



A Study of the Employability of Persons with Disabilities (Pwds) in Malaysia

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Abstract

The Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) Act, 2008 of Malaysia was established to grant disable people the equitable right of access to employment just as a non-disabled person. Although most of the developed and developing countries have established their own comprehensive education blueprint to support the PWDs, their employability is still doubtful. Therefore, the PWDs are uncertain as to their future employment opportunities. As stated in Item 4.4 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2015 which identified the quality of education. Whereby 2030, there must be a substantial increase in the number of youths and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship. Hence the purpose of this study is to explore the thoughts and opinions of employers, teachers, and parents of PWDs in order to gain a deeper understanding with regard to the employability of PWDs. For that purpose, a qualitative study approach was systematically applied. The findings of the study showed a mixed opinion in regards to the employability of PWDs.

Keywords: Pwds; Disabled; Employment; Employers; Teachers; Parents.

1. Introduction

Malaysia has a well-developed education system for persons with disabilities (PWDs) in the higher education institutions, vocational schools, etc. These higher education institutions and vocational schools; private and public, have vigorously produced a skilled workforce for the respective industries. However, it is believed that the PWDs are still neglected from successful penetration into the job industry. This is mainly because of the occurrence of problems during the transaction point from school, to post-secondary training, to employment as far as the PWDs are concerned. Therefore, their employability is doubtful. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2015 no. 4 stated that, by 2030, there must be a substantial increase in the number of youths and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs, and entrepreneurship. The SDGs 2015 was adopted at the United Nations Summit in 2015 by all member countries which aim to mobilize efforts to end all forms of poverty, fight inequalities and tackle climate change while ensuring that no one is left behind. Malaysia is one of the 193 countries which has agreed to adopt the Agenda.

On the issue of employing PWDs, research shows that their employment are to a certain degree in line with established policies. Kudo (2010) highlighted that many companies are providing employment opportunities to PWDs, in line with their Corporate Social Responsibilities (CSR) objectives. However, there are companies which are still reluctant to employ PWDs because they perceive that this will cause productivity losses or become a burden to the organization.

Thus, this study employs a qualitative approach to explore the thoughts and opinions of employers, teachers, and parents of PWDs in order to gain a deeper understanding with regard to the employability of PWDs. The study also aims to find out the availability of employment opportunities and the level of willingness among employers to hire PWDs in Malaysia, and the challenges faced by PWDs in their working environment once they are hired.

2. Literature review

Furuoka, Lim, Pazim, and Mahmud, (2011), studied the state of employment of PWDs in the United States, Japan, and Malaysia. The researchers concluded that the government of these countries has established legislation to protect the rights of PWDs. According to Lee and Lee (2016), the employment of PWDs has increased in some countries. For instance, Korea has introduced a mandatory employment quota system for PWDs in 1990, while Japan had implemented a similar policy since 1976. The mandatory quota system in Korea is 3% in the public sector and 2.7% in the private sector, while in Japan the rates are 2.0 to 2.3% in the public sector and 1.8 to 2.1% in the private sector. With the introduction of the mandatory quota system, the employment of PWDs has increased tremendously in these countries. This policy seemed to uphold the sustainable development goals rather than the economic needs of the country, (Lim, 2013).

Similarly, Malaysia also addresses the issue of employability of PWDs. The Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) Act, 2008 was established to grant disable people the equitable right of access to employment just as a non-disabled person. However, it is believed that the Act has not been fully implemented as indicated by Ang, Ramayah, and Vun (2013). It remains unknown the exact number of PWDs employed in Malaysia, as it is not compulsory for employers to recognize and register them as a PWDs (Ng, 2009). As a result, there are calls for more studies on the employment of PWDs in Malaysia (Ang, Ramayah and Vun, 2013).

The PWDs Act 2008, promoted the rights for formal education for PWDs. In Malaysia, children from seven years old including the disabled are enrolled into the school system under the Ministry of Education which upon completion, PWDs have the opportunity to progress into vocational schools either in government or private schools. The acquired knowledge and skills enable PWDs to be independent and become employable in the country (Lee, Abdullah, and Mey, 2011). As a result, one percent of PWDs were successfully absorbed to work in the public sector while the absorption of PWDs into the private sector is still lacking (Salleh, 2002; Lee, Abdullah, and Mey, 2011). As can be seen, however, the absorption rate remains much to be desired.

Literature suggests that companies turn away PWDs due to employer's negative perception of them. Studies have also shown that the opportunity ratio of PWDs against people without the disability is lower in Malaysia (Ta and Leng, 2013). In addition, the negative perception held by society on PWDs's mobility, makes them be a target of discrimination in the workplace (Khoo et al., 2013). Employers still hold onto their stereotype thinking that disable employees may result in the loss of economic gains but this is mainly due to their own inability to manage the PWDs (Lavasani, What and Ortega, 2015). According to Ta et al. (2011), the assumption that companies will incur additional costs due to training and health services become the biggest stumbling block that prevents PWDs from joining the workforce.

By involving employers, teachers and parents of PWDs in this study will enable a deeper understanding of the issues of the employment of PWDs, thereby providing avenues for improvements in efforts to achieve the SDG15.

3. Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the employability of PWDs in Malaysia. This study involved managers or supervisors of PWDs, teachers, and parents of PWDs. Past researchers state that parents are skeptical about the employability of PWDs. Thus interviewing the parents of PWDs, will give a broader understanding of the issue. Interviewing these three groups of respondents, will produce a more holistic view of the situation and lessen ambiguity, providing better insights and understanding of PWDs and their employability.

Qualitative methods are most suitable for this type of research, often closely allied with in-depth interviews, to reinforce and evaluate findings on a broader scale. It can increase the understanding of an individuals' views and knowledge of the given topics and situation as stated by Leedy and Ormond (2010) and Polit and Beck (2010). Unlike quantitative studies that aim to determine statistical relationships between variable measured numerically, qualitative studies seek to make use of participants' narratives and analyze them in order to derive meaning (Zikmund, Babin Carr, and Griffin, 2012). Qualitative research uses a pragmatic approach towards an extensive understanding of the specific occurrences under context-specific settings without the need to manipulate the occurrence of interest (Austin, and Sutton, 2014; Gelling, 2015). The researcher can collect and present the rich data obtained through interviews (Morettietal, 2011 and Silverman, 2010).

As such, interviews were conducted among PWDs' parents, employers, and teachers from the special needs school in Malaysia. The data were collected until saturation and a content analysis was performed which entailed open, axial coding and selective coding to identify themes that addressed the research questions of the study.

Convenience sampling method was adopted as the most eligible way to gather information for this study. The method stressed on the subjects that were selected on the basis of them being conveniently available to provide the information required (Sekaran and Bougie, 2013). Therefore, this research drew a sample from the population of parents of PWDs and employers, as well as teachers in Malaysia.

According to Ulin, Robinson, and Tolley (2005), when handling qualitative research, it is normal to use small sample sizes. Moreover, Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) claimed that a minimum of six participants will generate appropriate data for qualitative studies. In this study, in-depth interviews consisted of semi-structured questions were used during the face to face interviews with the selected nine respondents. The interviews lasted on average one hour each.

4. Findings

4.1. Employment Opportunities for Pwds

Respondent 1, mentioned they have an agreement with certain Non-Profit Organisation (NGO) whereby they will contact the NGO whenever there are employment opportunities for PWDs. The respective area manager will identify a suitable outlet to place the PWDs but prior to that, an interview with the PWD and the parents will be held where the manager will explain the job scopes. According to Respondent 2, if a PWDs is capable of performing the job, they will be hired without any discrimination. So far, both respondents are satisfied with the performance of the PWDs while admitting that it is not mandatory for them to hire PWDs.

4.2. The Willingness of Employers to Hire Pwds

According to Respondent 3, the management is very pleased with the performance of PWDs in their team because they are very disciplined and loyal. Respondent 1 said that employment of PWDs started in the 1980s even before they established a Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Department. Usually, they hire PWDs through word of mouth and mostly hire workers with hearing and speech disabilities. They altered their outlets to cater for the PWDs such as by using brighter lights and coloured buzzers. Most PWDs are stationed in the kitchen and those with learning disabilities have responsibilities in the dining area to train them to handle more complex tasks. Currently, Respondent 1 has more than 70 PWDs working for them. Respondent 4 claimed that they do not have any particular policy for PWDs because they treat their employees equally. However, they have modified their toilets and the car parks to accommodate the PWDs.

4.3. Perceptions of Teachers' on the Employability of Pwds

Respondent 2 mentioned that they received extensive educational support from the government for PWDs students, including providing comprehensive and holistic modules to support the teachers in their teaching and learning activities. In addition, the government has also supplied the necessary equipment and apparatus to support and facilitate the teaching process. Consequently, the schools were able to develop the PWDs students to pursue their studies independently into vocational schools, thus securing better job opportunities. Respondent 2 also added that the support for PWDs students has also come widely from the commitments of parents. While parents should trust the schools and teachers' capabilities in preparing the students with the relevant skills needed in the workplace, according to Respondent 5, they encourage parents to play a significant role and be directly involved in the schools' activities to develop the potentials of their PWDs students. However, despite a well-established government support towards the development of PWDs students, the parents, however, are not able to utilise them for their children due to financial constraints. This is because the government is not providing sufficient financial aids to support the families.

On the contrary, Respondent 6 feels that employability of PWDs is not easy as they are always looked upon negatively by employers. They are always judged by their physical outlook and disabilities when they should actually focus on their strengths and capabilities. Respondent 6 feels that employers should be more receptive towards PWDs by giving them equal job opportunities.

4.4. Obstacles Faced By Pwds in Their Working Environment

Respondent 6 thinks that PWDs workers are loyal employees. They are the type of people who do not know how to say no to their employers. Therefore bullying is quite common among the PWDs workers. Respondent 7 from the parents' group complained about their children being victims of bullying in the workplace, especially if the employers do not take proper measures to prevent them. Respondent 7 stated that sometimes their PWDs children do not know how to differentiate right from wrong and as a result they are easily influenced. Hence, the parents have to monitor their children closely even at the workplace. The respondent from the parents' group is of the opinion that it is their responsibility also to ensure that the employers are well informed about the disabilities of their children leading to a mutual understanding and better cooperation between the two parties.

However, according to Respondent 9 from the employers' group, PWDs who came through NGO are well trained and exposed to the work environment because they have a job coach to assist them in adapting to the work environment and also to listen to their problems. Nevertheless, Respondent 9 cautioned that any fundamental problems pertaining to PWDs must be notified to the respective employers in advance to avoid any unsolicited problems. If the problems are not brought forward by the parents or NGO or teachers early, it could be detrimental to the PWDs at the workplace. Respondent 9 had experienced a case where the instructor had to repeat instructions several times to a student. Further investigation showed that the student was a PWD. Such problems could have been avoided if the employers were notified in advance prior to their recruitment.

4.5. Perceptions of Parents on the Employability of Pwds

Respondent 8 was very positive in allowing her child for future employment. In fact Respondent 8 believed that her child was capable of being an entrepreneur immediately upon graduation from her vocational school. Her exposure in fashion and tailoring from the vocational school had increased her confidence in her child. The Respondent is satisfied with the government's initiatives in developing the potentials of her child. The various therapies such as speech and horse-riding therapy had helped to enhance her child's potentials. Seminars attended by the Respondent had also helped her to be psychologically prepared in order to assist her child to gain employment.

Similar responses were also received from Respondent 7 where she claimed that teachers have played a vital role in developing the potentials of her child. The teachers went beyond their responsibilities in the classrooms by creating a network with potential employers for their children. Respondent 7 is very satisfied and grateful for the treatment of the employer towards her child because he was given proper training before he started work. His co-workers were very co-operative and helpful. He had never been discriminated because of his disabilities. In fact, he enjoyed working in the environment with his co-workers.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the government should play an important role in enforcing the employment of PWDs in order to increase their employment rate in the country. They should not only join efforts with the educators and vocational trainers but also work collectively with prospective employers, understand the requirements and the types of skills needed among the PWDs.

Overall the findings revealed that parents collectively agreed that PWDs students who are well trained and equipped with the necessary skills are successfully employed in the workforce. The parents are happy and satisfied with the government's support and treatment by employers towards PWDs. This will eventually make them able to survive independently.

On the other hand, employers feel the challenge is for the parents to send and fetch their disable children although they provide flexibility. Nevertheless, for restaurants' employability, persons with physical disabilities are not suitable because the facilities in the restaurants are not accommodative to their needs. In order to create awareness level, employers can work with JKM, SOCSO and participate in the conference and talks. Employers can share that they do employ PWDs. Employer highlighted that MNCs especially Japanese firms hired a lot more PWDs whereby they have to create the job opportunity for them. They feel that rather than giving the opportunity to foreign workers, our country can give or create more opportunities to PWDs.

Similarly, teachers also agree that all the support given to them are utilized to enhance the skills and employability level of the PWDs students. Moreover, they agree that these students are successful employees to the extent of becoming entrepreneurs. However, the teachers also feel that employability for these children is not easy. Only a handful of them is employed. There are still many of them who are able to contribute to the nation's workforce but not employed.

In short, the findings of this study concluded that positive feedbacks of the employability of PWDs. However, the government should make the employability of PWDs mandatory similar to Japan and Korea where they have two percent to three percent mandatory employment quota for PWDs. Then, more of these PWDs are employed. In addition, many of these PWDs will have the confidence to work independently too.

Although society holds a negative perception towards PWDs, this study proves that PWDs are able to be employed. In addition, Grimmer and Bingham (2013) and Lee, Park, Rapert, and Newman (2012) indicated that customers' perceptions on the firms depend on the firms' economy and social policies especially in profit maximization. For instances, in their corporate and social responsibilities towards hiring disable persons. In addition, securing employment has a certain degree of positive impact on PWDs in terms of financial stability and psychological empowerment. Employment also increases one's sense of recognition and self-respect as well as the opportunity for PWDs to contribute to the country's development.

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