Empowering Person with Disabilities (PWD) For Graduates with Work-Readiness Training: A Journey with Employers

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Abstract

The employment sector presents a significant challenge to Persons with Disabilities (PWD). The rates of employability and unemployment among PWD are also increasingly worrying. Various stigmas and discrimination are experienced by PWD while working in certain sectors to the extent that their capabilities are perceived to have a significant performance gap compared to non-disabled workers. Therefore, the primary objective of this study is to explore the issues and challenges faced by employees with disabilities within a year of being placed in an organization and undergoing the career skills training of the (Peneraju Juang Skil Kerjaya) . This study utilizes a qualitative method employing a thematic approach to analysis. To uncover these issues, seven PWD employees were interviewed using the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) method. The interviews were then transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis. The following four themes emerged: learning the necessary job skills, feelings of fear and difficulty adapting to the workplace environment, feeling inferior, and employer hesitancy in giving work assignments/instructions. These themes can serve as a guide to improving programs oriented towards the preparation of PWD graduate workers and the Training Module for Improving the Career Skills of PWD Graduates.

Keywords: Empowering, Person with Disabilities, Readiness Training, Skills

Introduction

Unemployed PWD Graduates with work readiness training describe a group of individuals with disabilities in Malaysia who have graduated from a higher education program, participated in job training, and are seeking employment. With the emergence of a global economic boom, career opportunities to transform the labor market into a more competitive entity await in the future. Responding to this challenge, various parties need to understand the questions and concerns arising from the current and expected changes in the workplace as we enter the era of the digital millennium and a world without borders.

The most significant obstacle among today's higher education graduates is meeting the job requirements and skills needed in the workplace (Suarta et al., 2017). Lack of qualifications is a primary factor limiting access to employment for the disabled, and negative attitudes among management levels are often identified as the main obstacle to the successful placement of disabled individuals (Toritsyn & Kabir, 2013). Their disabilities cause their abilities and opportunities to be denied, making them less competitive in the job market (Verulava & Bedianashvili, 2021). Creating an accessible workplace is essential to accommodate individuals with disabilities. Research emphasizes the positive effects of accessible infrastructure and inclusive workplace policies (Hernandez et al., 2017). Tailored skills development programs for individuals with disabilities have been shown to increase their employability (Capella-McDonnall, 2005). These programs focus on building both technical and soft skills. Discrimination and bias in the workplace can contribute to the unemployment of graduates with disabilities (Baldridge, Ehrhardt & Veiga, 2014). Employers' perceptions and misconceptions about the abilities of individuals with disabilities can influence hiring decisions. The role of government policy in addressing unemployment among graduates with disabilities is crucial, as demonstrated by a study impacting the impact of supportive policies in promoting inclusion and diversity in the workforce to be met by disabled workers (Shier, Jones, & Graham, 2015). According to the Social Model of Disability (SMD), if society is established and built in a way that is accessible and friendly to people with disabilities, those individuals will not be blocked from full participation in the world around them (Barnes, 2019). This model views the origin of disability as stemming from societal attitudes and physical structures, rather than being solely a medical condition faced by the individual. Social disability can lead to difficulties in making social and emotional progress, thereby reducing the quality of life for PWD. This study is also based on the Social Model of Disability, examining how organizational structures, policies, and cultural factors affect the experience of disabled workers through the Peneraju Juang Skil Kerjaya.

Graduates need to be prepared with skills and abilities for quality education, and training policies need to complement each other to make their dreams a reality (Suarta et al., 2017). In Malaysia, a career skills enhancement module that matches the potential and ability of OKU graduates in preparation for entering the world of work has already been developed. This study is a pilot study that uses a mixed-method design, a case study on 10-15 IPTA graduates with disabilities, and 10-15 Job Coaches from government-related companies (GLC). This research focuses on OKU graduates with physical disabilities. The research period is 18 months, starting from June 2022 until November 2023. The results of this study will contribute to the development of the training module for improving the

career skills of the disabled (SKIL-KERJAYA OKU) and the Job Coach module. This will provide a specific career enhancement training module for physically disabled Bumiputera graduates and a special training module for job coaches in preparation for placing disabled graduates in GLC through the MySTEP program. Therefore, the primary objective of this study is to comprehensively explore the issues and challenges encountered by employees with disabilities within a year of their placement in an organization, subsequent to undergoing the career skills training program offered by (Peneraju Juang Skil Kerjaya). The study aims to identify and analyze the specific obstacles faced by these individuals as they integrate into the workforce post-training. By delving into these challenges, the research seeks to provide insights that can inform strategies and interventions aimed at enhancing the employment experience and overall success of employees with disabilities in professional settings.

Materials and Methods

The researcher employed a qualitative method by implementing the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) approach. FGD is a qualitative research method commonly utilized in social science and market research. It entails a small group of participants, typically ranging from 6 to 10 people, who share their opinions, perceptions, and experiences on a specific topic under the guidance of a moderator (Morgan, 1997). The FGD technique is a qualitative research design intended to explore and comprehend participants' attitudes, beliefs, and experiences about a specific topic (Krueger & Casey, 2015). A small group of individuals, selected based on certain criteria, engage in open and interactive discussions facilitated by skilled moderators.

In this study, the purpose of the FGD was to gather in-depth insights about participants' experiences with employers during a year of working under the MyStep program. A total of seven participants took part in the FGD. Study participants have the right to express their thoughts without hesitation. Pseudonyms were used to represent them, and they were made aware that they could withdraw from this research at any point in time. Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data. Thematic analysis is a technique used to discover, examine, and describe patterns (themes) within qualitative data. Braun and Clarke (2006) highlight that thematic analysis is a versatile and approachable method that can be adjusted to suit various research questions and viewpoints. They define themes as patterns of responses or meanings within a dataset that explain or represent possible interpretations of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes capture important aspects of the data related to the research question and can be viewed as overarching concepts that emerge during the analysis process. Braun and Clarke (2006)

later stress that coding is a crucial step in thematic analysis and forms the basis for identifying potential themes. Thematic analysis in interviews involves self-transcribing as the first phase of qualitative data analysis. Textual findings from the narratives were collected and coded using manual analysis. The codes were reviewed to produce a thematic 'diagram' of the analysis.

Results

A thematic analysis was conducted on seven interview transcripts, each representing one disabled worker participant. The interviews aimed to uncover and understand the experiences of these individuals while working with employers in the selected sector. The analysis revealed a total of four themes derived from the interview transcripts, namely: (1) Learning a lot of skills needed in the job, (2), Feelings of fear and difficulty adapting to the workplace environment, (3), Feeling inferior, (4) Employers are hesitant to give work assignments/instructions.

Table 1: Demographic profile of the participants

Participants (not a real name)	Company (not a real name)	Age
R1	Education	25
R2	Education	26
R3	Finances	25
R4	Hospital	25
R5	Services	27
R6	NGO	24
R7	Foundation	27

1. Learning a lot of skills needed in the job

The statement "Learn a lot of skills needed in the job" discusses the importance of acquiring diverse skills in the workplace for individuals with disabilities. It emphasizes that learning various skills not only benefits their careers but also enhances their versatility in the job market. The skills gained may vary based on the industry and job role, encompassing technical skills, communication, cooperation, collaboration, and problem-solving abilities. The following quotes are from interviews with respondents:

"...Learned a lot related to the process of a letter being issued, how to deal with staff hassles, knowing about human resources"... (R1)

"…Interacting with customers via email and phone calls, and managing program participant registration…" (R2)

"…I was exposed to various situations when dealing with customers; from this point of view, I was able to gain experience and be confident to interact with customers…" (R3)

According to Omar et al., (2022), the problem related to the unemployment of disabled individuals is a challenging topic due to limited information on the characteristics and skills needed by the industry to promote employment for this group. The skills required for graduates to meet the needs of the job market include digital skills, information and communication technology skills, interpersonal skills, marketing skills, practical skills, and writing skills. On the other hand, according to the study by Abd Manaf et al., (2018), the majority of respondents (57.14%) suggested that employers and the community should be informed and educated about the capabilities of the disabled. Additionally, respondents recommended that job opportunities based on qualifications be opened and given to the disabled (28.57%), and suitable and safe facilities for the disabled should be improved (28.57%).

2. Feelings of fear and difficulty adapting to the workplace environment

The statement "feelings of fear and difficulty adapting to the workplace environment" addresses the challenges faced by respondents in adapting to and navigating the workplace environment. These challenges encompass both internal and external factors, impacting the emotional well-being and overall work experience of individuals. Specific challenges identified include stigma and discrimination, accessibility and accommodation concerns, and communication challenges. Communication difficulties emerge as a prominent issue, leading to social anxiety and feelings of isolation among respondents. Quotes from interviews further illustrate these challenges:

"…I think, in the long term, it makes them often gather among themselves and chat about other people. I'm a bit uncomfortable with this culture and sometimes feel left out. But not everything is like that…" (R3)

"…One of the main challenges I experienced was that it was difficult to understand what was taught…" (R4)

"…The structure of this building uses a lot of transparent glass which is quite clear so that I can't distinguish between glass and non-glass. This situation sometimes causes me to hit the glass. However, be more careful if you go through those places…" (R7)

According to Bam and Ronnie (2020), challenges and experiences of PWD employees at the workplace are evident in the practice of induction and orientation, the struggle with disclosing disabilities to colleagues, the desire to strive for 'normality,' and feelings of frustration and weakness at the workplace. In contrast, a study by Soeker et al., (2018) found that PWD workers perceived their colleagues in the workshop as "like family" and expressed enjoyment in work tasks and the work environment, highlighting special support from their colleagues. Achieving goals, engaging in work tasks, and experiencing a sense of universality at work contribute to employees finding meaning in their lives through work participation.

(3) Feeling inferior

Feelings of inferiority among employees PWD can arise from various factors, and addressing these concerns is crucial to foster an inclusive and supportive work environment. Inferiority feelings may stem from a negative workplace culture, leading to isolation if the workplace fails to support the abilities of individuals with disabilities. The fear of being perceived as less productive than non-disabled colleagues can contribute to low self-esteem. The following quotes are from interviews with respondents:

"...Low self-confidence - not confident of being able to do the given tasks correctly and well..." (RA3)
"...Difficulty getting along with colleagues..." (RA5)
"...The challenge I face is the challenge of perception. There are times when I feel that their perception of the disabled is very low..." (RA7)

According to Abd Razak et al., (2023), MySTEP specifically contributes to increasing the feasibility of graduates with disabilities by providing valuable opportunities for skill development and practical experience. The initiative also emphasizes the potential for expansion and cooperation with external organizations, aiming to offer comprehensive and actionable resources to transform the lives of unemployed graduates with disabilities through effective job readiness training. On the other hand, according to the study by Nogueira and Sousa (2021), Person with Disabilities (PWD) acknowledge their emotions when interacting with colleagues, but many disguise their discomfort. The prevailing emotion characterizing their daily professional life is pride, highlighting the significance of work in their daily lives. Feelings of inferiority are experienced as an emotional effect when interacting with colleagues in the organization.

4. Employers are hesitant to give work assignments/instructions

Most respondents expressed that employers may hesitate to give tasks or work instructions to PWD for various reasons, influenced by misconceptions, lack of awareness, or concerns about facilities. Throughout the work experience, employers harbor misconceptions about the capabilities of individuals with disabilities, assuming they may not perform as well as their non-disabled counterparts. The following quotes are from interviews with respondents:

"...sometimes they are afraid to give assignments because they think that this group is not capable of doing them. this has given an emotional challenge to do the task..." (R1)
"...What I don't like when I'm at work is that there are employees who are afraid to give me tasks because they are afraid that I won't be able to do the tasks." (R2)
"...the scope of the assignment is also unclear. they don't give assignments in an organized manner so that sometimes i lack assignments at work. Employee awareness of the disabled is still low..." (R4)

According to Borghouts-van de Pas and Freese (2021), most employers are not very proactive in hiring people with disabilities, and they often hold stereotypical beliefs unsupported by research evidence. Disabled workers are still perceived as less efficient than non-disabled workers, and expectations for their abilities are not high. It is crucial for employers to be knowledgeable about the rights of individuals with disabilities during the screening process, including awareness of prohibited questions during recruitment (Markel & Barclay, 2009). Additionally, Omar, Zakaria and Puad (2021) found that PWD face struggles with prejudices, narrow-mindedness, and maltreatment. Employment of PWD is hindered by a skeptical and doubtful perspective regarding their ability and capacity to fulfill job responsibilities. Encouraging continuous support at the grassroots level is essential for the more prosperous development of the lives of disabled people.

Conclusions and Discussion

The main objective of this study is to explore the experiences of MySTEP program who have undergone The Career Skills Improvement Training Module for PWD Graduates (Disabled Career Skills). MySTEP is a government initiative that offers short-term employment opportunities (contracts) in various ministries, government agencies, Government-Related Companies (GLCs), government-related investment companies (GLICs), and strategic partners. The program provides individuals with disabilities from diverse academic backgrounds the opportunity to gain job opportunities and work

experience, thus improving their marketability. It involves a minimum of one (1) month and a maximum of twelve (12) months of employment in any participating organization. From the interviews conducted, four main themes emerged based on their experiences over a year of working in the organization, namely. learning a lot of skills needed in the job, feelings of fear and difficulty adapting to the workplace environment, feeling inferiority, and employers are hesitant to give work assignments/instructions. Respondents shared both positive and negative experiences. The Career Skills Improvement Module Program can indeed help graduates who have just finished their studies to secure jobs, especially for those with disabilities. This program can also serve as a platform for graduates to find employment if conducted periodically or annually. Graduates with disabilities will also have a direction after completing their studies if this program is continued or improved. Many valuable experiences can be gained, especially in employment, compared to remaining unemployed for an extended period without the opportunity for disabled workers to venture into certain sectors. Then, there are some limitations and recommendations for future research, namely sample size and generalizability. If the study involves a small or specific sample of employees or organizations, the generalizability of the findings to a wider population may be limited. Future research could target larger and more diverse samples to increase the external validity of the findings. Another limitation is time constraints; limiting the study to challenges within one year of training may overlook long-term or evolving barriers that disabled workers face over time. Future studies could consider a longitudinal approach to capture changes and persistence of challenges over a longer period. Last but not least is the methodological challenge. Thematic analysis, while valuable, may have limitations in terms of subjective interpretation and researcher bias. Researchers should acknowledge and address these challenges to increase the rigor and credibility of the study.

Acknowledgments

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