

MUN105 Fall 2020/21
**Thinking Globally, Acting Locally:
Assessment of a Local SDG Intervention**

Research Question:
How can we increase the chances of employment in the
formal workforce for people with intellectual
disabilities?

Jia Hao Choo

Statement of Problem & Intervention:

Intellectual disabilities (ID) are characterized by a below-average intelligence or the lack of mental abilities to carry out day-to-day tasks. People with ID have often been neglected and deemed not suitable in the formal workforce across all regions in the world. The underemployment of people with ID is often a result of prejudice and discrimination. In fact, according to the United Nations, 80% to 90% of persons with disabilities of working age (15 – 64 years old) in developing countries are unemployed, whereas in industrialized countries, between 50% and 70% of persons of disabilities are without employment (UN DESA n.d.). Specifically in Malaysia, among the 15 million workforce, only about 17000 out of around 280000 persons with disabilities of working age were employed from 1990 to 2018 (HRDF 2019). This existing inequality puts people with ID in unfavourable situations where they are denied opportunities to live a normal life by participating in and contributing to the formal workforce.

To combat the aforementioned inequality in Malaysia, a local intervention in Penang called “Stepping Stone” aims to provide people with ID an opportunity to develop their career skills through giving on-the-job skill trainings in a variety of basic skills like baking, cooking, crafts making and more with the help of numerous staffs (Asia Community Service 2020). The intervention is open for any person with ID residing in Penang, and it operates every day in a work centre located in the western part of the state. Ultimately, the intervention aims to support people with ID to pursue a career of their own choice by providing them work opportunities through improving their skills in a particular career. As part of their intervention, they also aim to develop the participants’ work attitudes and social skills, so that they can integrate better into the formal workforce.

Significance:

It is important to view people with ID as bringing skills and new opportunities to the workforce rather than as impediment, therefore having more people with ID to be employed in the workforce could potentially increase the productivity of the economy. Not only that, it is also important for us to be more inclusive of people with ID, as it is an important step to achieve a truly equal society. In fact, linking to the Sustainable Development Goal 4, specifically under target 4.5, we should aim to “ensure equal access to all levels of...vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities” (UNESCO n.d.). Hence, this is a problem that should be taken seriously, and significant steps made towards solving this issue can help TO create a more inclusive society for people with ID by increasing their representations in the formal work sectors.

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate the success of Stepping Stone, and also to identify how we can best support people with ID to develop their career skills through training programs to increase their chances of formal employment. As mentioned earlier, it is to the interest of employers to consider employing people with ID, as they may help to increase the productivity. Therefore, this paper aims to shed light on how employers, government organisations or any NGOs can create programs best tailored for people with ID to help them to become more competent in their jobs. This will also help employers to be more willing to hire people with ID, hence mitigating the issue. Besides, the findings will hopefully also provide insights to other job coaching or work training programs in how they can improve their programs in order to maximise the learning for people with ID.

Lastly, the research findings can also be significant in that it can be applied to many other countries since the issue of underemployment for people with ID can be observed globally. Therefore, every potential stakeholder, regardless of locations, can learn from the

findings to create or improve their training programs for people with ID. More importantly, through this paper, they can hopefully recognise that people with ID, with sufficient support and training, can also be competent in the formal workforce.

Literature Review:

Existing literatures have identified several key reasons behind why people with ID are underemployed in the formal workforce.

The main issue seems to be discrimination towards people with ID. According to Gates and Akabas, many employers or co-workers do not express accepting behaviours towards people with ID, which results in a “misfit between the worker and the workplace” (Gates and Akabas 2010). This is also supported by Meltzer, Robinson and Fisher in another work stating that people with ID are often subject to stigma from employers and colleagues, which makes them feel undervalued (Meltzer, Robinson, and Fisher 2020). Interestingly, the aforementioned discrimination seems to stem from anxiety and discomfort when interacting with people with ID. According to a study by Colella and Dipboye, people are unable to predict the behaviour of people with ID, which extends to fear that they might be harmed. This feelings of anxiety might be the reasons why people often discriminate against people with ID (Dipboye and Colella 2013). Essentially, the discouraging attitudes that employers have towards their disabilities presents a barrier for people with ID to get a job formally.

However a literature by Jahoda et al. suggests that improved, more encouraging interactions with work peers does not seem to increase the sense of belonging and reduce the discrimination, as these relationships often do not extend outside the work environments (Jahoda et al. 2008). Instead, the literature acknowledges that the lack of autonomy in the workplace may be what causes the discrimination and keeps people with ID out of the workforce. In fact, their research suggests that work environments which provide greater autonomy can increase the sense of self-confidence of people with ID, hence making them

more empowered to hold out against the discrimination. This viewpoint is also supported by another study in Norway from Garrels and Sigstad, which shows that people with ID are so used to having little self-autonomy that they “may not feel inclined nor empowered to call for change” (Garrels and Sigstad 2019). Therefore, it can be inferred that a restrictive work environment does not create an inclusive environment where people with ID are confident enough to call for change, which further persists the existing discrimination.

Lastly, the lack of employment may also stem from the preconception that people with ID lack the competence to work in a formal job. The preconception may come from the employers but also from the people with ID themselves. According to the study by Garrels and Sigstad, participation in formal environment requires a certain level of competence to solve different work tasks, and many persons with ID view themselves as not being competent enough to do that (Garrels and Sigstad 2019). This suggests an issue with the lack of self-confidence faced by people with ID. In fact, a study by Trembath et al suggests that work experience may improve the employment prospects of people with ID, as it helps them to be more confident in their ability (Trembath et al. 2010). This also correlates with the study conducted by Jahoda et al, which suggests that people with ID who manage to obtain employment is due to their sense of “self-efficacy”, which refers to the ability for the people themselves to achieve something successfully (Jahoda et al. 2008). Cavanagh et al coin this work experience as transitional learning, which they argue is important for “workers to learn skills that they can take into other jobs” (Cavanagh et al. 2019).

In all, there are 2 main reasons why people with ID are underemployed in the formal workforce. The first is the discriminations from other people, which may be caused by unhealthy interactions or the lack of autonomy. The second is related to the perceptions and self-perceptions that people with ID do not have the competence to work formally. Therefore, a successful training program that can effectively increase the chances of formal employment of

people with ID should aim to tackle these issues by building a sense of confidence in their own competencies to work and also by reducing the discriminations and the unfair preconceptions about their work abilities.

Hypothesis:

A more comprehensive training system provided for people with intellectual disabilities (ID) to develop their career skills will increase their chances of formal employment.

Methods:

To examine the hypothesis more closely, here is how the concepts are operationalized:

The concept of “comprehensive training system” is defined as the overall quality of the approach used in developing programs that aim to support people with ID to develop their career skills. Specifically, it will be measured using the following three independent variables, derived from the literature review:

- The level of autonomy, which refers to the extent to which people with ID are given freedom in choosing what they want to learn;
- The level of inclusiveness, which refers to the amount of support and encouragement that people with ID received from staffs;
- The amount of transitional learning opportunities, which refers to the amount of time that people with ID spent on learning skills that are directly related to the job that they want to work in.

These three measures will be independent variables to be tested against the concept “chances of formal employment”, which will be operationalized as the attitude of employers towards people with ID. This will be measured by recording whether there is an improved preconception that people with ID, who have gone through training programs, are more competent for a formal job.

Essentially, this paper aims to test whether a training program, which provides a high level of autonomy, high level of inclusiveness, and a great amount of transitional learning opportunities, is able to improve the preconceptions of employers towards people with ID in the sense that they will be more confident in people with ID's competence in a formal work role after attending the training program.

To measure these variables and concepts, three semi-structured interviews are conducted separately with three key actors. Here is a brief summary of the three interviewees:

- Participant 1 is the chairperson of an initiative in Malaysia that aims to connect and empower youths and adults with ID by organising advocacy programs and public talks on topics like further education and employment for people with special needs.
- Participant 2 is the owner and employer of a café in Malaysia, which hires only people with ID or autism to provide them an equal participation in the formal workforce.
- Participant 3 is the lead coordinator of the training program under review.

All three participants have extensive experiences of working in organisations or roles that support people with ID. Therefore, through interviewing with these experts, this assessment aims to obtain their insight on the qualities that a training program for people with ID should have, and more importantly, assess the extent to which the hypothesis defined and operationalized above is true.

Findings:

Regarding the level of autonomy in a training program, there seemed to be a consensus from all participants that a high level of autonomy given to people with ID is not the best option, because they often do not have the skill of self-advocacy, so it is unlikely for them to speak out their wish. Participant 3 specifically mentioned that while it is useful to ask them what people with ID want, they are often unable to fulfil those wishes in reality. Also, the

participant argued that it is impossible to provide everything that they want due to financial and resource constraints. Therefore, it is equally as important to give them instructions and a specific schedule to follow instead of a total freedom. However, that is not to say that it is not important to respect their needs. For example, participant 2 explained that it is still important to give them breaks whenever they want to, as it can improve their learning efficiency.

In regards to how the skill of autonomy translates to workplace environments, all three participants agreed that employers will value employees with ID more if they have their own autonomy, as it allows employers to fully consider their needs and make sure that they are more cared for. This will help to create a healthy work environment that may help to improve their work productivity. Yet, as mentioned earlier, certain level of support and instructions should still be given. The evidence above shows that while the skill of autonomy is greatly valued by employers, having a high level of autonomy in a training program does not necessarily mean that it will help people with ID to develop such skill that can be transferred to workplaces that helps to increase their chances of employment.

Secondly, all three participants agreed that having a high level of inclusiveness is very important as it allows people with ID to be better cared for. For example, participant 3 mentioned that people with ID constantly need a lot of encouragements from staffs, which ties in with an explanation from participant 1, who highlighted that in an inclusive environment, people will be able to recognise and accept the differences of people with ID, hence allowing better support to be given. One common point from all 3 participants was that in an environment where people with ID is constantly supported, they are able to build on their social skills and self-confidence. These skills will be extremely useful in a workplace environment, as they are able to better communicate with co-workers and voice out their opinions more confidently.

Therefore, it can be inferred that a high level of inclusiveness will definitely develop important skills that allow people with ID to be more communicative in a workplace, which would help to reduce the anxiety and discomfort felt by other co-workers when interacting with them. This will help to improve the attitude of employers and co-workers towards people with ID, hence increasing their chances of employment.

Lastly, on the amount of transitional learning opportunities, all 3 participants stated that it is compulsory for people with ID to be given trainings in the jobs that they want to work in. In fact, participant 2 argued that these trainings should take place as frequently as possible, whereas participant 1 suggested that they should last for 3 months. Moreover, Participant 3 suggested that these trainings should last for 6 months, and should be repeated if more time is required, up to a maximum of 2 years. Two participants also suggested that trainings with professional job coaches can greatly increase the efficiency of training programs. While there are differences in the amount of time suggested, all of them believed that it is definitely beneficial to let people with ID to go through a great amount of training, as it allows them to develop skills that are deemed valuable by employers. Therefore, it can be concluded that a greater amount of transitional learning opportunities does correlate positively with the improvement in attitude of employers towards people with ID, hence increasing their chances of employment.

All in all, evidence collected suggests that the overall hypothesis that a more comprehensive training system will increase the chances of employment for people with ID is proven to a large extent. It is because there is a positive correlation between the amount transitional learning opportunities and level of inclusiveness, and the chances of employment of people with ID in the formal workforce. However, as mentioned earlier, the level of autonomy does not directly correlate with the chances of employment.

Bringing these findings back to the intervention under review, on the whole, the initiative is extremely successful. For instance, the lead coordinator stated that a large majority of the training session is devoted for participants with ID to learn on-the-job skills such as sewing and baking with professional job coaches, which, according to the findings, will be really helpful when entering the formal workforce. However, there are only a limited range of skills training available, and most of them are related to creative arts, so it is challenging to offer everyone trainings in the job that they want to work in. Yet, this paper also discovers that a total autonomy in a training program does not directly correlate with the chances of employment, so while not every participant of the intervention gets to learn what they really want, the outcome will not be heavily affected. Though the specifics were not given, the lead coordinator also mentioned that the participants constantly receive check-ins from staffs. This demonstrates that the intervention has a high level of inclusiveness, which definitely helps to increase the chances of employment for the participants with ID.

However, there are a couple steps that can be implemented to improve the potential success of the intervention. For one, since the intervention accepts volunteers to help out, it is essential to ensure that the volunteers demonstrate kindness and support towards people with ID to maintain the inclusiveness of the training environment. While background checks and interviews are conducted with the volunteers prior to acceptances, it may be even better if proper training sessions are provided before allowing them to have any formal interactions with people with ID. This will make sure that they know how to interact with people with ID and deal with unexpected situations properly. Also, the coordinator revealed that the participants follow a daily schedule. While a total autonomy is not advised, a daily schedule may limit the activity of the participants too much. Therefore, it might be better to provide them a to-do list for the day to ensure that they are able to maximise their learning while also allowing a certain extent of freedom in case they need to take breaks.

Conclusion:

This research aims to identify how we can increase the chances of employment of people with ID. Particularly, this paper assesses whether a more comprehensive training can lead to an increased chances of employment for them. From the findings, the hypothesis is proven to quite a great extent, as the level of inclusiveness and the amount of transitional learning opportunities have a positive correlation with the chances of employment, as measured through the attitude of the employers towards people with ID. Interestingly, one of the variables - the level of autonomy in a training program does not seem to correlate with the chances of employment. This contradicts with the literature review suggesting that a high level of autonomy can help to reduce discriminations in workplaces, hence increasing the chances of employment for people with ID. The divergence is largely due to the idea that people with ID often do not have the ability to self-advocate. So, giving them a high level of autonomy does not mean that they can develop autonomy skills that can be translated to workplaces. So, additional researches may need to be done to identify better ways that can be implemented to develop their autonomy skills.

Regardless, other factors mentioned in the literature reviews such as existing fear felt by people when interacting with people with ID and the preconception that people with ID are not competent are proven to be valid factors that can be addressed through comprehensive training programs that has a high level of inclusiveness and a great amount of transitional learning opportunities. Therefore, in order to increase the chances of employment of people with ID in Malaysia, they should be given opportunities to go through such training programs. Also, since the issue of underemployment of people with ID can be observed globally, this conclusion can be applied worldwide in that all training program targeted at people with ID should strive to achieve the aforementioned qualities. Hopefully, through these comprehensive training programs, the issue can be mitigated globally.

Bibliography

- Asia Community Service. 2020. 'Stepping Stone Work Centre'. September 2020.
<https://www.asiacommunityservice.org/index.php?page=SteppingStone>.
- Cavanagh, Jillian, Hannah Meacham, Patricia Pariona Cabrera, and Timothy Bartram. 2019. 'Vocational Learning for Workers with Intellectual Disability: Interventions at Two Case Study Sites'. *Journal of Vocational Education & Training* 71 (3): 350–67.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13636820.2019.1578819>.
- Dipboye, Robert L., and Adrienne Colella. 2013. *Discrimination at Work: The Psychological and Organizational Bases*. Psychology Press.
- Garrels, Veerle, and Hanne Marie Høybråten Sigstad. 2019. 'Motivation for Employment in Norwegian Adults with Mild Intellectual Disability: The Role of Competence, Autonomy, and Relatedness'. *1501-7419*, September. <https://doi.org/10.16993/sjdr.639>.
- Gates, Lauren, and Sheila Akabas. 2010. 'Inclusion of People with Mental Health Disabilities into the Workplace: Accommodation as a Social Process | SpringerLink'. 15 October 2010. https://link-springer-com.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/chapter/10.1007/978-1-4419-0428-7_20.
- HRDF. 2019. 'Inclusivity of Disabled Person at the Workforce'. Human Resources Development Fund. https://www.hrdf.com.my/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/03.-issue_Feb01_2019-Human-Capital-Report-Inclusivity-of-Disabled-Person-at-the-Workplace.pdf.
- Jahoda, Andrew, Jeremy Kemp, Sheila Riddell, and Pauline Banks. 2008. 'Feelings About Work: A Review of the Socio-Emotional Impact of Supported Employment on People with Intellectual Disabilities'. *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities* 21 (1): 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-3148.2007.00365.x>.
- Meltzer, Ariella, Sally Robinson, and Karen R. Fisher. 2020. 'Barriers to Finding and Maintaining Open Employment for People with Intellectual Disability in Australia'. *Social Policy & Administration* 54 (1): 88–101. <https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12523>.
- Trembath, David, Susan Balandin, Roger J. Stancliffe, and Leanne Togher. 2010. 'Employment and Volunteering for Adults With Intellectual Disability'. *Journal of Policy and Practice in Intellectual Disabilities* 7 (4): 235–38.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-1130.2010.00271.x>.
- UN DESA. n.d. 'Disability and Employment | United Nations Enable'. Accessed 22 November 2020. <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/resources/factsheet-on-persons-with-disabilities/disability-and-employment.html>.
- UNESCO. n.d. 'Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) | Education within the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development'. Accessed 22 November 2020.
<https://sdg4education2030.org/the-goal>.