“You’re employed! How can we work together?”
The experiences of employers in employing persons with learning disabilities in Malaysia

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Abstract
Employment for persons with disabilities in Malaysia is not uncommon. The movement of self-advocacy has impacted as one of the key focus for persons with learning disabilities to advocate their rights for employment. But, on the other hand, the voices of employers often remain unheard. This study focuses on understanding the experiences of employers and hearing their voices when persons with learning disabilities are employed in their workforce. Through a purposive sampling method, in-depth interviews were conducted with six employers in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in which they described their learning experiences. Information gathered has provided a greater understanding and appreciation of the magnitude of impact of employing a person with disabilities upon the entire employment system in Malaysia. The essential themes found can shed light on the issues of employment for persons with learning disabilities. These factors are deemed to be influential in the development and efficacy of the learning opportunities that can be created as intervention support for an inclusive setting in any community development, particularly in support of the government effort to promote the “1 Malaysia” concept.

Key words: employment, employer, persons with learning disabilities/difficulties, Malaysia

Introduction
Employment for persons with disabilities is one of the key factors for independent living and quality of life (UN CRPD, 2008; PDA, 2008) in the promotion of social inclusion. With the significant development in policy and legislation concerning persons with disabilities, particularly in the improvement of employment outcomes, the desire of persons with
disabilities to be included in the world of work is undeniable and practical. Even though employment for persons with disabilities is not uncommon nowadays, it is still not as widespread as it should be (Gosling & Cotterill, 2000). In Malaysia, the government has promoted various measures and initiatives in creating equal opportunities for persons with disabilities, yet there is still discrepancy in the laws and regulations to encourage more participation from the employers (Furuoka, Lim, Pazim & Mahmud, 2011). The setting up of Job Coach Network Malaysia in 2005 at the national level has been another effort to enhance and empower persons with disabilities for equal opportunity in employment (Ogawa, Kuno, Yeo & Sakai, 2011). On the one hand, the enactment of Persons with Disabilities Act in 2008 is regarded as a crucial step in the development for persons with disabilities at large, in this case for equal employment opportunities. It is argued that the implementation and enforcement need to be reinforced and evaluated periodically. Hence, with the acknowledgement to enhance equal opportunity for persons with disabilities, understanding the experiences of employers is vital to encourage more participation in improving the situation.

Understanding the employers’ experiences on the issues of employment for persons with learning disabilities is important because many employers are unaware and ignorant about the ability of persons with learning disabilities without research evidence (Lengnick-Hall, Gaunt & Kulkarni, 2008). The myth of disabilities is still unexplored as opposed to their abilities, particularly for persons with learning disabilities because their disabilities are invisible and hidden (Wills, 2008). According to Lengnick-Hall, et al. (2008), there is resistance from the perspective of employers to consider effectively including persons with learning disabilities in the workforce. Often, persons with learning disabilities are misunderstood as unproductive and unsuccessful. This has been a hindrance to their being employed in Malaysia (Furuoka, et al., 2011).
Employers and persons with disabilities have their roles and responsibilities to affect and reinforce each other in achieving employment or causing unemployment. The employer holds the authority and determines the conditions or terms of the employment for persons with disabilities (Wilton, 2004). However, it does not mean the employer is the sole decision-maker. Other key players in this system such as the family, the school and other service providers do have an impact. Therefore, by understanding the perspectives of employers, the intertwined and overlapped roles of each parties is believed to smoothen the progressive development in employment for persons with disabilities in the promotion of social inclusion.

In relation to achieving inclusion through employment for persons with disabilities, the experiences of employers are critical in the planning on the support need for life at work. By understanding their experiences, it challenges the training plan with the ends in mind (Taylor, McGilloway & Donnelly, 2004). Such information could be a useful guide for training efforts to take place in a school, vocational training and supported employment programmes (Kaehne & Beyer, 2009). It establishes a meaningful mechanism for communication between service providers and business professionals (Gosling & Cotterill, 2000). It is believed that when persons with learning disabilities are prepared and trained according to the requirements set by the employers, the myth of disabilities will be minimised by their potentiality. Hence, it encourages a more comprehensive transition planning and support for persons with learning disabilities to be equipped and trained for the workforce.

Understanding the experiences of employers becomes critical for its rationale in achieving a check and balance between the need and the possibility in employment for persons with learning disabilities in the effort to improve the unemployment issues such as discrimination against persons with learning disabilities and managing a diverse workforce (Wooten & James, 2005). Understanding the experiences of employers does not imply a definite answer but create an avenue for employers and persons with learning disabilities to
interact and respond in achieving employment. Many employers do share different views, concerns and experiences with regard to accommodating persons with learning disabilities in the workforce. It is believed that the understanding of the experiences of employers will enhance the chances of employment for persons with disabilities in the midst of managing challenges of discrimination. Employers are recognised for their role in strategizing organisation that can empower the lives of persons with learning disabilities.

In Malaysia, ‘persons with disabilities’ is defined in Persons with Disability Act (PDA) 2008 to include persons with physical disabilities, sensory impairment, learning disabilities and psychosocial disabilities. In this study, the term “persons with disabilities” is limited to persons with learning disabilities and/or intellectual disabilities only. Based on the Act, learning disabilities include Global Developmental Delay, Down Syndrome and other related intellectual disabilities, Autism, Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder and Specific Learning Difficulties such as Dyslexia, Dyscalculia and Dysgraphia (DSW, 2011).

The purpose of this study is to describe and better understand the belief and experiences of employers in accepting and accommodating persons with learning disabilities in their businesses and companies. When the experiences of employers are shared and understood in a realistic manner, it is believed to make an impact on the community, particularly other employers, in changing their mindset and their evaluation of persons with learning disabilities. Subsequently, it affects the strategy of their recruitment plan (Wilton, 2004) when persons with learning disabilities are being included. The point lies in the paradigm shift of the employers in the process of including persons with learning disabilities in the workforce when such valuable information and insight are deliberately and effectively addressed by schools, families and communities.

Specifically, the research questions are:
(1) What are the identified factors in the positive and negative experiences of employers in employing people with learning disabilities,

(2) What are the strategies used in accommodating and including persons with learning disabilities at work?

**Method**

This qualitative interview study focused on examining the experiences and strategies of employers. Patterns of meaning and understanding of employment from the employers (Gribich, 2007) are explored and analysed. Phenomenological study is designed in its relation to social action where interpretive practice is used to engage knowledge-in-practice (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) particularly in understanding the insider’s perspective of employers on the issue of employment for persons with learning disabilities. This qualitative research emphasized on the processes and meaning of the social experiences of employers.

**Sampling**

Six employers who are currently employing persons with learning disabilities in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia agreed to be interviewed and shared their experiences. It is a purposive sampling which allowed the researcher to choose a specified group of people to provide the data and insight to contribute to the understanding of their experiences. The employers experience in employing persons with learning disabilities ranged from six months to five years. In their educational background, four of them hold a degree at graduate level, one at diploma and one at certificate level. There were three male and three female participants aged between 36 to 50 years old; three are Chinese, two are Malay and one is Indian. Three of the participants selected have been previously known to the researcher. However, conscious efforts were made to have a non-hierarchical relationship, to show respect, to engage the employers, to maintain a non-judgmental attitude, and to listen attentively.

A summary of the settings of the companies is depicted in the following table.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Company</th>
<th>Nature of business</th>
<th>Operating hours</th>
<th>Total number of workers</th>
<th>Number of workers with LD*</th>
<th>Job scope for PWDs*</th>
<th>Salary as compared to other workers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>Child Care Centre</td>
<td>8am – 6pm</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Teacher Assistant</td>
<td>Not on par</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T</td>
<td>Science Education Company</td>
<td>8.30am – 4.30pm</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Office Assistant</td>
<td>Not on par</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>Restaurant</td>
<td>24 hours</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Crew Member</td>
<td>On par</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L</td>
<td>Shipping Company</td>
<td>24 hours</td>
<td>228</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Data Entry</td>
<td>On par</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S</td>
<td>Factory</td>
<td>24 hours</td>
<td>420</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Factory worker</td>
<td>Not on par</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>Stemcell Company</td>
<td>8am – 5pm</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Data Entry</td>
<td>On par</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* LD = Learning Disabilities  
* PWD = Persons with Disabilities

Two of the six companies, L and S, were considered large and multi-national companies, employing more than 100 employees with 24 hours operation. On the other hand, two companies (J and N) require persons with learning disabilities to work in contact with customer service whilst the other companies employed them as support staff in other areas as assigned by the supervisor. In terms of salary paid to persons with disabilities, three companies paid them on par to other co-workers, which means they have the other benefits as a staff. The others came out with specific terms with re-defined job description for employees with learning disabilities.

**Data Collection**

Data collected were triangulated through interviews, observations and documental analyses made by the researcher to examine the research questions. A semi-structured interview research method was chosen for this study revolving around a few central questions. This preferred choice allows the researcher to enjoy some level of flexibility during interviews with the intention to maintain some structure over its parameters (Bailey, 2007). All participants are designed to be asked the same set of questions in the interviews and were
allowed to respond in an open-ended fashion. For example, questions included, “What makes you employ a person with learning disabilities?” and “What are the strategies you have used when working with these people?” In addition, employers are asked to identify their learning experiences and types of support they may find helpful in providing employment for persons with learning disabilities. Probing questions were used to elicit more details and to clarify meaning from the employers. Observations through field work during the interviews involved interaction with persons with learning disabilities at work and physical environment field notes to confirm the information obtained from interviews. Other documents included personal profile of employees with learning disabilities, staff reports and newsletters from supporting organisations were used in document analysis.

Interview Procedures

Participants were contacted through tele-conversation and then provided an information sheet and a letter of request via email a few days before the interviews were conducted. Prior to the interview, employers were asked to fill up a form of Employer’s Information and sign the Participant’s Consent Form. Anonymity and confidentiality of participants were assured. Interviews took place in participants’ offices at times convenient for them with no other people present to maintain minimal disruptions. Two interviews were conducted in open space where the noise level of the environment was beyond control. Individual interviews were between 45 and 60 minutes in duration and were digitally recorded. Trustworthiness of the research protocol was recognised in the researcher’s plan to share the findings of the study with the employers concerned.

Data Analysis

To make sense of employers’ experiences from interviews, triangulated method is used to validate data collected from interviews, observation field notes and document analyses. Comparison of data of similar content from different sources aimed to confirm the validity
and reliability of results (Creswell, 2005). Careful planning was involved to ensure the accuracy of recordings and to test the truthfulness of the analytic claims upon the recording (Silverman, 2004). A thematic analysis approach (Devenish, 2002) was used, firstly to gather connected ideas, words or concepts; and followed by searching for abstract principles. Nvivo 10, a qualitative analysis software package was used in addition to organise and code data in a more efficient and secure manner without losing the context of the entire interview. Themes were subsequently decoded and analysed from the data depicted in the results.

Findings

Triangulated analysis of interviews, observations and document analyses revealed the experiences of employers in an in-depth ‘real life’ (Silverman, 2004) manner as designed and planned. A number of strategies, however, were associated with the experiences and concerns in the employment for persons with learning disabilities.

The past experiences of the employer affect their belief and action

The findings revealed that employers who have past experiences in dealing with persons with disabilities and/or learning disabilities are more receptive in employing employees with learning disabilities.

“My past experience is my…relative, he is much more so-called… need(s) more work, he will throw tantrum at people...But as for me, to handle the people consider not the first time...” (J)

“Yes...it was at my previous company...but they are deaf people...” (N)

“I was with the other company; I joined some society work...” (T)

“I was dealing with the people; oku (abbreviation in his mother tongue to mean a person with disabilities) is deaf...” (S)

Such encounters in the past have reduced the gap between understanding and misconception of learning disabilities (Gerber & Price, 2003). Hence, this has added value to affirm their belief in the potential of persons with learning disabilities in the workforce.

The positive experiences working with persons with learning disabilities is derived from their attributes and abilities at work

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Many employers shared their positive experiences in relation to the attributes of the young persons in their respective companies (Morgan & Alexander, 2005). Even though each had different descriptions of the attributes, this proves that persons with learning disabilities do have abilities at work. The attributes include following instructions, punctuality, concern for others, friendliness and creativity.

**Following instructions**

“... her behavioural is a lot so-called stable, and she understands, more mature...she can always follow rule...that’s the beautiful part.” (J)

“... they can work...follow what we want.” (N)

“... they accept your opinion...they follow up what to do...they reserve certain space for you to accept this thing.” (T)

The ability of employees with learning disabilities in following instructions at work has affirmed the employers to perceive their abilities and potential in accomplishing their given tasks. Report analyses from job coaches have proven this ability over a period of time after the employees settled at the work place.

**Punctuality**

“... he will turn up at work...no problem... see, what is most important is his punctuality, very good...” (N)

“... we admire his attitude...he is very punctual, he come to work punctual, start work, and he’ll finish work for lunch break on time, and he go(es) for the lunch, and then he come back, and have a few minutes of nap, then he’ll continue the work, he’ll put alarm...” (M)

Punctuality at work was observed by the employers and job coaches. Such structural discipline was built in their lives, and it is admirable to the employers where respect was gained.

**Concern for others**

“... he take(s) care other colleagues...he (is) willing to help them...” (M)

“... if got problem, they are concern each other...human relationship is good, very very good...” (S)

The willingness to help the other co-worker at work, and the concern shown by employees with learning disabilities was unexpected by the employers in the initial stage. It was convinced by the genuineness with observation made by employers.

**Friendly**

“... they love to be friendly, they love to talk.” (J)
“... when they communicate with each other, they share their feeling, is the same as ours, the feeling as the workers is the same...they will be smile(ing)…” (S)
“... I like to talk to him...most of the customers praised him, he is very good staff...” (N)

Employees of learning disabilities were friendly with other co-workers. Though some may not have much speech, their facial expression and body language has added value in creating a friendlier atmosphere at work. Employers are satisfied and enjoyed getting to know their employees. Some has gone extra miles in taking initiative in building rapport with their employees. Observations were made by the researcher during interviews at different office where employees with learning disabilities were enjoying their interactions with their co-workers. Interaction with other co-workers has proven and encouraged the natural attributes of employees with learning disabilities as reported by the employers.

Creative
“... actually they are quite good in their job...they are very creative, and also innovative...” (T)
“...some of them very surprising, they can perform more than what we’re giving them.” (T)

Employees with learning disabilities were given opportunity to be creative and innovative at work. Employers and other co-worker gained confidence and trust when tasks were given to employees were accomplished beyond expectation.

Inevitably, employees with learning disabilities are much respected for their contribution in the work place. The abilities of persons with learning disabilities are related to their work performance, good work ethics were practiced, and the employers perceive this as their strengths compared to other workers (West, Wehman & Wehman, 2005).

Systematic
“... he is perfect in his work...he is ...digital person...routine work like a robot, he’s not a computer. He can do the job very efficiently, so he know(s) what to do, and he take(s) the number, so he know what to key in...no short-cut...that is the goodness of this person.” (M)
“... he likes to write down everything in his log book...surprise (me)?” (N)
The efficiency of employees with learning disabilities was observed by the employers and supervisors in accomplishing the tasks given in a systematic and proper manner. This has minimised unnecessary mistakes where accuracy at work was acknowledged with appreciation.

Focus
“... this is the main strength they have, to focus in one area, they can finish that work, then only they move to another work...they don’t want to have any mistake.” (M)
“... they tend to be more detail.” (L)
“... he has good memory...” (N)

Employers and supervisors acknowledged the strength to focus at work by the employees with learning disabilities. The detail effort at work has produced quality of work which was beyond the expectation of some employers.

Committed
“... one of the significant one is their...tolerance level...that is, the by-product of having them to work in our organization. Once they get hang on to their work, they are actually very much committed to it.” (L)
“...they are actually full of ...spirit to work as a normal...” (S)

The commitment of the employees was built up through time when it is enhanced by the spirit of work in the work place.

Responsible
“... they have the sense of responsibility...for a longer, stable work force.” (L)
“... they are serious at work.” (N)

The sense of responsibility and seriousness at work has affirmed the employers and supervisors in keeping these employees at work especially with the task assigned to them.

It is evident to note that most of the employees go beyond the employers’ expectation in their aptitude for work. Hence, trust was built between them. This has resulted future career development plans to promote persons with learning disabilities in supervisory positions.

The negative experiences of employers allow changes for improvement

Negative attributes such as slowness and self-resistance in the employees were shared as a means to understand the nature and characteristics of people with learning disabilities. Employers and supervisors could accept such attributes but would expect improvements, if
given the opportunity. These negative experiences in relation to the personal characteristics and work performance (Carter & Wehby, 2003) do affect the employers’ belief and action in dealing with them.

**Slow**

“... they are very slow to pick up all the instruction...” (S)

“... he wants to learn something, for example cashier...he wants to learn, but others said...very slow...customer complain.” (N)

“...it takes them longer time to fit in...” (L)

Employers acknowledged the slower capacity of their employees with learning disabilities. Even though it affects the company’s work performance, accommodative strategies such as job modification was used to improve work performance as reported by job coaches. Reports from supervisors and other co-workers implicated resistance when employees were starting work. It took a period of time for employers and other co-worker became more understanding in accepting them at work. Conflicting perception in this manner challenged the employers in anticipating the potential of these employees in achieving gainful employment.

**Self-resistance**

“... once they switch to other environment, definitely they are unsafe...” (T)

“...for me at the very beginning, it’s quite challenging...there was self-resistance...for them to change is rather difficult, because they are so used to...er...repetitive work...when there is change of supervisor or department...maybe mobility there is a bit restricted...for them to relate to us, maybe it takes more time, and at different pace.” (L)

Employers realised employees with learning disabilities took time to adjust to new work routine, new supervisor, and new co-worker. Some did not response well in the initial stage. Time and effort in relating and building relationship needed when the characteristic and personality of employees with learning disabilities are understood.

“... we have the quality for them to look into, so that one is quite difficult for them to catch. It takes a long time to catch it. So, even the one year, they are still learning to catch it...” (S)

“...when things are too dynamic, changes, when there is frequent changes, there will be a certain level of concerns, when we require them to fit into the changes quickly...” (L)

These attributes affect the company’s work performance, quality of work and the dynamics of the company in keeping up the image of the company. A more sensitive and
understanding environment had been created to include persons with learning disabilities. More initiative in rapport building was built in order to motivate employees with learning disabilities to contribute according to expectations. The support from other co-workers is an important point for improvement to happen.

**Strategies of employers in understanding and complementing each other in partnership**

The identified factors in the experiences of employers in employing persons with learning disabilities have granted employers opportunity in understanding the needs of persons with learning disabilities. Job accommodation was used to strategize and realise the ability and possibility of employment for persons with learning disabilities. With respect and understanding, employers build rapport with their employees, and impact the whole company to understand each other. This has enhanced the working relationship between employers and employees. It was an uphill task to achieve its balance but not an impossible task.

Other strategies include engaging job coaches from the local agencies. The support provided by job coaches recommended has been helpful in taking care of the emotional and social needs of employees with learning disabilities which have sometimes been overlooked by employers. Partnership with these local job coaching agencies is evidently a good strategy to achieve the goal of getting real jobs for persons with learning disabilities (Wilson, 2003). In this case, the role of job coaches becomes vital in sustaining the partnership between employers and persons with disabilities by complementing each other for mutual benefit, as well as for employment development for persons with learning disabilities.

**Discussion and Implications for Practice**

The findings of this study have important implications for employment of persons with learning disabilities and the other stakeholders. The experiences and concerns of employers
challenge the role of all stakeholders in the employment setting in the working together.

Understanding the person in a holistic manner in terms of personal, social and emotional needs is essential in developing the relationship for each other (Taylor, McGilloway & Donnelly, 2004). Good relationship contributes to good work performance and job satisfaction (West, Wehman & Wehman, 2005). Persons with learning disabilities have fundamental value and worth. Focusing on the relationships amongst each other helps to produce change. The argument lies in whether such relationships should be initiated by the employers as the authority figures, or by the employees as persons with their own rights. The point is relationships should derive from both parties in a natural and progressive manner.

Moreover, the role of employers goes beyond the company in achieving sustainable employment for persons with disabilities. They can be catalysts for other employers in the corporate sector by being proactive in sharing their positive experiences and as role models. The point is to learn from one another. Such sharing could gear towards creating a paradigm shift and change in attitude, than merely of knowledge, so that the engagement to include persons with learning disabilities in the work force can be sustainable and also increased in numbers. This implicates the importance of inter-agency partnership (Taylor, McGilloway & Donnelly, 2004; Kaehne & Beyer, 2009) as an advantage for the development of employment for persons with learning disabilities. The argument is persons with learning disabilities encompass the whole range of categories from ‘severe’ to ‘mild’, ‘complex needs’ to ‘easy to place’ where the learning differences are being emphasized with different appropriate strategies and support. In this case, job coaches from different service organisations in the local community play a critical role in facilitating complementary services amongst themselves, as pointed out by Wilson (2003), crucially working closely with employers in developing an appropriate approach with ‘careful appreciation of the nature and consequences of impairment in work situations’. Hence, there must be an amount of respect
and trust built into the partnership for collective learning, commitment to each other to
achieve mutual benefit and development in enhancing the young persons with learning
disabilities, the company and the community at large for a satisfying quality of life.

Equally important is the availability of support from all the parties in the community
to interact with one another, learn from each other and collaborate in accomplishing mutually
desired outcomes as there is no limit to what can be learned and accomplished. The effort to
promote the ability and potential of persons with learning disabilities requires effective and
positive public awareness, ongoing monitoring and evaluation, especially in the current
practice and policy implementation. Promoting disability awareness such as Disability
Equality Training at the national level and providing Job Coach Training as an initiative by
the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, would be impactful in
ensuring persons with disabilities’ right to work in accordance to the Persons with
Disabilities Act 2008. However, periodical evaluation is needed to keep up with the global
changing trend. An employer forum and network could be organized and coordinated at the
ministry level to initiate and strengthen the inter-agency collaboration, both within the
community and at nation-wide level. As identified by Johnson, et al., (2003) for promoting
successful collaboration: commitment, communication, and strong leadership are the key
factors for us to learn from. The driving force behind these efforts must continue to be a
strong value base that promotes the dignity, worth and importance for all individuals.

The outcomes described in this study present a significant challenge to the issues of
employment for persons with learning disabilities from the perspectives and experiences of
employers. It is an ongoing changing trend to achieve inclusion for persons with learning
disabilities at work and in the community. It is hoped that there is commitment to use this
research as:

- A basis for subsequent policy discussions and practice development
A vehicle for promoting the changes which people with learning disabilities and their allies aspire.

The researcher is convinced that people with learning disabilities will be making their case for their rightful inclusion in the society.

References


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