

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Challenges Faced by Malaysians with Disabilities in the World of Employment

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: *This paper aims to explore and understand the challenges that are encountered by Malaysians with disabilities in the world of employment.*

Method: *A survey was undertaken in four Northern Malaysian states (Perlis, Kedah, Penang and Perak) to obtain the primary data. Two sets of questionnaires were formulated. The first questionnaire was addressed towards Malaysian people with disabilities, while the second one was for the employers. Descriptive statistics were used to explore, summarise and describe the data collected.*

Results: *This paper argues that integrating people with disabilities into the mainstream workforce should be the way forward, given that they are a pool of untapped human resources. Crucially, this study also highlights some of the key challenges faced by Malaysian people with disabilities, such as discrimination and exploitation at work.*

Conclusions: *This paper concludes that equal employment and training opportunities should be extended to Malaysian people with disabilities, in an effort to integrate them into the mainstream workforce. The existing Disability Act 2008 should be revised to address the challenges and issues highlighted in this paper.*

Key words: *employment, people with disabilities, markets, discrimination, Malaysia.*

INTRODUCTION

People with disabilities are present in all societies. Many of them are 'hidden' at home or in a particular institution due to social stigma, prejudice and

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environmental barriers which prevent them from participating productively in society. The Malaysian Disability Act (2008) defines persons with disabilities as 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. Nonetheless, people with disabilities are part of the community and as legal citizens, they have the right to enjoy all the existing facilities in the country and also participate in all aspects of national development including employment in the labour market, without any discrimination. Whether in the private or public sector, the employer must treat the applications of people with disabilities as they would for any other candidates. People with disabilities should not to be considered merely out of sympathy or to meet the requirements set by the government quota.

Against this backdrop, the main objective of this study was to explore, ascertain and understand the challenges that Malaysians with disabilities face in the world of employment, so that more pragmatic policies and measures can be formulated to enable them to reclaim their rights in a modern society. The study assumes significance in the light of Malaysia's goal to be transformed into a developed nation by the year 2020. Social inclusiveness and equal employment opportunities for vulnerable groups like people with disabilities should be brought to the forefront of social development agendas.

Literature review

Several studies have shown that bias or discrimination in hiring people with disabilities is still rampant throughout the world. Most of the literature on the topic has revealed that people with disabilities are often viewed negatively (Barnes, 1992; Jayasooria et al, 1997; Gouvier et al, 2003; Haq, 2003; Brown et al, 2009). There is also a bias against meeting with them due to the prejudices and misconceptions prevalent among the public regarding their ability to perform and compete in the job market. They are normally not given priority as compared to their counterparts without disabilities (Colella et al, 1998). To aggravate the situation, they are often "stereotyped" as helpless, dependent and in need of assistance (Fichten & Amsel, 1986). To compound this, Hunt (1966) argues that the main factor contributing to the problems faced by people with disabilities is not their physical condition, but the social pressure:

"The social disabilities of oppressed groups are not a consequence of their physical attributes, but of forms of social organisation which discriminate them."

Lack of understanding about the culture of people with disabilities, 'stereotyping' and the various obstacles they encounter, often cause them to be marginalised in the employment market. In Malaysia, of an estimated 2.4 million people employed in the last 10 years, only 3,523 are people with disabilities and they are employed mainly in the private sector (Hooi, 2001). This number is very small, and it shows that utilising people with disabilities as a potential human resource has yet to be explored (Salleh et al, 2001). Additionally, data from the Malaysian Social Security Organisation (SOCSO) showed that Malaysia recorded a total of 56,698 cases of industrial accidents in 1982, and the number had escalated to 124,898 in 1991 due to an increase in industrial as well as road accidents. This scenario will contribute directly towards the increasing number of people with disabilities, as well as to those who are removed from the job market due to their disabilities. There are also an estimated 80,000 cases of accidental injuries in the workplace reported each year in Malaysia, and 3000 of the injured experienced permanent disability. In the case of severe accident-related disabilities, the victims usually opted out of working although they need not have done so had they been offered appropriate tasks and supporting facilities. This could be done in several ways. First, the provision of a barrier-free environment suited to persons with disabilities would enable them to return to work. Second, they should be provided with suitable transport to reach the workplace. Third, the workplace should be modified and made more accessible. Facilities such as these would encourage them to return to work, and to utilise their experience and expertise.

The failure to integrate people with disabilities into the workforce has severe economic ramifications too. Based on a World Bank Report, the marginalisation of people with disabilities in middle-income countries such as Malaysia, resulted in a loss in Gross National Product (in the budget) between US \$1.68 to US \$ 2.38 billion (Perry, 2002).

According to the Director of Disability Development Department of Malaysia, Ms Norani Hashim, only 581 people with disabilities have been employed in the public sector since 2008. However, the private sector performed more satisfactorily as they were able to recruit a total of 17,000 workers with disabilities (The Star, 2010). This is in line with the estimates given by Ganapathy (1992) that about 10-20% of the people with disabilities are considered economically active and are either employed or engaged in private practice.

METHOD

This study employed both quantitative and qualitative research approaches to elicit information on the challenges that Malaysian persons with disabilities encounter in the world of employment. For the quantitative part, data is based on a survey carried out in four Northern States in Malaysia - the States of Perlis, Kedah, Penang and Perak. The samples are divided into two groups, namely, i) people with disabilities (of all types) and ii) employers. The sample for people with disabilities was identified through the appropriate non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

The data for the employers was collected through a postal survey. Structured questionnaires were sent to about 250 private companies operating in the four Northern States of Peninsular Malaysia in 2010. The samples were selected at random, from a list published on a government website and from the Yellow Pages. The variables in the questionnaires include the company's background, their experience(s) in employing people with disabilities, and their perceptions about such employees and about the barriers they have to face when employing people with disabilities. Although 250 questionnaires were sent out, the return rate was only 15.6% or only 39 respondents from the employer sample. Though this return rate is not encouraging, it does cover employers from two of the most industrialised states in the Northern region, namely Penang and Perak.

The sample selection for the respondents with disabilities was based on the number of persons who were registered for the year 2009, with the Department of Social Welfare in each Northern State identified for this study. Of the total number of 277,509 Malaysians with disabilities who had registered, 73,545 were from the four states in Northern Peninsular Malaysia. For the purpose of this research, 0.6 percent or 478 of those registered in the four Northern States of Peninsular Malaysia were selected, as shown in Table 1. Face-to-face interviews as well as focus group meetings were conducted with the entire sample, and research tools such as structured and semi-structured questionnaires were employed. However, the respondents did not give complete answers to some of the questions, especially the ones pertaining to government policies and provision of employment for people with disabilities. The lack of response is a limitation and could be due to the respondents' limited educational background and poor knowledge of government policies.

Table 1: Respondents' Demographic Profile

	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Age of Respondents		
15 - 19	7	1.5
20 - 24	58	12.1
25 - 29	78	16.3
30 - 34	71	14.9
35 - 39	53	11.1
40 - 44	54	11.3
≥ 44	149	31.2
Missing	8	1.7
Total	478	100.0
Type of Disabilities		
Physical Disabilities	287	60.0
Blind/Low Vision	61	12.8
Deaf	85	17.8
I.D	43	9.0
Missing	2	0.2
Total	478	100.0
Gender		
Male	301	63.0
Female	177	37.0
Total	478	100.0
Marital Status		
Single	260	54.4
Married	218	45.6
Total	478	100.0

(Source: Fieldwork survey, 2011) (N = 478)

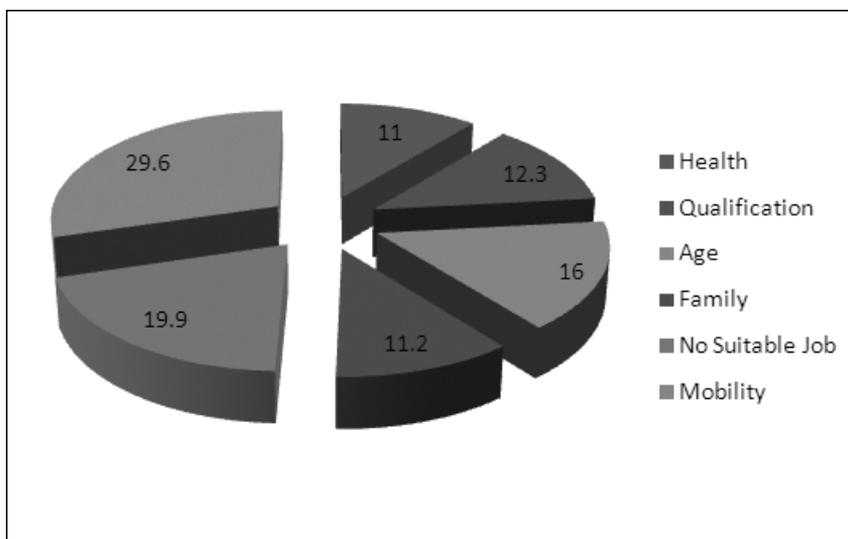
The quantitative method was complemented by a qualitative approach which involved focus group discussions comprising four to six respondents. Each session lasted between 1 – 1.5 hours and the interview protocol contained 10 semi-structured questions, some of which were made to overlap with the survey questions. The focus group discussions were successfully employed as a research tool whereby each of the respondents slowly 'opened up' and revealed their

personal experiences and types of challenges encountered at the workplace – topics that are often evaded during individual interviews. Since the questions asked in this study were not sensitive in nature, approval from the Ethics Committee was not required. A discussion on the findings, based on the data gathered from the questionnaires and focus groups, follows.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Employment and income are two important elements which determine the standard of individual living. Employment can provide a person with the confidence and assurance to live with dignity and independence. People with disabilities are citizens who also have these aspirations. From the total study sample of 478 people with disabilities, 74.9% (358) reported that they were employed, 18.4% (88) stated that they were “unemployed” and 6.7% (32) were not sure of their employment status as they only did seasonal jobs, as and when such jobs were made available. As shown in Figure 1, most of the unemployed respondents attributed their situation to lack of mobility, citing problems of transportation and lack of suitable jobs in the labour market. These are two problems which should be addressed if people with disabilities are to be fully integrated in the development process.

Figure 1: Reasons for Not Working



(Source: Fieldwork survey, 2011) (N = 478)

Transportation is a critical problem for people with disabilities. The present public transportation system in the country is unfriendly and inaccessible to them. The position would be improved if employers could provide them with decent accommodation or transportation to and from their workplaces.

In this survey, only 10.8% (39) of the 358 employed respondents mentioned that their employers provided transportation to their workplace, 44.4% (159) travelled to their workplaces using their own transport and the remaining 12.0 % (43) depended on public transport. The question that emerges is how are people with disabilities to commute to their workplaces if they do not have their own transport?

Problems associated with inaccessibility to the built environment are barriers that Malaysian people with disabilities face. Although there are provisions in the Uniform Building By-Laws that stipulate all public buildings should provide accessible facilities for them, there is no clear-cut enforcement on the implementation of this law. This has resulted in many public buildings that continue to be inaccessible to people with disabilities, especially to those in wheelchairs.

The issue of suitable jobs was another obstacle people with disabilities encountered in the open market. Since the majority do not have high levels of education and trained skills it is difficult to get high-paying jobs. During the focus group session, one respondent lamented:

“What jobs can I get, I am not educated and do not have any skills. Even if I work, my salary is not able to support me, so it is better for me to do my own business.”

Most of the respondents felt they were unemployed due to external factors rather than because of their own disability. Only 14.1% (12) of the hearing impaired, 14% (6) of people with learning disabilities, 10.5% (30) of people with physical disabilities and 1.6% (1) of the visually impaired felt their disability was responsible for unemployment. This study revealed that the majority felt they would be able to perform tasks if given the opportunity.

The highest percentage among the unemployed were people with learning disabilities at 53.5% (23), followed by the hearing impaired at 28.2% (24), while the lowest percentage of unemployed people were those with visual impairments at 13.1% (8). A high percentage of respondents with learning disabilities do not work because they have low educational qualifications and are unable to be independent. The job opportunities for this group are mainly with non-

governmental or related organisations. Since NGOs are more well-informed about their needs, they do not feel pressured at work as compared to working in the open market. Additionally, the staff in these organisations are always at hand to help them when needed.

None of the respondents with learning disabilities held professional and managerial level positions. Most of them were either support staff or were engaged in their own businesses, while some worked in the private sector and with the NGOs. The learning disabilities group felt that they were unable to undertake work that required a lot of thinking because they did not know how to read. This was disclosed by one of the respondents during the focus group interview:

“We do not know how to read, but we can understand from drawings and pictures. Finding other jobs is quite difficult as most of the employers do not understand us. Quite a number of our friends who worked as cleaners at the hospital were dismissed because we work slowly and employers do not understand our problems.”

Therefore, it is important for employers to interact with people with disabilities and gain a better understanding of their needs before accepting them as employees. In this way, the rights of employees with disabilities will be met and they will remain in their jobs.

In general, except for those with learning disabilities, the respondents preferred to work in the public sector rather than the private sector. 72.9% (35) of people with physical disabilities and 16.7% (8) of the visually impaired were employed in the public sector. On the other hand, 44.6% (86) of people with physical disabilities, 24.4% (47) of the hearing impaired, 22.3% (43) of the visually impaired and 8.8% (17) of those with learning disabilities were working in the private sector and with the NGOs. Almost all the respondents with learning disabilities worked in either the private sector or with the NGOs.

In addition to salaried employment, this study found that self-employment was one of the preferred options. This is not surprising as most of the respondents had either primary level education or none at all, and the best option for them was to run their own businesses which did not require high levels of education. This also gave them more freedom and independence as their performance was not time-bound. Of the total number of respondents, 10.5% (50) in the Northern States of Peninsular Malaysia were self-employed and 72.0% (36) were those with physical disabilities, followed by 16.0% (8)

with hearing impairments and 4.0% (2) of the visually impaired. None of the people with learning disabilities were self-employed, possibly due to their inability to face challenges independently.

Understanding the Needs of Employees with Disabilities

The concern and empathy shown by employers towards their employees with disabilities was evaluated in terms of the provision of facilities in the built environment. This concern also included whether they provided transportation to and from the workplace, as well as their ability to understand and satisfy the needs of these workers. In general, most of the employers were unfamiliar with, and insensitive to, the needs of their workers with disabilities. The built environments in the workplaces were not disability-friendly, which in turn hindered the movement of employees with disabilities.

Of the 358 respondents who answered this question, only 14% (50) of them stated that their employers had provided a special parking bay for workers with disabilities. Even though the built environment was not disability-friendly, 26 % (94) of the respondents indicated that there were suitable toilet facilities in their workplaces, as shown in Table 2. However this statement is not verified as most of them did not really understand or know about the correct specifications required for disability-friendly facilities. It is difficult to determine whether the existing facilities actually meet the standards and guidelines stipulated in MS1183 and MS1184 (specification of facilities for people with disabilities according to Malaysian standards/guidelines) because this study did not include visits to the workplaces of the respondents.

Table 2: Accessible/Friendly Facilities in the Workplace

Facilities	Frequency (N=358)	Percentages %
Accessible Toilet	94	26
Ramp	64	18
Parking Bays	50	14
Emergency Lights	39	11
Signage	46	13
Resting Place	70	20
Transport to Work	56	16

(Source: Fieldwork survey, 2011) (N = 358)

An analysis of the respondents' opinions (about the facilities provided by their employers) revealed that the private sector was more concerned about meeting the needs of people with disabilities compared to government departments. The private sector was also more committed towards the provision of other facilities such as toilets, disability-friendly routes, emergency lighting and restrooms. The most obvious commitment was in providing transportation to work. Only 2.1% of the respondents employed in the public sector said their employers provided transport to work, compared to 21.8% of employees in the private sector. This is quite ironic because the public sector is government-owned and ought to set an example in providing such facilities. These issues must be addressed if the government wants more people with disabilities to participate in the labour market. In Hong Kong, for example, the local government regards it as a social responsibility to provide a special vehicle to transport workers with disabilities to their workplaces.

Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction determines whether a worker with disability will be able to continue doing the work he/she undertakes. Several factors are responsible for this, such as the treatment received from their employers and colleagues, the disability-friendly facilities provided in the working environment, salaries that are commensurate with their qualifications and the type of tasks assigned. There should be no elements of discrimination and oppression from the employers or colleagues. For people with disabilities, employment is a highly-valued privilege and they are usually loyal to their employers because switching jobs is not easy. This was evident as 28.0% (101) of those interviewed (N = 358) mentioned that their current job was their first one since entering the job market. While 22.0 % (79) had applied only once before they were offered their jobs, the remaining respondents mentioned that they had to apply several times before getting their current jobs. Some of them had applied more than 10 times before they were successful. They were sometimes even forced to accept job offers under unfavorable conditions, such as low salaries that did not match their expertise. Those who managed to secure their jobs at the first attempt had received assistance from relatives or NGOs who would have had personal contact with the employers. This was disclosed by some of respondents. One respondent with hearing impairment said:

"Dato' Saleena helped me a lot to secure my current job. I think the opportunity is given by my employer after a letter sent by Dato' Saleena stating that the deaf can work and Dato' is very close with my boss."

Another respondent with the same disability stated:

“When informed by a friend (also with hearing impairments) that there were vacancies at the company where he was working as a production operator, I went there for an interview and when I told them that I am deaf, the employer did not mind and immediately offered me the job.”

The first instance revealed that someone’s personal contact with the employer convinced the latter to offer the job to the person with disability. In the second case, the employer was confident about taking on the applicant because of previous experience with hearing impaired workers. In fact, some of these employers do not need to conduct interviews as they depend on their existing employees with disabilities to introduce other people with disabilities who are willing to work with the company. As one of the respondents with hearing disabilities stated:

“My boss is friendly to the disabled, I got my current job when my friend who is working with the company introduced me to my boss and my friend who is disabled himself also helped me during the interview.”

In the effort to secure employment, the services of family members were also taken, as mentioned by one respondent with learning disabilities:

“My uncle and my mother knew the staff at Taman Seri Indah so they asked them whether there was any job vacancy. I was then requested to fill the form and I was accepted to work at the centre.”

Although many workers with disabilities continued in their jobs, there were also a few who had moved on. This study found several factors that were responsible for this. One of the reasons related to their working relationships with employers or colleagues, especially with those who could not understand their needs and feelings. However, only 14.0 % (50) of the respondents mentioned having had problems with their employers, and only 10.0 % (36) (N=358) had faced problems with their colleagues. Though these percentages are indeed small, such problems would undoubtedly affect the sustainability of people with disabilities in the job market. The most significant factor that contributes to this is miscommunication between people with disabilities, especially the hearing impaired, and their employers or colleagues. There is also some misunderstanding about the tasks assigned to these workers. Under the impression that the assigned tasks were not within their scope of duty, some of them felt that they were facing discrimination and that their contributions were not appreciated. Discrimination

and exploitation are two issues that are not clearly defined as they depend on the perceptions, feelings and pressures faced by the victims themselves. Most of the respondents felt they were being exploited as their tasks and workloads were not commensurate with their position in the company in respect of monetary returns. Some respondents also felt that they faced discrimination when they were not promoted despite working for many years. From the respondents' feedback, it was apparent that private sector employees felt more confident that their contributions were appreciated by their employers, compared to those in the public sector.

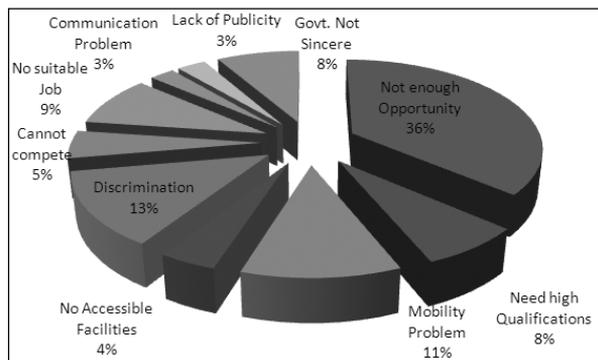
The respondents also felt that the government's role in ensuring adequate jobs for the people with disabilities was not enough. The majority, regardless of their working status, felt that the measures taken by the government were merely rhetorical and not sincere. As one of the respondents with physical disability put it, no concrete steps have been taken to provide assistance, especially for those with low educational qualifications:

"What job can the government offer me? I do not have a high level of education, what work can I do?"

This indicated that the job quota and job allocation were unable to solve the problems of unemployed people with disabilities because the most of them were not well educated, and some had no formal education. Only 33.3% (159) of the respondents felt that the measures taken by the government to help them get proper jobs was adequate, while 56.7% (271) felt that the government measures were not enough.

The reasons for dissatisfaction are shown in Figure 3. 36.0% (88) cited insufficient job opportunities for people with disabilities in the job market, 13.2% cited discrimination during job applications, 11.0% (27) stated that the employer did not provide transportation, 9.0% (22) felt there was no suitable work for people with disabilities and 8.0 % (20) doubted the government's level of sincerity (N=242). Out of 358 respondents, only 242 answered this question while the rest were not sure of the Government's role in ensuring sufficient jobs in the market for people with disabilities. Thus, the missing value of 116 subjects who did not respond can be considered as a research limitation.

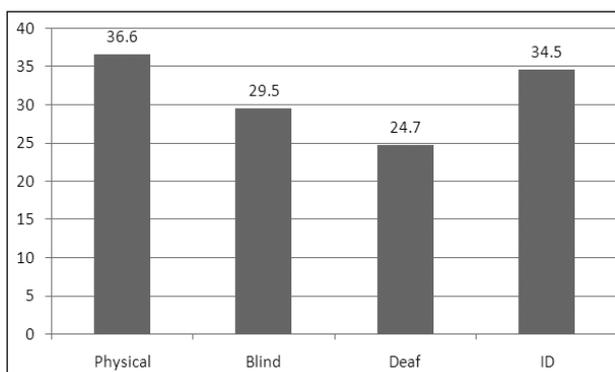
Figure 3: Reasons for Dissatisfaction with the Inadequate Role of the Malaysian Government



(Source: Fieldwork survey, 2011) (N = 242)

The opinions regarding the role of the government varied according to the respondents' disabilities. However, most of them felt that the measures taken by the government were inadequate to help people with disabilities find employment in the open market, as shown in Figure 4. Only 36.6% of the respondents (with physical disabilities) felt that the measures taken by the government were sufficient. Among the visually impaired, only 29.5% felt that the government had done its best but the others were of the opinion that the government should play a greater role. They also felt that the government should be sincere in its efforts by translating rhetoric into action. The measures taken so far were clearly ineffective as there are still a lot of qualified and highly educated people with disabilities who cannot find jobs to match their qualifications.

Figure 4: Opinions of Respondents (based on disabilities) towards Inadequate Assistance by the Government



CONCLUSION

Being gainfully employed is an important aspect of human life. It enables a person to be self-reliant, independent and to live with dignity. However, this study found that the notion of 'equal employment opportunities' for people with disabilities is neither a priority nor a practice with Malaysian employers. There are still many Malaysian people with disabilities who are unemployed. Even those who are employed find that the salaries they earn are much lower than warranted by their academic qualifications. To compound the problem, discriminatory treatment (either by their employers or colleagues) is still rampant despite the existence of Malaysia's People with Disability Act. This proves that the Act is unsuccessful in protecting Malaysian people with disabilities from discrimination or exploitation. It is therefore proposed here that either the existing Act should be revised or Malaysia should have an Anti-Discrimination Act like the United Kingdom's Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA) and The Americans with Disability Act 1990 (ADA) in the United States, to protect the rights of marginalised and vulnerable groups like the people with disabilities.

It is clear that this study's findings could contribute significantly towards shaping more disability-friendly and pragmatic social policies for Malaysian people with disabilities vis-à-vis the nation's aspiration to be a developed nation by 2020. As suggested by renowned development planners (Todaro & Smith, 2011), the notion of development should be holistic and integrated. In addition to the emphasis on economic growth, development should consider matters pertaining to equal distribution and inclusiveness of the marginalised and vulnerable sections such as people with disabilities. Hence, this study aimed to understand and then address the challenges faced by Malaysian people with disabilities, in order to reinstate and reintegrate their productive role and function in society. This group's potential in the workforce is not fully utilised as they are not given equitable opportunity and training to be self-reliant and to compete in the open market.

This study does have several limitations. Firstly, though substantial numbers of people with disabilities were interviewed (478 persons), there was an unequal distribution in terms of the category of disability they belonged to. Most of the respondents were those with physical disabilities (287 respondents or 60.0%), followed by those with hearing impairment (85 respondents or 17.8%), visual impairment (61 respondents or 12.85%), learning disability (43 respondents or 9.0%) and a few with other disabilities (2 respondents or 0.4%). Secondly, all the

respondents with learning disability were inmates belonging to a centre. Since respondents from outside the centre were not interviewed, this could create a situation of bias in interpreting the respondents' views. However, this study does provide a good platform for future research. As only four states in Northern Malaysia were surveyed, further research which encompasses the entire country is required in order to obtain a comprehensive picture of the plight and challenges faced by Malaysian people with disabilities in the world of employment.

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