



# Employment Opportunities and Benefits for People with Down Syndrome in Malaysia: A Qualitative Research

## RESEARCH

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Despite the importance of employment on individual well-being, the literature on the positive impact of work participation, specifically for individuals with Down syndrome, is scant.

**Aim:** We conducted in-depth interviews to explore how people with Down syndrome perceive employment benefits in Malaysia.

**Method:** Forty-five participants were interviewed, including six individuals with Down syndrome, ten family members, six employers and co-workers, 22 community members, and a policy maker.

**Result:** Three themes emerged from reflexive thematic analysis: (1) personal growth, (2) employer incentives, and (3) improving social acceptance.

**Conclusion:** The findings emphasise that fostering a positive attitude towards the employment of individuals with Down syndrome would benefit them and contribute to society. Relevant bodies could utilise the findings to develop effective employment policies for the community.

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## KEYWORDS:

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## INTRODUCTION

Employment is important to an individual as it offers income, forges social relationships, elevates social status, and ultimately provides meaning in life (van Campen & Cardol 2009). Evidence shows that employment is linked with the general population's better physical and mental well-being (Hintikka et al. 2009; Meltzer et al. 2009). Employment also enhances the quality of life by providing a sense of identity, contribution, and belonging (Emerson et al. 2011). Moreover, individuals with disabilities were found to be able to contribute to economic growth as they expanded the job recruitment pool and improved employees' tenure (Houtenville & Kalargyrou 2012).

However, despite the importance of employment on well-being, people with disabilities remain the largest untapped source of the labour force (Green & Brooke 2001). Similarly, people with disabilities in Malaysia were reported to have significantly higher unemployment rates than the general population (Ang 2017). Being unemployed could hinder their efforts to become independent and continue to rely on their parents, family, or the government for support (Harun et al. 2019). Ultimately, their exclusion from the workforce would cost 3–7% of the total national gross domestic product (Buckup 2009). This proves to be an issue of economic loss to the nation if the barriers to their integration into the workforce are not remedied. Therefore, this study aims to identify intervention strategies that would promote and drive positive employment attitudes among employers and nurture the culture of acceptance within society.

## EMPLOYMENT AND INDIVIDUALS WITH DOWN SYNDROME

With the advancement of medical care and improved quality of life, the life expectancy for individuals with Down syndrome has increased drastically, from only 12 years in the 1950s to 60 years over the past decades (Englund et al. 2013). Therefore, the importance of addressing employment issues for individuals with Down syndrome cannot be overstated as it directly impacts their overall socioeconomic status and quality of life.

Down syndrome is the most commonly identifiable cause of intellectual disabilities, accounting for around 15–20% of the population (Rutter 2002; Schalock et al. 2009). Down syndrome is characterised by specific traits that distinguish it from other neurogenetic disorders associated with intellectual disability (Channell et al. 2021; Tomaszewski et al. 2018). These traits include difficulties in expressive language fine motor skills, and social functioning. Effective communication is crucial in workplaces, and challenges in this area may affect their ability to convey ideas, understand instructions, or collaborate with colleagues. Additionally, employers and colleagues may hold misconceptions about individuals with Down syndrome's abilities, limiting their opportunities for professional growth. Thus, high unemployment or part-time paid employment and unpaid volunteer work are typical for individuals with Down syndrome (Kumin & Schoenbrodt 2016). Studies have shown that individuals with Down syndrome have a wide range of functional abilities and skill asynchrony, which could affect their job qualifications. Therefore, although Down syndrome is often grouped with other conditions of cognitive limitations, it is important to examine their socioeconomic issues separately from the others.

Individuals who have Down syndrome possess the capability and desire to attain self-sufficiency and make valuable contributions to the betterment of their community and society (Foley et al. 2013; Foley et al. 2014; Kumin & Schoenbrodt 2016; Scott et al. 2013). However, the literature usually discusses the barriers and hindrances to employment for people with disabilities in general, and evidence on the benefits of work participation, especially for individuals with Down syndrome, is limited. Therefore, this study will explore the positive impact of employment for individuals with Down syndrome, and the results from the analysis can guide policy makers and organisations in promoting their integration into the workforce.

## EMPLOYMENT POLICIES AND LEGISLATIONS IN MALAYSIA

In Malaysia, despite establishing various policies and legislations, the employment statistics for people with disabilities still show no significant improvement. As of 2018, data indicated that around 4,500 individuals with disabilities were employed in the public and private sectors. This constituted roughly 1.4% of the working-age adult population with disabilities, which was documented as 320,870 individuals in the Social Welfare Department's national disability register for the same year (Kementerian Pembangunan Wanita Keluarga Dan Masyarakat 2018).