

# **Employees with Disabilities: Malaysian Employers' Reflections**

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## **Abstract**

Employment among persons with disabilities remains controversial and debatable. This paper briefly explores employers' perspectives on managing employees with disabilities in their organisations. In particular, this paper discusses experiences shared by organisations when hiring persons with disabilities. A qualitative study was utilised and semi-structured interviews were adopted as the main data collection instruments. Six employers from the private sector in service industries in Malaysia with a breadth experience in hiring PWDs were selected as participants. The discussion of the results centred on the profiles of the employers and reasons for hiring employees with disabilities in organisations. The implications of the findings for organisations, service providers, and the government are further discussed.

**Keywords:** Persons with Disabilities, Employment, Hiring, Employers' Experience With Persons With Disabilities, Malaysia

## **Introduction**

The right to work is fundamentally significant and it should be accessible to all persons, regardless whether the person is normal or has a disability. The ability to obtain job allows a person to improve his or her individual economic status. It also facilitates people to improve self-esteem, participate socially, as well as gain knowledge and skills. Unfortunately, persons with disabilities across the globe are trapped with the issue of unemployment and the topic remains at the forefront of discussions.

The World Report on Disability (2011) revealed that the unemployment issue among disabled people affected them to being socially excluded, less economically involved, and living in poverty. These negative effects are due to their unpleasant experiences in accessing many areas such as employment, health support, education, and transportation. In order to ensure persons with disabilities to have a better life, several measures have been carried out worldwide. For example, Perry (2003) pointed out the execution of the Biwako Millennium Framework for Action toward an inclusive, barrier-free, and rights-based society. This framework is manifested in promoting the rights and equality of persons with disabilities in Asia

and the Pacific. Among the important key points discussed in the framework is the equal employment opportunity among persons with disabilities. In Malaysia, the government has enacted Persons with Disabilities Act 2008 to provide equal opportunity and workforce diversity to those persons with disabilities.

According to Malaysia Persons with Disabilities Act of 2008 (Act 685), “persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in society”. This act was enacted to provide equal opportunity for persons with disabilities and to ensure their welfare and well-being are taken care of. As the act came into force, it opens a new dimension and hope to PWDs (Islam, 2015) with the intention of improving the persons with disabilities’ quality of life (Hirwan Jasbir, Harlida Abdul Wahab, & Hamiza Omar, 2013) as well as guaranteeing their human rights fundamental (Ang, 2014; Hirwan Jasbir et. al, 2013).

The Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development has outlined seven categories of disabilities in Malaysia. These categories are hearing impairment, vision impairment, speech impairment, learning disabilities, physical disabilities, mental, and multiple disabilities. According to Department of Social Welfare statistics report (2015), currently, there are 365, 677 persons with disabilities registered with the department. These amount of disabled people are further categorised into 129, 550 (35.43%) learning disabilities, 125, 491 (34.32%) physical disabilities, 32, 807 (8.97%) visual impairment, 29, 636 (8.10%) hearing impairment, 29, 403 (8.04%) mental disorder, 16, 963 (4.64%) multiple disabilities, and 1, 827 (0.50%) speech impairment. Table 1.1 illustrates the number of disabled people registered according to the disabilities in Malaysia.

**Table 1.1**  
*Number of PWDs according to the types of disabilities in Malaysia*

Categories of Disabilities	Number	Percentage (%)
Learning disabilities	129, 550	35.43
Physical disabilities	125, 491	34.32
Visual impairment	32, 807	8.97
Hearing impairment	29, 636	8.10
Mental disorder	29, 403	8.04
Multiple disabilities	16, 963	4.64
Speech impairment	1, 827	0.50
Total	365, 677	100.00

Source: Department of Social Welfare Statistics Report (2015)

Employment has been identified as a vital need for persons with disabilities. Significantly, the employer is identified as a major stakeholder in discussing employment among persons with disabilities (Ju, Roberts, & Zhang, 2013). The employer may influence the employment rate

among persons with disabilities as well as showcase their ability (Unger, 2002). In this regard, viewpoints and perspectives of employers on issues of persons with disabilities employment are certified (Unger, 2002).

In addition, there are various studies conducted from the employers' perspective related to persons with disabilities and were summarised between 1999 to 2012 by Ju et al. (2013), such as, (i) employers' attitudes toward workers with disabilities and their American with Disabilities Act (ADA) rights, (ii) employers' willingness to hire disabled employees, (iii) employers' attitudes towards specific types of disabilities, (iv) employers' perception on the employability of persons with disabilities, (v) employers' experience in hiring persons with disabilities, and (vi) factors related to employers' attitudes such as gender, organisation size, and experience with disabled employees.

Apparently, the process of managing persons with disabilities employees is challenging. Problems arise when organisations do not have adequate knowledge and skills in managing disabled employees (Kulkarni & Valk, 2010). For instance, a study performed by Kulkarni and Valk (2010) found, firstly, there are limited policies and practices used for managing disabled employees in the organisations. Additionally, as the policies and practices are limited, most of the organisations and the human resource departments rely on personal experience and self-learning in managing disabled employees (Kulkarni & Valk, 2010). In this regard, each organisation has different policies and practices in managing disabled employees because they are unsure whether the methods are applicable to all organisations accordingly (Duff, Ferguson, & Gilmore, 2007).

Secondly, accommodating disabled employees in organisations is also another consideration among employers at the organisation level (Domzal, Houtenville, & Sharma 2008; Araten-Bergman, 2016). A study conducted by Domzal et al. (2008) identified 20% of officers in charge of managing disabled employees who stated that they have difficulties accommodating disabled employees. The reason for this percentage is due to the fact that they do not know how to assist the disabled employees as their needs differ from one another.

In conjunction with the abovementioned, one can say that employers' perspectives on employees with disabilities are still conflicting (Ju et al., 2013; Lengnick-Hall, Gaunt, & Kulkarni, 2008). The inconsistency is contributed by several reasons such as challenging and evolving current working environment, implementation of legislative laws and clause which made the employers think that they may be sued for inappropriate actions towards disabled employees, and employers still have inconclusive information about persons with disabilities (Ju, Zhang, & Pacha, 2012; Kaye et al., 2011; Khoo et al., 2012). On top of that, continuing misconceptions among employers have made the issue remain problematic and complicated (Araten-Bergman, 2016; Lengnick-Hall, Gaunt, & Kulkarni, 2008; Luecking, 2008). Hence, it opens room for further investigation by the researcher. Reflecting on the Malaysian scenario, although the government has implemented laws and various policies as well as programs, the participation of the persons

with disabilities in the employment continues to be problematic and disappointing (Lee, Abdullah, & Mey, 2011; Othman, 2013; Ta & Leng, 2013). Therefore, it is essential to explore the employers' experiences in managing persons with disabilities employees as this could help to understand the dynamic nature of disabled employees in the workforce (Othman, 2013).

In the present study, the authors utilised a qualitative research design to explore the employers' experiences in managing PWDs employees. The participants for the study were from private organisations in service industries and they are actively hiring disabled employees in Malaysia.

### **Methodology**

This study employed a qualitative method to explore participants' responses. A purposeful sampling was found to be the appropriate technique for identifying participants for the study. The process of identifying the participants for the study started with the researcher gathering the lists of employers hiring employees with disabilities. The lists were assembled from various sources, especially from organisations that work closely with persons with disabilities, such as Malaysia Social Welfare Department, Social Security Organisation (SOCSO), and Malaysia Labour Department. Because the author wanted to focus on the employers' experiences in hiring and managing employees with disabilities, the selection of the employers was based on the following criteria: i) they have the authority to hire and terminate non-disabled employees and disabled employees, ii) they work at private organisations in service industries, iii) they offer competitive employment to employees with disabilities, and iv) they agree to participate in the study voluntarily.

As the information regarding employers that hire employees with disabilities was obtained by the researcher, an initial contact was made via phone calls with the officers or executives of the organisations. From the phone calls, six employers from private organisations in service industries with vast experience in hiring and managing employees with disabilities agreed and were selected to participate in the study.

After the employers agreed to participate in the study, the researcher sent an email comprised of an invitation letter from the graduate school and the interview protocol. The invitation letter outlined the purpose of the study as well as the declaration that all the information provided by the employers were strictly treated with confidentiality. The idea of attaching the interview protocol together with the invitation letter was to provide the employer with an idea about the interview session. Likewise, this practice gave the employers ample time to make preparation as they will share their experiences of hiring employees with disabilities.

For the purpose of obtaining information for the study, a qualitative semi-structured interview was utilised. Accordingly, semi-structured interview permits the exchange of questions and responses between the interviewer and the interviewee (Kvale, 2006). The interview protocol gives the interviewer flexibility and freedom to obtain comprehensive information, to interpret

underlying meanings of the interviews opinions, and explore the emerging issue (Robson, 2002).

The interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis. Each of the interview session took approximately 1 hour and 30 minutes. The interviews were conducted in *Bahasa Melayu* and were translated into English for the analysis purposes. The audio recordings were collected using an MP3 audio recorder. The interview audio was then transcribed as soon as possible, as stated by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (1994). The analysis was assisted by using computer-aided qualitative data analysis software, ATLAS.ti. Moreover, ATLAS.ti permitted the researcher to create links between codes, themes, or sub-themes and enabled them to generate a visual model through a network. The data of the study were assembled from September to December, 2016.

## **Results**

Table 2 shows the participants' profiles. From the table, it can be seen that employers were mostly accepting towards employees with learning disabilities. Five out of six employers who were interviewed in the study had hired employees with learning disabilities. Also, two out of six employers had hired employees with hearing and physical disabilities.

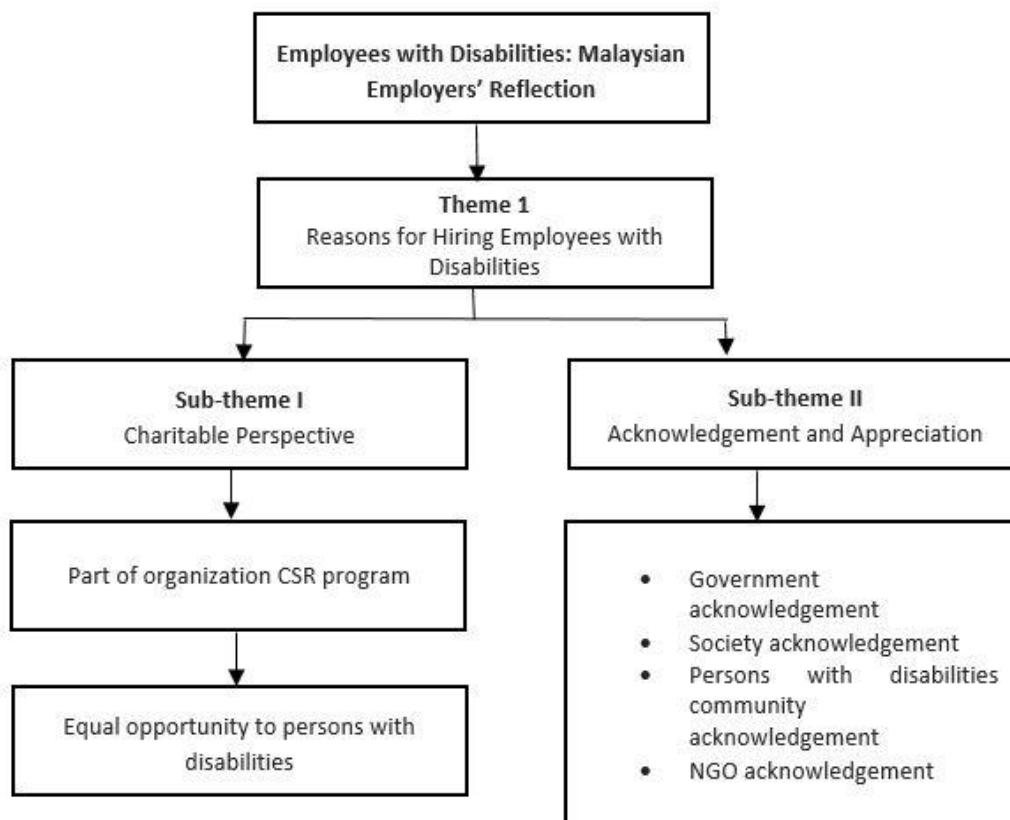
**Table 2**  
***Profile of Participants Employers***

Participants	Year of Established	Categorization of Service Industries	No. of Employees	First intake of PWDs employees	No. of PWDs employees	Percentage (%)	Types of disabilities
P1	2000	Accommodation (Hotel industry)	350	2004	2	0.57	4, 7
P2	2013	Food industry	9	2016	3	33.3	1, 6
P3	1973	Food industry	30000	1991	350	1.17	2,3,6
P4	1957	Wholesale & Retail	7000	2012	136	1.94	1, 2,3,4,6 ,7
P5	2008	Accommodation (Hotel industry)	132	2012	3	2.27	6
P6	1967	Wholesale & Retail	4200	2011	29	0.69	2, 4, 6, 7

Note: Types of disabilities: 1 = visual impairment, 2 = hearing impairment, 3 = speech impairment, 4 = physical disabilities, 5 = mental disorder, 6 = learning disabilities, 7 = multiple disabilities

Moreover, Table 2 indicates the number of employees with disabilities in the organisations together with their percentages, years of the first intake of employees with disabilities in the organisations, and the organisations' year of establishment. The highest number of employees with disabilities hired in the organisations is 136 (3.4%), followed by 29 (0.83%), 18 (81.81%), 3 (2.27%), and 2 (0.57%). On the other hand, the first intake of employees with disabilities in the organisations begins in 1991, then 2004, 2011, 2012, and the most recent is on 2016. Accordingly, the oldest organisations were established in 1957, followed with 1967, 1973, 2000, and 2013.

From the interviews and analysis performed by the researcher, employers' reasons for hiring employees with disabilities were identified. The sub-themes were further identified and discussed in detail. The emerged themes and the sub-themes are illustrated in Figure 1.



**Figure 1**  
*Themes and Sub-themes Emerged*

### ***Theme 1: Reasons for Hiring Employees with Disabilities***

These reasons can be divided into two categories: charitable perspective and acknowledgement and appreciation.

#### ***Charitable Perspective.***

The employers admitted that the practice of hiring employees with disabilities in their organisations was stirred by corporate social responsibility. They view the employment of persons with disabilities and other underprivileged people as a noble approach. Moreover, by hiring such group of people, organisations see the practice as meaningful and one of the ways for them to give back to the community. Compared with other types of charity activities like monetary assistance, employers consider the employment of persons with disabilities as more appropriate because the practice could help the persons with disabilities improve their quality of life. This can be achieved when they are capable to earn a salary. With the salary earned, persons with disabilities are able to take care of themselves and their families. For example, Employer 6 and Employer 4 pointed out:

*“...It is our responsibility to help as much as we can to this group of people. Hiring them is part of our CSR program. As in return, when the society sees our effort hiring the disabled people, they will say that our company is care and kind...”* [Employer 6]

*“...Among employers’ out there, we are well-known for our CSR program of hiring persons with disabilities...”* [Employer 4]

The employers also believed that hiring persons with disabilities is one way to promote equal opportunity among them. The opportunities given allow them to show their abilities and talent. This at the same time shows the public that persons with disabilities are also capable to carry out work like non-disabled people if they were given the chance, which in turn helps to change fallacious perception towards persons with disabilities. Employer 1 and Employer 2 explained their views as such:

*“...Not only employing this special group of people, but making sure that we’re giving them the opportunity to get the exposure and they learn something from the opportunity given...”* [Employer 1]

*“...We are not employing the disabled to generate profit, we are more towards giving equal employment opportunity. I see our practice of hiring them in that way. I believed they are can do the work if they get the chance. The same thing with normal people am I right? If I don’t get the chance before, I don’t think I am here today...”* [Employer 2]

### **Acknowledgement and Appreciation.**

The employers described that the practice of hiring employees with disabilities benefited the organisations to project a reputable image. The organisations' approach and effort of hiring persons with disabilities was acknowledged by several parties such as the government agencies, the society, the persons with disabilities community, and the non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Moreover, some of the employers were awarded Persons With Disabilities (PWDs) Employer Care Award or "Anugerah Majikan Prihatin OKU" from the government agency. The acknowledgement and credit remarked the organisations' effort of hiring persons with disabilities. For instance, Employer 4 and 3 postulate:

*"...We are in XXX organisation, we are one of the companies that always provide job to the disabled people. Our practice has been acknowledged by the Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development and was awarded several times..."* [Employer 4]

*"...In food industry, we can say we are the pioneer of the program hiring disabled people in Malaysia. Our uniqueness has been recognised by the government and they give recognition to us as well..."* [Employer 3]

Furthermore, when talking about acknowledgement and appreciation, employers frequently mentioned the appreciations received are from the persons with disabilities community. Employer 3 shared her experience:

*"...What I want to share is, our practice of hiring disabled community was not only were appreciated by the normal people but we also received overwhelmed appreciation from the disabled community. For example, even though they are (disabled people) connected and communicate with each other through Facebook, they can come all the way from Hong Kong to see how our disabled employees working here..."* [Employer 3]

### **Discussions**

This study aims to understand and explore the employers' experiences in managing persons with disabilities employees in their organisations. The findings were derived from interviews with six participating employers. Examination and exploration of these employers' experiences can benefit government agencies, service providers, and potential employers to hire persons with disabilities employees in their organisations where developing understanding is crucial toward the approaches of employers and should be omitted in doing business.

Based on the profiles of the employers, it can be seen that most of them are favourable in hiring employees with learning disabilities. The results from the findings are coherent with the

work performed by Bricout and Bentley (2000) and Butterworth (2012), where employers are favourable in hiring employees with such types of disability. The anticipated findings found several possible explanations of why persons with learning disabilities were favourably hired by employers. First, persons with learning disabilities makes the largest group of disabled people registered with Malaysia Social Welfare Department. Due to this, it has a compelling effect on employers' willingness to hire employees with disabilities in their organisations. Furthermore, the employers described one of the major concerns of hiring persons with disabilities is that they need to register with Social Welfare Department. They further elaborated that the registration is a great concern since employers need to ensure their practice of hiring employees with disabilities complies with the law and helps to manage them effectively in the organisations.

The second explanation is that employers who hired employees with learning disabilities in the present study actively collaborate with disability educational institutions and disability-related organisations. These disability educational institutions and disability-related organisations have primarily trained persons with learning disabilities. The mutual agreement between the employers and the institutions has made the collaboration a success. Likewise, the employers were able to recruit employees with disabilities since the institutions channelled their qualified disabled trainers to work with the employers.

Another key explanation for employers to be in favour of hiring employees with learning disabilities is that they are physically fit to carry out tasks in organisations. They can easily move around and access places at the workplace. At the same time, employers would not need to do any modification at the workplaces. Thus, this leads to maximum participation and inclusion of employees with disabilities in the organisations.

Looking at the year of the organisations was established and the year they started to hire employees with disabilities, a clear message emerging from the findings is that organisations with high awareness on the importance of employment among persons with disabilities made the decision to recruit their employees with disabilities early into their organisations. However, the findings also revealed a few of organisations that took a longer time to make decisions in hiring employees with disabilities. A possible interpretation for this is that these organisations may have limited exposure and awareness on persons with disabilities. Moreover, out of six employers, four began to hire employees with disabilities in 2011 onwards. This is a positive sign of the government's effort in conducting disability awareness and exposure to employers and the society since Malaysian government established Persons With Disabilities Act in 2008. After years of conducting these, the government have positively influenced and convinced employers to hire employees with disabilities in their organisations.

Likewise, the current study found that even after employers hire employees with disabilities in their organisations, the number remains small. Most of the employers have less than 10% of persons with disabilities from their total number of employees. This indicates that the

employees with disabilities remain a minority group employed in organisations. One of the contributors to the small number of persons with disabilities in employment in Malaysian private sector is that there is no legislative mandate to include persons with disabilities in employee recruitment process. Apparently, there is a policy designed called 1% employment policy should be filled up by employees with disabilities, yet this policy only applied to the government sector. The absence of the legislative mandate and clauses on persons with disabilities in private sector has made them excluded and unfavourably engaged by employers in the working stream. This finding echoes Abidi and Sharma's (2014) work where employees with disabilities makes the minority group of employees in organisations. Moreover, they found that among the barriers to the employment of persons with disabilities in private sector is due to no legislative mandate or equal opportunity in private sector for persons with disabilities.

Being empathic toward persons with disabilities for being socially left out and considering the problems they encounter on the job market, many participating employers expressed that projecting charitable perspective as a major reason for them to recruit persons with disabilities. Some of them also mentioned that their recruitment of persons with disabilities was due to giving equal opportunity to persons with disabilities same like the non-disabled people. On top of that, employers expressed several appreciations and acknowledgements they had experienced when hiring employees with disabilities from the government, the society, the disabled people community, and the NGOs. This finding is in line with the work performed by Huang and Chen (2015) where hiring persons with disabilities showed that the organisations cared for the community, which helped to project a reputable image. Since not many organisations are willing to hire persons with disabilities, the employers' great-hearted effort and initiative should be praised, acknowledged, and appreciated by the community. Equally important, the effort shown helps to increase the number of persons with disabilities in joining the workforce. At the same time, it helps them to create a positive progress such as self-dependent, financially stable, and manifest significant contribution to the society.

From another standpoint, since the hiring of employees with disabilities is part of employers' CSR programs, this shows that the employers are not stressing on the concept of inclusive employment. Inclusive employment refers to persons with disabilities getting equal access and opportunity to gain employment (Leymatt, 2011). Employing employees with disabilities can be considered as "cosmetic prop" to the organisations because the practice will put them in the limelight. However, there are no defective consequences when they do not hire disabled people in the organisations. The current practice is not very proactive. Persons with disabilities should have equal consideration and opportunity same like non-disabled people when it comes to hiring process in organisations. There is an urgent need for organisations to shift their views on persons with disabilities from charity-based into human rights-based as it has been stressed in Biwako Millenium Framework for Action and Persons With Disabilities Act 2008.

One limitation of the study is its small sample size as with most cases of in-depth interview qualitative studies. In anticipation of this concern, this study tried to include participating employers of both genders, working in various service industry types, hiring employees with different disability types, and coming from different geographical regions. Conversely, it is conceivable that more themes may have been identified if there had been more participants who took part in the study. With regard to qualitative nature, this study does not envision that generalisations be made beyond its scope. Nonetheless, the results can be understood as exploratory, which is helpful for future validation conducted by using different research methodologies.

### **Conclusions**

This study underscores the importance of understanding employers' experiences in managing persons with disabilities employees in organisations. Through a better understanding of the employers' experiences in managing persons with disabilities employees, such as reasons for hiring employees with disabilities, this can help employers and practitioners to consider factors and elements when they have the desire to hire employees with disabilities. The results have a number of implications for employers and service providers. First, the number of employees with disabilities in organisations should be increased. Organisations are advisable to increase the number of employees with disabilities by giving opportunities and chances to persons with disabilities since many of them are unemployed as well as helping them to improve their quality of life. Secondly, the identified reasons for hiring employees with disabilities in this study shows that the practice of hiring disabled people is largely influenced by social responsibility. Organisations have to change the practice of hiring persons with disabilities from social responsibility into inclusive employment. It is vital for persons with disabilities and other minority groups of people to have equal access to employment whereby they should be included during the organisations' recruitment process.

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