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Headline: Goodwill High, Systems Weak: Singapore Not There Yet on Disability Inclusion

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A new nationwide survey led by Singapore Management University (SMU) has revealed that while Singaporeans care deeply about inclusion, the pathway from empathy to employment remains steep. Despite widespread goodwill, both persons with disabilities (PWDs) and the general public rate Singapore's employment policies below moderate in effectiveness, with future improvement by 2030 seen as only "minor".

Among those in hiring positions, both PWDs and members of the public admitted they were only "a bit willing" to hire a person with disability, a sobering sign that positive sentiment has yet to become action.

When asked what would most improve employment for PWDs, both groups ranked empowerment and practical enablement highest. Meaningful inclusion at the workplace is held back by poor accessibility, low awareness of support schemes and a lack of practical employer tools.

The study, Engage.Me., was created and led by Singapore Management University (SMU) Principal Lecturer of Statistics Rosie Ching, and supported by the Singapore Association of the Visually Handicapped (SAVH) and the Singapore Association for the Deaf (SADeaf).

Together, they surveyed the deaf and hard-of-hearing community, people with visual impairments, persons with physical impairments as well as members of the general public to collect data on perceptions, awareness and engagement in inclusive employment.

Said Ms Rosie Ching, "Every statistic in the results shows goodwill but goodwill without access doesn't get anyone hired. Until we improve workplace accessibility, make support easy to find, and give employers practical tools and benefits, people with disabilities will keep hearing 'you're welcome here' while the door essentially stays half-closed, akin to being invited to a feast and left standing outside the restaurant."

The study began in July 2025, and over a two-month period, polled a total of 7,265 people, which included 171 visually-impaired respondents, 193 deaf or hard-of-hearing individuals, 151 persons with physical disabilities, 961 people who work or volunteer with PWDs and 5,789 members of the general public across Singapore.

Full survey results are accessible at www.screeningstatistics.com/engageme.

Key findings of practical implications:

1. Accessibility the weakest link

More than half of PWDs rated physical, tech and social accessibility in workplaces below 50%, with technology scoring the lowest.

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The public was even more critical, with 6 in 10 rating tech accessibility as the weakest link in inclusion efforts.

Ms Ching commented: "Accessibility, especially digital, is still the critical bottleneck. Without the means to apply, connect, or communicate, participation in employment, education, and social life, including the ability to apply for jobs, collaborate with colleagues, and engage in community or policy processes, engagement simply isn't possible. If digital access fails, PWDs cannot even reach the stage of engagement that defines genuine participation."

2. Awareness gap: 8 in 10 unaware of training, 7 in 10 unaware of hiring grants

The survey found a striking lack of awareness of government or employer support.

8 in 10 PWDs have never heard of training programmes for employability.

2 in 3 are unaware of hiring grants for PWDs.

Even among those in hiring roles, fewer than one in two have heard of workplace grants or PWD employability training schemes.

Ms Ching commented: "Goodwill is evident, but support remains significantly inadequate. Without clear signposting and practical nudges, awareness lags, and with it, genuine inclusion."

3. Support gap: PWDs rate their self-sufficiency far below expectations

PWDs rated their job satisfaction at 6.38 out of 10, a "high-average" score. However, their ability to financially support themselves stands at just 5.4 out of 10, far below the 7.0 that the general public believes it should be. This marks a significant perception gap.

In other words, job satisfaction is holding up due to PWDs being reasonably satisfied with their jobs. However, financial self-sufficiency is not, because they feel markedly less secure about their ability to stand on their own feet financially. The disconnect highlights how positive public sentiment has yet to translate into tangible empowerment and financial security.

Ms Ching commented: "While job satisfaction among PWDs is reasonably high, their perceived ability to support themselves financially drops significantly, well below even what the public believes it ought to be. This disconnect shows that goodwill alone has not yet translated into real empowerment or economic independence."

4. Mindsets alone are not enough to increase engagement with PWDs

The study revealed a positive correlation between attitudes towards PWDs (Disability Attitude Index, DAI) and employment engagement (Disability Employability Index, DEI). However, attitudes account for only 11% of actual engagement.

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This indicates that mindset shifts alone are not sufficient to move the needle. Although attitudes toward persons with disabilities (PWDs) are generally positive, they do not strongly predict employability outcomes.

While inclusive attitudes are important, sustainable inclusion requires structural enablers such as accessibility, training, and policy support to translate good intent into meaningful employment outcomes.

Ms Ching: "We've statistically shown that Singaporeans care and empathise. Yet inclusion for persons with disabilities happens only when empathy is matched with infrastructure. Without proper accessible systems, inclusive hiring, and genuine workplace support for employers as much as for employees, good intentions rarely pave the way for real opportunity."

Key Recommendations:

1) Fix digital and information gaps:

More than half of PWDs rated accessibility below 50%, and 8 in 10 were unaware of existing training or hiring grants. To address this gap, the study recommends developing a national "Inclusion Gateway", a unified digital portal that connects job opportunities, grants, and training programmes. The platform would feature SMS or Whatsapp prompts that guide users step-by-step and be co-tested by PWD users.

2) Equip employers and tie incentives to inclusion outcomes

Mindsets account for only 11% of employability outcomes; structure does the rest. To address this gap, the study recommends introducing inclusive-hiring perks for business leaders. Companies that actively close accessibility and hiring gaps could receive tax benefits or national recognition, ensuring inclusion is no longer an act of voluntary goodwill but a measurable, recognisable and rewardable business practice.

Mr Samuel Choo, SAVH Executive Director commented: "SAVH is deeply grateful for this meaningful collaboration with Singapore Management University to uncover valuable insights into the lived realities of persons with visual impairment. The Engage.Me. findings highlight accessibility as the key stumbling block to employability, what we have long observed on the ground, and which we now have concrete statistical proof of.

The awareness and support gaps revealed by this survey are equally worrying. Many persons with disabilities, including employers, remain unaware of existing training and hiring grants. Goodwill is there, but awareness is not. Without both, inclusion stalls. SAVH will continue to shine a light on these support schemes, not only within our own services but across the wider community. Because inclusion is more than awareness, it takes accessible technology, prepared employers, and real opportunities that lead to independence and dignity for every person we serve."

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Mr Josh Lye, SADeaf Executive Director commented: "We're encouraged that the study supports what we already know: that Singaporeans care and empathise with persons with disabilities. But we're also reminded that for good intentions to lead to real opportunity, empathy must be matched with infrastructure - properly accessible systems, inclusive hiring and genuine workplace support for employers and employees. We're glad we could make a small contribution to this SMU study. The insights are a helpful step towards building more inclusive systems and opportunities, and empowering Deaf, Deafblind, and Hard-of-hearing individuals."

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