

Report on Employment Landscape for Persons with Disabilities in India

Based on the research of four scholars¹ from the Indian School of Business (ISB) and the Indian Institute of Management Udaipur (IIMU), done in collaboration with Sarthak Educational Trust

INTRODUCTION

According to the World Health Organization, disability is an umbrella term which could mean an impairment (problem in body function/ structure), an activity limitation (difficulty encountered by an individual in executing a task/ action), or a participation restriction (problem experienced by an individual in involvement in life situations)². Historically, persons with disabilities (PWDs) have been stigmatized by society because their disability was perceived to be associated with some curse or disease (Munyi 2012). They were considered to be helpless and dependent on others for everything. These perceptions have significantly evolved over time, and the negative perceptions of PWDs' abilities have reduced to a great extent.

To further ensure the change in general perception towards PWDs, the government of India has quite recently changed its official terminology for PWDs to 'Divyang' (meaning divine body part/s) or 'Divyangjan' (meaning persons with divine body parts). Prime Minister Narendra Modi had said (while introducing this new term), "We see a person's disability with our eyes. But our interaction tells us the person has an extra power. Then I thought, in our country, instead of using the word 'viklang,' we should use the term 'divyang.' These are people who have a limb or several limbs with divine powers which we don't have."³

Efforts are also being made by philanthropic organizations such as Sarthak to integrate the PWDs into society and to empower them to be independent in all walks of life (Kulkarni and

¹ **Jayant Nasa**, Doctoral Candidate, Indian School of Business (ISB); **Arti Srivastava**, Doctoral Candidate, Indian Institute of Management Udaipur (IIMU); **Prakash Satyavageeswaran**, Faculty, IIMU; **Sundar G. Bharadwaj**, Visiting Faculty, ISB (primary affiliation: University of Georgia, USA)

² <https://www.who.int/topics/disabilities/en/>

³ <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/pm-narendra-modi-suggests-use-of-divyang-for-persons-with-disability-in-his-mann-ki-baat/articleshow/50341878.cms>

Kote 2014). As a result, their inclusion in the workforce (of various organizations in India) for wage employment has considerably increased. And though more companies are recruiting PWDs today than they did before, this move seems to be driven primarily by corporate social responsibility motives or to meet certain regulatory requirements (Wuellrich 2010). A few firms seem to recruit PWDs as token hires just to virtue signal the firm's diversity. However, several firms have now begun to see PWDs as an untapped talent pool with immense potential (Lengnick-Hall, Gaunt, and Kulkarni 2008), and thus have been actively employing them for their skills.

In our research, we examine whether accessing this mostly untapped "blue ocean" (Kim and Mauborgne 2004) of talent could be a sustainable strategy for organizations to win the war for talent in today's competitive landscape. Some anecdotal evidence from practice suggests that not only do the PWDs have a greater commitment to their work and the firm, but also have higher productivity in certain kinds of jobs.⁴ Further, it is possible that their engagement with the firm also improves the morale and the work output of the other employees. Thus, as a consequence of employing PWDs in a firm, the overall employee turnover rates may decline, and also the customer perceptions of the firm could improve. All these factors should ultimately lead to better firm performance. And, since employing PWDs requires investment in infrastructure, training, and changes in business processes (Kaye, Jans, and Jones 2011), it is likely that the competitor firms will find it difficult to emulate the same strategy.

The goal of our research thus is to develop a comprehensive understanding of having PWDs as part of the workforce from a strategic perspective. We study the impact of employing PWDs on their productivity and engagement, engagement of the other employees, customer engagement, and the firm's overall performance. Specifically, we aim to address the following research questions:

1. How are the PWD employees perceived in terms of productivity? How is their productivity different from that of other employees (non-PWDs)? How do these differences impact

⁴ <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/jobs/why-companies-are-hiring-people-with-disabilities/articleshow/61609438.cms>

their job prospects (when they are seeking a job) and their career progression (once they are in a regular full-time job)?

2. How engaged are the PWD employees with the firm?
3. How does working with the PWD employees affect the morale and engagement of other employees in the firm?
4. How does the employment of PWDs affect the attitudes and engagement of the customers?
5. How does the employment of PWDs impact the firm's operational performance?

In this report, we present the main insights from our systematic study of the employment market for PWDs in India. As people with different types of disabilities are likely to have different kinds of challenges relating to employment, we limit our focus only to persons with physical and sensory disabilities – locomotive/ orthopedic disabilities, hearing and speech impairments, and visual impairments. In terms of industries, while we primarily focus on employing organizations in the service sector (hospitality, retail, IT, education/ training), we believe that most of our findings extend to other industries as well (though this should be verified by further research).

FIELDWORK

We visited training/ intervention centers and offices of two non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working for skill development and employment of PWDs, and also visited the premises of seven corporate organizations that recruit PWDs. In the process, we were able to conduct eighty-five semi-structured interviews and one group discussion (total duration: 55 hours 22 minutes).

In addition, we witnessed two job fairs for PWDs, attended one industry conference on the employment of PWDs, and also attended one skill competition for PWDs. We view our observations at these events as akin to corporate ethnography complementing our semi-structured interviews. At these events, we briefly interacted with about twelve other

stakeholders relevant to our context. Consequently, we were able to gain insights from the following respondent categories:

- Senior advisors/ board members, top management, middle/ lower-level staff, and volunteers of two NGOs working for the employment, skill development, and overall empowerment of PWDs
- PWDs searching for employment
- PWDs employed in the IT/ retail/ hospitality industries and few of their supervisors, HR managers, and co-workers
- Few PWDs employed in public sector/ training institutes/ NGOs
- Few corporate recruiters at job fairs
- Couple of guardians/ parents of PWDs
- A medical professional experienced in the treatments of different types of disabilities

KEY INSIGHTS

Overall Employment Landscape

Our respondents from an NGO working in the space of skill training and employment of PWDs (since 2008) indicated that, over the years, more firms in India have become open to the prospect of hiring PWDs. The discussions we observed in an industry conference between HR managers and top-level executives of various firm also gave us a sense that, while many firms in today's time are indeed recruiting more PWDs than before, these decisions seem to be mainly driven by social responsibility motives or to satisfy certain regulatory requirements to have "diversity," as also documented in some prior research (Wuellrich 2010). However, the NGO workers also told us about several firms, particularly those that recruit PWDs over multiple cycles of recruitment, that go beyond seeing their hiring as just a CSR initiative and begin to recognize their talent, capabilities, and potential of adding value to the organization in multiple ways. While this is a good sign, in line with the extant literature (Hernandez et al. 2012), we also observed

that many firms recruit PWDs primarily at entry-level jobs and do not have the required career progression policies in place for their PWD staff.

The senior advisory members of NGOs, who mostly interact with the top management of the corporate organizations hiring PWDs⁵, shared that the strategic intent of recruiting PWDs is on the rise and believed that this would trickle down further to all organizational levels. While it is intuitive that the concerns and attitudes towards employability and potential of PWDs should vary with the size of the organization, we found that such variations also exist within the same organization at different hierarchical levels. The decision of the top-level management to make PWDs a part of their workforce may be well-intentioned, but we observed that the wholehearted acceptance of the PWD co-workers among the lower- and middle- level staff continues to be a challenge. An important implication of this finding is that, when organizations begin to recruit PWDs for the first time, the top management should ensure that proper management of change practices are followed to ensure that the PWD employees do not feel ostracized and are fully accepted by other employees, and at all hierarchical levels. This way, the hiring of PWDs won't remain just a token for "diversity" but would rather inherently become an integral part of the organizational culture.

Perceived Work Performance of PWDs and Related Concerns

Our interactions with the HR executives and immediate supervisors of the PWD employees revealed that the PWDs are, in fact, better resources for the organization since they have relatively lower attrition rates, are more disciplined, and have a greater commitment towards work than their non-PWD peers. While training them requires a higher time investment, the respondents (HR managers/ supervisors) reported that, once trained, their productivity is considerably higher. We were also informed that they are more sincere, less distracted, and more intrinsically motivated to perform than the non-PWD staff. In fact, many organizations have already started realizing these benefits of employing PWDs and have been employing them in large numbers not for "social responsibility" but rather as a business model. An example is a large

⁵ Sarthak Educational Trust alone has more than 1,000 corporate recruiting partners all over India.

hotel chain in India – which has been recruiting PWDs for more than a decade now for the hard-nosed financial benefits associated with employing them, and as a consequence, PWDs now make for more than 20% of its workforce (according to a senior advisory of an NGO working for the skill development and employment of PWDs in India).

We also got to know of several other firms that are also recruiting PWDs as a business strategy. Over time and multiple cycles of recruitment, these firms have gained confidence in PWDs' work and abilities. Our interactions with the workers/ volunteers of the NGOs serving as an interface between employing firms and PWD candidates revealed that they receive positive feedback on PWDs' work performance by most of the recruiting firms.

However, due to limitations such as communication, mobility, and (misplaced) perceptions of incapability, the PWDs are primarily assigned simple and routine tasks that do not challenge their potential adequately. We observed that such work allocations sometimes lower the PWDs' intrinsic motivation and often makes them feel underconfident about their potential, the implications of which we discuss further in the next section.

PWDs' Perspective

The interviews that we did with the PWDs directly also revealed that, despite being willing to work hard and eager to use their creative potential, they often end up being involved in routine monotonous jobs. Further, the lack of empathy and understanding from their supervisors and co-workers towards their disability-specific needs makes it even more challenging for them to optimally utilize their knowledge and talent/ skills. A few of our PWD respondents shared several incidences wherein their rest-breaks were symbolically interpreted as an undue privilege extended to them. While many similar experiences existed, it was heartening to see that the PWDs continued to have a very positive attitude towards their current and previous employers.

Our understanding of the broad employment landscape for PWDs in India is that the need for employment in them is much higher than the non-PWDs. Though the reason may superficially seem to be their financial situation, we learned through our research interviews that a job means

much more to PWDs than just a means of making money. For several of them, the experience of being employed is a life-changing event. Some respondents shared with us how finding a job helped them earn respect from their own families. Therefore, in terms of Maslow's hierarchy of needs⁶, it will be right to claim that in addition to satisfying the basic needs of food, clothing, shelter, and financial security/ stability, a job also serves higher-order needs of belongingness, self-esteem, and self-actualization for the PWDs – by helping them achieve their full potential as an individual and by giving them an opportunity to contribute to the lives of people around them.

We also observed that most of our employed PWDs feel a sense of gratitude towards their employing organization and do not intend to switch jobs anytime soon (which seems to be fairly common for the non-PWD staff members at the corporates we visited). Additionally, we could clearly notice a sense of belonging and attachment towards the organization not only in the PWDs whom we got in touch with through their employers but also in those whom we contacted directly through our NGO partners. In our informal and off-the-record interactions with many of these employees, they came across as self-appointed ambassadors for their organization. Many of our respondents who were presently not associated with any firm, continued to talk positively about their previous employers, projecting them as great places to work. Relatedly, our conversations with HR managers and senior advisory board members of the NGOs also revealed that the mere presence of the PWD workers adds to the corporate image of the organization as it begins to be seen as a great place to work (by prospective employees) or to take one's business to (by potential and existing customers).

Underlying Motivations of the Employing Organizations

While our interviews with some respondent categories suggest that the employment landscape for PWDs has improved tremendously over the years, some of the NGOs working in this space also provided an alternative viewpoint. The instances of rejection from the organizations, that the NGOs approach for recruiting PWDs, are still fairly common. Our direct interactions with some of the corporate recruiters also revealed a similar story. In contrast to the

⁶ <https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html>

projection by these corporate organizations of employing PWDs as a business model, we noticed that their primary underlying motivations are driven by charity. While on the one hand, they take pride in discussing the potential and benefits of their employed PWDs, but on the other hand, when asked about reasons for employing them, they switch to the idea of doing good and responsibility towards society.

Size of Unemployment Problem among PWDs

At an overall level, we realized that there is still a dire need for employment among PWDs in India. This came across in their willingness to go through the discomfort of traveling for hours daily by the non-accessible public transport to reach the mostly-inaccessible buildings for their work/ training/ job fairs. The sheer numbers that we saw in the job fairs for PWD and the stories shared by the NGO workers/ volunteers demonstrate the magnitude of the employment problem for PWDs in India. These numbers also represent the size of this relatively-untapped talent pool, who are not only more productive (at least in certain jobs) and have a higher determination to prove themselves but are also less costly – in terms of training costs (which is a consequence of lower attrition rates).

CONCLUSION

We conclude that having PWDs in the workforce of service organizations has many strategic advantages (which several firms haven't realized as of now). Not only are the employees with disabilities more focused and sincere at work than the non-PWD employees, but they also have lower attrition rates. Employing them, particularly in customer-facing roles, enhances customer engagement and improves the overall corporate image.

Not considering (for recruitment) such a large talent pool seems like a missed opportunity by the organizations that are busy fighting the war for just the non-PWD talent, who are relatively less loyal and more distracted than the PWDs. This is also inimical for India as a nation since such

a large chunk of its population is not being given enough opportunities to contribute to the country's GDP and to the economy as a whole.

We thus suggest that employing PWDs could be a sustainable strategy for firms. In terms of the war for talent, the investments in the attitudinal and skill training, infrastructure, and policies (required to make PWDs an integral part of the workforce) creates a barrier for competitive firms to emulate the same strategy easily and could thus be extremely beneficial for the businesses in the long run.

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We gratefully acknowledge the contribution of **Sarthak Educational Trust** in making our research efforts successful. Founded in 2008 by Dr. Jitender Aggarwal, Sarthak is a non-profit organization working for the skill development, employment, and overall empowerment of the PWDs in India. With centers in sixteen cities, Sarthak engages with the unemployed PWDs – helping them by providing skill training and placement support. Sarthak also engages with the corporates not only by assisting them in finding the right talent but also by conducting sensitization workshops and job mapping activities, thus ensuring that the placed PWD candidates are suitable for the assigned role and are comfortable in their work environment.

In line with the recommendation from our research, it was very heartening to see that Sarthak's appeals to the corporates for recruiting PWD candidates are not charity-based. With guidance and support from its accomplished national and local advisory board members (who work on a pro-bono basis), Sarthak encourages the corporates to employ PWDs only if it makes business sense to them. By helping with job mapping, Sarthak makes the firms realize the various job profiles at which persons with specific disabilities will be able to fit and perform optimally. The great relationship that Sarthak shares with its hiring partners proved to be particularly helpful for our research, as Sarthak could serve the role of a trusted intermediary, allowing these organizations to provide us access to their employees. We felt that all the organizations and individuals participating in our research had complete trust in Sarthak; that's why they agreed to interact with us in the first place and were completely honest in their responses.

Besides serving as an important intermediary in the employment market for PWDs in India, Sarthak also has other initiatives, such as Abilympics (life skills competitions for PWDs that contribute to their all-round empowerment and help ignite greater ambition in the PWD community) and early intervention centers (here kids with disabilities, including those with intellectual disabilities, and their parents are provided counseling/ guidance by trained psychologists; kids are also made to do simple but effective exercises to reduce the extent of their disability and its impact on their regular life). We applaud and appreciate Sarthak's efforts for ensuring that PWDs of all ages, and from all strata of the society, are empowered to lead an independent and full life. Of course, we are also very thankful to the entire team of Sarthak for helping us substantially with this important research project.

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