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Short Report

## Offering jobs to persons with disabilities: A Dutch employers' perspective

*L'emploi des personnes handicapées : le point de vue d'employeurs néerlandais*



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### ABSTRACT

The study investigates which considerations employers take into account in response to a social policy measure that requires employers to hire persons with disabilities (PwD). It also looks at if and how employers shape their human resource practices dependent of their organisational context. The decision to hire PwD was theoretically positioned in the Contextual Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) Framework. In a qualitative study carried out among 38 Dutch employers who are inclusive, or are having a positive, neutral or negative attitude to employing PwD, three questions were explored: (1) Which strategic issues in response to a social policy measure do employers consider in their decision (not) to hire PwD?; (2) Which conditions have to be met to assess the organisational setting to be suitable to hire PwD?; (3) How do employers hire PwD aligned with their overall HRM system? This article provides evidence that employers respond in a contextual and strategic way to an institutional pressure, and that

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they assess different levels of fit (environmental, strategic, organization and internal fit) in their considerations to hire PwD. A customised approach is therefore needed in motivating employers to hire PwD which is based on different HRM perspectives.

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## R É S U M É

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Cet article s'intéresse aux considérations prises en compte par les employeurs en réponse à une mesure de politique sociale qui les oblige recruter des personnes en situation de handicap. Nous examinons si et comment les employeurs façonnent leur gestion des ressources humaines en fonction de leur contexte organisationnel. La décision d'embaucher une personne en situation de handicap est positionnée en référence au cadre théorique Contextual Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM). Dans une étude qualitative menée auprès de 38 employeurs néerlandais considérés comme inclusifs ou comme ayant une attitude positive, neutre ou vis-à-vis de l'emploi de personnes handicapées, trois questions ont été étudiées : (1) Suite aux nouvelles mesures législatives, quelles sont les considérations stratégiques que les employeurs prennent en compte dans leur décision d'embaucher (ou non) des personnes handicapées ? ; (2) Quelles conditions doivent être remplies pour considérer le cadre organisationnel comme propice à l'embauche de personnes handicapées ; (3) Comment les employeurs embauchent-ils des personnes handicapées en fonction de leur politique de gestion des ressources humaines ? Cet article prouve que les employeurs réagissent de manière contextuelle et stratégique à une pression institutionnelle, et qu'ils considèrent différents niveaux d'ajustement (environnemental, stratégique, organisationnel et interne). Une approche personnalisée est donc nécessaire pour motiver les employeurs à embaucher des personnes handicapées.

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## 1. Introduction

Statistics show that despite the right to work in an environment, which is open, inclusive and accessible to persons with disabilities (PwD), the employment rate of PwD is much lower than for people without disability (European Commission, 2017). In an attempt to increase the participation rate in the Netherlands, the Participation Act (PA) was developed. Dutch government, employers' organisations and trade unions committed themselves to create 125,000 jobs for PwD. A quota can be activated if employers do not create the agreed number of jobs. Employers' involvement in the hiring process is crucial to meet the government's policy objective, however despite the financial penalties most employers do not yet employ PwD. This raises the question, what keeps employers from hiring PwD?

To find potential explanations, in the current literature, the (re)entry of vulnerable groups into the labour market is predominantly investigated from the supply side by studying how the employability of PwD can be enhanced or by assessing the effectiveness of educational and vocational services. The focus of this literature is on the individual level of PwD and published primarily for service providers and policy makers (Bruyère, Van Looy, Schrader von, & Barrington, 2016; Devins & Hogarth, 2005). Only more recently, scholars and policy makers recognize the need to include demand-oriented

policies and disability related employer practices (Van Berkel, Ingold, McGurk, Boselie, & Bredgaard, 2017; Bruyère et al., 2016). Employers' attitudes towards hiring and retaining PwD have been studied quite extensively (Burke et al., 2013) and show that while employers report generally positive attitudes toward PwD, there are principal barriers to actually hire PwD, such as a lack of awareness, reasonable accommodation and concern of costs (Kulkarni & Lengnick-Hall, 2014; Kaye, Jans, & Jones, 2011). Prior research suggests that organisations vary in their willingness to hire PwD based on the work places characteristics, such as work cultural issues, job match and employers experience and support issues (Gilbride, Stensrud, Vandergoot, & Golden, 2003). However, Burke et al. (2013) state that the role of the organisational context and Human Resource (HR) practices to improve hiring PwD is still underexplored. Governmental policy measures promoting labour market participation have clear implications for Human Resource Management (HRM), through recruitment, selection and onboarding of PwD. Saleh and Bruyère (2018) state that regulatory environments are a step forward to improve labour outcomes for PwD, but have not proven sufficient in themselves. Therefore, both in literature and in research studies, the link between social policy measures and its translation into HRM activities need to be studied.

The aim of this study is to contribute to the knowledge about the role of employers and the organisational context in the employment of PwD. This paper contributes to the literature by positioning the employment of PwD in the overall HRM strategy, lifting it from the operational level, concerned with the HR activities to hire PwD. The research questions that are addressed are: (1) Which strategic issues in response to a social policy measure do employers consider in their decision (not) to hire PwD?; (2) Which conditions have to be met to assess the organisational setting to be suitable to hire PwD?; (3) How do employers hire PwD aligned with their overall HRM system?

## 2. Theory

The Contextual Strategic Human Resource Management Framework (CSHRM) by Paauwe and Farndale (2017) provides a suitable lens to study the decision to hire PwD in the overall organisational strategy and its environmental context. It was built on Paauwe's (2004) Contextually Based Human Resource Theory (CBHRT), which argues that HRM cannot be understood as a stand-alone phenomenon. HRM activities in general should be aligned with the business strategy and context in order to be effective. The CSHRM Framework illustrates how the main organisational actors have to balance institutional, business strategy and internal organisational mechanisms to create a strategic HRM system that delivers organisational outcomes that balance financial and employee well-being outcomes, which in the long run impact societal well-being. At the heart of the CSHRM Framework is the alignment process between context and the SHRM system, aimed at achieving four types of fit (Boon, Den Hartog, Boselie, & Paauwe, 2011): (1) environmental fit: the alignment of the SHRM system with the institutional environment of the organisation, including the social, cultural, political and legal contexts; (2) strategic fit: alignment between the business strategy and the SHRM system; (3) organisation fit: the alignment between the organisation's heritage and its SHRM system and (4) internal (or horizontal) fit of the various components of the SHRM system itself.

### 2.1. Strategic issues in response to a social policy measure: Environmental and strategic fit

The CSHRM Framework assumes a relationship between the environmental, strategic, and organisational factors and the room for manoeuvre of organisations, resulting in strategic organisational choices. The Dutch Participation Act (PA) (2015) is an example of an environmental legal factor and places the responsibility of hiring PwD in the hands of employers. Employers have little or no control over these macro level factors, however they do have some leeway in their responses. Whether the goal of the PA is attainable, depends on the strategic considerations of employers whether or not to comply with the law. To acquire strategic fit, alignment between the strategic decision to hire PwD and the HRM strategy can be achieved through matching this with one of three strategic HRM perspectives.

A first SHRM perspective to align with the PA, concerns an HRM strategy that aims for social legitimacy (Boselie, Paauwe, & Farndale, 2013). This perspective provides ample opportunities to demonstrate the positive contribution of hiring PwD to a variety of SHRM's goals, e.g. by responding positively to government regulations (legitimacy), labour participation of vulnerable groups in

society (business ethics) or to a positive employer brand (corporate social responsibility) (Siperstein, Romano, Mohler, & Parker, 2005).

The second focus in Strategic HRM is on economic rationality (Beer, Boselie, & Brewster, 2015), which may explain why organisations are hesitant to offer jobs to PwD. In this dominant view, HRM strategy consists of policies and activities to attain sustained competitive advantage through critical success factors like high service, quality, productivity, innovation, and flexibility. Studies show that employers may view hiring PwD as not-strategic, because they assume that this does not lead to high performance outcomes (Lengnick-Hall, Gaunt, & Brooks, 2005). Much research shows however, that this is a wrongful assumption (Patton, 2019; Hartnett, Stuart, Thurman, Loy, & Batiste, 2011).

A third SHRM perspective is concerned with the impact of HRM on employee well-being (Van de Voorde, Paauwe, & Van Veldhoven, 2012) and focuses on outcomes such as engagement, commitment or stress. To find alignment with hiring PwD, an assessment has to be done for the consequences on employee well-being. Various studies reveal that hiring PwD may both have positive and negative consequences for employee well-being (Siperstein et al., 2005; Stone & Colella, 1996).

## 2.2. Creating a suitable organisational setting to hire PwD: Organisation fit

The CSHRM Framework argues that strategic HR choices in organisations depend on the organisational configuration. If employers are convinced that hiring PwD fits within the organisational strategy, then this needs to be embedded in their organisational setting and climate (at the meso level) to acquire organisation fit. Depending on their position, organisational structures, procedures, culture, history, individual organisational actors may or may not have the power to hire PwD. The CBHRT of Paauwe (2004) identifies potential meso factors that influence this decision, such as the internal configuration, current managerial issues and the dominant coalition.

## 2.3. Aligning hiring PwD with the overall HRM system: Internal fit

In the CBHRT the strategic organisational choice of an organisation leads to operational HR strategies and practices, outcomes and performance (Paauwe, 2004). If employers are convinced that hiring PwD fits within the organisational strategy, and they have taken the necessary steps to prepare the organisational context, then they consider how they want to hire PwD, to acquire internal fit (micro level). To acquire internal fit, the primary SHRM perspective must be aligned with the operational level, and this differentiates which kinds of HR activities are needed to hire and integrate PwD effectively. Organisations may consider alternative ways of selection, recruitment, introduction, job design, supervision and types of employment contracts. With regard to selection, the mainstream sources may yield fewer PwD, while employers may overlook other sources (Kulkarni & Lengnick-Hall, 2014; Saleh & Bruyère, 2018). Multinational corporations have introduced HR practices broadening the available talent pool and viewing “neurodiversity as a competitive advantage” (Saleh & Bruyère, 2018; Austin & Pisano, 2017). In a study, which examined HR practices that support the employment of workers with an intellectual disability, it was found that opportunities to participate in work are driven primarily by developing a social climate, by providing instruction, advice, support, reassurance and encouragement via e.g. the introduction of buddy systems (Meacham, Cavanagh, Shaw, & Bartram, 2017).

## 3. Method

A grounded theory qualitative design (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was used to develop analytic categories of factors that synthesize and explicate employer's hiring processes among 38 employers. The research questions were explored from the perspectives of three different samples of employers: inclusive employers and employers with a positive, negative or neutral attitude towards the legal obligation to hire PwD.

### 3.1. Interviews & focus groups

Data were collected through interviews and focus groups. First, eleven inclusive employers (already employing PwD) were interviewed. The inclusive employers (sample 1) were identified using the list of key characteristics of employers who are open to hire PwD developed by [Gilbride et al. \(2003\)](#). Three information sessions were organised by the researchers, in which formal, neutral information was given on the PA. Focus groups with 21 employers (sample 2) were hosted to discuss the opportunities, concerns and challenges participants brought to the table, through purposive sampling to ensure that there was a variety of participants, differing in attitudes, and contextual backgrounds. The participants first filled in a short questionnaire, with the name of the organisation, industry, number of employees, number of PwD employed and the dominant HRM perspective. Then a discussion was started, with a moderator posing questions on the attitudes towards the PA, the attitudes towards hiring PwD in relation to their organisational context and the support organisations needed with regard to hiring PwD. The participants challenged and inspired each other and the topics were explored and discussed in depth. Finally, six negative employers (sample 3) were identified during two additional information sessions organized by a Metalektro sectoral fund, who were willing to give an additional interview.

### 3.2. Data analysis

All of the interviews and focus groups were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim and pre-structured notes were taken. To analyse the data, the coding process of [Dougherty \(2004\)](#) was used for the interviews. In the open coding phase, codes were added to the transcripts. In the axial coding phase, the raw data was ordered in a matrix allowing for a systematic analysis of the data, arranged by respondent and theme. The following main codes were used: Organisational characteristics, PA, Target group, SHRM-perspective/activities. In the selective coding phase, a storyline was built by relating all remaining categories to the selected core categories and by systematically validating the suggested relationships. While analysing the answers given in the focus group, the responses were enriched with background information from the questionnaires and literature review.

## 4. Results

In [Fig. 1](#) an overview of the findings of this study is presented.

### 4.1. The strategic issues employers consider in their decision (not) to hire PwD: In search of environmental and strategic fit

#### 4.1.1. Competitive mechanism: business case

The obligatory character of the PA by itself does not alter employer's decision to hire PwD. Employers link this decision to their overall strategic organisational fit and the suitability of their organisational context. With regard to assessing strategic fit, it was found that inclusive employers perceive more opportunities to acquire sustained competitive advantage through hiring PwD. The most mentioned lever to hire PwD was (line) management's perception of a fit with their business models. This is in line with the competitive mechanism dimension in the CBHRT model. Hiring PwD should create a competitive advantage and sold as a "business case" within the organisation. Creating jobs for PwD was perceived as cost increasing by employers with a neutral or negative attitude. However, some organisations with an economic rationality HR perspective perceived a strategic fit and mentioned Social Return on Investment (SROI) obligations as an opportunity to create competitive advantage by hiring PwD (e.g. 5, 16<sup>1</sup>). Another competitive advantage was to recruit workers from different labour market segments, in times of labour shortages. Due to the ageing workforce, especially in the manufacturing sector, several HR-managers expected difficulties to find staff with the right

<sup>1</sup> The numbers between quotation marks refer to the number of the organisation that mentioned this in the interviews, and can be found in [Appendix A](#).

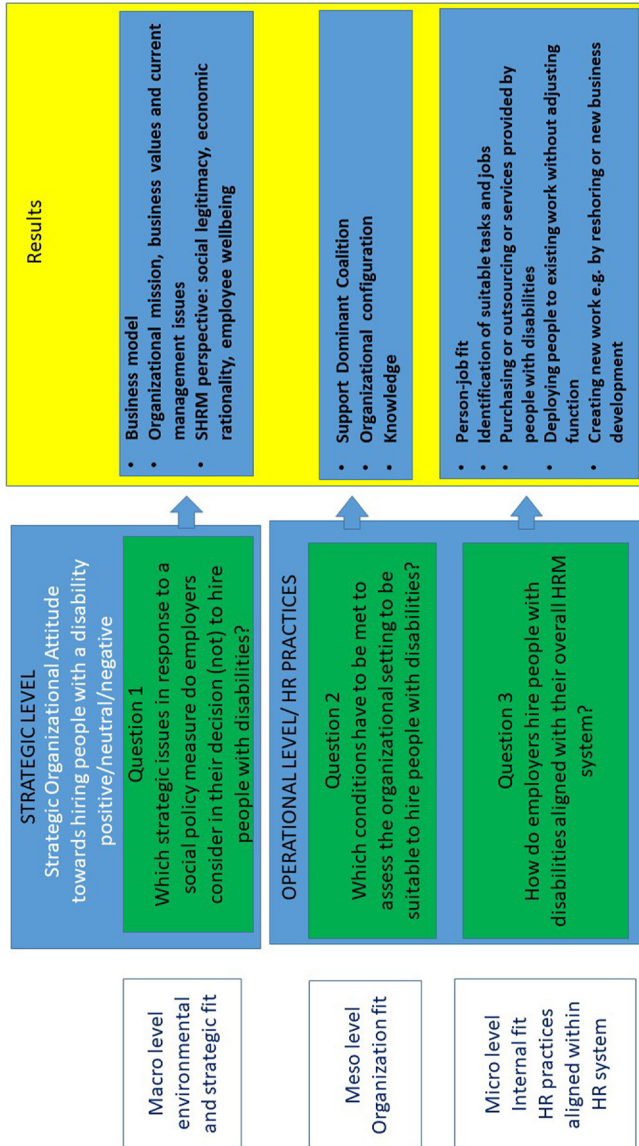


Fig. 1. Overview of findings.

qualifications (1, 3, 4). However, the HR-managers with a negative attitude towards hiring, doubted whether PwD are able to meet their requirements (3, 6, 7, 8, 19). Fear of financial penalties resulting from not complying with the law or a negative employer brand when most of their competitors did employ PwD may also turn hiring PwD into a strategic choice.

#### 4.1.2. Organisational mission, business values and current management issues

Economic turbulence (resulting e.g. in restructuring) was mentioned by many employers, as a reason why creating jobs for PwD is not possible. Lean management, automation, and outsourcing also led to the disappearance of many low qualified jobs (1, 3, 4, 11–15). Although inclusive employers and employers with a positive attitude also struggle with this issue, they do make exceptions (15) by referring to their business values. Organisations with personnel issues, such as high absenteeism rate, low mobility, and turnover, or a relatively old workforce in combination with physically heavy work, struggled to keep their current workforce vital and employable. They need sheltered workplaces for their current employees who may drop out and therefore choose not to hire PwD.

#### 4.1.3. SHRM perspective

Organisations with a strong affinity to social legitimacy in their mission, legacy or HRM perspective were more likely to hire PwD. Inclusive employers indicated that social legitimacy motives dominated in their decision, and this was considered a sufficient outcome of the employment relationship (17, 18, 24, 25, 27–33). The majority of the organisations with a strong focus on economic rationality sympathized with the idea of integrating PwD; business-wise however they felt it is cost-increasing. Some employers with an economic rationality perspective are prepared to consider whether PwD can fill future vacancies, with the quota levy in mind, but the essence is that the target group must have the required knowledge and skills (1–4). Organisations with a negative attitude more often perceive that hiring PwD could well be at odds with the organisation's efforts to improve productivity. Gaining competitive advantage through the benefits of PwD was mentioned by employers, such as having special talents, that enhance person-job fit (for instance people with autism delivering zero error products), cost-effectiveness, through wage subsidy or benefits accrued from CSR. Depending on their HRM perspective, the motives differed. For organisations with an economic rationality approach the strongest motivation to hire occurred in industries where SROI is required. No employer mentioned employee well-being motives to engage in hiring PwD as a primary motivation, although some of them pointed at potential advantages for employee wellbeing.

#### 4.2. Conditions that have to be met to assess the organisational setting to be suitable to hire PwD: In search of organisation fit

With regard to the second research question three relevant conditions were found. The first condition is in line with the CBHRT: support of the dominant coalition is one of the most important facilitators in creating employment opportunities for PwD. Commitment from the top is essential, but support must also be present in other parts of the organisation, such as middle management and colleagues. Many inclusive company owners have a personal affiliation with PwD, have the power to hire PwD and convince the rest of the organisation (e.g. 9). HR managers that do not intend to hire indicated an order by their top management is the most effective way to decide. However, if HR is no advocate and there is no affiliation with PwD within top management, the organisation will not hire PwD despite the law. The organisational configuration is the second condition, which influences the strategic choice. Job and workforce characteristics at the operational level determined largely the perception of being able to offer jobs to PwD. Organisations with a high skilled workforce in the banking industry, logistics, and technology did not expect to find suitable candidates (1, 6). Organisations with mainly low qualified jobs were much more likely to hire PwD (28, 30). Multi-nationals face the challenge of alignment with head office policies, e.g. the “headcount” business principle, makes it impossible to hire people for part-time jobs (4, 5). Larger organisations are better equipped to hire PwD, as they have more workplaces and an HR department or a diversity manager that can dedicate time and expertise to hire the target group (e.g. 16, 18). Having adequate knowledge appeared to be the third crucial factor if an employer wants to place (more) PwD. Knowledge in this context is twofold,

namely knowledge about available instruments and knowledge about PwD. Virtually all employers, except inclusive employers, indicated that they lack knowledge of the characteristics, qualifications, and limitations of PwD. Smaller organisations considered the PA to be an administrative burden, and found it hard to find information and suitable candidates. They complained about the lack of external support of employment services of the municipalities (3, 4, 7, 10, 13, 14, 21). Inclusive employers did not report problems with regard to recruiting PwD. They pointed at multiple platforms to contact PwD (16, 17, 18).

#### 4.3. *The alignment of hiring activities of PwD with the overall HRM system: Internal fit*

With regard to the third research question, the internal fit, we found that many employers do not perceive suitable tasks in their organisation for PwD. They mentioned lack of vacancies or restructuring as a reason why no vacancies are available. Inclusive employers are more creative and apply a strength-based, person centred approach and are able to identify more employment opportunities compared to negative employers. So the question remains, whether there is not enough suitable work, or whether employers do not see the possibilities. Four HR activities were identified in the present study to hire PwD in response to the PA: (1) outsourcing employment to third parties; (2) employing PwD in existing jobs, without adjustments, but with assistance; (3) employing PwD in new jobs consisting of a combination of tasks that are already performed in the organisation; (4) creating new jobs that previously did not exist especially for the employment of PwD, through reshoring, or new business development mainly by inclusive employers. Inclusive employers hire PwD on regular, permanent employment contracts in jobs that are adjusted to fit the person or engage in collaborations with other organisations to create new jobs (16, 17, 18). The employers that do not have an intrinsic motivation, consider outsourcing, employment through contract agencies or deliberately do not comply with the PA and are prepared to pay financial penalties (1–5). Inclusive organisations are much more open to adjusting current jobs to fit the abilities of PwD and have a creative mindset (16, 18). In the selection phase, these employers indicated that a good person-job and organisation fit is essential, and that a person-centered approach is necessary, such as job carving. Organisations (5, 10) that do not employ PwD indicated that most managers have a ‘function-oriented’ perspective, they do not change the job requirements and therefore have trouble to fill current vacancies with PwD. Organisations that have a negative attitude toward hiring PwD, questioned whether PwD can meet the job requirements, and therefore do not intend to hire PwD. They pointed at essential skills (work accurately, independently, under time pressures and able to follow safety regulations), required in all cases, even in the lowest qualified jobs (2, 10).

### 5. Implications for Social Policy and HRM

This study shows that employers respond to the law requiring to hire PwD by considering a whole range of organisational factors, including their business and HRM strategies. This demonstrates the necessity to build a bridge between social policy and strategic HRM. Although none of the employers indicated that they intended to hire PwD because of the law, it did stimulate them to think about hiring PwD. However, [Dibben, James, & Cunningham \(2001\)](#) warn, that by solely reacting to the law, employers may resort to ad hoc HR activities that do not automatically develop into a proactive and integrated HR strategy to effectively address the needs of PwD and their employers. [Dibben et al. \(2002\)](#) describe how stressing moral and legal motivations may position PwD in a needy, vulnerable and “different” situation, rather than as people with talents and skills. In this study quota did not change the minds of employers with a negative attitude; they were prepared to pay financial penalties. Stressing the possibilities to recruit PwD for organisations experiencing labour shortages, may also be ineffective, as most negative employers in our study did not think creatively about fitting PwD in regular jobs. The results of this study suggest that employers might be more receptive to social policy measures when they are aligned with the organisational business purpose. In addition, providing employers with innovative views on job carving to utilize the full potential of current staff is more likely to be successful.



Employers use strategic arguments to support their attitude towards hiring PwD by referring to different levels of fit. With this study, we demonstrate that hiring PwD should be studied in a contextual way, and that situational factors play a role in employer's strategic choices. The results are in line with previous studies in disability, social policy and SHRM literature. For instance, in line with SHRM literature, we found that employers strive for competitive advantage through human capital that is rare, valuable, difficult to replicate, and non-substitutable. Applying this to the human capital of PwD, competitive advantage may stem from: (1) special talents, that enhance person-job fit (2) cost-effectiveness, through (tax) benefits for employers or reduced sickness risks through special insurances or (3) benefits accrued from diversity and CSR, which were all mentioned by employers in our study.

Organisations that have an SHRM perspective that aims for economic rationality could be receptive to hear about ways to lower their labour costs, and how to achieve competitive advantage through wage subsidies. Organisations that have a SHRM perspective aimed at creating employee well-being, might consider how their current employees could benefit from the employment of PwD, for instance by reducing high work pressure through job carving. And finally, for organisations that have a social legitimacy SHRM approach, the moral appeal to give PwD a chance on the labour market might resonate well.

### Disclosure of interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interest.

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### Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.alter.2020.10.002>.

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