Quality of working life according to workers with disabilities as experts by experience

Calidad de vida laboral según las personas trabajadoras con discapacidad como expertas por experiencia

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Abstract

Introduction: Quality of Working Life (QWL) for people with intellectual disabilities is a key construct for their well-being; however, it has rarely been explored from their own perspective. This study adopts an inclusive approach, recognising these workers as experts by experience. Method: a qualitative design was employed through focus groups and the Delphi technique with 23 workers with intellectual disabilities from a third-sector organisation. Valued aspects of their work environment were explored during the sessions and the results were analysed through inductive coding using Atlas.ti. Results: a total of 325 indicators were identified and grouped into ten dimensions, the most prominent being: job stability and work conditions, job content, and supervisory support. Job satisfaction, workload, and working conditions emerged as the nodes with the highest density of connection. The Delphi process confirmed the relevance of the proposed items. Discussion: the findings reaffirm dimensions outlined in classical QWL models while introducing nuanced insights grounded in the lived experiences of workers with intellectual disabilities. An necessity for accessible, participatory, and rights-based evaluation tools was highlighted in the article.

Keywords

Quality of working life, intellectual disability, inclusive research, focus group, Delphi technique, evaluation.

Resumen

Introducción: la calidad de vida laboral (CVL) en personas con discapacidad intelectual es un constructo clave para su bienestar, pero escasamente estudiado desde su propia perspectiva. Este estudio adopta un enfoque participativo reconociendo a estas personas trabajadoras como expertas por experiencia. Método: se empleó un diseño cualitativo con grupos focales y técnica Delphi con 23 personas trabajadoras con discapacidad de una entidad del tercer sector. Las sesiones exploraron aspectos valorados en su entorno laboral, y los resultados se analizaron mediante codificación inductiva asistida por Atlas.ti. Resultados: se identificaron 325 citas agrupables en diez dimensiones, siendo las más destacadas: estabilidad y condiciones del trabajo, contenido laboral y apoyo de la persona supervisora. La satisfacción laboral, la percepción de sobrecarga y las condiciones laborales fueron los nodos más densos y conectados. La validación Delphi confirmó la relevancia de los ítems propuestos. Discusión: los hallazgos reafirman dimensiones propuestas en modelos clásicos de CVL e introducen matices desde la experiencia vivida como personas trabajadoras con discapacidad. El artículo subraya la necesidad de desarrollar herramientas accesibles, participativas y centradas en derechos.

Palabras clave

Calidad de vida laboral, discapacidad intelectual, investigación inclusiva, grupo focal, técnica Delphi, evaluación.

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1. Introduction

Quality of working life (QWL) is a multidimensional concept that significantly influences mental health, employee retention and organisational commitment and performance (Mosadeghrad, 2013; Pérez-Conesa et al., 2018; Romeo et al., 2020; Rubel et al., 2023). It is a key element of personal and professional well-being, especially for disabled people, who face additional obstacles to accessing, remaining in and progressing within employment. QWL has also been associated with job satisfaction, a sense of inclusion and employees general well-being (Toledo et al., 2023). Researchers such as Rubel et al. (2023) have demonstrated that QWL impact job performance and the intention to stay in the same role via satisfaction.

One model that has been used to explain job satisfaction in this area is Hackman and Oldham's (1976) job characteristics model. This model shows that certain characteristics of the work environment affect instrinsic motivation, job satisfaction and performance. In particular, it specifies five basic job features: skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy and feedback. The combination of these characteristics create three critical psychological states: the experience of meaningful work, a sense of responsibility for outcomes, and awareness of the actual results of one's work. These factors then predict positive outcomes such as increased motivation, improved performance, increased job satisfaction and reduced employee turnover. These dimensions can be taken together to see how a role has the potential to produce intrinsic motivation.

Empirical evidence has confirmed the usefulness of this model for workers without disabilities in different sectors and job profiles (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). For example, Blanz (2017) confirmed its applicability among social workers in Germany. Derbis & Jasiński (2018) extended the model by incorporating the notions of resilience and sense of coherence and showed that job satisfaction and psychological resources are closely related to work engagement. This framework was extended by Han et al. (2020) in turn by including transformational leadership as a predictive variable, mediated by job meaningfulness. They emphasised that perceiving one´s tasks as meaningful strengthens the link between leadership and performance. More recently, Meynhardt et al. (2024) proposed an extension to the classic model, adding the public value generated by the organization as a new relevant job attribute, capable of influencing work engagement through self-efficacy. Furthermore, Sonnentag (2017) details how specific job characteristics can lead to either engagement or burnout. Taken together, these studies suggest that both the objective characteristics of the job and the psychological, social and contextual resources (*e.g.*, leadership, organisational culture or perceived public value) are key determinants of job satisfaction and well-being. This model has been applied to workers without disabilities but could be a framework for assessment in inclusive settings.

More traditional models have been used to explain job satisfaction of workers with disabilities such as the Lofquist & Davis (1991) job-person fit theory. This theory states that the more characteristics of a person fit with those of the job, the more likely there are to be satisfied with their work and to stay in the job. One of the kay factors in this fit, as found in studies using this model, is the availability of accesible and disability-inclusive work environments (Eissenstat et al., 2022).

Demerouti et al. (2001) proposed a well-established model known as the Job Demands and Resources (JD-R) model for the investigation of QWL; this model has been validated with studies looking at workers with disabilities (Akkerman et al., 2018b; Flores et al., 2011, 2021) have shown its validity in both sheltered employment and open employment contexts. This model shows that higher job demands are associated

with a decline in health, while job resources such as social support, enhance motivation and job satisfaction (Flores et al., 2021). Similarly, the systematic review carried out by Kocman & Weber (2018) found that the factors influencing job satisfaction among individuals with intellectual disabilities are comparable to those identified in the general population. However, there are differences in the significance assigned to aspects such as social support and autonomy. In a similar vein, Flores et al. (2011) reported that low job demands combined with high levels of support from colleagues and supervisors are associated with a better QWL. Meanwhile, studies such as Heyman et al. (2016) highlight that even within competitive employment, working conditions can vary significantly. It is therefore important to note that only a proportion of workers with intellectual disabilities have access to high-quality jobs with adequate benefits and working hours. With regard to the organisational context, the review by Alves et al. (2022) emphasises that the low participation of people with disabilities in the labour market is linked to employer bias, a lack of reasonable accommodations, and poor working conditions. Other studies have also show that the demand-control-support model is also effective in explaining variations in levels of burnout and engagement (Vassos et al., 2019).

These and other studies highlight the need to adopt robust theoretical models and inclusive approaches that take into account both objective working conditions and subjective perceptions to properly assess work-related stress in this group, where research has been limited (Teborg et al., 2024). As noted above, the factors associated with QWL among disabled workers can be classified as personal, organisational and contextual. Research has identified positive self-assessment, empowerment and perception of autonomy as key factors in this regard (Di Maggio et al., 2019; Smedema et al., 2018). At the organisational level, variables such as supervisor support, perceived pay equity and working conditions have been associated with higher levels of satisfaction (Eissenstat et al., 2022; Sundar & Brucker, 2019). Evidence also shows that employee satisfaction is influenced by participation in decision-making and the opportunities to express opinions. However, these aspects are sometimes insufficiently encouraged in the work environments of these employees (Lukas et al., 2018).

Studies based on job type indicate that satisfaction levels tend to be higher in open employment than in sheltered employment (Akkerman et al., 2016, 2018a, 2018b). Furthermore, the success of inclusion in mainstream settings depends on factors such as organisational support, accessibility and workplace accommodations (de Carvalho-Freitas et al., 2024). The feeling of being valued as a team member and receiving recognition for one's work are essential elements in both types of environment (Heyman et al., 2016).

A variety of approaches have been used to assess QWL among people with disabilities. A significant number of studies have utilised instruments designed specifically to assess job satisfaction among these workers. In this regard, there are validated instruments available, such as the Job Satisfaction of Persons with Disabilities Scale (Brooks et al., 2021; Smedema & Talbot, 2020), which assesses both tangible and intangible benefits of work. This scale has been validated across a range of contexts and populations with different types of disabilities (Brooks et al., 2021; Smedema et al., 2016, 2020). Other studies have used structured interviews or *ad hoc* surveys adapted to the cognitive needs of participants with intellectual disabilities (Kocman & Weber, 2018). Research has highlighted the importance of concepts such as self-determination and psychological empowerment as significant predictors of job satisfaction (Di Maggio et al., 2019). Other studies have employed scales developed for the general population to assess job satisfaction (Akkerman et al., 2018b), burnout or engagement among these workers (Flores et al., 2011, 2021).

Although some studies have used adapted tools, few have consulted workers with disabilities themselves, particularly those with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities, on which aspects they consider relevant to assess. This omission underscores a pivotal distinction between "doing for" and "doing with", essential

in participatory approaches to disability. It is vital to acknowledge that workers with disabilities possess a unique perspective, one which aligns with the principles of autonomy and participation as outlined in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (hereinafter, the Convention) (ONU, 2006). By recognising their expertise, we can ensure that their voices are heard and their contributions are valued. The "experts by experience" perspective, whereby people with disabilities draw on their life experiences to contribute to research and service evaluation, has gained prominence in participatory research due to its value in enriching processes and outcomes with their lived perspectives.

For instance, Gupta et al. (2023) highlight the dual role (professional and experiential) that researchers bring to team dynamics, enhancing a situated understanding of reality. Pallisera et al. (2017) present a compelling argument that the involvement of co-researchers with lived experience of disability, despite the challenges it poses to power redistribution, significantly enhances the legitimacy and social relevance of the studies. This is particularly important given the historical exclusion and under-representation of people with intellectual disabilities in research that directly affects their lives. Traditional methodological practices, deficit-focused theoretical frameworks, and rigid research designs have reinforced a passive view of these individuals as mere subjects of study (Majid et al., 2025). In response to this exclusion, participatory research approaches have emerged (*e.g.*, Benz et al., 2024) and have been gaining momentum, driven by principles of social justice, human rights, and a growing awareness of the epistemic value of lived experiences (Kover & Abbeduto, 2023; Salmon et al., 2018). Therefore, as Pallisera et al. (2017, p. 9) point out, it is increasingly necessary to disseminate and analyse both the results and the research processes carried out in an inclusive manner. This should include examining in depth the support measures implemented and discussing strategies that can facilitate the wider application of inclusive research practices.

Literature suggests that QWL among disabled individuals should be conducted using accessible tools that consider both individual and contextual factors. Despite advances in validating tools and identifying predictors, there is still a need to incorporate the voices of people with disabilities in defining what constitutes a good quality of working life, moving towards a truly participatory and rights-based approach. Participatory research approaches are characterised by the active involvement of people with disabilities in all stages of the research process, from formulating research questions to collecting, analysing and disseminating results (Stack & McDonald, 2018). This approach is grounded in participatory methodologies such as participatory action research and experience-based co-design (Benz et al., 2024; Heerings et al., 2022) and proposes a redistribution of power that recognises people with intellectual disabilities as "experts by experience" (Vega-Córdova et al., 2020).

Inclusive research involving people with intellectual disabilities has emerged as an ethical and transformative practice aligned with the social model of disability and the "nothing about us without us" movement. (Strnadová y Cumming, 2014). This approach aims to ensure that people with disabilities are not merely participants but also active agents in the design, implementation, and interpretation of studies (Fullana Noell et al., 2016). There are different forms of participation, ranging from advisory roles to co-authorship and project leadership, which have made it possible to capture more genuine perspectives on aspects such as well-being, self-determination and access to services (Alvarado Torres et al., 2025; Bigby et al., 2014; Haigh et al., 2013). It has been demonstrated by several studies that effective collaboration in this type of research requires specific competencies from both researchers and co-researchers with disabilities, in addition to suitable support structures (Embregts et al., 2018). Furthermore, participatory and inclusive methodologies have proven useful in fostering environments for horizontal dialogue and the production of situated knowledge (Cashin et al., 2025; Knevel et al., 2022). Active participation has been shown to

yield a number of benefits, both for individuals and collectively. These include the development of research skills (Morgan et al., 2015), the strengthening of personal agency, and the generation of more relevant and culturally sensitive knowledge (Clark et al., 2017; Pfeiffer et al., 2024).

Despite the progress made, structural and methodological barriers remain and continue to hinder full participation. Some of these challenges relate to the need for methodological flexibility, extended timeframes, and the risk of excluding people with higher support needs (Hewitt et al., 2023; Shaw & Wickenden, 2024). There is also a lack of suitable tools, institutional prejudice, and insufficient training for researchers in accessible techniques (Bishop et al., 2024). To address these barriers, strategies such as the adaptive interview have been proposed (McFarland et al., 2024), incorporating visual aids, responsive communication techniques, and walking interviews to facilitate the expression of ideas by people with intellectual disabilities. The use of participatory methods not only benefits participants with disabilities; it also improves the quality, applicability and ethical standards of research (Davison et al., 2022). Research has shown that when disabled people are involved as co-researchers, the relevance of results increases, interpretative biases are reduced, and the social legitimacy of the knowledge produced is strengthened (Gupta et al., 2023; Ocloo et al., 2024).

In addition, this approach is in line with the principles of the Convention, emphasising the full and effective participation in social life, including research that directly affects people with disabilities (ONU, 2006).

Inclusive research is a flexible approach which can be tailored to suit different needs. It is structured on a continuous scale of participation, ranging from consultation to co-research or leadership by people with disabilities. In this regard, this study adopts a participatory approach to cocreation, in which people with disabilities actively contribute to defining the construct, generating dimensions and indicators, and assessing their relevance, without this necessarily implying their participation in all the technical phases of the research process.

Therefore, in light of the above, the present study aims to identify the key dimensions that workers with disabilities, acting as experts by experience, consider essential for assessing their quality of working life. This study will also contribute to the development and evaluation of indicators for the creation of a tailored and relevant measurement tool. We also hope that the dimensions identified can be interpreted in the light of theoretical models such as the job characteristics model (Hackman & Oldham, 1976) and the job demands and resources model (Demerouti et al., 2001).

2. Method

2.1. Design

This exploratory-descriptive qualitative study is based on the use of focal groups. The design incorporated a participatory approach based on co-creation, in which participants played an active role in knowledge construction, helping to identify relevant dimensions, develop indicators and subsequently evaluate them for the development of the instrument, going beyond the traditional role of informants. This methodological strategy is particularly suitable for exploring shared perceptions and meanings among people with disabilities regarding their quality of working life. This qualitative focus enables users to gain a more in-depth and

contextualised understanding of the factors relevant to their well-being in the workplace. It overcomes the limitations of standarised instruments, which do not always reflect the users' priorities or their everyday language. This approach aligns with person-centred participatory methodologies (Walmsley & Johnson, 2003). This means that a design based on focus groups not only captures the diversity of viewpoints regarding quality of working life but also represents an ethical choice that is consistent with the principles of participatory and transformative approaches.

2.2. Participants

The 23 study participants, all of whom were considered experts by experience, were carefully selected from among the employees of Grupo Lince and the Fundación Personas special employment centres, which together employ more than 800 people with disabilities.

The participants, divided into two groups, were aged between 25 and 61 (M = 43.9; SD = 10.7), with 56.5% being male and 43.5% female. In the survey, 73.9% of the workers reported having an intellectual disability; 13% reported having a total permanent disability; 8.7% reported having a psychological disability or mental health problem; and 4.3% reported having a physical disability.

In terms of length at the job, this ranged from less than one year to 13 years (M = 5.4). All participants were employed in special workplaces in different sectors (*e.g.*, cleaning, gardening, light assembly, laundry, support services), which made it possible to gather a diverse range of work experiences within the same organisational framework. Their workplaces are located in Palencia, Segovia, Valladolid and Zamora. Purposive qualitative sampling was carried out with the aim of ensuring a diverse representation in terms of job roles, length of service and gender, as well as different levels of support required. The selection focused on workers who could provide relevant information based on their direct experience in the workplace, participating as experts by experience in the process of generating qualitative data. This strategy enabled us to capture a broad and nuanced view of the factors influencing the quality of working life for people with disabilities from their own perspective. Please refer to Table 1, which presents additional characteristics broken down by focus group.

Table 1. Characteristics of participants by focus group

Variable	Focus group 1 (n = 13) M (DT) / %	Focus group 2 (n = 10) M (DT) / %
Age	44.2 (11.5)	43.5 (10.3)
Years of professional experience	20.8 (9.9)	19.1 (10.9)
Years of service with the company	7.3 (7.5)	14.0 (9.3)
Years in current role	3.9 (2.7)	7.4 (4.0)
Men	69.2%	40.0%
Secondary education or equivalent	36.5%	50.0%
Degree of disability between 33-64%	92.3%	90.0%
Indefinite contract	84.6%	100.0%
Full work day	92.3%	50.0%

Source: compiled by the authors.

It was decided that the same individuals who had participated in the focus groups would take part in the Delphi method. Their prior experience would provide them with valuable contextual knowledge to make informed judgements regarding the relevance and clarity of the proposed indicators. All people were invited to participate in the Delphi process anonymously and on an individual basis. This process was designed to ensure the independence of the judgements made and to minimise potential group bias.

2.3. Tools

The present study employed a sequential approach using focus group methodology, followed by the Delphi technique, which allows for in-depth qualitative exploration with structured validation through expert consensus. The focus group guide was developed using an open and inductive approach, rather than being derived directly from specific theoretical models, with the aim of encouraging the emergence of dimensions based on the participants experiences. In this study, participants were invited to act as experts by experience in identifying, defining and assessing the content that should be included in work-life quality. This technique has previously been used in research involving people with intellectual disabilities as a strategy for reaching consensus in applied contexts (Frankena et al., 2016).

Each technique has a complementary function. For example, the focus group helps to identify key themes, significant aspects or unexpected categories and generate an initial set of indicators, dimensions or evaluation items from an introductory and contextual perspective. This procedure has become one of the most widely used techniques in qualitative research in the fields of health and the social sciences due to its ability to capture perceptions, beliefs and collectively constructed meanings (Amezcua, 2003; Buss Thofehrn et al., 2013). This technique facilitates the establishment of a structured space for dialogue, where interaction between participants not only generates data but also facilitates the joint construction of meaning (Arboleda, 2008). As several authors emphasise, the success of this technique depends on appropriate moderation, the preparation of a thematic guide, and the creation of a climate based on trust (Donaduzzi et al., 2015; García Meza & Ontiveros Delfín, 2019). Furthermore, focus groups are particularly useful in participatory contexts and research committed to social transformation, as they encourage the expression of voices that have historically been silenced (López, 2022). Overall, the literature indicates that the focus group is a versatile, effective and ethical tool for exploring sensitive or underresearched topics, particularly when seeking to integrate the perspectives of diverse groups.

Therefore, after explaining the reasons for establishing a focus group and its role as an expert panel, we posed the question of the group as to which aspects they considered most important in a role similar to their own. The script included the following questions:

1. What they like most about their job; for example: What makes you happy in your job?
2. What they don't like so much, for example: What don't you like about your job?
3. Colleagues, smanagers and the working environment, for example: Are there any aspects of your job that cause you stress?
4. Continuous professional development, for example: Do they teach you new things at work?
5. Feeling good at work, for example: Describe the factors that contribute to your satisfaction and happiness in your workplace.
6. Closing questions, for example: if you were able to make one change to your current role, what would it be?

The Delphi technique allows participants to evaluate and reach consensus by drawing on their expertise gained from personal experience (McMillan et al., 2016; Reguant Álvarez y Torrado Fonseca, 2016). As it is applied anonymously and in a structured manner (in our case, in the form of a questionnaire with five response options, rated from 1 to 5, with 5 being the highest importance), it eliminates social desirability bias and the peer pressure that might exist in the focus group and encourages more thoughtful and sincere responses. In order to ensure the cognitive and linguistic accessibility of the tool, particularly for diverse populations or those with comprehension difficulties, the questionnaire was adapted following the principles of easy-to-read language developed by Inclusion Europe and published in collaboration with FEAPS (2012). The adaptation process included syntax review, reduction of complex structures, the use of everyday vocabulary, brief sentences and a direct style. In order to facilitate this process, we employed an artificial intelligence tool (ChatGPT) that utilises natural language processing models. This tool enables the rephrasing of technical or abstract statements into clearer and more accessible versions while maintaining the integrity of the original conceptual content. The research team reviewed the draft version of the questionnaire manually to ensure semantic accuracy, the use of inclusive language, and compliance with the standards of clarity, coherence and legibility required by easy-to-read principles. Table 3 provides examples of items included in the questionnaire.

The Delphi method is an iterative process involving several rounds. Following a thorough analysis of the first round, it was determined that all items met the pre-established consensus criteria, indicating a high level of agreement among the participants. As the methodological studies indicate, Delphi is an iterative and flexible process designed to achieve consensus, for which there is no universally agreed number of rounds (Hasson et al., 2000; Jorm, 2015). As a general rule, the process is continued until a consensus is reached or a point of diminishing returns is observed (Hasson et al., 2000; McKenna, 1994). However, the number of rounds is subject to variation depending on the study design and the level of agreement achieved. Many studies adapt the number of rounds to their specific objectives (Keeney et al., 2001).

As demonstrated in Table 2, the indicators were evaluated using a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5. The main criterion for acceptance was established as a threshold of agreement, utilising the 'top-2' approach, which stipulates that scores must be 4 or higher.

Table 2. Consensus indicators from the Delphi process for the set of items

Item	Average	SD	Mean	IQR	Aiken's V	I-CVI	CVR	Decision
QIM_01	4.55	0.60	5.00	1.00	0.72	0.95	0.90	Accept
QIM_02	4.70	0.47	5.00	1.00	0.75	1.00	1.00	Accept
QIM_03	4.30	1.08	5.00	1.00	0.67	0.80	0.60	Accept
QIM_04	4.10	1.21	4.00	1.00	0.63	0.85	0.70	Accept
QIM_05	4.35	0.81	5.00	1.00	0.68	0.80	0.60	Accept
QIM_06	4.85	0.37	5.00	0.00	0.78	1.00	1.00	Accept
QIM_07	4.80	0.41	5.00	0.00	0.77	1.00	1.00	Accept
QIM_08	4.50	1.10	5.00	0.25	0.71	0.90	0.80	Accept
QIM_09	4.30	1.22	5.00	1.00	0.67	0.90	0.80	Accept

Item	Average	SD	Mean	IQR	Aiken's V	I-CVI	CVR	Decision
QIM_10	4.70	0.92	5.00	0.00	0.75	0.95	0.90	Accept
QIM_11	4.85	0.49	5.00	0.00	0.78	0.95	0.90	Accept
QIM_12	4.75	0.55	5.00	0.00	0.76	0.95	0.90	Accept
QIM_13	4.70	0.57	5.00	0.25	0.75	0.95	0.90	Accept
QIM_14	4.50	1.00	5.00	1.00	0.71	0.90	0.80	Accept
QIM_15	4.25	1.07	4.50	1.00	0.66	0.90	0.80	Accept
QIM_16	4.55	1.00	5.00	0.25	0.72	0.90	0.80	Accept
QIM_17	4.90	0.31	5.00	0.00	0.79	1.00	1.00	Accept
QIM_18	4.80	0.52	5.00	0.00	0.77	0.95	0.90	Accept
QIM_19	4.85	0.37	5.00	0.00	0.78	1.00	1.00	Accept
QIM_20	4.85	0.37	5.00	0.00	0.78	1.00	1.00	Accept
QIM_21	4.65	0.75	5.00	0.00	0.74	0.85	0.70	Accept
QIM_22	4.25	0.79	4.00	1.00	0.66	0.80	0.60	Accept
QIM_23	4.30	1.17	5.00	1.00	0.67	0.80	0.60	Accept
QIM_24	4.20	1.11	4.50	1.00	0.65	0.85	0.70	Accept
QIM_25	4.60	0.75	5.00	1.00	0.73	0.95	0.90	Accept
QIM_26	4.55	1.00	5.00	0.25	0.72	0.90	0.80	Accept
QIM_27	4.50	0.61	5.00	1.00	0.71	0.95	0.90	Accept
QIM_28	4.50	0.83	5.00	1.00	0.71	0.90	0.80	Accept
QIM_29	4.10	1.12	4.00	1.00	0.63	0.80	0.60	Accept
QIM_30	4.60	0.75	5.00	1.00	0.73	0.95	0.90	Accept
QIM_31	4.45	1.10	5.00	1.00	0.70	0.90	0.80	Accept
QIM_32	4.45	1.10	5.00	1.00	0.70	0.90	0.80	Accept
QIM_33	4.70	0.47	5.00	1.00	0.75	1.00	1.00	Accept
QIM_34	4.60	0.75	5.00	1.00	0.73	0.95	0.90	Accept
QIM_35	4.40	1.14	5.00	1.00	0.69	0.85	0.70	Accept
QIM_36	4.65	0.93	5.00	0.00	0.74	0.95	0.90	Accept
QIM_37	4.50	1.00	5.00	1.00	0.71	0.90	0.80	Accept
QIM_38	4.55	0.60	5.00	1.00	0.72	0.95	0.90	Accept

Note. Mean= arithmetic mean; SD= standard deviation; IQR= interquartile range; V de Aiken= Aiken's V coefficient of content validity; I-CVI= ítem-level content validity index; CVR= content validity ratio. Higher values on these indices are indicative of a greater degree of consensus among participants. The decision to accept was made in accordance with the previously established consensus criteria.
Source: compiled by the authors.

The decision to retain the items was based on a set of criteria widely used in content validity studies (*e.g.*, Polit & Beck, 2006). Specifically, it considered: (1) Aiken's V values ≥ 0.60, interpreted as indicative of item adequacy according to the number of judges and the scale range; (2) Item Content Validity Index (I-CVI) values ≥ 0.80, as an indicator of substantial agreement among judges; (3) the Content Validity Ratio (CVR), interpreted by the number of judges, taking positive and high values as evidence of the item's relevance; and (4) the mean and the interquartile range (IQR), as indicators of central trend and dispersion, ensuring that ratings were concentrated in the upper levels of the scale and showed low variability. Furthermore, the acceptance criteria stipulated that a minimum of 50% of judges must place their ratings within the top two categories of the scale (i.e. ≥ 4), thereby reflecting a high degree of practical agreement beyond the statistical indices.

Following the conclusion of the first round of the study, it was determined that no further rounds would be necessary due to all items meeting the established consensus criteria.

Table 3. Sample items from the questionnaire for the Delphi technique

Items
04. Should you do different things instead of always doing the same things?
08. Is it important to get on well with colleagues?
12. Is it important that customers treat you well?
16. Is it important to be well organised at work?
20. Is it important to have a good work schedule?
24. Is it important to do training or courses that you enjoy?
28. Is it important to be able to give your opinion on work-related matters?
32. Is it important that they appreciate you as a person?
36. Is it important that your job doesn't harm your health?

Source: compiled by the authors.

2.4. Procedure

The study was conducted at the organisation where the workers are employed. All participants were informed of the objective of the focus group, their role as experts by experience, the voluntariness and anonymity of their participation, as well as the confidentiality of the information. Furthermore, it is not possible to associate their names with the answers given. The distribution of forms was conducted for the purposes of obtaining informed consent, withdrawing consent, and consenting to the recording of the session. Participants were informed of the study's basis in an agreement with the Fundación Personas and that it had been approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Salamanca (registration number 1386). To facilitate the participation of all, two focus groups were held in consecutive sessions during the course of the same morning. During these sessions, they were informed that in a second phase, the researchers would require

their individual and anonymous cooperation to assess the relevance and importance of including different items in the scale to be developed for the assessment of QoL. During the Delphi phase, Word and Excel files were utilised to ensure better adaptation to individual characteristics. Each participant completed the questionnaire independently, with assistance from their personal assistant, if required. 20 of the 23 participants who had taken part in the focus groups volunteered to take part in this phase.

2.5. Analysis

The objective was not to assess the current satisfaction of the participants but rather to identify factors that they consider key to a work-life quality (QWL) scale based on their experience. Consequently, the coding and qualitative analysis were adjusted in the following ways:

1. The process of extracting categories and subcategories, with the relevant codes to be linked to the evaluable dimension. Rather than categorising responses as positive or negative personal experiences, it is more useful to identify the structural, psychosocial or contextual factors that participants cite as important for assessing QWL.
2. Avoid coding as evaluative categories. We have avoided using labels such as positive aspects or difficulties. Instead, we have used neutral categories that respond to potential dimensions or factors for the future scale.
3. The inclusion of emergent and inductive codes, as the participants are experts by experience. This approach has been employed to allow categories to emerge from their own accounts, even though we started with a preliminary framework derived from the literature. This inductive approach enabled the avoidance of imposing existing theoretical frameworks during the category generation phase, reserving their use for the subsequent interpretation of the results.

The analysis was conducted using an inductive thematic approach. This procedure aligns with methodologies previously employed in focus group studies in the field of disability (*e.g.*, Jenaro et al., 2013), where systematic processes of transcript coding are combined with the organisation of data into categories and analytical dimensions. The Atlas.ti v.9 (2020) software was used to code the text fragments; this software enables the coding, organisation and exploration of relationships between text segments, facilitating the identification of patterns and thematic structures in unstructured data (Muñoz Justicia, 2005). The software was used to select quotes, which were then grouped into codes and assigned to this process, working independently. Once initial coding was completed, the coders met to discuss and agree on the names of the codes and groups. Any disagreements were resolved through consensus. This has enabled us to identify the codes with the greatest rootage, in other words, codes with the most associated citations, as well as the codes with the highest density, that is those with the most links to other codes. The presence of a greater number of roots indicates that the theme is of greater importance. Meanwhile, higher density is indicative of greater complexity or centrality of a theme. Finally, the codes have been used to generate different networks, which represent the conceptual model of quality of working life, or parts thereof, derived from the participants in their capacity as experts by experience.

Results of the Delphi method required the use of descriptive statistics to determine the relevance of the various QWL indicators from the participant's perspective.

3. Results

The results of the Delphi process showed a high level of consensus on all items. The I-CVI scores ranged from 0.80 to 1.00, while the CVR scores ranged from 0.60 to 1.00. Meanwhile, the Aiken's V coefficients ranged from 0.63 to 0.79, indicating adequate levels of content validity. Responses were not widely dispersed, with an IQR between 0 and 1. These results indicate high levels of agreement among participants, justifying the decision not to conduct further rounds. However, some items demonstrated moderate Aiken's V values. This suggests that further validation phases may be necessary to allow for greater differentiation between indicators. The full results for all items are in the supplementary material (see Table 2 for more information).

Following the coding of the text excerpts, 325 coded quotations were identified; these were organised into dimensions and, in turn, into indicators or subcategories (please refer to Table 4 for more information). It is evident that a significant proportion of the comments (25.2%), to be precise, pertain to aspects of job security and working conditions. Other frequently mentioned aspects relate to job content (14.8%), supervision and management (11.7%), pay and compensation (10.5%) and workplace relations and atmosphere (9.2%). In addition, certain indicators are present more frequently in the coded quotes. The most common of these are the support of the supervisor, the significance of the tasks, work overload, salary, working conditions and opportunities for development. It is suggested that these factors are of particular importance to those involved in shaping the quality of working life. Conversely, certain indicators exhibit a stronger correlation with other codes, particularly those related to higher density. Examples of this include job satisfaction, working conditions and work overload. As these indicators also show a high degree of interconnection, the presentation of results below focuses on them.

Table 4. Dimensions and indicators associated with QWL

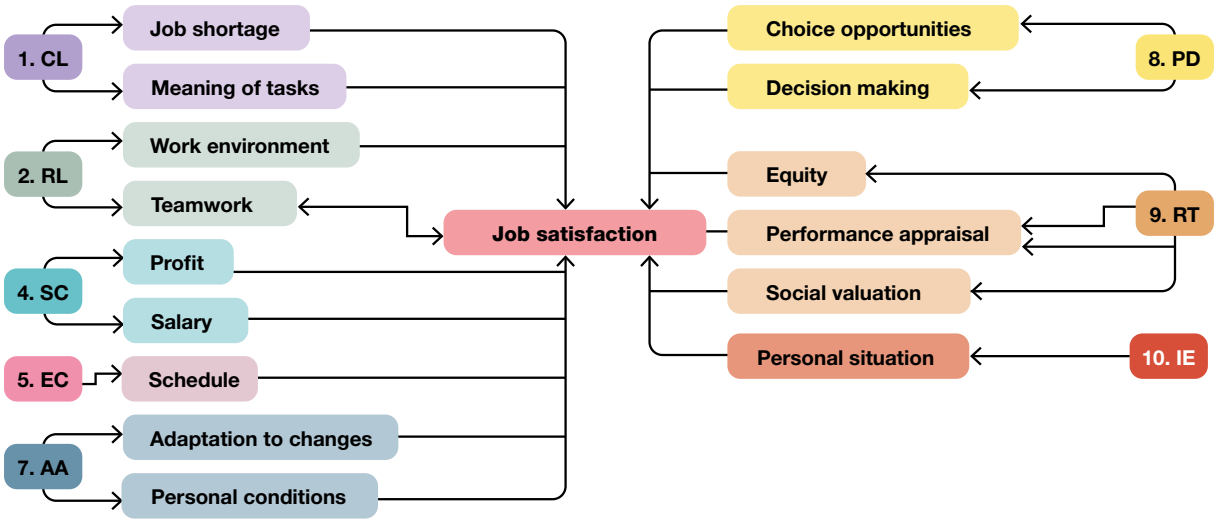
Dimensions and indicators	Rooting	%	Density
1. Work content	**48**	**14.8**	
Work content and tasks	2	0.6	1
Delimitation of the tasks	5	1.5	2
Scarce work	2	0.6	2
Efficiency	7	2.2	2
Different tasks	3	0.9	2
Meaning of the tasks	29	8.9	4
2. Work relations and atmosphere	**30**	**9.2**	
Work atmosphere	5	1.5	3
Customer relations	3	0.9	1
Interpersonal relationships	10	3.1	1
Teamwork	15	4.6	3
No-conflict work	1	0.3	1
Customer service	1	0.3	2

Dimensions and indicators	Rooting	%	Density
3. Supervision and management support	**38**	**11.7**	
Help from the supervisor	31	9.5	2
Human resources administration	1	0.3	4
Organisation	2	0.6	2
Dealing with managers	1	0.3	2
4. Salary and remuneration	**34**	**10.5**	
Profit (financial gain)	8	2.5	2
Salary	26	8.0	3
5. Stability and conditions	**82**	**25.2**	
Working conditions	25	7.7	6
Schedule	15	4.6	2
Physical overload	13	4.0	3
Work overload	29	8.9	6
6. Job opportunities	**20**	**6.2**	
Ongoing training	6	1.8	1
Development opportunities	18	5.5	3
Promotional opportunities	2	0.6	1
7. Adaptations and support	**11**	**3.4**	
Job suitability	3	0.9	1
Adapting to change	4	1.2	4
Personal circumstances	4	1.2	4
8. Involvement in decisions	**6**	**1.8**	
Choice opportunities	1	0.3	4
Decision-making	5	1.5	2
9. Recognition and treatment	**26**	**8.0**	
Social attitudes	6	1.8	2
Equity	8	2.5	2
Professional acknowledgement	7	2.2	2
Worth/value	2	0.6	2
Employee appraisal	2	0.6	4
Social perception (by customers, society)	1	0.3	4
10. Emotional impact	**22**	**6.8**	
Impact on health	4	1.2	2
Job satisfaction	12	3.7	14
Personal circumstances (work-life balance)	6	1.8	3
Total number of coded entries	**325**		

Source: compiled by the authors.

If we examine the indicators with the strongest roots and highest density, the job satisfaction indicator stands out (see Figure 1), as it is closely linked to numerous indicators across different dimensions. Specifically, it relates to indicators of recognition and treatment (equity, social recognition and recognition as a worker), job content (workload and the meaningfulness of tasks) and working relationships and workplace atmosphere (work environment and teamwork). It is also associated with indicators of remuneration and compensation (profit and salary), as well as working hours, within the stability and conditions dimension. Observations have also been made regarding associations with adaptations and support, including personal circumstances and adjustment to change, as well as involvement in decision-making, including decision-making opportunities. These associations also extend to the personal situation indicator within the emotional impact dimension. Overall job satisfaction is identified as a key indicator, as it is linked to most of the dimensions identified, with the exception of supervision, management and career opportunities.

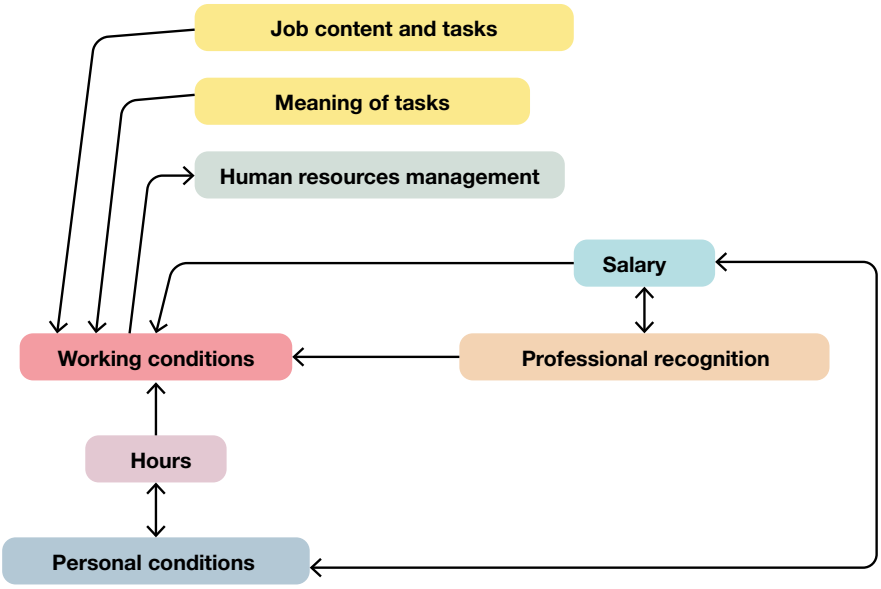
Figure 1. Job satisfaction indicators and dimensions



Note: The colours represent the different dimensions of QWL, as shown in Table 4. The indicators are listed alongside their respective dimensions, which are indicated in brackets. Indicators belonging to the same dimension are the same colour.
Source: compiled by the authors.

Below is a graphical representation of another of the most frequently mentioned indicators (i.e., local roots) and relationships (i.e., density), namely working conditions. This indicator relates to job content (including tasks and the meaning of tasks), supervision and management (including human resources management), stability and conditions (working conditions and working hours), adjustments and support (personal circumstances), and recognition and treatment (professional recognition). These relationships tend to be more closely linked to objective aspects of work than to subjective ones.

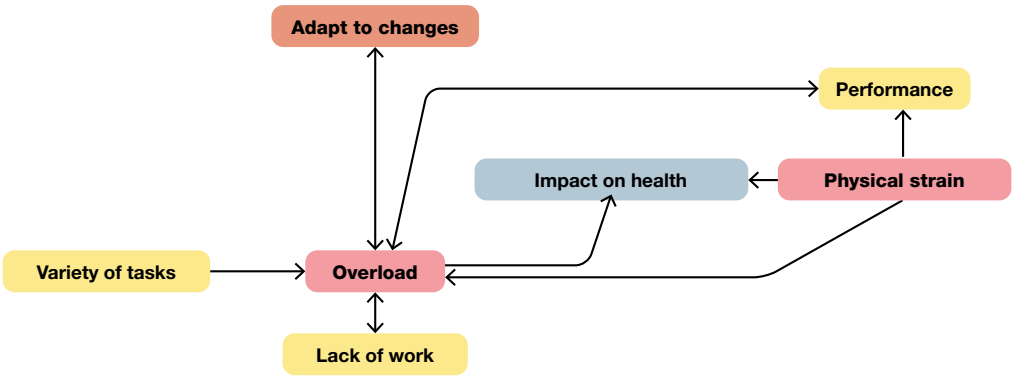
Figure 2. Indicators relating to working conditions



Note: created using Atlas.ti v.9. The colours represent the different dimensions of QWL; indicators belonging to the same dimension are the same colour.
Source: compiled by the authors.

Another particularly rich indicator in terms of associated citations and links to other indicators is also presented: the work overload indicator (see Figure 3). Many indicators are linked to the work content dimension (variety of tasks, low workload, and performance). Aspects of adaptation and support (adjustment to changes) and emotional impact (effect on health) are also involved. Physical overload is part of this dimension, and both constitute indicators of stability and working conditions.

Figure 3. Indicators of work overload



Note: created using Atlas.ti v.9. The colours represent the different dimensions of QWL; indicators belonging to the same dimension are shown in the same colour.
Source: compiled by the authors.

Finally, it should be noted that the 38 indicators identified in the previous analysis were used to draw up the questionnaire for evaluation using the Delphi method. Following the receipt of responses from 20 of the 23 participants in the focus groups, the analysis demonstrated that the items were rated in terms of importance, with average scores ranging from 4.10 to 4.90. The median scores ranged from 4 to 5 (see Table 2). It should be noted that items 4 ('Is it important to do different things and not always the same thing?') and 29 ('Is it important to be able to choose some aspects of your work?') achieved an average score of 4.10. These items relate to task variety, decision-making and work overload. The high scores obtained for all items provide clear evidence of their relevance in the construction of a QWL assessment scale.

Taken together, the results obtained enable the identification of a set of dimensions and indicators relevant to the assessment of QWL from the participants' perspective. In particular, it is vital to consider key elements such as job stability and working conditions, job content, supervision and management, working relationships and workplace atmosphere, and recognition and treatment. In addition, specific indicators such as job satisfaction, working conditions, work overload or support from the supervisor must be taken into account when designing a future scale. These findings provide an empirical basis for the selection and formulation of items, in line with the participatory approach adopted.

4. Discussion

The results of this study indicate that people with disabilities have identified multiple factors as being key to assessing their quality of life, which closely correspond to the theoretical frameworks reviewed. The emerging dimensions show similarities with classic models such as Hackman & Oldham (1976) or the job demands and resources model (Demerouti et al., 2001), which allows the findings to be situated within the context of established theoretical frameworks. However, these were not used as the basis for the study's design. Furthermore, they offer unique insights grounded in the worker's personal experiences, emphasising elements that may be frequently disregarded in conventional assessments. With regard to the moderate Aiken's V values observed for some responses, it is possible to interpret these values in the context of a broad panel of participants. This allows for a greater diversity of ratings to be captured and lends a more rigorous and conservative nature to the assessment of content validity.

Firstly, indicators relating to the content of work, such as the meaningfulness of tasks, variety or autonomy, clearly reflect the dimensions proposed by Hackman & Oldham (1980): skill variety, task identity and meaningfulness. However, the components in our study are closely related to the emotional dimension, where job satisfaction emerges as a key indicator. This is strongly linked to multiple dimensions, ranging from recognition to involvement in decision-making. This finding is in line with recent research, which identifies job satisfaction as a key indicator of well-being in the workplace for people with intellectual disabilities (Leclerc et al., 2026). This finding emphasises that QWL needs to be understood in a holistic way, bringing together both the objective aspects of the job and the worker's subjective experiences.

Secondly, it emphasises the significance attributed to job stability and working conditions, with aspects such as physical or mental strain, working hours and general working conditions. These results align with research showing the impact of work-related stress and working conditions on well-being in the context of disability

(*e.g.*, Holding et al., 2024). This section, which is cited most frequently by participants, is directly linked to the job demands of the JD-R model. These demands have consequences for emotional health, well-being and job retention (Flores et al., 2021; Vassos et al., 2019). The indicator of perceived work overload merits particular attention, as it is not only prevalent but also intimately connected to other dimensions, such as job content, expected performance and individual adjustments. It is evident that this aspect cannot be analysed in isolation; rather, it should be considered a cross-cutting phenomenon that permeates the entire work experience of this group.

Thirdly, although the role of supervisor support is frequently mentioned, it does not appear to be as strongly linked as other indicators. This may suggest that, whilst it is important, its influence is mediated by other factors. However, previous literature has shown that positive and tailored supervision is a strong predictor of satisfaction and commitment (Akkerman et al., 2018a; Arnold & Harris, 2025; Smedema et al., 2018). Therefore, it would be advisable to explore this dimension in greater depth in future validation phases.

Another area of growing importance is that of recognition and treatment, where indicators such as personal and social esteem, a sense of fairness, and the perception of being treated as a valuable employee are directly linked to job satisfaction. The results suggest that employment has a symbolic dimensión for people with disabilities, linked to recognition, identity and social relationships. It is not only the type of tasks they perform that matters, but also how they are viewed and treated by those around them. In accordance with the principles established by the Convention (ONU, 2006), these experiences demonstrate that employment possesses a value that extends beyond its purely functional aspect.

Furthermore, less common forms of participation in decision-making appear to be strongly linked to key indicators such as satisfaction, autonomy and fairness. This finding aligns with the principles of participatory approaches and the evidence suggesting that active involvement, not only in work but also in the research process, increases perceptions of agency, self-esteem and well-being (Pallisera et al., 2017; Stack and McDonald, 2018). The under-representation of this dimension may indicate a discrepancy between employees' desire for participation and the actual opportunities to exercise it. This represents an area for improvement for organisations in the workplace sector analysed.

Finally, it should be noted that certain factors which are traditionally considered central in the relevant literature (for example, wages) are identified in this study as relevant, but not a priority. This should not be interpreted as a lack of importance, but rather as evidence that, for many people with disabilities, the quality of work is also measured in non-financial terms: feeling useful, valued, supported or understood. Similarly, the impact of salary on the quality of working life is not solely determined by absolute figures; rather, it is influenced by subjective factors such as fairness and whether the salary is appropriate to an individual's personal circumstances. In this regard, employees may be more influenced by their perception of pay in relation to the effort involved, the treatment received or their own needs, than by its objective amount. However, this finding should be interpreted with caution, as pay constitutes a structural element of employment and a key component of the right to work. The observation that the economic aspect was less prominent in the participants' accounts may be indicative of the influence of other factors on their daily lives, rather than a lack of relevance of the economic component. This prompts a line of inquiry for future research that could explore the role of wages in different work contexts in greater depth.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study, particularly with regard to the extent to which the findings can be generalised. The research was conducted within a single third-sector organisation

with relatively structured and adapted working conditions, and the participants were employed in special employment centres. This may limit the generalisability of the findings to other work contexts with different organisational characteristics. Furthermore, while a diverse sample of workers with disabilities was sought, the non-probabilistic nature and convenience sampling may introduce biases in the representation of the work experience. Furthermore, while the primary focus of this article has been on identifying indicators and dimensions of CVL deemed relevant by workers with disabilities, it is recommended that this study be complemented by incorporating other perspectives. These could include support staff, human resources managers, and workers without disabilities in these services, which could enrich the analysis.

Despite its limitations, the study makes several significant contributions. Firstly, it is a study in which workers with disabilities have been directly involved as experts by experience in the design of an assessment tool. This participatory and rights-based approach is central to the study's ethos. From a methodological perspective, this study adopts a participatory approach that recognises people with disabilities as active agents in the production of knowledge. While it may not be a model of inclusive research in its most comprehensive form, it does incorporate key elements of co-creation that enable progress towards more democratic and context-specific models of evaluation. Secondly, it has promoted the inductive and situated identification of relevant dimensions for evaluating the quality of life of people with disabilities (QOL) based on the voices of those who experience it, moving beyond traditional normative approaches or those adapted from the general population. Thirdly, the combined methodological approach of focus groups and the Delphi technique applied to workers with disabilities, together with linguistic accessibility adaptations based on easy-to-read language, reinforce the methodological rigour and appropriateness of the study. Furthermore, the study's findings can be interpreted within the framework of models such as the demands-resources model and the job characteristics model, demonstrating their applicability to groups with disabilities, with an emphasis on under-explored dimensions such as the meaning of work or social recognition.

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