

Employers' Perceptions of Persons with Disabilities: Evidence of Gender Differences

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ABSTRACT

Objective – Employers' perceptions towards persons with disabilities (PWDs) are crucial such that they can directly influence intention to hire disabled workers. The aim of the current study was to examine whether employers perceive women with disabilities and men with disabilities differently with respect to disability type and on several employment-related concerns.

Methodology/Technique – Data were obtained from a sample of 201 employers in East Malaysia via a survey questionnaire.

Findings – The findings suggest that employers' perceptions were influenced by disability type as well as were gender-specific on matters relating to absenteeism, work quality and supervision but not loyalty and business costs. Interestingly, employers were found to express more favorable perceptions towards women with disabilities than men with disabilities. In terms of disability type, men with physical disabilities and women with auditory/communication disability were perceived the most favorably.

Novelty – Demonstrate the originality/value of the research which makes it different from prior studies.

Type of Paper: Empirical

Keywords: Persons with Disabilities; Employers; Gender, East Malaysia.

JEL Classification: J14, J16.

1. Introduction

The topic of persons with disabilities' (PWDs) low employment rates has been long debated on and examined. Yet, the employment of PWDs remains a challenging issue for human resource managers. Many authors (e.g., McLaughlin et al., 2004; Shier et al., 2009) contended that stereotyping, prejudice, discrimination, and stigma present the major obstacles for PWDs to gain employment. PWDs are often perceived as unable to work, less capable, weak, dependent, needy and incompetent (Bell & Klein, 2001; Staniland, 2009; Stone & Colella, 1996). Consequently, employers tend to consider PWDs as "risky hires" and are as such not keen to hire disabled workers. These findings, however, may not appropriately portray the

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reality within Asian societies other than those of western countries. Disability research in the Asian context is also still few and far between, resulting in the dearth of data on the disabled population. Limited data has in turn hampered efforts in developing and implementing policies and legislations to increase the participation of PWDs in open employment. In Malaysia, for instance, only a handful of studies (e.g., Ang, 2012; 2014; Tiun & Khoo, 2011; 2013) has investigated employers' perceptions towards PWDs with respect to attitudes, performance and costs. Given that, the present study is an attempt to extend these past studies by focusing on gender and disability type, using a sample drawn from a different geographical location (i.e., East Malaysia). Specifically, it examined the perceptions of employers towards PWDs along disability and gender lines. Employers' perceptions towards PWDs are crucial as they can directly influence intention to hire disabled workers. Even in this modern era when organizations claim to value diversity, hiring discrimination against PWDs persists as a sad reality (Callis, 2016). It is thus hoped that this study would provide useful statistical data which can help increase employment participation for PWDs.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Disability Type

The present study examined four types of disability (i.e., physical, visual, auditory/communication, and intellectual disabilities). Some authors (e.g., Carver & Rodda, 1978) argue that there are no generalized public attitudes across disability type. McLaughlin et al., (2004) posits that although the type of disability may not directly affect acceptance of PWDs but stigma (i.e., social perception) does. Hence, people are likely to perceive PWDs less favorably, more so as employees. Reactions can also differ according to the nature of disability such that people usually react more negatively to some disabilities than others (Safilios-Rothschild, 1970; Stone & Colella, 1996). Safilios-Rothschild (1970, p. 128) opines that facial disfigurements seem to be "the least liked, least tolerated, and the most anxiety- and aversion-provoking disabilities."

For most industries, particularly the hospitality industry, physical attractiveness is considered a virtue and as such this may hinder the recruitment of PWDs (Bengisu & Balta, 2011). A study in the food service industry found that employers tend to view different types of disability differently (Park, 1995). In another study, Bell and Klein (2001) predicted that job applicants' ratings would differ according to disability type (e.g., physical disabilities, neurological disabilities and mental illness). Bell and Klein's (2001) assumption were that individuals without a disability would receive highest hiring recommendations and higher salaries and would be viewed as more competent. Individuals with physical disabilities would receive a second highest rating, followed by those with neurological disabilities and mental illness. Interestingly, the results were contrary to their predictions. Bell and Klein (2001) surmised that the findings could be a true reflection of the situation at hand or possibly a result of the "norm to be kind." This norm may also be used to explain past findings which evidenced that employees with disabilities received similar or relatively higher promotability ratings than those without disabilities (Ang, 2012). But higher promotability ratings lamentably did not translate to salary progression for PWDs (Ang, 2012). Based on the aforementioned, it is evident that the effect of disability on public perceptions and/or attitudes remains inconsistent in the literature. Yet the literature generally suggests that non-disabled people (including employers) do assess disability type as a different entity or a unique phenomenon. This attitude can in turn affect how PWDs are perceived differently in employment (i.e., outcome and treatment) (Unger, 2002).

2.3. Gender

As to the effect of disability type, research findings (e.g., Bell & Klein, 2001; Martz & Xu, 2008) on the relationship between gender of PWDs and managers' reactions has been mixed. Research calls as such have been made to further explore the extent to which employers' perceptions are influenced by the gender of PWDs

(Stone & Colella, 1996). This study was accordingly undertaken to investigate whether there were gender differences in Malaysian employers' perceptions towards PWDs.

In some countries, working-age women face barriers to entering and participating in the workplace. Burke (1999) reported that women with disabilities generally have more negative working experiences than those reported by non-disabled women. These negative experiences included higher levels of harassment, a more demanding and hazardous work place, greater work demands and higher levels of job insecurity. Similarly, Traustadottir (1990) reported that women with disabilities face more serious employment problems than men with disabilities, and this seems to be true for all types and levels of disability. Further, when compared to men with disabilities, women with disabilities have lower employment rates (Hale et al., 1998; Jans & Stoddard, 1999). The reason could be that women with disabilities may in fact have received relatively little education. Jans and Stoddard (1999) reported that boys with disabilities comprised about two-thirds of the students in special education classes. The large discrepancy in terms of gender implies that the majority of girls with disabilities does not acquire the necessary skills and knowledge that potential employers look for before offering them a job (Traustadottir, 1990). The authors have also argued that disabled women are doubly disadvantaged in the workplace, or "double handicapped" (Backenroth, 1996), through the combination of gender and disabilities. Consequently, they tend to have lower labor force participation and lower income when compared to both non-disabled women and men and also disabled men.

On the contrary, Stone and Colella (1996) contended that disabled men are likely to be perceived less favorably than disabled women. They attributed this to the fact that characteristics associated with disabled people (e.g., lack of physical strength and dependent) are contrary to general consensus that men are supposed to be stronger and more independent than women, regardless of disability status. Bell and Klein's (2001) study hypothesized that employers' ratings would be higher for men with disabilities than for women with disabilities. However, their data did not support the hypothesis. Instead, female applicants with disabilities were found to generally receive higher ratings such that employers preferred to hire them than their male counterparts. The results could be explained by Flexible Correction Model that states that employers may have overcorrected for the perceived bias in rating female applicants with disabilities (Chien et al., 2014; Wegener & Petty, 1997).

4. Methodology

This study employed a survey questionnaire to obtain data from 201 non-disabled employers representing mainly small-medium enterprises (SMEs) in various industries in East Malaysia. All the respondents were directly responsible for the hiring of employees in their respective organizations. However, they might or might not have previously employed PWDs. The sample was comprised of 108 (54%) female and 93 (46%) male employers. Chinese respondents (115 or 57%) made up the majority of the sample, followed by indigenous people of Sabah (40 or 20%), Malay (29 or 14%), Other (i.e., Bugis) (10 or 5%), Indian (4 or 2%), and indigenous people of Sarawak (3 or 2%).

About a quarter of the sample was running real estate/renting/service business (43 or 21%). The remaining was involved in wholesale/retail/repair business (40 or 20%), manufacturing companies (31 or 15%), hotels and restaurants (23 or 11%), financial institutions (19 or 10%), educational institutions (9 or 5%), health and social work organizations (5 or 3%), and other businesses (31 or 15%). The respondents were predominantly middle managers (82 or 40.8%).

5. Analysis and Findings

Descriptive statistics were computed to test the employers' perceptions towards PWDs across disability type and gender. Table 1 shows that generally persons with physical disabilities were perceived the most favorably ($M=39.03$), followed by those with auditory/communication disabilities ($M=38.95$) and visual disabilities ($M=38.23$). Persons with intellectual disabilities ($M=37.27$) were perceived the least favorably.

The results also revealed that perceptions of employers were not only influenced by disability type but were also gender-specific. On the whole, women with disabilities ($M=77.05$) were perceived more favorably than men with disabilities ($M=76.43$). For men with disabilities, the employers expressed the most favorable response towards men with physical disabilities (19.65), followed by those with auditory/communication disabilities ($M=19.33$), visual disabilities ($M=19.11$), and finally intellectual disabilities ($M=18.34$). When asked about women with disabilities, the respondents perceived women with auditory/communication disabilities ($M=19.62$) the most favorably. This is followed by women with physical disabilities ($M=19.38$), visual disabilities ($M=19.12$) and intellectual disabilities ($M=18.93$).

Table 1. Employers' perceptions across disability type and gender.

	Physical disability		Visual disability		Auditory / Communication disability		Intellectual disability		Total	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Male	19.65	3.41	19.11	3.23	19.33	3.23	18.34	3.56	76.43	11.69
Female	19.38	3.14	19.12	2.94	19.62	3.07	18.93	3.49	77.05	11.22
Total	39.03	6.07	38.23	5.76	38.95	5.92	37.27	6.42		

Next, employers' perceptions of men and women with disabilities were assessed on six employment-related concerns using Park's (1995) scale. The results shown in Table 2 provide some evidence of gender differences with respect to employers' perceptions towards PWDs. To elaborate, on whether PWDs tend to be absent less often than other employees, 56% of the employers expressed favorable attitude towards women with disabilities when compared to those reported of men with disabilities (44%). However, more employers (53%) perceived that women with disabilities would usually quit the job sooner than other employees. A higher percentage of employers (55%) felt that men with disabilities would need to be closely supervised. On delivering work of higher quality, men with disabilities received more favorable responses from the employers (63%).

Interestingly, no significant differences were observed in terms of employers' perceptions of PWDs' loyalty and increased business costs. Almost an equal number of employers agreed that men with disabilities (49%) and women with disabilities (51%) were usually loyal to the companies they work for. Employers were also equally divided in perceiving that employing men with disabilities and women with disabilities (50% vs 50%) would increase business costs or expenses.

Table 2. Gender differences in employers' perceptions of employment-related concerns.

Employment-related concerns	Men with disabilities (%)	Women with disabilities (%)
1. ____ are absent less often than other employees.	44	56
1. ____ usually quit the job sooner than other employees.	47	53
3. ____ need close supervision.	55	45
4. ____ usually turn out work of higher quality.	63	37
5. ____ are usually loyal to the companies they work for.	49	51
6. Employment of ____ would increase business costs or expenses.	50	50

6. Discussion

There are several noteworthy findings in the present study. When asked about their perceptions of PWDs across gender and disability type, employers were found to express more favorable perceptions towards women

with disabilities than men with disabilities. The data as such did not provide any support for the view that women with disabilities are doubly disadvantaged by their gender and disability status (Backenroth, 1996). It however corroborates Stone and Colella's (1996) contention that disabled men are likely to be perceived less favorably than disabled women. The finding is also consistent with Bell and Klein's (2001) study, supporting the utility of Flexible Correction Model in explaining gender differences in the domain of disability. As noted earlier, employers may have overcorrected for the perceived bias in rating women with disabilities (Chien et al., 2014; Wegener & Petty, 1997).

The study findings also suggest that employers' perceptions towards PWDs are not only determined by the gender of PWDs but can also be influenced by the type of disability. Men with physical disabilities and women with auditory/communication disabilities were perceived the most favorably. It is reasonable to surmise that when considered collectively as PWDs, physically disabled people were seen in the most favorable light when compared to other disability types. But perceptions of employers seemed to have altered along gender lines such that women with physical disabilities received lower ratings than women with auditory/communication disabilities. The reason could be that having a physical disability may not fit the stereotypically distinctive traits of non-disabled women who are most frequently characterized as nurturing, attractive and feminine (Nario-Redmond, 2010).

Regardless of gender, those with intellectual disabilities were perceived most unfavourably. This finding supports previous work that has consistently shown that intellectually challenged persons are the most marginalized among PWDs. They are the least likely to be hired when compared to those of other disability types. People with auditory/communication disabilities similarly face challenges in getting employment. Non-disabled employers may anticipate communication difficulty with hearing impaired workers, more so in a fast-speed work environment which highly values verbal communication and telephone culture among the employees.

When perceptions of employers were assessed on six employment-related concerns, the data revealed concerns which are also gender-specific in nature on four out of the six concerns. In other words, employers rated men with disabilities and women with disabilities differently on different matters. The findings corroborated those of past studies (e.g., Bell & Klein, 2001; Jans & Stoddard, 1999; Martz & Xu, 2008; Stone & Colella, 1996). To reiterate, more employers held favorable perceptions towards women with disabilities relating to absenteeism and supervision. On the contrary, more employers felt that women with disabilities would usually quit the job sooner than other employees. The employers also expressed some concerns about the quality of their work. As for men with disabilities, more employers perceived that they need close supervision when compared to other workers. Yet, employers generally thought that men with disabilities would usually turn out work of higher quality.

Interestingly, there was no gender differences observed between men with disabilities and women with disabilities on the dimensions of organizational loyalty and increased business costs. The concern that employment of PWDs (regardless of gender) would increase business expenses is noteworthy such that it is an unfortunate misperception among employers. Many organizations often associate employing PWDs with expenses which are feared to rise from workplace accessibility for PWDs. Thus, organizations should know that reasonable accommodations for PWDs incidentally does not involve costly or complicated technology and as such will not incur significant business costs (Job Accommodation Network, 2016; Olson et al., 2001; Unger, 2002). For instance, the building of wheelchair ramps, PWDs' washrooms and the allocation of special car parking spaces are all but a one-off expenses. Most of the accommodations cost less than \$500 (JAN, 2016). There are also tax benefits available to help businesses ensure disability legislations compliance (Callis, 2016).

Training and education could also help modify the attitudinal and cognitive perceptions in non-disabled people's mind such that their negative attitudes towards PWDs can be changed (Ang, 2014). Hence, it is crucial that the government, organizations and NGOs expend a concerted effort in organizing awareness seminars or training programmes on disability and PWDs for non-disabled workers. Additionally, disabled employment

agencies can help employers acknowledge qualified PWDs and diminish hiring discrimination. The agencies can also help employers in respect of advertising, selecting, placement and finally on-job training (Job Coach Network Malaysia, 2016; Norani et al., 2001). Employers will only need to provide job responsibilities of the vacancies, whereas the agencies will recommend suitable and qualified PWDs and special equipment will be made to help the disabled employees carry out their work more competently.

7. Conclusion and Future Research

In view of the limited disability studies in Malaysia, the current study was embarked on to provide more disability data which can help in the development and implementation of policies and legislations to increase the participation of PWDs in open employment. The study has largely demonstrated that employers' perceptions of PWDs are influenced by disability type and gender. It also has to some extent supported the applicability of Flexible Correction Model within the disability domain. The data showed that non-disabled employers might have overcorrected for the perceived bias when rating women with disabilities, resulting in more favorable perceptions of women with disabilities than men with disabilities. The findings also suggest that regardless of gender, persons with intellectual disabilities were perceived the least favourably by Malaysian employers. The key implication is that employers' negative perceptions towards PWDs need to be kept in check. Unless and until these negative attitudes towards PWDs are altered, the job prospects for PWDs will remain poor. Another important implication is that employers should know that the cost of accessibility far outweighs the advantage of integrating PWDs in the workforce. A workplace that employs PWDs speaks volume of adding diversity which can provide all employees (non-disabled and disabled) the opportunity to work together, drawing on different strengths while challenging people to explore new perspectives (Callis, 2016).

It is hoped that the present study has provided a reference point for future work in the area of disability. Future research might examine a larger sample to help establish a greater degree of accuracy and generalizability of the findings. Another fruitful direction would be to determine whether a particular industry (e.g., manufacturing or service) is more supportive and fitting for PWDs. Future studies should also make distinctions along disability type, severity of disability and gender. Another arena for future research will be to explore the utility of the Flexible Correction Model (Wegener & Petty, 1997) in the disability domain. Finally, more intense disability studies should be commissioned by the Malaysian government (Ang, 2012; 2014) to deliver tangible benefits with regard to improving the employment opportunities for PWDs in the country.

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