

## **QUALITIES OF EMPLOYEES WITH DISABILITIES IN ORGANIZATIONS: EXPLORING EVIDENCE FROM MALAYSIAN EMPLOYERS**

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**Abstract:** *This paper attempts to discuss the qualities shown by employees with disabilities that were hired by employers in the private sector. This study is qualitative in nature and the data for the study was gathered using semi-structured interviews with 12 employers who actively hired and have a wide experience in managing employees with disabilities. From the analysis that was performed, employers indicated that they are satisfied and enjoyed hiring this group of people in the organization. The results revealed that these disabled employees demonstrate positive qualities while in employment. The implication of the findings will be important insights to be highlighted and further discussed as it would help encourage employers to hire persons with disabilities. This contributes to the knowledge on employment among disabled and would assist increase the participation of persons with disabilities in the workforce.*

**Keywords:** *Employees with Disabilities, Employment, Employer Perspectives, Employee Traits, Malaysia*

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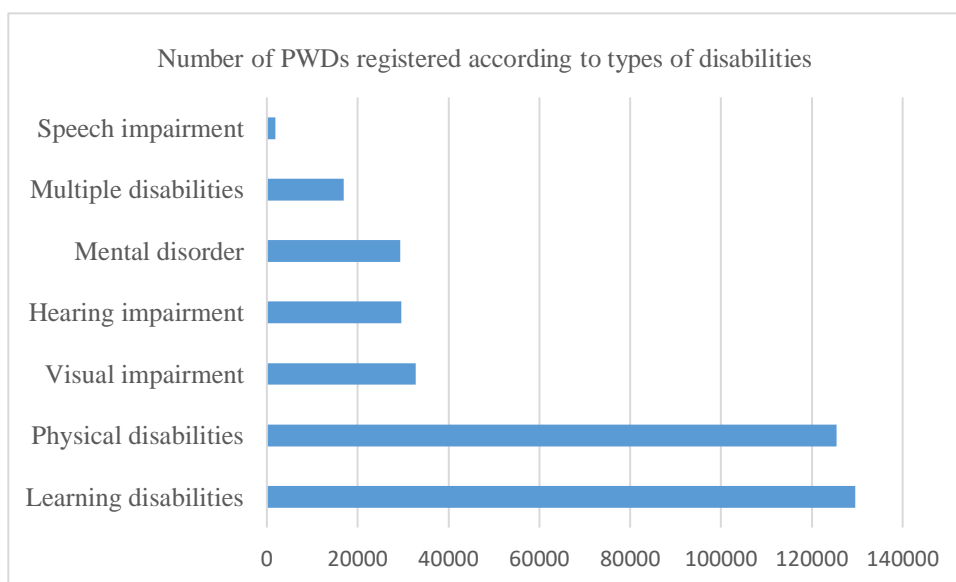
### **Introduction**

Across the world, persons with disabilities are trapped in the issue of employment and it is frequently debated among scholars and practitioners. For instance, The World Report on Disability (2011) reported that the unemployment issue among disabled people affected them to be socially excluded, less involved in the economy, and they often live in poverty. Furthermore, the disabled people have lower labour market inactivity compared to non-disabled people (Labour Force Survey, 2006). Although the issue is constantly controversial, the persistent inadequacy tackling the issue resulted in the disabled people to be viewed as a vulnerable group and hardly participate with society (Kim, Kim, Shin, & Yoo; 2015, Lengnick-Hall, Gaunt, & Kulkarni; 2008).

Like other countries in the world, persons with disabilities in Malaysia are also combating the employment issue. Numerous programs and legislative measures such as the Persons with Disabilities Act 2008 and the National Plan of Action for PWDs (2007) are designed to increase their participation in society. However, the establishment of these acts and clauses have not yet shown desirable outcomes (Islam, 2015).

According to Malaysia’s Persons with Disabilities Act of 2008 (Act 685), “persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in society”. This act was enacted to provide equal opportunity to persons with disabilities and to ensure their welfare and well-being are taken care of. As the act came into force, it opens a new dimension and hope to PWDs (Islam, 2015) with the intention of improving the persons with disabilities’ quality of life (Hirwan Jasbir, Harlida Abdul Wahab, & Hamiza Omar, 2013) as well as guaranteeing their fundamental human rights (Ang, 2014; Hirwan Jasbir et. al, 2013).

The Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development has outlined seven categories of disabilities in Malaysia. These categories are hearing impairment, vision impairment, speech impairment, learning disabilities, physical disabilities, mental disorder, and multiple disabilities. According to the Department of Social Welfare’s statistics report (2015), currently, there are 365, 677 persons with disabilities registered with the department. This amount of disabled people are further categorised into 129, 550 (35.43%) with learning disabilities, 125, 491 (34.32%) with physical disabilities, 32, 807 (8.97%) with visual impairment, 29, 636 (8.10%) with hearing impairment, 29, 403 (8.04%) with mental disorders, 16, 963 (4.64%) with multiple disabilities, and 1, 827 (0.50%) with speech impairment. Figure 1 illustrates the number of disabled people registered according to their disabilities in Malaysia.



**Figure 1: Number of PWDs according to the types of disabilities in Malaysia**  
 Source: Department of Social Welfare Statistics Report (2015)

Despite various measures being undertaken, persons with disabilities need to encounter more hurdles in obtaining and securing a job as compared to non-disabled people (Stone & Colella, 1996). Many employers admit that they were reluctant to hire disabled employees in their

organizations (Hernandez, Keys, & Balcazar, 2000). There are several possible explanations for this situation. The study conducted by Lengnick-Hall, Gaunt, Kulkarni (2008) found that employers are reluctant to hire persons with disabilities because they lack qualification, assuming unfavourable acceptance of co-workers towards disabled employees, and fear of the unknown. In contrary, a number of researchers have reported that employing persons with disabilities in an organization resulted in positive outcomes. For instance, it can be seen that persons with disabilities perform equal with non-disabled employees, demonstrate low absenteeism or turnover rate, have minimal involvement in workplace accidents, and is committed and motivated to work (Colella, 1994; Lengnick-Hall, 2007; Schoonheim & Smits, 2008; Stone & Colella, 1996).

Given the abovementioned situation, the inconsistency and continuous arguments among scholars on qualities portrayed by employees with disabilities should be further explored (Andersson, Luthra, Hurtig, & Tideman, 2015; Schur, Kruse, & Blanck, 2005) since qualities of employees with disabilities may vary over time. The investigation would be useful in tracking changes in the qualities of persons with disabilities in employment. Moreover, this effort is beneficial to correct inaccurate information and abolish negative stereotypes encircled among persons with disabilities. Linking to the Malaysian scenario, the participation of the persons with disabilities in employment continues to be problematic and disappointing (Lee, Abdullah, & Mey, 2011; Othman, 2013; Ta & Leng, 2013). Even though the Persons with Disabilities Act 2008 was enacted, the number of employment involving disabled employees in Malaysia remains persistently low (Islam, 2015; Ang, 2014; Khoo, Tiun, & Lee, 2013). Therefore, it is crucial to explore employers' experiences in managing employees with disabilities as this could help understand the dynamic nature of disabled employees in the workforce (Othman, 2013). The present study explores the qualities of employees with disabilities in the organization.

## **Method**

### ***Research design and sampling***

This study employed a qualitative method. In this study, the researcher carried out an in-depth exploration of participants' responses. Purposeful sampling was deemed a suitable technique to be utilized for analysis of information with rich sources (Bryman, 2004). Additionally, purposeful sampling is a technique widely used in qualitative research for the identification as well as selection of key informants in a limited resource setting (Patton, 2002). The process involved identifying and selecting individuals or groups that are knowledgeable on or experienced with the phenomenon of interest (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

In relation to this, the authors wanted to focus on the experiences of employers in the private sector who have successfully hired employees with disabilities. The selection criteria for potential participants are as follow, i) they have the authority to hire and terminate non-disabled employees and disabled employees, ii) they work at private organisations in the service industry, iii) they offer competitive employment to employees with disabilities, and iv) they voluntarily agree to participate in the study.

### ***Data collection and procedures***

The process of identifying the participants for the study started with the researcher gathering the lists of employers successfully hiring employees with disabilities. The lists were assembled from various sources, especially from organisations that work closely with persons with disabilities, such as the Malaysian Social Welfare Department, the Social Security Organisation (SOCSO), and the Malaysian Labour Department.

As the information of the potential participants for the study was obtained and identified, the process of collecting the data began with initial contact with the potential participants. 18 phone calls were made to the officers or executives of the organizations. From the phone calls, 12 employers from private organisations in service industries agreed and were selected to take part in the study. These employers have breadth of experience in hiring and managing employees with disabilities.

Once the employers agreed to take part in the study, the researcher sent an email comprised of an invitation letter from the graduate school and the interview protocol. The invitation letter outlined the purpose of the study as well as the declaration that all the information provided by the employers will be strictly treated with confidentiality. The idea of attaching the interview protocol together with the invitation letter was to provide the employer with an idea about the interview session. Equally important is that this practice gave the employers ample time to make preparation as they will share their experiences of hiring employees with disabilities. All the participants who agreed to take part in the study gave consent to the researcher to record the interviews.

For the purpose of obtaining information for the study, a qualitative semi-structured interview was utilised. Accordingly, a semi-structured interview permits the exchange of questions and responses between the interviewer and the interviewee (Kvale, 2006). The interview protocol gives the interviewer flexibility and freedom to obtain comprehensive information, to interpret underlying meanings of the interview opinions, and explore the emerging issue (Robson, 2002).

The interviews were conducted on a face-to-face basis. Likewise, the interview sessions were carried out at a place agreed by the participants. Each of the interview session took approximately 1 hour and 30 minutes. The interviews were conducted in *Bahasa Melayu* and were translated into English for analysis purposes. The interview audio was then transcribed as soon as possible, as suggested by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (1994). The analysis was assisted by using computer-aided qualitative data analysis software, ATLAS.ti. In this regard, ATLAS.ti permitted the researcher to create links between codes, themes, or sub-themes and enabled them to generate a visual model through a network. The data of the study were assembled from September 2016 to February 2017.

### ***Participants***

A total of 12 employers from 3 different cities located in the Northern region, Central region, and Southern region of Malaysia participated in the study. The gender of the participants composed of 5 females and 7 males. Table 2 depicts other relevant information collected such as year employers established, categorization of service industries, the number of employees, the number of employees with disabilities together with the percentage, and types of disabilities.

## Results

Table 2 illustrates the profiles of the participants. From the table, the most hired employees with disabilities are from learning disabilities where 10 out of 12 employers who were interviewed in the study have hired employees with such disabilities. The other types of disabilities who are hired are those with hearing impairment (7 employers), physical disabilities (7 employers), visual impairment (5 employers), and 3 employers hired employees with mental disorders.

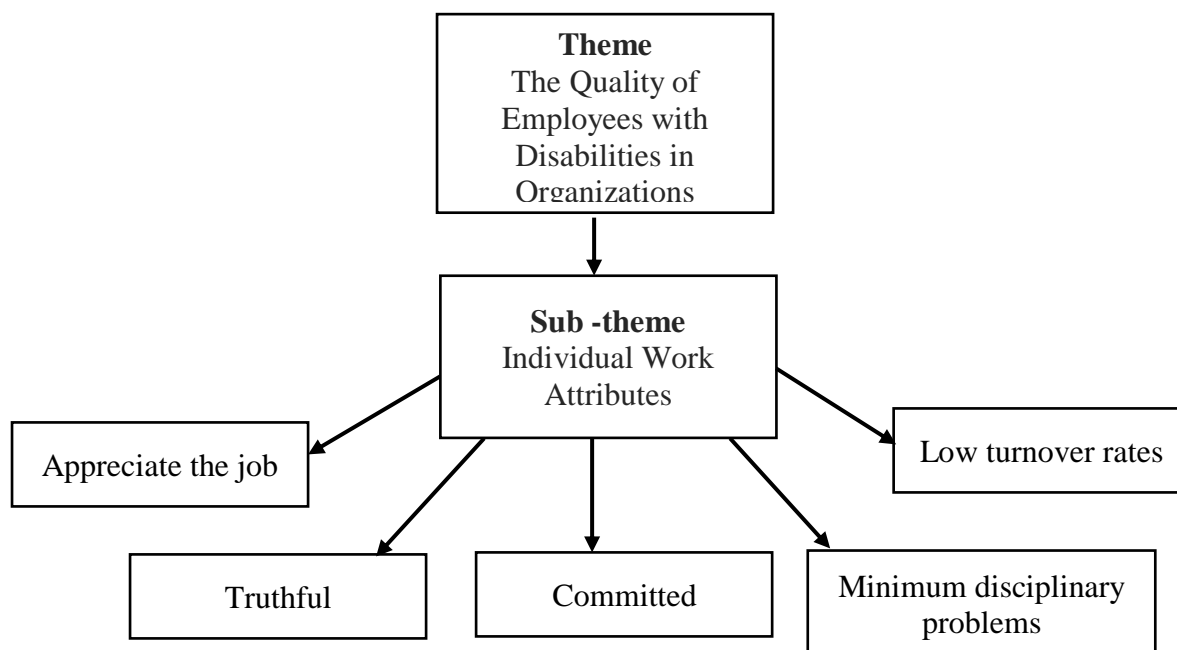
**Table 2: Profile of Participants' Employers**

Participants	Year Employers Established	Categorization of Service Industries	No. of Employees	No. of EWDs	Percentage (%)	Types of Disabilities
P1	2012	Food industry	9	3	33.3	1, 6
P2	1973	Food industry	30000	350	1.17	2,3,6
P3	1957	Retail industry	7000	136	1.94	1, 2,3,4,6,7
P4	2008	Hotel industry	132	3	2.27	6
P5	1967	Retail industry	3500	29	0.83	2, 4, 6, 7
P6	2005	Hotel industry	149	5	3.36	2, 3
P7	2002	Food industry	380	9	2.37	2, 3, 4
P8	1984	Retail industry	9105	109	1.20	1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7
P9	2005	Retail industry	4132	17	0.41	1, 4, 5, 6
P10	1997	Hotel industry	142	11	7.75	5, 6
P11	1962	Utility	49	15	30.61	4, 6, 7
P12	1982	Food industry	12, 000	128	1.07	1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7

Note: Types of disabilities: 1 = visual impairment, 2 = hearing impairment, 3 = speech impairment, 4 = physical disabilities, 5 = mental disorder, 6 = learning disabilities, 7 = multiple disabilities

The above table also shows the number of employees with disabilities in the organisations together with their percentages. In coherence with this, the highest number of employees with disabilities hired in the organisations is 350 (1.17%), followed by 136 (1.94%), 128 (1.07%), and 109 (1.20%). At the same time, the categorization of service industries participated in the study were detailed out in the above table. By looking at the service industries, 4 employers were from the food industry, another 4 employers were from the retail industry, 3 employers from the hotel industry, and only one employer coming from the utility industry.

From the interviews and analysis performed by the researcher, the personal traits and qualities of employees with disabilities were identified. The sub-themes were further identified and discussed in detail. The emerged theme and the sub-theme are exemplified in Figure 1.



**Figure 2: Theme and Sub-theme Emerged**

**Theme: The Quality of Employees with Disabilities in Organizations**

The theme emerged in the present study was known as the quality of employees with disabilities in organizations. There is one main sub-theme identified and was discussed in detail. The sub-theme is individual work attributes. A total of six individual work attributes were identified and are recognised as appreciative for the job, truthful, committed to the job given, minimum disciplinary problem, low turnover rate, and good working attendance.

*Individual Work Attributes*

The employers described that employees with disabilities are capable in demonstrating excellent work attributes while they are working with them. Although disabled employees might have some limitations, it does not prohibit them to demonstrate their capabilities and successfully engage with the work. Several employers stated that, to a certain situation, the quality of work shown are better compared with non-disabled employees. The employers believed, once a person with disabilities is hired, they are motivated to be responsible and engaged with the organization.

When discussing the qualities of employees with disabilities in the organization, all participant agreed that disabled employees appreciate their job. For example, participant 3 illustrated how he deals with this issue:

*“...One thing when you hired the disabled people, you can see that they all appreciate the job...” [P3, male]*

In the same vein, there are several examples of acts by the disabled that shows they appreciate the job. For instance, the disabled obey instructions, are seldom involved with problems at the workplace, are usually not demanding and work accordingly with what the organization had provided to them. Participant 10 explained her experiences in this way:

*“...So far, our disabled staff were doing fine...to some extent, they do appreciate the work and what we’ve done for them. They don’t demand many things as well...” [P10, female]*

For some of the participants, the reason for this was that persons with disabilities are generally combating with various issues and challenges in life. One of the challenges is the hurdles of obtaining and securing a job. Therefore, the opportunity given should be wisely used and that has influenced them to show their appreciation to the job.

*“...They are more appreciate the job...I can see it. You know they already faced a lot of hardship in their life, so when they are employed, they are more appreciate it...” [P12, male]*

Correspondingly, several participants said that, employees with disabilities are found to be truthful employees. In conjunction with this, some of the participants mentioned that, disabled employees are genuine in expressing their feelings. This ranged from sharing personal problems, workplace problems, or just sharing what they do and see. For instance, there is a situation where disabled employees share their problems with the officer responsible in handling them. Besides that, the officer knows that they are telling the truth and do not make up stories. This was shared by participant 2:

*“...Like her and her friends, they never hide something from me. Whether they have problems at the workstation or problems at their house, they will share it with me...and I know they are telling me the truth. Until now they rarely make up stories...” [P2, female]*

Furthermore, some of the participants’ added, employees with disabilities are genuine and were considered to have a “pure heart” when they are performing the job. According to participant 7:

*“...This disabled staff they are very truthful. We find them have a pure heart. They will tell me whatever they do and they see...” [P7, female]*

Moreover, from the interviews and analysis performed, employees with disabilities are committed to their work when they are hired by an organization. A number of employers described employees with disabilities as committed when they are working in the organization. For instance, participant 5 said, from a working perspective, employees with disabilities are committed when they are given a task to be completed.

*“...I would to highlight here is, when I give works to them they will do it seriously. I can say they do it with full commitment and dedication even if it was a simple task...” [P5, male]*

One female participant described how the head chef at the hotel praised the disabled employees for demonstrating full commitment when they carried out the work:

*“...I can see their passion and intensity while doing the job, especially to produce the outcome like normal employees. There was a time I had discussion with the head chef and he gave credit to my disabled employees. According to him, he is satisfied with their performance and said they are very passionate whenever he asked them to do work...” [P6, female]*

It is interesting to note that most of participants who had experience with employees with disabilities mentioned that disabled employees show minimum disciplinary problems during their tenure in an organization. Although they have had encountered several disciplinary problems with the disabled, the disciplinary problems are not severe and are tolerable. According to participants' experiences, common disciplinary problems involved are poor time management and low productivity at times. In order to elucidate the problems, some of the participants make efforts to discuss with the disabled and explained to them the way they acted is inappropriate and not abiding to the organization's rules. For instance, participant one who is also a visually impaired talked about his experience:

*“...So far, I haven't deal with major disciplinary issues with my disabled employees...” [P1, male]*

The above statement is further supported by participant 5. According to him, from the working track record, disabled employees are involved with disciplinary problems. However, it is with minor problems:

*“...Looking back to their working track record, they show very little disciplinary problems here. Yes, I admitted they do sometimes create problems, but only minor problems...” [P5, male]*

At the same time, participants also agreed that employees with disabilities have low turnover rates. Some of the participants' have disabled people working with them for more than 10 years. Participant 2 admitted that the turnover rate among her disabled employees is low and she has disabled employees having worked for more than 10 years at her place:

*“...Here, the turnover rate among disabled employees is very low. There are some of our disabled employees here had worked for more than 10 years...” [P2, female]*

During an interview with participant 5, he did a comparison between disabled employees and non-disabled employees. An interesting finding emerged when he said that there are many aspects where the disabled are better compared to non-disabled employees. He highlighted about the low turnover rate shown by the disabled.

*“...If you asked me to compare between disabled employees and normal employees, there are many aspects disabled employees are better compare to normal employees. One of it is their low turnover rate...” [P5, male]*



Moreover, the reasons for the low turnover rate among employees with disabilities mentioned by the participants are composed of two main aspects. The first aspect is the supportive working environment. The practices of a supportive working environment such as positive relationship between supervisor and co-workers have positively influenced the disabled to stay with the employer. Secondly, the low turnover rate among the disabled is also contributed to when they feel valued by the employer. Involving the disabled in the organization's programs and activities, encouraging ideas from them, and acknowledging their works, to name a few, are among participants' practices that make the disabled feel valued and appreciated.

Furthermore, the participants described that they do not have problems with employees with disabilities in attendance. Many of the participants confessed that employees with disabilities usually come to work on time. Talking about this issue, some of the participants' further elaborated that their disabled employees come to work early than the exact working time. The experience was shared by participant 2:

*"...I don't have problem with their (employees with disabilities) attendance. They are tip-top! Disabled employees do not have problems with their working attendance. They came up to work on time, and most of the time came to work early. 30 minutes earlier than the time it supposed to be..." [P2, female]*

From the researcher's observations, the situation could be explained by two factors. First, several participants' practices to allocate their disabled employees to the nearest outlet with their home. Secondly, some participants indicated that they provide accommodations to the disabled such as hostels and provide transportation assistance to transport them. Employers admitted that these practices help the disabled to commute easily and safely from their home to the place they work. Equally important, the practices permit the disabled to demonstrate good working attendance while they are working with the employer.

### ***Discussions***

This study aims to understand and explore the qualities shown by employees with disabilities in the organization. The findings were derived from interviews with twelve participating employers. Examination and exploration of these qualities of employees with disabilities can benefit private organizations, service providers, government agencies, and potential employers to hire persons with disabilities in their organisations. Besides that, this helps eliminate misconceptions as well as stigmas among the society regarding persons with disabilities.

From a broader perspective, despite being different, persons with disabilities have shown great qualities when they are in employment. Employees with disabilities were found to exhibit distinguished work attributes such as job appreciation, truthful, committed to the job given, minimum disciplinary problem, low turnover rate, and good working attendance. These results agree with the findings of other studies like Hashim and Wok (2014) Houtenville and Kalargyrou (2012), Kulkarni and Valk (2010), Lengnick-Hall, Gaunt, Kulkarni (2008), Colella (1994), Lengnick-Hall (2007), Schoonheim and Smits (2008), and Stone and Colella (1996). With regard to the consistent results, the present study also found that employees with disabilities have minimum disciplinary problems during employment. The results may be

explained by several factors. Firstly, obtaining and securing a job is arduous for persons with disabilities. The processes involved are complex. They need to plead for a job, confront stigmas and misconceptions, adjust their abilities with the job requirements and environment, as well as demonstrating their competency. Indeed, these trials have influenced the disabled to be indebted and comply with an organization's rules in line with the opportunity given to them.

Another possible explanation is the supportive working environment that the disabled received in an organization. In particular, the supportive working environment is established from decent relationships with supervisors and co-workers. For instance, the supervisor is able to recognize the needs of the disabled. In coherence with this, the supervisor may develop necessary skills when dealing with disabled employees at the workplace. In terms of relationship with co-workers, co-workers give full co-operation when working with the disabled. In this regard, they support the organization's initiative in hiring this special group of employees by developing good relationships between them and assisting the disabled whenever possible. Given these practices, this would decrease the chances for disabled employees to be involved with disciplinary problems at the organization.

### ***Limitations and Recommendations***

There are certain limitations of the study which should be addressed. Firstly, the study is small in sample size. The sample size of the study is small due to a limited number of participants. Secondly, the interviewees were officers responsible in handling and managing employees with disabilities in an organization. With respect to this, they may have positive attitudes and favour them than other people in an organization (Colella & Stone, 2005). Future studies should consider to include other people in the organization such as board of directors and co-workers as their comparative views, perceptions and expectations may critically debate hiring employees with disabilities. Moreover, this can provide an inclusive understanding on hiring persons with disabilities in an organization.

With regard to the qualitative nature, this study does not envision that generalisations are to be made beyond its scope. Nonetheless, the results can be understood as exploratory. A future study investigating various employment issues regarding persons with disabilities would be essential by employing different research approaches.

### ***Conclusions***

The study contributes to understanding employers' experiences in hiring employees with disabilities. This study emphasizes the understanding of the qualities of employees with disabilities in an organization. Despite its exploratory nature, this study offers some insight in understanding disability issues, specifically employees with disabilities in an organization. The present study makes several noteworthy contributions. Firstly, the understanding of the qualities shown by employees with disabilities helps eliminate employer misconceptions and stigmas towards them. A disability status is not a barrier for them to demonstrate excellent work attributes and perform like non-disabled employees. In contexts where disability is highly stigmatized, misconceptions were a major threat to persons with disabilities and was often intertwined with less competency and incapability in performing a job. Issues such as less competency, incapability in performing job duties, and symbol of sympathy faded away when employers know the positive qualities revealed by employees with disabilities. Secondly, while

more efforts is carried out to increase the participation of persons with disabilities in the workforce, the understanding of their qualities shown in employment is inadequate and unclear. Given that the labour market is not fully tapping the potential of persons with disabilities, it is important to gain a better understanding of their qualities and their impact on overall organizational effectiveness.

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