Breaking out of the Glassbox: Employee Responses to Disability Inclusion in the Workforce in Thailand

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Abstract: This study will focus on the diversity brought about by disability, or difference in capabilities, in the workforce, particularly exploring employee perspectives to disability inclusion in the workplace. A phenomenological analysis was conducted based on the qualitative data gathered through semi-structured interviews with employees who have experienced working with People With Disabilities (PWD). This research extracted themes surrounding employees perceptions formed from their experiences working with disabled colleagues, as well as link its possible effects to the formation of organizational culture and shared values among the employees in the enterprise. The findings show that employees working in a disability-inclusive environment had enhanced motivation to work harder and gained a sense of pride as influenced by their disabled colleagues. Furthermore, a culture of open-mindedness and equity sensitivity were also observed in the employees who have experienced working with disabled people. This study will be deemed useful in further understanding employee responses to disability inclusion and give insights into the management of diversity in organizations.
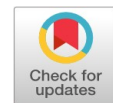
INTRODUCTION

Many disabled people remain dependent due to many causes such as inadequate services, isolation and lack of community accommodation (World Health Organization, 2013). Furthermore, there are also preconceptions towards disabled people as needy, helpless and deserving of special treatments (Stone & Colella, 1996). The image of disabled people as infinite dependents has somehow been the norm for many years (Bualar, 2014).

However, arguments have arisen to forward a change in society's perception. As equal members of society, they are entitled to control over their lives and have opinions on issues that concern them including health, education, and community living (World Health Organization, 2013). In fact, it is argued that PWDs' inclusion to the workforce and accessibility to work opportunities is a right, equal to their non-disabled counterparts (United Nations General Assembly, 2006).

This paradigm shift has been recognized through different initiatives and government policies already addressing diversity and disability inclusion in the workforce. As a matter of fact, international agencies such as the United Nations, the World Bank and the International Labor Organization have contributed significant policy instruments promoting the rights of PWDs to opportunities such as education, training and employment. Young adults with disabilities have been the focus of employment policies in many Western governments and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries in the last 10 years (Stafford, Marston, Beatson, Chamorro-Koc, & Drennan, 2019). Schur, Kruse, Blasi, and Blanck (2009) emphasized that employment, more than just a source of livelihood and income, also helps PWDs to improve self-esteem and conquer social isolation.

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In this process, businesses have been encouraged, if not required by law, to make reasonable accommodations and participate in the disability inclusion process (World Health Organization, 2013). However, it is undeniable that certain effort and adjustments must be made internally within the business to accommodate such participation which may even include financial investment on support systems and infrastructures (Solovieva, Walls, Hendricks, & Dowler, 2009). On the other hand, articles have been highlighting the role of PWDs in creating competitive advantage for businesses and contributing to improved productivity and economic benefits despite the costs of workplace adjustments (Solovieva, Dowler, & Walls, 2011; Sriboonyaponrat, 2016). Looking at the bigger picture in terms of productivity, equal opportunities and payment for disabled people may increase the Gross Domestic product (GDP) by up to 7 percent based on a conservative estimate, still not counting the increased productivity expected from family members as well (International Labour Organization, 2018; United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2015). In fact, the relevance of disabled people as a valuable resource in the workforce has been increasingly recognized especially in countries with ageing societies experiencing a decline in the working-age population (Vornholt et al., 2017).

Research showed that there had been an increase in the employment of PWDs in the 90s (World Health Organization, 2013). However, from the disabled persons' perspective, they continued to struggle to prove that they are reliable and competent employees. Although they were employed, they felt like they were treated as second-class employee. This situation was described as a glass box, where PWDs felt that they were somehow able to join, but not fully belong to the workplace. They also felt that they were exposed to stigma that further escorted them to social estrangement. The glass box metaphor further explains the disabled employee's experience of being "stuck" generally in lower-level positions regardless of the qualifications. A feeling of being hired merely to reach some human resources quota served as an unspoken barrier that excluded them from being an equal member of the team. They seem to be left out of consideration for important decisions and relevant projects. This situation pressures PWDs to prove themselves in the hopes of escaping the glass box (Purc-Stephenson, Jones, & Ferguson, 2017).

Workplace adjustments affect not only the company [employer] and the disabled employee themselves, but also certainly the people working in the organization. Accommodations given to PWDs mean that a different treatment is given to a certain group compared to another. Co-worker reactions and acceptance contribute to the success or failure of the implementation of accommodation. For this reason, co-workers must not be overlooked as important stakeholders in the disability inclusion process (Colella, 2001).

LITERATURE REVIEW
Thailand: Society and Work Culture

In Thailand, being a predominantly Buddhist country, many people believe that disability is a consequence of a wrongdoing in a persons' previous life. Negative social attitudes towards disability have been associated with religious beliefs. Disabled persons were considered to be cursed or sufferers from their past sinful behaviors (Bualar, 2014).

In addition, social attitudes in Thailand lead to the formation of stereotypical ideas towards disabled people. Social bias is often formed through media, literature and other carriers of culture. These preconceptions from employers about impairments are additional issues PWDs have to deal with in their employment (Bualar, 2014). In the mainstream Thai mindset, disabled people are objects of pity and must remain under the custody and care of their family members (Naemiratch & Manderson, 2009).

In terms of work culture, Komin (1990) identified 9 value orientations carried by Thais in the workforce: the ego, grateful relationship, smooth interpersonal relationship, flexibility and adjustment, religio-psychical orientation, education and competence, interdependence, fun-pleasure, and achievement-task. Komin (1990) findings indicate that task achievement value is likely to be influenced by social relationship values. The results further reiterated the Thai work perceptions that task-achievement values of being "ambitious" or "hard-working" were seen negatively in contrast to social relationship values like being "caring", "considerate" and "helpful". Moreover, Harada (2017) noted Thai people's tolerance for ambiguous situations and relatively low effort to minimize such ambiguity. Harada (2017) linked it to the

Thai expression "mai pen rai" or "that's all right" which exhibits a carefree attitude amidst adversity, such as mistakes made by others' failure or misfortune.

Furthering the context of Thai work culture with reference to Hofstede's model of cultural dimensions, Thailand has a highly collectivist culture that explains their long-term affinity to a group or extended relationships. While people in more individualistic societies perceive that they are supposed to look after themselves or their direct family alone, people in collectivist societies take care of each other in the name of loyalty. Thais, in general are not confrontational. They tend to not openly express their disagreement at the risk of offending another member of the group (Hofstede Insights, n.d.).

Moreover, Thailand has the lowest Masculinity ranking among Asian countries rendering it a Feminine society. Given this scenario, the dominant values held is caring for others and quality of life rather than competitiveness, the desire to be the best or stand out from the crowd (Hofstede Insights, n.d.).

METHODOLOGY

This research aims to have a qualitative study of the impressions that have existed and developed among employees from their experiences working with PWDs. In order to effectively gather insights from the employees, the study used interviews to gather qualitative data leading to the understanding of the effect of disability inclusion as observed on a personal level.

The recommended number of participants known to be sufficient in reaching a certain saturation point in phenomenological researches ranges from 2 to 10 informants (Boyd, 2001). Therefore, the participants in this research were maintained within this recommended range. After the data is collected and analyzed, the researcher extracted themes or generalizations that have been observed to be occurring in different participant experiences.

Purposive sampling was used to select participants for the study based on the researcher's independent judgment on the employees' working experience and relation to disabled employees. Taking the research aims and objectives, the researcher selected participants whose experiences were deemed helpful in answering the research questions or achieve research objectives.

The data collected were analyzed with a phenomenological approach which aims to understand people's first-hand experiences in a particular situation. This approach is used to describe, comprehend, and derive possible meanings of individual and subjective experiences in relation to the topic being studied (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Data were processed through Hycner (1985) "Five-Step Explicitation Process." In the first part of the explicitation, the data were treated holisticallytaking the informants' experience as a story or narrative. The aim of the first part is to grasp the whole meaning of the informants' lived experiences instead of dividing into parts (Värlander, 2012). Consequently, data were categorized to find relevant units of meaning from individual interviews. Recurring units appearing from interview transcripts were noted making up its respective clusters. Following suit, the units and clusters were cross-checked among the informants' interviews to see overarching themes across different people's responses. Since the data were processed with a bracketed perspective from the researcher's preconceptions and theoretical concepts, the findings primarily comes from an inductive method.

EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCES IN A DISABILITY INCLUSIVE WORKING ENVIRONMENT

This study looked at employee responses after their first-hand working experience with PWDs. In particular, colleagues and peers to disabled employees may have either positive or negative impressions towards disability inclusion in their work environments developed due to PWD's contributions, challenges and attitude experienced in the workforce.

As a result of this study, the readers will be able to get a deeper comprehension of employee perspectives after their experience working with disabled colleagues and exposure to a disability-inclusive working environment. Therefore, the readers will have an increased awareness of disability inclusion in the workplace and its effects on the people in the organization.

In order to effectively gather insights from the employees, the study used semi-structured interviews

of 10 employees who had experiences working with PWDs to gather qualitative data leading to the understanding of the effect of disability inclusion as observed on a personal level. The participants were fully aware of their involvement in the research, but confidentiality was maintained. Interviewees were informed that their names and workplaces would not be disclosed in the research report and interviews will be transcribed under pseudonyms. The outstanding employee experiences in a disability-inclusive working environment can be classified into the following:

Charisma leading to inspiration and motivation

Non-disabled colleagues see a disability-inclusive environment as an internally fulfilling and intrinsically motivating opportunity for almost the entire workforce. Disabled employees seem to have charisma or an innate tendency be popular and socially influential in the company.

"She is very influential to the team as well-she is popular. . . " (Betty, Junior Claim Assessor)

Seeing the diligence and hard work of disabled people serves as an inspiration for non-disabled people to work harder. Furthermore, the presence and success of disabled people in the company were pointed out to be a possible source of inspiration for their fellow disabled people to have the courage to enter and be accepted in the workforce.

"Sometimes, when I see PWDs working, that gives me motivation for work like, they have the disabilities, they can do. So, why not we can do or try to do as much as they can? Abled bodies are lazy! *laughs* Maybe we are too comfortable with our life." (Camille, Receptionist)

Although initial literature states that company policies may exempt disabled people from doing extra work or work falling under organizational citizenship duties (Colella, 2001), as experienced by the informants of this research, the disabled colleagues were proven to still work beyond what is required of them on their own initiative. Aside from being a helpful colleague, they were also actively volunteering on side-projects that allows them to be seen as a role model towards groups of disabled people within and outside the company in the act of paying it forward for the employment opportunity they were able to attain.

"When we give the opportunities [to volunteer] to them, they would like to pay it forward to other people as well, so they are willing to be volunteers. Because they are the very first group of PWDs [to be working in the company], they would like to be the role model so that people will open their minds and other PWDs can come to work with us." (Dennis, Manager)

This hardworking and diligent attitude springing from disabled employees creates an upward spiral of motivation and inspiration around the company.

"I earned some attitude. I learned the way the [disabled people] are working, so I think I have to work harder than the disabled man To be a normal person, I have to work harder than the disabled person." (Felicidad, Housekeeper)

Equity sensitivity and managing expectations

There seems to be layers of dichotomy experienced by the employees in a disability-inclusive environment. First and foremost, while they are knowledgeable that they have to extend patience, sensitivity and understanding toward their disabled colleagues due to their condition, they are also concerned about keeping them empowered to deal with the situation themselves. As a result, they experience hesitation in demanding for help in work-related activities and keeping low-expectation towards their disabled colleagues' performance at work.

"I have to explain to others that she cannot speak. Most of the time, I try to help her communicate with others. But I feel like she does not need my help, because she acts like she is like a normal person. I do not want to make her feel bad in the way she handles other people." (Ina, HR Officer)

"When it comes to expectations, I do not give 100% expectations... We are not the person to be picky and pushy for the work... We do not expect her to be the top performer..." (Azva, Assistant Vice President)

The second dichotomy is observed in the behavior of disabled colleagues. One hand, responding to their colleagues' low expectations and hesitation to demand tasks, the disabled colleagues try harder to reach out and offer assistance to their colleagues.

"When someone in the team members is absent or works [with] high load, Yaya knows where she should go to help without anyone telling her." (Betty, Junior Claim Assessor)

On the other hand, some disabled employees exhibit insecurity from their condition that leads them to behave in a reserved manner. In this case, some non-disabled colleagues reported the need to emotionally support their disabled colleague to let their potential shine. Their desire to not let their disability catch attention prevent them from taking the courage to reach their full potential.

"What I found more challenging is how to make her shine with her potential, because she does not want other employees to see that she has a disability. I try to make her show her potential to other..." (Betty, Junior Claim Assessor)

Furthermore, Non-disabled employees feel the sensitivity, a sense of panic and fear to make mistakes from their disabled colleagues. This may be caused by the fear that the prospective mistake would be attributed to the disability, as well as pressure to get the work correctly done despite the disability.

"...Eh is very hyper and she does not want to be the burden, so nature of her, she needs to do this jobShe has this sensitivity and she panics that she will not get it [the task] again...." (Ava, Assistant Vice President)

All these layers of dichotomy experienced by both the non-disabled employees and their disabled colleagues ultimately results in an increased equity sensitivity in the organization. Equity sensitivity is a mindset among employees where the effort and contribution they are making to the organization is comparable to another concerned employee. People may have a different extent of equity sensitivity: there is the kind of employees labeled as benevolents who find satisfaction in giving their talents, altruism and finding personal worth in the organization. On the other end, there are the entitleds who prioritize personal interests and are always looking for ways to maximize personal rewards from the organization, most often through extrinsic means such as pay, benefits and job security. In the middle of the spectrum lie the equity sensitives who are focusing on maintaining good employment relationships and achieving desired outcomes (Rai, 2008).

The act of offering assistance and lowering expectation from the non-disabled colleagues, while counteracted by their disabled colleagues' constant effort to prove their competence show behaviors observed in benevolents and equity sensitives. Both parties extend equity sensitivity towards the situation and a culture of a more cautious behavior is observed in terms of the employee relationships in the workplace. Attitudes leaning to entitlement and prioritization of personal interests were less likely seen in the interview responses.

"I have to be working harder as Mr. Gop did. If Mr. Gop works harder than me, it is not going to be good." (Gerald, Leader of the Assembly Team)

"..There's a little bit about work that I need to teach more, teach extra Personally, I am nice to people so there is no problem with me." (Jackie, Compensation and Benefits Officer)

"Ms. Eh is one of the families that I am taking care of and no other company seeing this way. We are the part of the Thai society that is doing this..." (Ava, Assistant Vice President)

"I feel that we have very,very good benefit, similar [equal] to PWDs, but comparing to us, they mostly have higher expense for living. So, sometimes, I feel that those benefits given to them are lower." (Camille, Receptionist)

The presence of equity sensitivity in the organization were positively linked to organizational commitments and job satisfaction and negatively related to job turnover likelihood (King & Miles, 1994).

Open-mindedness, conquering prejudices and gateway to innovation

The employees who had prior encounters with a disabled person, having seen them begging alms in the street or as a family member who they needed to take care of, are the ones who have exhibited more preconceptions and stereotypes towards disabled people. These prejudices include doubts on the capability of the disabled person to fulfill a task, contribute significantly to the company or to be able to work at a higher-level position.

"Before working and being friends with PWDs, I thought that PWDs always like requesting privilege,

demanding...At first, I still doubt that, Is she smart? Is she truly able to work? ... Because, normally, I saw PWDs working at entry-level or maybe in labor in factories." (Camille, Receptionist)

On the other hand, those who did not have prior encounter or experience with disabled people come into the workforce as a clean slate without any preconception. Hence, the image painted towards their disabled colleagues as abled individuals was solely formed in the workforce.

Therefore, a disability-inclusive workplace makes the company employees accustomed to encountering unfamiliar situations and keeping an open-mind towards diversity. Overall, being immersed in a disability-inclusive workplace becomes the key to conquering prejudices formed through their initial encounters with disabled people.

"Sometimes, she teaches us things about living because of her experience, shares her stories... I learned that when we find something new, we need to be very, very, open. Do not judge by its first look. This is what I learned living with PWDs." (Camille, Receptionist)

As per the opinions of the colleagues expressed in the interview, diversity management is enhanced as per their experience. Working on a team, they are being more considerate of each members' competencies and utilizing the opportunity to understand each person's strengths and weaknesses. Recognizing these competencies helps in task delegation and teamwork success.

"When you have some assignments, you need to think that, Do they have the capability to do the assignment with the right person? I think, like the normal person, when you have team members with abled bodies, you need to think about that as well..." (Dennis, Manager)

Furthermore, interview results also exhibit learning points introduced by disabled people to their non-disabled counterpartssuch as new communication strategies, insightful comments related to product development, more efficient process of doing things.

"I learned how to communicate with her I ask her to teach me [sign language]. She always teaches me." (Ina, HR Officer)

"One advice that was very useful was, 'How can blind people buy the insurance and enter into contract?'They cannot sign, they cannot type... I asked her [blind colleague], 'When you enter into a contract, what do you do?'She gave me an advice that 'should just get a thumb stamp, finger stamps, and witnesses." (Dennis, Manager)

"Mr. Gop has skills and he is a good worker, and he can figure out other ways that he can work faster. I can see that and I can apply the way Mr. Gop works." (Hector, Leader of the Welding Team)

Sense of pride and fulfillment

A sense of pride and fulfillment in different angles were detected from the interview responses. Firstly, employees express their pride towards their employers for having an inclusive policy towards disabled people. They take their employer as a role model and advocates their company's policies to their peers within and beyond their workplace. Some of the respondents expressed that they are proudly telling other people that they are working in a disability-inclusive company.

"I am proud of the company. It feels good that the company is hiring a disabled person, so it is going to be an image or example to other people who is normal, and also the other person who is disabled. It is going to be good example for them to work..." (Hector, Leader of the Welding Team)

Interview responses also show that the intention or purpose of the company for hiring disabled people affects employees' perception of their company. When the employee knows that the company is only doing it as per government requirement or tax incentives, the employee does not exhibit this sense of pride, and even subjects the company to comparison against other companies that do better. Furthermore, when a disabled person was hired for the quota instead of their merits and qualifications, the employee perceived this even as detrimental to the company and for the image of disabled people themselves:

"...for my company, we include disabled peopl...because the government told us to do so... I know some people [company] can do better than us, but for my company, we do because the government asked us." (Ina, HR Officer)

"I think it is very good that we accept them... I do not want the company to do this as charity or

we need to hire them just for reaching the quota. It will not feel sustainable in the long run. When the PWDs we hire do not have the qualifications, it will corrupt the mindset of the people in the company. In the future, PWDs can get no chance to work in the company because the mindset is not open.” (Dennis, Manager)

Secondly, there was also a sense of pride cultivated by the employee towards their disabled colleagues. Many instances in the interview cited that the disabled person's capability to work and live a normal life dignifies the disabled person in the eyes of their colleagues.

Lastly, there is also a sense of pride and fulfillment to themselves as a colleague who has been contributing to a disability-inclusive environment. They see themselves as a contributor to the opportunity given to the disabled colleague. Whatever inconvenience caused by the disability experienced in the workplace was offset by the pride to the perceived contribution to the society's betterment in the bigger picture.

“Overall, I am happy working with a disabled person. I am also proud of the disabled man for the reason that the disabled person can work normally. In some cases, they can work better than a normal person. I am proud of my colleague. I am proud to be his assembly leader...” (Gerald, Leader of the Assembly Team)

Gouthier and Rhein (2011) identified attitudinal organizational pride as a cognitive and durable pride springing from one's perception of an organization. This attitudinal pride was exhibited from the respondents' statements. When there is pride in the organization and the employees identify themselves in the decisions of their leader, it is more likely for the employees to have the shared sense of vision which may have direct influence on commitment and turnover intention, as well as an indirect relation to creativity (Gouthier & Rhein, 2011; Nissa, Jhatial, Nawaz, & Halepota, 2018).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper explored the employees' perspective from working with disabled colleagues. Most of the interview responses exhibited a positive effect on the mindset and motivation of employees in the company. Furthermore, they also felt a sense of pride towards the decision the company made regarding hiring PWDs which develops rapport between the leaders and the followers as well as nurturing commitment of service to the organization. On the other hand, we were also able to get a hint that uncertainty of the extent to which non-disabled employees should extend assistance and lower their expectation may be a factor that leads to the feeling of being in a glass box as reported by the disabled colleagues. This situation is currently being dealt by keeping an open-mind and maintaining equity sensitivity in the organization.

While the findings of this research support the claim that a positive impact is experienced from having a disability-inclusive workforce, companies that have programs to include disabled workers remain at a minority. There may also be additional barriers that were untapped by the results of this research. Thailand scoring high on individualism-collectivism dimension from Hofstede's cultural dimensions model, means that Thais have a highly collectivist society that is exhibited at work (Pimpa, 2012). Findings from Komin (1990), also show that Thai socio-cultural system values social relationships more than task achievement. Therefore, such cultural dynamics may have given a leeway for more tolerant and patient answers with regards the PWDs' participation at work exhibited in the interview responses.

A cross-cultural study may be conducted to see whether employees coming from countries with national cultures who are stricter in efficiency and output would have different perspectives towards a disability-inclusive environment. Furthermore, the degree of cultural diversity in the organization may also generate another variant of employee response answering whether a multi-culturally diverse organization would be more or less accepting of disability inclusion.

Lastly, since the findings of this qualitative study linked disability inclusion motivation and inspiration as experienced by the employees intrinsically, a quantitative study may also be explored finding the extent of the actual productivity increase in a good disability-inclusive and a well-managed diversity in the organization.

The findings of the research leaned towards positive outcomes linking to increased motivation,

sense of pride, sensitivity and open-mindedness in the organization. Overall, diversity in the workplace through disability inclusion improved the overall climate in the workplace, encouraged flexibility and teamwork, as well as challenging traditional mindsets and promotes open-mindedness.

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