

## **Challenges of Social Inclusion of the Visually Impaired and Blind Persons in the Sri Lankan Workplace**

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### **Introduction**

People with visual impairment and blindness (VI&B) represent the majority of the differently abled population in most communities (WHO, 2011) where social inclusion in the workplace has always been a challenge. They are more likely to be overly sympathized, negatively viewed or even teased which results in them being excluded from society (Zainol et al., 2018). Social inclusion of diverse communities is a key element of social sustainability coming under UN Global Compact principles. Thus, a high priority has been given to studies dealing with social inclusion, which include the improvement of orientation & mobility and social acceptance aimed at empowering employees with VI&B. This paper focuses on the challenges associated with social inclusion encountered by the employees with VI&B in the workplace.

Employees with VI&B do not enjoy full integration in the workplace due to the lack of social support. Inability to navigate through social venues, failure to recognize co-workers, inability to obtain food and drink without assistance and the need to rely on colleagues for assistance are some of the barriers that exclude them from socializing (Naraine & Lindsay, 2011). Alma et al. (2012) highlight personal value attached to participation and the size of their social network as major determinants of social inclusion, while factors such as self-perceived vision and degree of visual impairment has no relationship to social inclusion of the visually impaired adults. Thus, it is imperative to investigate the issues of social inclusion of employees with VI&B for implementing new policies, support services and intervention programs towards enhancing their social inclusion (Hagiliassis et al. 2014) and in turn to guarantee social sustainability.

## **Objectives**

The research problem emanates from the fact that although social inclusion of persons with VI&B is a priority area, no systematic investigation has been carried out on the social inclusion of employees with VI & B in the Sri Lankan organizations. Thus, a serious knowledge gap exists in this area. The objective of this study is to explore the extent to which the Sri Lankan workplace provides a conducive environment for the employees with VI&B. In particular, the key challenges associated with their orientation & mobility and social acceptance are determined.

## **Methodology**

Due to the exploratory nature of this research, a qualitative approach has been adopted. The study population comprises of medium to large scale organizations in Sri Lanka. The data collection method adapted was mainly in-depth interviews where seven blind respondents consisting of four males and three females of executive grades were selected using the snowball sampling technique. Each of these respondents represented organizations with a broad range of sophistication with respect to functionality, which included a state university, a top banking institution and an AG's office, whose names are not disclosed for confidential reasons. The interviews were conducted on a face-to-face mode and over the phone, based on a pre-determined interview protocol which lasted for 45 to 60 minutes and the proceedings were recorded and transcribed. Using pattern matching and thematic analysis techniques, data so gathered were analyzed to elucidate the key challenges encountered and factors that would facilitate improved social inclusion.

## **Results and Discussion**

Five main challenges with respect to orientation & mobility and social acceptance came to light and one of the key determinants that stimulates higher levels of social inclusion was also found. The key findings are summarized below:

- a) *Inadequate Infrastructure Support:* Most organizations in the sample have almost no facilities to support physical accessibility of employees with VI&B, and hence they face many difficulties with respect to orientation and mobility. None of the organizations have taken any interest to address

the issues of mobility from the employees' place of residence to workplace. Personal safety is left at risk and accidents have also been reported in certain places. Only one private sector organization provides a VI&B friendly environment which includes guiding floor tactiles, trailing bars, and guiding stickers, braille markings in lifts, embossed stickers and voice-support in elevators. One of the largest public sector financial institutes in the sample has a standard layout on all floors so that employees with VI&B could locate the respective places reasonably well. In most institutions within the sample, people's support is admirable. Although, there are critical issues with respect to orientation and mobility for employees with VI&B, they seem to view them as 'the way it is' and tolerate to a very great extent.

- b) *Issues with respect to Social acceptance:* All participants maintain very good social relationships with their colleagues in the workplaces where they felt that they are part of the team. Thus, social acceptance is not observed to be a major issue for employees with VI&B in all organizations studied. However, it is observed that the level of these relationships depends on the individual behavior of the person with VI&B and their orientation. Other employees seem to provide adequate support to the fellow workers with VI&B. There are instances where the support goes beyond the required level showing excessive sympathy, thus resulting in persons with VI&B feeling underrated.
- c) *Poor job design:* In most state organizations there is a major mismatch of a person's specifications (including the skills) and the job design. For example, graduates with VI&B have been placed in executive positions where the main mode of information access is paper based hard copy file systems.
- d) *Inadequate workplace safety:* Employees with VI&B face many problems when it comes to workplace safety, where repeated collision and accidents are taking place. No strategies and operational mechanisms promoting workplace safety are in place in most organizations within the sample.
- e) *Mismatch of focus:* The emphasis placed on disability support in most organizations appear to be focusing toward people with physiological impairments rather than visual disabilities. In the two 'better' organizations, sharing information through electronic media is well

supported. However, common forms of information dissemination such as noticeboards are not accessible by employees with VI & B.

## **Conclusion**

This study highlights five critical challenges encountered by employees with VI&B in the workplace. Orientation and mobility support is found to be a largely neglected area. No assistive technologies are practically used in the workplace to aid VI&B employees for their navigation and information sharing. Job redesign to promote a VI&B friendly workplace would facilitate the overall productivity of the organization. Although, social support at the individual level is prevailing in general, it is important to develop a disabled friendly mindset and attitudes of the other employees toward facilitating social inclusion of VI&B and to promote unity towards establishing social sustainability at large. In addition, the top management support has been recognized as a key determinant that facilitates social inclusion, in particular in the social acceptance arena.

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