provided by the *Find a Job* platform. Contract type was coded as: 1 = permanent contract, 2 = temporary contract, 3 = apprenticeship.

3.5 | Analysis Procedure

Separate probit models incorporating the control variables described above were estimated for each dependent variable. Each model was estimated twice: first, using the three-level categorical independent variable for Disability Confident certification (with non-Disability Confident organisations as the reference category); and second, using the dichotomous independent variable for the presence of an employee disability network. The coefficients for the Disability Confident Level 1 and 2 and Level 3 dummy variables, and for the employee disability network variable, indicated whether disability-inclusive hiring and retention practices were more likely to be included in job adverts posted by these organisations than by non-Disability Confident organisations or organisations without employee disability networks.

We also calculated post-estimation predicted probabilities to facilitate interpretation and assess practical relevance. These values represent the estimated probability that job adverts from each group (i.e., non-Disability Confident organisations; Disability Confident Level 1 or 2 organisations; Disability Confident Level 3 organisations; organisations with/without employee disability networks) included a given practice, holding all other variables constant.

4 | Results

4.1 | Disability Confident

To address our first research aim, we analysed whether job adverts posted by Disability Confident organisations were more likely to include disability-inclusive hiring and retention practices than job adverts posted by non-Disability Confident organisations.

The results for disability-inclusive hiring practices are reported in Table 2. For Disability Confident Level 1 or 2 organisations, none of their adverts offered easy read formats, and they were significantly less likely than those of non-Disability Confident organisations to include Access to Work (-0.169 , $p < 0.05$), with post-estimation predicted probabilities suggesting that only 0.1% did so (compared to 0.2% of non-Disability Confident organisations).

However, Disability Confident Level 1 or 2 organisations' adverts were significantly more likely than those of non-Disability Confident organisations to offer large print (1.411, $p < 0.01$), braille (0.712, $p < 0.01$), alternative formats (0.538, $p < 0.01$), guaranteed interviews (1.326, $p < 0.01$), reasonable adjustments

(0.727, $p < 0.01$), and remote or hybrid working (0.146, $p < 0.01$).

Nevertheless, post-estimation predicted probabilities indicated that these practices were included in only a very small proportion of Disability Confident Level 1 and 2 organisations' job adverts. Specifically, only 0.3% offered large print (compared to 0.006% of adverts posted by non-Disability Confident organisations); 0.1% offered braille (0.01% in non-Disability Confident organisations); 0.7% offered alternative formats (0.2% in non-Disability Confident organisations); 4.7% offered guaranteed interviews (0.2% in non-Disability Confident organisations); 7.7% offered reasonable adjustments (1.7% in non-Disability Confident organisations); and 5.2% offered remote or hybrid working (3.9% in non-Disability Confident organisations). Hence, while Disability Confident Level 1 or 2 organisations' adverts were more likely than those of non-Disability Confident organisations to include six of the eight disability-inclusive hiring practices, the frequency of inclusion of these practices in their job adverts was low.

Turning to Disability Confident Level 3 organisations, Table 2 shows that none of the Disability Confident Level 3 organisations' adverts mentioned Access to Work, and they were not significantly more likely than those of non-Disability Confident organisations to offer alternative formats (-0.425 , $p =$ non-significant), with just 0.04% doing so; or remote or hybrid working (-0.069 , $p =$ non-significant), with just 3.4% doing so.

However, Level 3 organisations' adverts were significantly more likely than those of non-Disability Confident organisations to include the other five practices (large print: 2.083, $p < 0.01$; braille: 2.142, $p < 0.01$; easy read: 2.154, $p < 0.01$; guaranteed

TABLE 2 | Disability-inclusive hiring practices in job adverts from Disability Confident and non-Disability Confident organisations.

	Large print	Braille	Easy read	Alternative formats
Reference category: Non-Disability Confident organisations				
Disability Confident Levels 1 and 2 organisations	1.411*** (0.138)	0.712*** (0.146)	(a)	0.538*** (0.043)
Disability Confident Level 3 organisations	2.083*** (0.149)	2.142*** (0.157)	2.154*** (0.203)	-0.425 (0.298)
Prob > χ^2	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
N	132,456	132,456	112,344	132,456
	Large print	Braille	Easy read	Alternative formats
Reference category: Non-Disability Confident organisations				
Disability Confident Levels 1 and 2 organisations	1.326*** (0.031)	0.727*** (0.017)	-0.169^{**} (0.081)	0.146*** (0.019)
Disability Confident Level 3 organisations	2.379*** (0.045)	1.298*** (0.033)	(b)	-0.069 (0.065)
Prob > χ^2	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
N	132,456	132,456	130,343	132,456

Note: Coefficients given, standard errors in brackets. Probit analysis. All equations control for: log of organisation size; Standard Occupational Classification; annual salary; Standard Statistical Region; sector (public, private, voluntary); working hours (full-time, part-time, or either full- or part-time roles); and contract type (permanent, temporary, apprenticeship). (a) No adverts posted by Disability Confident Level 1 and 2 organisations offered easy read formats. (b) No adverts posted by Disability Confident Level 3 organisations mention Access to Work.

*** significant at 1%.

** significant at 5%.

interviews: 2.379, $p < 0.01$; and reasonable adjustments: 1.298, $p < 0.01$). Nevertheless, only 1.5% offered large print, 1.5% offered braille, and 0.5% offered easy read, although higher percentages included guaranteed interviews (24.8%) and reasonable adjustments (18.9%).

The results regarding disability-inclusive retention practices are reported in Table 3. Disability Confident Level 1 and 2 organisations' adverts were significantly more likely than those of non-Disability Confident organisations to include all four practices (enhanced sick pay: 0.116, $p < 0.01$; group income protection: 0.174, $p < 0.01$; employee assistance programmes: 0.379, $p < 0.01$; and healthcare plans: 0.245, $p < 0.01$). However, post-estimation predicted probabilities indicated that only 2.2% of Disability Confident Level 1 and 2 organisations' adverts included enhanced sick pay; 0.4% included group income protection; 14.3% included employee assistance programmes; and 4.2% included healthcare plans (compared with 1.7%, 0.2%, 7.9% and 2.5% of non-Disability Confident organisations' adverts respectively).

Regarding Disability Confident Level 3 organisations, their job adverts were not significantly more likely than those of non-Disability Confident organisations to include enhanced sick pay (0.001, $p =$ non-significant), with only 1.7% doing so, and were significantly less likely to offer healthcare plans (-0.253 , $p < 0.01$), with only 1.4% doing so. However, they were significantly more likely than non-Disability Confident organisations to include the other two practices (group income protection: 0.318, $p < 0.01$; and employee assistance programmes: 1.041, $p < 0.01$). Nevertheless, only 0.6% of Level 3 organisations' adverts included group income protection, although 32.1% included employee assistance programmes.

Therefore, the evidence suggests that, overall, neither Level 1 and 2 nor Level 3 Disability Confident certification was associated with the widespread inclusion of disability-inclusive hiring and retention practices in job adverts.

4.2 | Employee Disability Networks

To address our second research aim, we examined whether job adverts posted by organisations with employee disability networks were more likely to include disability-inclusive hiring and retention practices than job adverts posted by organisations without such networks.

The results for hiring practices, reported in Table 4, reveal a mixed pattern. None of the adverts posted by organisations with an employee disability network included braille, easy read, Access to Work, or remote or hybrid working arrangements. However, they were significantly more likely than those posted by organisations without such networks to include the other four practices (large print: 1.851, $p < 0.01$; alternative formats: 1.218, $p < 0.01$; guaranteed interviews: 0.731, $p < 0.01$; and reasonable adjustments: 0.757, $p < 0.01$).

Post-estimation predicted probabilities indicated that these differences were substantively meaningful, although the overall percentage of adverts that included these practices remained low. Specifically, 3.4% of adverts posted by organisations with a disability network offered large print, 3.7% offered alternative formats, 5.3% included guaranteed interviews, and 11.7% included reasonable adjustments, compared with 0.1%, 0.2%, 1.1% and 2.8% respectively for organisations without such networks.

Turning to retention practices (Table 5), adverts posted by organisations with an employee disability network were significantly more likely to include employee assistance programmes (1.744, $p < 0.01$), with predicted probabilities indicating that 58.8% did so, compared to just 8.8% of adverts from organisations not reporting such networks.

However, they were not significantly more likely to include group income protection (0.149, $p =$ non-significant) and were significantly less likely to include enhanced sick pay (-0.421 , $p < 0.01$) or healthcare plans (-0.349 , $p < 0.01$). Predicted probabilities indicated that only 0.4% of adverts posted by organisations with an employee disability network included group income protection, 0.6% included enhanced sick pay, and 1.3% included healthcare plans, compared with 0.3%, 1.8% and 2.8%, respectively, among organisations without such networks.

Therefore, on balance, employee disability networks were not associated with the widespread inclusion of disability-inclusive hiring and retention practices in job adverts.

5 | Discussion

We argue that the three prongs of state, employer, and joint regulation within Dickens' (1999) seminal framework have

TABLE 3 | Disability-inclusive retention practices in job adverts from Disability Confident and non-Disability Confident organisations.

	Enhanced sick pay	Income protection	Employee assistance programme	Healthcare plan
Reference category: Non-Disability Confident organisations				
Disability Confident Levels 1 and 2 organisations	0.116*** (0.024)	0.174*** (0.052)	0.379*** (0.013)	0.245*** (0.020)
Disability Confident Level 3 organisations	0.001 (0.071)	0.318*** (0.120)	1.041*** (0.030)	-0.253 *** (0.067)
Prob > chi ²	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
N	132,456	132,456	132,456	132,456

Note: Coefficients given, standard errors in brackets. Probit analysis. Controls as included in equations in Table 2.

*** significant at 1%.

TABLE 4 | Disability-inclusive hiring practices in job adverts from organisations with/without employee disability networks.

	Large print	Braille	Easy read	Alternative formats
Organisations with an employee disability network	1.851*** (0.098)	(a)	(a)	1.218*** (0.071)
Prob > χ^2	0.000			0.000
N	132,456			132,456
	Guaranteed interview	Reasonable adjustments	Access to work	Remote or hybrid working
Organisations with an employee disability network	0.731*** (0.056)	0.757*** (0.041)	(a)	(a)
Prob > χ^2	0.000	0.000		
N	132,456	132,456		

Note: Coefficients given, standard errors in brackets. Probit analysis. Controls as included in equations in Table 2. (a) Practice not included in any adverts posted by organisations with an employee disability network.

*** significant at 1%.

TABLE 5 | Disability-inclusive retention practices in job adverts from organisations with/without disability networks.

	Enhanced sick pay	Group income protection	Employee assistance programme	Healthcare plan
Organisations with a disability network	-0.421*** (0.124)	0.149 (0.161)	1.744*** (0.036)	-0.349*** (0.087)
Prob > χ^2	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
N	132,456	132,456	132,456	132,456

Note: Coefficients given, standard errors in brackets. Probit analysis. Controls as included in equations in Table 2.

*** significant at 1%.

become increasingly blurred, giving rise to new hybrid forms of employer-driven state and employer-driven joint regulation. Very little research has explored the implications of these new regulatory forms to date.

Drawing on demand-side job-level microdata from 132,456 job adverts on the UK government's *Find a Job* website, we assess these hybrid regulatory forms by exploring whether organisations with Disability Confident certification as an example of employer-driven state regulation, and organisations with employee disability networks as an example of employer-driven joint regulation, were more likely to include disability-inclusive hiring and retention practices in their job adverts than were organisations not engaging with these regulatory forms. As well as advancing understanding of hybrid regulation, our analysis contributes to research on organisational inclusion and diversity initiatives by bringing disability more fully into view (Colella and Boehm 2026), as well as contributing to debates on the symbolic versus substantive nature of employer inclusion efforts (Triana et al. 2021). Our use of job advert data responds to calls for research that draws on observable demand-side evidence rather than self-reported data (Beatty et al. 2019) in examining the regulatory drivers of disability inclusion.

Our findings are summarised in Table 6. Regarding Disability Confident, six of the eight hiring practices and all four retention practices were more likely to be included in adverts posted by Disability Confident Level 1 and 2 organisations than in those posted by non-Disability Confident organisations, while five of the eight hiring practices and two of the four retention practices

were more likely to be included in adverts posted by Level 3 organisations. However, even in these instances, the frequency of inclusion was low. In Level 1 and 2 organisations, none of these practices (except for employee assistance programme) were included in more than 10% of adverts, and several practices (large print, braille, alternative formats, and income protection) were included in fewer than 1% of adverts. Similarly, for Level 3 organisations, easy read and income protection were each included in fewer than 1% of adverts. Even reasonable adjustments and guaranteed interviews were only included in 18.9% and 24.8% of Level 3 organisations' adverts respectively, despite being formal requirements for certification. Also notable was that Level 1 and 2 organisations' adverts were less likely than those of non-Disability Confident organisations to include Access to Work, and none included easy read, while Level 3 organisations' adverts were less likely to include healthcare plans and none included Access to Work.

The limited signalling of disability-inclusive practices in job adverts therefore suggests weak adherence to the expected Disability Confident certification standards. This might be viewed as symptomatic of the scheme's hybrid employer-driven nature (Hoque et al. 2024), in which employer involvement in its design is likely responsible for an absence of independent verification and auditing, or, in the case of Level 3, a peer review process that is conducted by another Level 3 organisation rather than an independent verification body.

Therefore, while the scheme's business-friendly design may have encouraged certification uptake, this lack of independent

TABLE 6 | Summary of findings.

Disability Confident Levels 1 and 2		Disability Confident Level 3	Employee disability network
Hiring practices included in job adverts			
More likely:	Large print (0.3%)	Large print (1.5%)	Large print (3.4%)
	Braille (0.1%)	Braille (1.5%)	Alternative formats (3.7%)
	Alternative formats (0.7%)	Easy read (0.5%)	Guaranteed interview (5.3%)
	Guaranteed interview (4.7%)	Guaranteed interview (24.8%)	Reasonable adjustments (11.7%)
	Reasonable adjustments (7.7%)	Reasonable adjustments (18.9%)	
	Remote or hybrid working (5.2%)		
No more likely:		Alternative format (0.04%)	
		Remote or hybrid working (3.4%)	
Less likely:	Access to work (0.1%)		
Not mentioned:	Easy read	Access to work	Braille
			Easy read
			Access to work
			Remote or hybrid working
Retention practices included in job adverts			
More likely:	Enhanced sick pay (2.2%)	Income protection (0.6%)	Employee assistance programme (58.8%)
	Income protection (0.4%)	Employee assistance programme (32.1%)	
	Employee assistance programme (14.3%)		
	Healthcare plan (4.2%)		
No more likely:		Enhanced sick pay (1.7%)	Income protection (0.4%)
Less likely:		Healthcare plan (1.4%)	Enhanced sick pay (0.6%)
			Healthcare plan (1.3%)

Note: More/no more likely/less likely than job adverts placed by non-Disability Confident organisations or organisations without employee disability networks. Percentages report the proportion of job adverts by organisations with Disability Confident Level 1 and 2, Disability Confident Level 3, or employee disability networks that include the practice.

verification may have also enabled organisations to secure certification (and the associated reputational benefits) either without implementing substantive organisational practices, or communicating these practices to jobseekers in job adverts, thereby suggesting a gap between formal commitment and observable recruitment behaviour. This raises questions about whether employer-driven hybrid regulation serves to enable employers to offer superficial signals of legitimacy to external stakeholders rather than as a mechanism for substantive inclusion. Although it is possible that the low frequency of inclusion of disability-inclusive practices in adverts posted by Disability Confident organisations reflects employers viewing certification as a shorthand signal that substitutes for the explicit listing of practices, prior research indicating that certification is not associated with improved employment outcomes for disabled people (Hoque et al. 2024) suggests the absence of explicit signalling may reflect actual limited disability-inclusive practice adoption rather than substitution effects.

Turning to employee disability networks, as summarised in Table 6, we found that although adverts posted by organisations with such networks were more likely to include four of the eight

hiring practices, overall inclusion rates remained low (from 3.4% to 11.7%). In addition, none of the organisations with employee disability networks included the remaining four hiring practices in their adverts. Regarding retention practices, two were less likely to be included in job adverts posted by organisations with employee disability networks than by those without such networks, and only one (employee assistance programme) was more likely to be included, albeit at relatively high levels (58.8%). This latter result may reflect the emphasis of such networks on employee wellbeing and support, although our empirical design does not allow a direct assessment of this matter.

Therefore, the presence of employee disability networks was, overall, not consistently associated with the inclusion of disability-inclusive practices in job adverts. Notwithstanding the possibility that this finding is explained by employers mentioning such networks in adverts as a substitute for the explicit listing of practices, or the possibility that organisations have implemented practices that they do not mention in their adverts, the findings suggest that the capacity of such networks to encourage the introduction of disability-inclusive practices,

and the communication of these practices to jobseekers in job adverts, is limited. Also striking is how limited the impact of employee disability networks appeared to be when compared with that of more conventional forms of joint regulation, with prior research showing a strong association between trade union consultation and negotiation and the adoption of employer equality practices (Hoque and Bacon 2014).

As such, the findings are consistent with arguments that employee networks may be constrained by the structural tensions arising from their reliance on employer-provided resources, which may limit their ability to challenge established organisational practices (Briscoe and Safford 2010; Friedman and Craig 2004). While our study cannot directly test this potential explanation for our findings, future research might usefully explore this matter.

Overall, interpreted through the lens of Dickens' (1999) framework, these findings highlight the limits of employer-driven hybrid forms of state and joint regulation in encouraging the inclusion of disability-inclusive practices in job adverts, with the minimal and uneven signalling with which these hybrid forms are associated suggesting they are more likely to be drivers of symbolic compliance rather than the comprehensive adoption of substantive practice. As such, rather than representing a pragmatic evolution of Dickens' (1999) multi-actor framework, hybrid regulatory forms may reflect a retreat from its original emphasis on complementary and mutually reinforcing institutional mechanisms.

These findings have implications for employers, disabled jobseekers and government. For employers, they suggest that if they want their Disability Confident certification or the presence of employee disability networks to be interpreted as clear indicators that they meet societal expectations regarding diversity and inclusion, they need to ensure that these expectations are translated into substantive practices, and that these practices are then clearly communicated to prospective new hires in job adverts. There is a role for HR practitioners in ensuring this happens, for example by systematically auditing adverts to ensure disability-inclusive practices are consistently signalled within them. Otherwise, organisations run the reputational risk of their engagement with employer-driven state and joint regulation being viewed as little more than diversity washing.

For disabled jobseekers, the findings indicate that they should not view commonly-used organisational signals such as Disability Confident status or the existence of employee disability networks as reliable indicators that organisations have adopted and signalled practices aimed at hiring and retaining disabled people. Instead, they should rely more on the specific practices communicated in job adverts.

Regarding government, the findings highlight the need to reassess employer involvement in co-producing state regulation, given the risk that this may dilute regulatory ambition and privilege the appearance of progress over substantive outcomes. In the case of Disability Confident, this suggests strengthening certification through more robust accountability mechanisms, including independent audits, transparent reporting, and outcome-based

certification criteria. In the case of employer-driven joint regulation, enhancing the formal role of employee disability networks (through statutory rights to be consulted on equality matters, and to paid time off for network leaders to undertake their duties, for example) may improve their capacity to influence the adoption of disability-inclusive practices and the signalling of these practices in job adverts.

This study has two main limitations. First, as outlined above, job adverts are selective rather than comprehensive representations of employer practice, with some disability-inclusive practices potentially being present but not advertised. Hence, our results should be interpreted as conservative lower-bound estimates of the actual prevalence of these practices. However, as also noted earlier, the content employers choose to include in (or omit from) job adverts is an analytically meaningful measure of employer behaviour, given that it reflects employers' strategic priorities regarding the practices they consider important to signal to potential new hires. It should also be recognised that job advert data may overstate actual practice, insofar as employers may fail to implement the practices they claim to offer (e.g., guaranteed interviews or reasonable adjustments).

Second, the study's cross-sectional design limits the ability to draw causal inferences. Given that organisations already committed to inclusion may be more likely to pursue Disability Confident certification or promote employee disability networks, the higher likelihood that organisations engaging with these regulatory forms include (some of) the practices in their adverts may reflect pre-existing commitments rather than causal effects. Nonetheless, irrespective of causality, the limited inclusion of disability-inclusive practices in the job adverts of organisations engaging with these regulatory forms suggests that their observable impact on employer signalling is modest.

Turning to avenues for future research, studies might examine whether hybrid regulation across other protected characteristics such as gender, race, or sexual orientation, is associated with inclusive practices rather than symbolic engagement, and whether this varies across national regulatory contexts. Regarding employer-driven state regulation, future research might assess whether independent audits, incentives, and accountability mechanisms could strengthen its effectiveness. Regarding employer-driven joint regulation, future research could explore whether different types of employee networks (e.g., grassroots-led vs. management-sponsored groups) vary in their influence on organisational practice, and whether this reflects differences in autonomy and access to senior leadership. Finally, studies could examine whether hybrid regulatory structures strengthen the relationship between inclusive practices and employment outcomes for disabled employees.

6 | Conclusion

This study examined whether hybrid forms of equality regulation, specifically Disability Confident as an example of employer-driven state regulation, and employee disability networks as an example of employer-driven joint regulation, are associated with the inclusion of disability-inclusive hiring and retention practices in job adverts. Responding to calls to examine the regulatory drivers of disability inclusion using

observable evidence of employer behaviour, our analysis of job advert data showed that organisations engaging with these hybrid regulatory forms included some, but not all, disability-inclusive practices in their job adverts more frequently than did organisations not engaging with these regulatory forms. However, even in these instances, the overall frequency with which such practices were included in job adverts was very low.

The findings therefore raise questions about the credibility of employer-driven hybrid regulatory forms in engendering the adoption and signalling of disability-inclusive hiring and retention practices. Therefore, consistent with broader debates on the symbolic versus substantive nature of employer inclusion efforts, employer engagement with such hybrid regulatory forms may reflect a desire to secure reputational benefits while not enacting or clearly signalling substantive practice. In this respect, rather than reinforcing the complementary roles of state, employer, and joint regulation within Dickens' (1999) framework, these hybrid forms may weaken their combined capacity to generate meaningful equality outcomes.

Data Availability Statement

Research data are not shared.

Endnotes

¹ Once missing data in the control variables is accounted for. The full population of adverts was 133,274.

² The correlation between the Disability Confident measure and the employee disability networks measure is 0.32. This is due to there being many more adverts placed by Disability Confident organisations than by organisations with employee disability networks. Hence, of the adverts placed by Disability Confident organisations, only 5.7% of these are placed by organisations that also have employee disability networks.

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Appendix

Table: Means of Control Variables

Log of organisation size	7.374
Standard occupational classification major group:	
Manager or senior official	0.095
Professional	0.308
Associate professional or technical	0.063
Administrative and secretarial	0.052
Skilled trades	0.168
Caring, leisure and other personal service	0.143
Sales and customer service	0.028
Process, plant and machine operatives and drivers	0.079
Routine occupations	0.066

(Continues)

(Continued)

Salary:

< £5000	0.000
£5000–£9999	0.002
£10,000–£14,999	0.006
£15,000–£19,999	0.012
£20,000–£24,999	0.192
£25,000–£29,999	0.210
£30,000–£34,999	0.120
£35,000–£39,999	0.068
£40,000–£49,999	0.128
£50,000–£59,999	0.051
£60,000–£69,999	0.020
£70,000–£79,999	0.010
£80,000–£99,999	0.006
£100,000+	0.022
Not specified	0.152

Full-time

Part-time

Either full or part-time

Standard statistical region:

Scotland	0.057
North East	0.042
Yorkshire and Humberside	0.080
East Midlands	0.069
East of England	0.054
South East	0.332
South West	0.106
West Midlands	0.093
North West	0.120
Wales	0.038
Northern Ireland	0.005
Multi-region role	0.004
Permanent	0.737
Temporary	0.115
Apprenticeship	0.148
Public sector	0.271
Private sector	0.716
Voluntary sector	0.012

Note: N = 132,456.