

Employment for Persons with Disabilities in Thailand: Opportunities and Challenges in the Labor Market

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Submitted: 3 September 2020, Accepted: 30 December 2020 Published: 21 April 2021

Volume 29, 2021. p.384-400. <http://doi.org/10.25133/JPSSv292021.024>

Abstract

This mixed-methods study aimed to examine the current situation of the enforcement of laws for the employment of persons with disabilities (PWDs), and the difference in perspectives between PWDs and employers in Thailand. Results showed that there were only 8% of PWDs employed in competitive labor markets. The most relevant jobs from the employer's perspectives for PWDs were unskilled labor. The majority of PWDs sought to be employed with essential support, including housing and transportation, in the mainstream open labor market. At the same time, employers were usually more concerned about particular approaches and accessible working environments for PWDs. Thus, this perspective gap was one reason for the low rate of employment of PWDs. In sum, there have been many challenges for the employment of PWDs in Thailand. Ways to improve career development for PWDs include the provision of suitable education and training, housing or dormitories located near workplaces, assistive technologies and reasonable accommodations in workplaces, and customized employment services for employed PWDs. Furthermore, positive attitudes, understanding, and collaboration between employers and PWDs should continuously be promoted.

Keywords

Customize; disability; employment policy; Thailand

Introduction

For several decades, employment for persons with disabilities (PWDs) has continued to present various challenges in developing and developed countries. One challenge is low employment rates of working-age PWDs, which is as much as three times that of the general population. Unfortunately, most unemployed PWDs would like to work, but cannot find jobs. Employers do not accommodate the majority of PWDs in their workplaces even though the cost of such accommodations is negligible (Alcock, 2008; Barnes, 1992; Lantz & Marston, 2012; World Health Organization, 2011). Studies have noted differences in the trend of disability prevalence and employment gaps, though little overall confidence of disability-related employment conclusions is possible due to varying definitions of disability, research participants, and methods (Baumberg et al., 2015; Shier et al., 2009). Physical limitations or health-related problems of PWDs have been significant barriers for employment, particularly for those in rural areas that engage in agricultural work and live in environments with limited infrastructure (Mani et al., 2018).

Over the past two decades, the disability model has shifted from a medical model to a social and rights-based model. Recently, the international movement based on Article 27 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), and primarily Goal 8, and Goals 1, 11, 16, and 17 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), have explicitly promoted improvements in the quality of life of PWDs through accessible employment in society. Both the CRPD and SDGs support the view of PWDs as productive citizens and encourage their full participation in society without discrimination (United Nations, 2015, 2018, 2020).

The ultimate goal in promoting employment for PWDs is to fully integrate strategies that include community-based employment, competitive employment, and an open labor market approach. However, individual placement and support (IPS), supported or customized employment as well as sheltered workshops, and forms of restrictive employment are still important alternative ways for some groups of PWDs who have significant or severe disabilities (Blanck & Adya, 2017; Mueser et al., 2016; Yell et al., 2017). Some critical challenges of effective employment still exist, such as stigmatization and discrimination against PWDs, and associated gender aspects (Gonzalez-Rabanal, 2012; Langer & Ferguson, 2020). Negative attitudes of stakeholders toward PWDs are also complex and are based not only on disability but also on race. As with the study by von Schrader & Nazarov (2015), who found that employers and organizations receiving race discrimination charges were also more likely to receive disability discrimination charges, thereby implying that negative attitudes toward marginalized groups also apply to negative attitudes toward individuals with disabilities.

For PWDs in Thailand, there have been efforts at legal remedies, such as the Persons with Disabilities Empowerment Act 2007 (B.E. 2550), a comprehensive rights-based law for persons with disabilities that contains a strong anti-discrimination section. The law also states that persons with disabilities shall be equal to others, accepted, and shall actively participate in social, economic, and political activities, including accessing necessary facilities and services. This law also provides key provisions regarding employment for PWDs as follows: (1) employers, or owners of the establishments and state agencies shall employ PWDs to work in suitable positions in proper proportions through a quota scheme requiring PWDs to comprise 1% of the total number of employees; (2) employers who do

not employ PWDs at the proper proportions shall send money to the National Disability Fund; (3) employers who do not follow the two options above may support the employment of PWDs through alternative ways such as granting concessions, arranging places for distributing products or services, hiring via subcontracting of PWDs, etc.; and (4) any employer who does not comply with the three options above will be issued a written order to enforce garnishment of property. These are the legal provisions stated in sections 33, 34, 35, and 36 of the Persons with Disabilities Empowerment Act 2007 (B.E. 2550), respectively (Office of the Council of State, 2007).

In 2015, PWDs in Thailand represented 1.9 million or 3% of the total population. The majority of PWDs were unemployed (approximately 75% of the PWD labor force), while employed PWDs were working primarily in the agriculture sector (15.4%) and unskilled labor market (9.6%). Males have double the employment rate of females (MSDHS, 2014). Recently, the total PWD population in Thailand increased slightly, and the employment rate of PWDs has also grown (DEP, 2020). However, such employment is likely to be temporary or uncertain with optional support through alternative ways. For example, employers may be granting concessions as described in section 35 rather than offering full employment as stated in section 33 of the Persons with Disabilities Empowerment Act 2007.

This study focuses on Section 33 of the Persons with Disabilities Empowerment Act 2007, particularly as Section 33 relates to the labor market in the private sector. In practice, there have been both positive and negative aspects of vocational activities and employment for PWDs after passing this law. Positive results have included (1) increasing employment rates and awareness among employers and PWDs, (2) national campaigning and business involvement in promoting job placement of PWDs, and (3) development of job training curricula for PWDs to address labor market needs. There have also been many challenges for vocation and employment for PWDs over the past decade, including (1) fragmentation and ineffective integration of related government sectors to promote the vocation and employment for PWDs, (2) unemployment of the majority of PWDs, (3) low income and unstable jobs for disabled workers, (4) poverty for PWDs and their families, (5) lack of capital and effective management for of self-employment, (6) inadequate assistive technologies and accessible workplace environments, and (7) work/life support. These challenges have persisted over the past two decades and continue to be experienced by PWDs (Bualar, 2015).

When this study was conducted in 2015, employers who complied with this quota system created more than 50,000 jobs for PWDs, but PWDs filled only 25,000 positions. Simultaneously, the National Disability Fund was increased from 100 million USD to 400 million USD in the past decade from employers' cash contributions. Yet, the majority of employers are still unable to reach PWDs employment quotas (Ministry of Labour, 2015). Despite this challenge, such efforts reflect increasing enforcement of disability laws. Still, many employers choose to send money to the National Disability Fund (Section 34) rather than provide opportunities to work for persons with disabilities (Section 33). Many other countries, both developed and developing, have passed smart laws for enhancing the employment of PWDs; however, there have been reports of discrimination against PWDs. Such countries endeavor to achieve better employment results for PWDs, and many researchers suggest that more research and exploration are needed to improve stakeholder participation. More research is also necessary to quantify the effects of legal efforts at increasing employment, particularly in low- and middle-income countries (Lantz & Marston, 2012; Nardodkar et al., 2016; World Health Organization, 2011).

Previous studies demonstrated that there are various factors influencing unemployment of PWDs in Thailand, including (1) prejudice and negative attitudes of employers towards PWDs, (2) the passage of disability laws and related regulations without sufficient evidence, (3) inadequate universal design in society, and (4) overly defensive mindsets from families of PWDs (Bualar, 2015). However, little is known about the perspectives of employers and PWDs on improving the effective employment of PWDs through legal enforcement. Understanding such perspectives can help stakeholders customize employment for PWDs. Therefore, this study aims to explore the current situation and perspectives of both PWDs and employers regarding organizational policy, job specifications, competency, and additional support needs of PWDs for employment. Examining the perspectives of both PWDs and employers ensures that both the supply and demand sides of the labor market are considered, and necessary customizations are made. The government and other stakeholders can use results from the study to promote employment more effectively for PWDs in the competitive labor market, according to Section 33.

Methods

This study was conducted in 2015 and used a mixed-method design consisting of quantitative and qualitative measures. In terms of its quantitative approach (Yamane, 1973), 432 PWDs and 417 employers participated in the study, representing both the supply and the demand side of the labor market. The supply side was represented by PWDs who were working age (15-60 years) or, in some cases, their caregivers. Questionnaires were distributed to all participants. Some caregivers completed questionnaires when PWDs were unable to do so due to limited communication or literacy skills, or lack of willingness. The demand side of the market was represented by employers with at least two years of experience working in human resources departments in companies with at least 100 employees. Companies with 100 or more employees are legally required to comply with the PWDs employment quota system scheme.

Individuals with disabilities who participated in the quantitative part of the study were selected by proportional multistage stratified random sampling according to their disability classification (physical impairment, deaf, blind, intellectual disability, autism) and geographic location (Northern, Southern, Eastern, North-Eastern, and Central parts of Thailand), as identified in the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security's database. Additional inclusion criteria for the sample were; (1) 15-60 years old, (2) no profound or severe limitations for work or employment, and (3) sufficient literacy skills, and willingness to be participants. Participants were asked to complete questionnaires comprising 62 items with three areas constructed by researchers, including; (1) general background of participants, (2) needs related to effective employment, and (3) suggestions for employers and effective employment. Six hundred copies of the questionnaires were sent via postal mail, of which 432 were returned. Completed questionnaires were analyzed by descriptive statistics.

Representing the demand side of the market, 417 employers were also selected by proportional multistage stratified random sampling related to their business classification in terms of size (small, medium, large company), type (public, private sectors), and geographic location (Northern, Southern, East, North-Eastern and Central parts of Thailand). Additional inclusion criteria were; (1) companies with over 100 employees who were

required to comply with the laws requiring a PWDs quota scheme, (2) at least two years of experience in job placement for PWDs, and (3) willing to complete questionnaires. Participants were asked to complete questionnaires constructed by researchers with 25 items across three areas, including; (1) general background of participants, (2) needs related effective employment for PWDs, and (3) suggestions for effective employment. A total of 800 questionnaires were sent via postal mail, of which 417 were returned. Completed questionnaires were analyzed by descriptive statistics.

For the study's qualitative design, 84 key informants were selected using the same inclusion criteria as the quantitative approach. Participants included a total of 42 PWDs (or in some cases, their caregivers), 31 employers, and 11 professionals from 36 communities and organizations located across five geographical parts of Thailand. Using purposive sampling from the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security's databases, participants were invited to join the focus group discussions by phone.

Five focus groups, each consisting of 15-20 participants from all groups identified above, were conducted by two researchers across five regions. The duration of the focus group discussions ranged from 75 to 90 minutes. Three focus group discussions were conducted with PWDs and professionals, and two focus group discussions were conducted with employers and professionals. Focus group discussion guidelines were drafted by researchers with eight items across three areas, including; (1) general situation and attitudes toward employment of PWDs, (2) needs related to effective employment of PWDs, and (3) suggestions for effective employment. Sign language interpreters were provided for deaf or hard-of-hearing participants. Focus group discussions were audio-recorded, and data were analyzed using analytic induction. Data were analyzed using a modification of thematic content analysis. Initially, the audiotapes were reviewed by two principal researchers to develop consensus on the initial coding structure, including the identification and indexing of themes.

Triangulation was used to establish corroborating evidence and support results from both the quantitative and qualitative sides of the study. Similarities and differences between the quantitative and qualitative data and their interconnections emerged and were used to conceptualize the study's results.

This study was approved by Mahidol University's Institutional Review Board (MU-IRB). All data were stored in computer files for analysis. Personal identifiers were removed during the transcription process to maintain confidentiality of the participants.

Results

Survey results

For PWDs representing the supply side of the market, 432 questionnaires were returned with completed information. The majority of participants were male (63.4%), ages 31-45 years old (59.4%), completed secondary school (54.4%), with physical and mobility impairment (50%).

According to questionnaire responses, the majority (79%) of PWDs were unemployed. Of the employed PWDs, 56 (13%) were self-employed and 35 (8%) held labor market jobs. Respondents also indicated their job desires, with 235 (54.4%) respondents desiring to be self-employed, 117 (27.1%) desiring to be a part of the private or public sector labor market, and 80 (18.6%) had no job desire. There were 227 (52.6%) respondents who believed that their disabilities would be problematic for employers, including (1) ineffective performance based on their disabilities, (2) co-workers, and (3) an inhospitable environment.

For employers or companies representing the demand side, 417 respondents returned completed questionnaires. The majority (60%) of respondents worked at companies that were less than twenty years old, hired less than 300 employees (46%), were located in Bangkok and central parts of Thailand (76%), and part of heavy industries (58%). There were 304 (73%) respondents who indicated that their companies had organizational policies for the employment of PWDs. There were also 275 (66%) respondents who perceived that their business had no limitations for employing PWDs. There were 225 (54%), 118 (28%), 46 (11%), and 29 (7%) respondents, respectively, who reported that PWDs were currently employed in their companies across disability types, including physical and mobility issues, hearing impairment, visual impairment, and others (e.g., intellectual disability, autism, mental illness).

In terms of relevant jobs and required job positions, both PWDs and employers reported that appropriate jobs for PWDs could be similar jobs as those found in the open labor market; however, adjustments might be needed to better match each disability type and its associated characteristics. More than half of PWDs expressed wanting to work in specialist and skilled workforces as their priority, though employers indicated their required job positions for PWDs mostly ranged in the unskilled workforces, including supporting services or unskilled positions, production, cargo, and quality assurance and quality control (QA/QC) as their first, second, and third priorities, respectively (Table 1).

Table 1: Job Positions Required by PWDs and Employers

Disability Type	Sought Job Position (Supply Side - PWDs)			Required Job Position (Demand Side - Employers)		
	First	Second	Third	First	Second	Third
Physical and mobility	IT, Electronics	Production	Supporting services	Supporting services	Production	Cargo & QA/QC
Hearing	Services, Maintenance	Specialist	Creative	Supporting services	Production	Cargo & QA/QC
Visual	Training, Lecture	Massage	Academic, Research	Supporting services	Production	Cargo & QA/QC
Others (e.g., intellectual disability, autism, mental health)	Agriculture	Services, Maintenance	Supporting services	Supporting services	Production	Cargo & QA/QC

In terms of the competencies of PWDs in doing their jobs, PWDs identified their competencies according to their disability categories and individual concerns. For example,

persons with physical or mobility and visual impairment indicated their work competencies as follows; (1) communication skills, (2) sequential tasks, and (3) time-consuming tasks as the first, second, and third highest-rated competencies, respectively. Persons with hearing impairment and others expressed wanting to work in areas that addressed their proposed competencies, with active, movement, or dexterous as the first highest rated competency, followed by delivery services and time-consuming tasks. Surprisingly, the job competencies of PWDs required by employers were not differentiated based on disability categories. Employers identified required job competencies as follows; (1) active movement or dexterous, (2) long time-consuming tasks, and (3) communication skills as the first, second, and third highest-rated competencies (Table 2).

Table 2: Competencies of PWDs Required for Work from the Perspectives of PWDs and Employers

Disability	Job Competencies of PWDs from PWD's Perspectives (Supply Side)			Job Competencies of PWDs from Employers' Perspectives (Demand Side)		
	First	Second	Third	First	Second	Third
Physical and mobility	Communication	Sequential task	Time-consuming task	Active, movement, dexterous	Time-consuming task	Communication
Hearing	Active, movement, dexterous	Time-consuming task	Delivery services	Active, movement, dexterous	Time-consuming task	Communication
Visual	Communication	Sequential task	Time-consuming task	Active, movement, dexterous	Time-consuming task	Communication
Others (e.g., intellectual disability, autism, mental health)	Active, movement, dexterous	Carry, delivery	Longtime task	Active, movement, dexterous	Longtime task	Communication

PWDs and employers were also asked to identify any additional support they felt was needed to employ PWDs. PWDs ranked their needs according to their disability categories and individual concerns. Almost all PWDs expressed needing housing and transportation support, and hospitable workplace culture as their first and second priority, while employers indicated differently. Employers perceived that once they hire PWDs, additional support for PWDs should include; (1) accessible working environments, such as ramps and toilets, (2) a hospitable organizational culture, and (3) housing and transportation (Table 3).

Table 3: Additional Support Needs in Employing PWDs from the Perspectives of PWDs and Employers

Disability	Additional Support Needs of PWDs (Supply Side)			Additional Support Needs of Employers (Demand Side)		
	First	Second	Third	First	Second	Third
Physical and mobility	Housing and transportation	Space and environment (ramp, toilet)	Hospitable culture	Space and environment (ramp, toilet)	Hospitable culture	Housing and transportation
Hearing	Housing and transportation	Hospitable culture	Space and environment (ramp, toilet)	Space and environment (ramp, toilet)	Hospitable culture	Housing and transportation
Visual	Work process and assistive technology	Hospitable culture	Housing/ transportation	Space and environment (ramp, toilet)	Hospitable culture	Housing and transportation
Others (e.g., intellectual disabilities, autism, mental health)	Housing and transportation	Hospitable culture	Space and environment (ramp, toilet)	Space and environment (ramp, toilet)	Hospitable culture	Housing and transportation

When examining job characteristics and welfare needed for PWDs, PWDs and employers had different perspectives. PWDs believed that job characteristics and welfare should be customized according to their disability. In contrast, employers considered PWDs as needing to follow standard or mainstream approaches similar to persons without disabilities in terms of job position, working hours, salary, and additional welfare needs (Table 4).

Table 4: Characteristics of Job and Welfare Needs for PWDs

Characteristics of Job and Welfare Required	PWDs' Perspectives	Employers' Perspectives
Type of position		
- Full-time	59%	100%
- Part-time	41%	0%
Total	100%	100%
Working hours		
- Normal (7-8 hours per day)	63%	94%
- Adjusted according to worker performances	37%	6%
Total	100%	100%
Salary		
- Normal	67%	94%
- Adjusted according to worker performances	33%	6%

Characteristics of Job and Welfare Required	PWDs' Perspectives	Employers' Perspectives
Total	100%	100%
Additional welfare		
- Normal	54%	0%
- Adjusted according to disability	46%	100%
Total	100%	100%

PWDs and employers were asked to rank key success factors toward effective employment for PWDs. Different points of view were expressed between PWDs and employers. PWDs ranked accessible transportation, positive attitudes of employers and society, and suitable vocational training and education for PWDs as their first, second, and third priorities. On the other hand, employers ranked the following key success factors as most important; (1) suitable vocational training and education for PWDs, (2) friendly policy, culture, and reasonable accommodations in workplaces for PWDs, and (3) positive attitudes of employers and society toward PWDs (Table 5).

Table 5: Key Success Factors for Employment of PWDs from the Perspectives of PWDs and Employers

Key Success Factor	PWD Perspective	Employer Perspective
1	Accessible transportation	Suitable vocational training and education for PWDs
2	Positive attitudes of employers and society toward PWDs	Friendly policy, culture, and reasonable accommodations for PWDs
3	Suitable vocational training and education for PWDs	Positive attitudes of employers and society toward PWDs

Focus group discussions

PWDs (Supply-side perspectives): Employment challenges and discrimination

Based on data from focus group discussions conducted with PWDs, there were many challenges, based on their type of disability, that PWDs experienced during their employment. For example, persons with visual impairments experienced negative stereotypes with their job placement, discrimination, and co-workers' unwelcomed conduct.

For people with hearing impairments, everyday experiences they faced in the workplace were communication problems with employers and co-workers, especially those who could not access workplace regulations and job assignments. Individuals with hearing impairment also expressed wanting to have some co-workers who were deaf as well. One person with a hearing impairment expressed the following:

It is difficult for me to get to know what my manager assigned me to do. It sometimes relates to the regulations and policies of the company. If I had some other coworkers who were also deaf and could understand and share more information with me, it would be better. [Transcribed through a sign language interpreter]

One person with a physical and mobility impairment indicated that his employer would not hire him since the employer doubted the worth of the investment in making environmental accommodations:

I once applied and asked for work at one company that announced job vacancies for PWDs. The man at the company said that he could not hire me because he saw me sitting in a wheelchair and wondered how I could come to work. After all, the company has no ramp and toilets for PWDs in the workplace. He further said that if he hired me, the company would need to renovate the workplace, and he did not want to invest in those accommodations due to the budget limitations.

For one participant who had autism and an intellectual disability, their caregiver reported on the limitations in workplace regulations, which included inaccessible and unsafe transportation means:

I can't let my son go to work independently outside because I worry about how much his employer would understand him and adjust their company regulations for him. He can't work with inadequate instruction or on tasks that require sustained attention and focus. It is hard for him to use public transportation to get to the workplace.

Other challenges that PWDs reflected on during the focus group discussions included (1) limiting regulations of employers without customized approaches, (2) commuting long distances and difficulty with transportation to workplaces, (3) discrimination by employers through inequality in salary and career promotion opportunities for PWDs, (4) mismatches between employer's work assignment and PWD's performance and educational background, and (5) non-legislative approaches relating to subsidy wage and incentive schemes for several groups of PWDs. Some PWDs in demonstrating a lack of motivation for work did not seek employment as they were waiting for other forms of help (e.g., charity).

Employers (Demand-side perspectives): PWDs and workplace limitations, and proposed solutions

Many employers reflected on the challenges with employing PWDs. One employer expressed doubt in the performance of PWDs, as well as concerns about the education, competency, or skills gap between PWDs and current labor market needs:

I would like to suggest that PWDs be trained in vocational skills to meet our current needs. For example, our hotel needs people who have strong communication skills in English, but it is rare for PWDs to speak English. PWDs also need to be trained in social and human relation skills before starting their working life.

Some employers also mentioned the limitations of employers themselves – particularly in the small business sector and related to inappropriate legal enforcement and lack of government support. One employer stated:

According to the law, I have to hire PWDs, but I think the size and type of company should be considered in this requirement as well. In the case of big companies, they might have the ability to invest in workplace modifications, but my company is small, with 200 employees, so I cannot allocate funds to accommodate the workplace and environment with accessible toilets and ramps for PWDs. Such investments would need to come from my budget without any government support. Thus, the government should be concerned about and support this issue as well.

Despite some of the limitations and challenges of employment for PWDs, there was one employer who expressed wanting to support PWDs in the workplace, but only to the extent that their resources would allow:

We try to support him [PWD employee] since he is physically disabled and lives in this village. His wife drops him off and picks him up for work by motorcycle every day. We assign him the role of office supplier and have him sit at a table, and we provided him with a new accessible toilet and ramp. Other welfares, salaries, and career promotion opportunities are similar to other personnel.

Discussion

This study explored the challenges involved in employing PWDs from the different perspectives of both PWDs and employers. A mixed-methods design was used to address the limitations of a single method. This study deviates from previous studies that typically use surveys or in-depth interviews to explore only one group's perspective (Baumberg et al., 2015; Bualar, 2015; Reichard et al., 2018; Yell et al., 2017).

Limited employment opportunities for PWDs reflecting ineffective law enforcement

Based on this study's quantitative and qualitative findings, there seems to be minimum employment opportunities for PWDs, as only 8% of Thais with disabilities were employed in the labor market through current enforcement of the law. This result supports previous research findings that the unemployment rate of PWDs is usually double that of persons without disabilities. In developing countries, 80% to 90% of PWDs of working age are unemployed, whereas, in industrialized countries, the figures have ranged between 50% and 70% (United Nations, 2020). Reichard et al. (2018) found that only 36.5% of people with physical disabilities and 11.3% of people with multiple disabilities were employed. This low employment rate of PWDs contradicts the essence of many laws, including Section 33 of the Persons with Disabilities Empowerment Act 2007 and international treaties, such as Article 27 of the CRPD and Goal 8 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These laws promote the quality of life of PWDs through employment and productivity in an inclusive society (United Nations, 2015, 2018, 2020). It can be concluded that low employment rates amongst PWDs reflect ineffective law enforcement and policy implementation.

Discrepancies between employer and employee's perspectives

The low employment rate of PWDs and ineffective law enforcement in Thailand could be due to various factors. One factor could be the discrepancy between the perspectives of the employer and the employee. Of those employed, there were many challenges for PWDs in securing and maintaining employment. Persons with hearing impairments were the most preferred by employers due to their usual working times and non-existing physical or mobility limitations. Additionally, PWDs who wanted to be in the labor market mainly required additional support, such as housing and transportation. At the same time, employers were usually much more concerned about using a specialized approach in making environmental accommodations, especially the installation of ramps and accessible toilets for PWDs. Differences in perspectives are likely due to employers and employees having different beliefs about or attitudes towards disability. PWDs have been perceived as burdensome, helpless, having no capacities for growth, and unable to reach a similar performance levels as their colleagues. (Shier et al., 2009; Vornholt et al., 2018). These negative attitudes of employers and society toward PWDs are root barriers towards quality development and employment of PWDs.

Barriers towards the employment of PWDs, negative effects, and next steps

Negative attitudes of employers and society toward PWDs are significant barriers for PWDs. The challenges that PWDs face in employment can be classified into three phases of the employment process; (1) transition, (2) acquisition, and (3) retention.

The challenges in the transition phase from unemployed to employed PWDs cover many areas, such as the low qualifications or education of PWDs, their low motivation for work due to the prevalence of charity-based living, and unmet labor market needs of existing vocational training programs for PWDs (Lantz & Marston, 2012; Shier et al., 2009; Vornholt et al., 2018).

There is a lack of transition services or supportive bridges from school to work programs available in Thailand. As several previous studies have demonstrated, programs that bridge PWDs from school life to work life can effectively address obstacles for youth with disabilities in transitioning to the workforce and improving community living (Abdullah et al., 2013; Gold et al., 2013). Thus, transition service programs for PWDs ought to be instituted explicitly in Thai law and national policy.

The challenges in the working or acquisition phases of employment include (1) negative attitudes of employers and co-workers toward PWDs, (2) inaccessible workplaces, (3) lack of knowledge of employers in supporting PWDs, (4) commuting long distances between workplaces and homes of PWDs, (5) unequal wages and salaries based on discrimination, and (6) inaccessible workplaces and environments or limited infrastructure such as inaccessible transportation that create more physical barriers to work (Barnes, 1992; Lantz & Marston, 2012; Mani et al., 2018; Shier et al., 2009; Vornholt et al., 2018; World Health Organization, 2011).

Finally, the challenges in the retention phase of employment include (1) unequal career promotion based on disability, (2) inaccessible transportation, and (3) lack of knowledge of employers in terms of customized employment (Barnes, 1992; Harvey et al., 2013; Vornholt

et al., 2018; World Health Organization, 2011). Negative attitudes toward PWDs are often derived from a lack of understanding and inaccurate information about disability, resulting in disability stereotypes, such as low productivity and increased illness. These negative attitudes should be replaced with a new, more appropriate understanding. For instance, one study showed how the employment of persons with mental health problems did not differ from other employees, as the average number of workdays that were lost was minimal. Most of the PWDs within the study were healthy and did not seek health care for their mental health problems (Chong et al., 2013).

Job security and employment are essential aspects of being a productive citizen in society. For PWDs, having a job is a critical factor in leading an independent living. The employment of PWDs can also be a way to decrease economic burdens on society (Lantz & Marston, 2012; Shier et al., 2009). A previous study demonstrated that the cost of supporting an individual with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) during their lifespan was the equivalent of \$1.4 million in the United Kingdom and the United States. This cost doubled for persons with intellectual disabilities or multiple disabilities. These costs were mainly spent on special education services, parental productivity loss in childhood and residential care, supportive living accommodation, individual productivity loss, and medical care in adulthood (Buescher et al., 2014). Employment of PWDs can decrease social and economic burdens at the macro level, while also decreasing burdens at the micro-level by promoting an individual's physical and mental health. Studies have found that the physical health and mental health of PWDs were strongly associated with employment status, and PWDs who were employed reported better general and mental health than their unemployed peers with the same disabilities (Reichard et al., 2018).

While there are many challenges that PWDs continue to face in seeking and maintaining jobs through the employment process (transition, acquisition, and retention), there is also an increase in worldwide awareness and understanding of the socio-economic impacts of chronic illness and disability. As a result, there are now more attempts at addressing employment issues for PWDs to promote more inclusive policies and societies (Small et al., 2015). This corresponds to findings from other studies (Cheausuwantavee & Suwansomrid, 2018; Lee et al., 2011).

Since the traditional labor market approach matches people to existing job openings, it does not usually work for PWDs. One practical approach to address the gap between PWD and employer needs is customized or supported employment (CE/SE). Customized or supported employment is a flexible process designed to personalize the employment relationship between a candidate and an employer in a way that meets the needs of both sides. It also emphasizes matching and negotiation, and adjusting between the job seeker or PWD, their representative, and the employer. Thus, CE/SE is not a traditional method of securing a job (Griffin et al., 2007; Harvey et al., 2013). Recent studies showed the practical application of the CE/SE approach in the workplace, including the individual placement and support (IPS) model. This model could help PWDs become employed in the competitive labor market, support sustained employment, and improve work outcomes. The quality of life measured through physical and mental constructs of PWDs employed under this model was also enhanced, especially those with physical or multiple disabilities (Mueser et al., 2016; Reichard et al., 2018). Given this positive outcome, customized or supported employment should also be systematically established for the employment of PWDs in Thailand.

In addition to customized or supported employment, many crucial aspects related to the employment of PWDs should be strategically considered to address the challenges identified in this study. Recommendations include: (1) national and local governments must transition various employment centers for PWDs from traditional settings like sheltered workshops to fully integrated approaches – the transition center should operate alongside the competitive labor market based on their abilities; (2) job placement evaluation, as well as a medical assessment of PWDs, must be standardized – PWDs should be guided systematically by transition services or in education provisions, and individualized education program (IEP) teams; (3) reasonable accommodations and funding as premises and equipment grant for employers and interagency collaboration among stakeholders such as policymakers, public and private sectors must be considered to maximize employment opportunity for PWDs; and (4) cost of travel to work and equipment for employed PWDs should be supported (Barnes, 1992; Blanck & Adya, 2017; Mueser et al., 2016; World Health Organization, 2011; Yell et al., 2017).

More than half of the countries worldwide have passed smart disability laws promoting employment for PWDs in prohibiting discrimination against PWDs during recruitment and continuing employment, offering reasonable accommodations in the workplaces, and offering various affirmative actions (Nardodkar et al., 2016). However, challenges related to employment and discrimination against PWDs persist globally. Therefore, effective employment of PWDs in competitive labor markets cannot be only solved by smart laws and singular approaches. Effective change requires dedicated and continued support through collaborations with all stakeholders who share a social justice lens.

Conclusion and recommendations

There have been minimal employment opportunities for PWDs, seeing as only 8% of Thai PWDs are employed in labor markets, and many employment challenges for PWDs still exist. The challenges can be classified into three phases of the employment process: transition, acquisition, and retention. Challenges in the transition phase included (1) low qualification or education of PWDs, (2) low motivation for work of PWDs due to a long-ingrained charity-based living model, and (3) unmet labor market needs of existing vocational training programs for PWDs. Challenges in the acquisition or working phase included (1) negative attitudes of employers and co-workers toward PWDs, (2) inaccessible workplaces, (3) lack of knowledge of employers to support PWDs, (4) long commuting distances between workplaces and homes of PWDs, (5) inaccessible transportation, and (6) unequal wages and salaries based on disability. Finally, challenges in the retention phase included (1) unequal career promotion based on disability, (2) inaccessible transportation, and (3) lack of knowledge of employers in terms of customized employment.

Based on this study's findings, the following steps are recommended. First, career development and employment preparation for PWDs are needed, particularly around outcome-based education and training for PWDs relating to the labor market demands. Second, an active job coaching and matching system between PWDs and employers is critical and should be launched in all communities nationwide. Third, additional support, such as transportation fees, housing, and assistive technologies, are needed for employed PWDs. Also required is an increase in employers' knowledge and practical skills to create a universal design and accessible environments in workplaces for PWDs. Such support should

be supported by government funding. Finally, promoting positive attitudes and understanding of employers toward PWDs must continue to be facilitated in the workplace.

Study limitations

First, the study's participants, who were employers, mostly worked at companies in the private sector with one hundred or more employees. Such companies have to comply with Section 33 of the Persons with Disabilities Empowerment Act 2007. Second, the study focused on the placement and employment of PWDs in the labor market rather than on PWDs who are self-employed or entrepreneurs. Third, the study was conducted in 2015, which might restrict the findings to that specific period. Given the limitations above, the results of this study are not generalizable to employers in the public or private sectors, or other time periods.

Acknowledgments

This study is part of a larger research project called “Employment Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities” funded by the Ministry of Labour, Thailand. Many thanks to all participants who contributed their valuable time and information to this study. Special thanks to Dr. Plern Pratoommas and Nicholas Blum as kind proofreaders and editors of English. The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest. The study was approved by Mahidol University, Institutional Review Board (MU-IRB). Informed consent was obtained from all patients for being included in the study.

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