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UNPACKING DECENT WORK: A WORK-IN-PROGRESS EXPLORATION OF THE LIVED REALITIES OF EMPLOYED PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES IN A SOUTH AFRICAN TOWNSHIP

Abstract:

Employment is a fundamental right and a crucial driver of individual and societal well-being. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 8 emphasises inclusive economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for everyone. Despite South Africa's progress in legislation aimed at addressing inequalities, individuals with disabilities still face persistent challenges, including workplace discrimination, insufficient physical accessibility, and limited chances for career progression. This paper reports on an ongoing study of the lived realities of employed individuals with disabilities in a South African township, examined through the lens of the International Labour Organisation's Decent Work Agenda. Guided by the Psychology of Working Theory, this qualitative, interpretivist investigation adopts a phenomenological approach to explore the subjective experiences of individuals with disabilities. Using purposive snowball sampling, life history interviews capture participants' narratives. Data will be analysed using thematic content analysis, supported by Tesch's eight-step framework, to ensure rigorous interpretation. Key objectives include understanding how individuals navigate employment, social welfare, and communication within their community while interpreting the stated Decent Work Agenda's relevance to their lived experiences. Ethical considerations such as informed consent, participant confidentiality, and compliance with the Protection of Personal Information Act guide every aspect of this engagement. The findings aim to inform policy reforms, enhance workplace accessibility, and raise awareness about this marginalised group's socioeconomic and psychological challenges. Fundamentally, the study proposes contributing to a more inclusionary employment landscape and promoting understanding of the SDG 2030 vision of equitable and sustainable development within South Africa's labour force.

Keywords:

ILO Decent Work Agenda, Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8, Social Welfare, Workplace Accessibility, Disability in the Workplace.

JEL Classification: I30, I15, J21

1. Introduction

Employment is a fundamental human right that supports individual dignity, economic stability, and community welfare. The United Nations' (UN) Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8 emphasises the importance of inclusive and sustainable economic growth, productive employment, and decent work. This implies the need for fair treatment and equal opportunities within the workforce (UN, 2024; Sachs et al., 2021). A key component of this vision is the International Labour Organisation's (ILO) Decent Work Agenda, which advocates for equitable pay, fair working conditions, and meaningful employment opportunities for all individuals, including those with disabilities (Krenin & Aigner, 2022). Admittedly, decent work extends beyond employment availability. It reflects aspirations for fair income, workplace rights, safety, recognition, personal development, and a supportive work environment (Kuzmina et al., 2021). Understanding how these principles are implemented is vital for enhancing employee well-being and strengthening organisational effectiveness.

The ILO's decent work agenda identifies four foundational pillars: employment rights, access to opportunities, social protection, and social dialogue (Rantanen et al., 2020). These pillars establish decent work as a fundamental human right and a crucial development aspect, but also connect fair labour standards, poverty reduction, and participatory decision-making to better health outcomes and lower work-related risks (Christie et al., 2021; ILO, 2022). In South Africa, post-1994 labour legislation is rooted in the Constitution, the Employment Equity Act, and the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act. These legislations are committed to equality and prohibit discrimination based on race, gender, or disability. Furthermore, these laws guarantee the right to choose employment, receive fair remuneration, work safely, and engage in collective representation.

Unfortunately, despite existing protections, achieving equal opportunity and fair treatment remains a hope rather than a reality for many, particularly for women and persons with disabilities, reflecting a broader trend of underrepresentation in the South African labour market (Stats SA, 2021; RSA, 2021). This exclusion is notable even though studies show that employees with disabilities bring reliability, creativity, specialised expertise, and strong work ethics—qualities that can significantly enhance organisational performance and reputation (Miethlich & Oldenburg, 2020; Dippenaar, 2021). When given equitable opportunities, individuals with disabilities can perform on par with their non-disabled peers, emphasising the importance of inclusive hiring practices and supportive workplace environments.

Aligning the Decent Work principles with South Africa's legislative commitments offers a pathway to closing persistent gaps in labour market participation. However, the degree to which these frameworks translate into meaningful, lived inclusion for persons with disabilities remains underexplored, especially in township settings where socioeconomic and infrastructural challenges intersect with disability-related barriers. It is within this context that the present research is positioned, investigating how employed persons with disabilities living in townships experience the Decent Work Agenda.

2. Literature review

2.1 Structural and social barriers to inclusive employment

Despite progressive post-apartheid legislation intended to eliminate discrimination, individuals with disabilities still face significant exclusion from South Africa's labour market. The lack of adequate assistive technologies, unreliable transportation, and ongoing wage disparities contribute to noticeable exclusion, increasing economic vulnerability and reliance on state support. In addition, barriers to access can further include inaccessible public or work environments, societal prejudice, limited access to quality education, and compounded social isolation, hindering their meaningful participation. Workplace transformation, further, is significantly impeded by deep-rooted misconceptions about the capabilities of individuals with disabilities, along with a lack of employer awareness regarding the necessary integration requirements, further reinforcing systemic exclusion (Ximba, 2016; Vornholt et al., 2017). Additionally, many employees are reluctant to disclose their disabilities due to fears of discrimination or loss of opportunities, which contributes to the functional invisibility of these individuals in workplaces (Cobley, 2011).

The marginalisation of persons with disabilities is not unique to South Africa but rather part of a broader historical pattern. Global awareness of disability rights began to increase after World War II, as veterans with permanent disabilities started to confront systemic exclusion. Although constitutional protections and policies promote equality in South Africa, psychosocial stigma and structural barriers continue to hinder socioeconomic participation (Calvert, 2021; Charles et al., 2023). These realities call into question whether legislative frameworks and international instruments such as the ILO Decent Work Agenda are translating into tangible improvements in the lives of employed persons with disabilities (Hanass-Hancock & McKenzie, 2017; Masdonati et al., 2018; Brown & Lent, 2020; Sinclair et al., 2022).

2.2 Theoretical Perspectives and Research

The Psychology of Working Theory offers a useful framework for analysing these challenges. This theory highlights how structural barriers such as marginalisation and economic exclusion interact with personal and community-level resources to shape access to decent work (Duffy, Blustein, Diemer & Autin 2016:127). The theory further stresses the importance of micro-level assets such as proactive dispositions, critical awareness, social support, and financial stability while attempting to mitigate systemic disadvantages. Nevertheless, little empirical evidence exists on how these dynamics unfold within township contexts in South Africa, where resource constraints and layered marginalisation intensify the struggle for equitable employment.

This gap provides the rationale for the present research, which explores the lived realities of employed persons with disabilities in an Ekurhuleni township. This text explores the relationship between global and national commitments to inclusive labour markets and the local experiences of well-being, dignity, and opportunity amongst the demarcated population. The research focuses on how participants understand their work, access social welfare, and engage in community activities, while evaluating how these experiences align with the principles of decent work. This research seeks to deepen our understanding of the daily lives of individuals with disabilities, who are often underrepresented in academic research. Although the study is ongoing, it is expected to

provide valuable insights that can inform legislation, guide workplace strategies, and enhance inclusive development efforts. Most importantly, the research aims to amplify the voices of people with disabilities, moving beyond mere rhetorical commitments to inclusion and generating actionable knowledge that fosters equitable and dignified employment.

3. Research methods and actions to date

3.1 Research approach and setting

This study utilises an interpretivist paradigm with a qualitative, phenomenological, and exploratory design. Interpretivism allows a deep understanding of how individuals construct meaning within their social realities while recognising the researcher's role in this process (Walliman, 2019; Chowdhury, 2014; Tenny, Brannan, & Brannan, 2022). Phenomenology is particularly effective in exploring participants' lived experiences from their perspectives, aiming to uncover the essence of the phenomenon being studied (Davidsen, 2013; Koopmans, 2015).

The life history method will capture the work experiences and career aspirations of employed individuals with disabilities in an Ekurhuleni township. This approach offers rich, contextualised accounts that shed light on how participants interpret their realities about the ILO Decent Work Agenda. Data will be analysed inductively, ensuring findings emerge from participants' narratives rather than being limited by predefined frameworks.

In modern workplaces, the emphasis has shifted from merely complying with employment equity mandates to actively creating inclusive environments for employees with disabilities. Despite existing legal frameworks, many individuals with disabilities continue to encounter barriers such as discrimination, limited opportunities for career advancement, and exclusion from the labour market (Shaw et al., 2022). These challenges hinder the realisation of their economic, political, and social rights.

This study explores the lived experiences of employees with disabilities through the lens of the International Labour Organisation's Decent Work Agenda. The research is situated in Duduza, a township within the City of Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality in Eastern Gauteng. Duduza's socio-economic dynamics provide a relevant context for examining disability inclusion in employment. Participants will be interviewed at their homes or mutually agreed venues to ensure comfort and accessibility (King et al., 2019).

3.2 Sample description

Participants were intentionally selected based on their ability to provide valuable insights into disability inclusion in the workplace. Recruitment was conducted through visits to community centres and religious venues in Duduza (Demarcation Board, 2021), where flyers outlining eligibility criteria were distributed. Interested employed individuals with disabilities were then contacted to arrange convenient meeting times. A purposive snowball sampling approach was used to identify cases with rich information and to expand the participant pool through referrals (King et al., 2019; Mont & Aderemi, 2023).

The final sample consisted of 15 working participants, with data collection guided by the principle of saturation (Morse, 2020). Participants ranged in age from 29 to 55 years, with an average age of 43. The group included nine males and six females, all identifying as Black South Africans, reflecting the demographic profile of the township context in South Africa. Participants had an average of seven years of work experience, highlighting a notable discrepancy between their age and years of employment—this pattern will be further examined in the analysis. The educational backgrounds of the participants varied: six had completed their matriculation, five had obtained diplomas or certificates, and two held postgraduate qualifications. Only two participants had not completed secondary schooling before entering the workforce.

3.3 Data collection and participant engagement

Given the sensitive and experiential nature of the topic, data were collected through in-depth, unstructured narrative interviews, which enabled participants to share their self-articulated life stories (Papadopoulos, 2023). A flexible thematic interview guide enabled core topics to be covered that emerge during each interview (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2016). Interviews occurred in neutral locations to ensure accessibility and minimise disruptions in participants' workplace settings (Welsh Government, 2020). This audio-recorded life story approach facilitated capturing first-person accounts of how their personal histories influence career aspirations and navigation within organisations. Methodology, sampling, and the interview schedule were refined during an initial pilot study (Kim, 2010; Rees et al., 2023). Additionally, field notes were taken to capture contextual details and the researcher's reflections, including methodological, personal, and theoretical observations (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2017).

3.4 Anticipated analysis and reporting

The verbatim transcribed interviews were anonymised (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2023). Data will be analysed using qualitative content analysis to identify implicit meanings and patterns within participants' narratives. Initially, interview transcripts and field notes will be read multiple times to ensure familiarity and coding data into thematic groupings to aid the interpretation of findings (Austin & Sutton, 2015; Dollah et al., 2017). This inductive reasoning process will adhere to Tesch's eight-step data analysis framework to ensure a rigorous and transparent process (Tesch, 1990). The study will follow established principles of trustworthiness to improve its findings' credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability.

3.5 Ethical considerations and researcher-participant collaboration

Participants are active knowledge-holders, and their contributions are essential for creating a more inclusive understanding of their workplace realities. The authors recognise that individuals with disabilities in South Africa have faced systemic exclusion, discrimination, and barriers to professional advancement (SAHRC, 2013–2017). Therefore, ethical guidelines protect participants from harm, discomfort, and privacy violations, ensuring their right to withdraw from the study at any time (Salkind, 2012; RSA, 2013; Neuman, 2014; Fleming & Zegwaard, 2018; Bovill, 2019; De Sutter et al., 2022). Institutional ethical approval was obtained [Anonymised] before the start of data collection.

4. Positioning the study within the 2030 SDGs: Envisioned contributions

South Africa's National Development Plan is closely aligned with the UN SDGs for 2030, focusing on reducing inequality, eradicating poverty, expanding employment opportunities, and promoting inclusive growth (Houngbo, 2023; Stats SA, 2017). The advancement of social justice, the creation of equitable opportunities, and the protection of vulnerable groups directly align with SDG 8, advocating for productive employment and decent work for all. Additionally, it connects with SDG 4, emphasising the importance of quality education and lifelong learning in facilitating career development and workplace inclusion (Nel et al., 2020). Collectively, these frameworks emphasise the importance of establishing work environments that acknowledge and facilitate the complete involvement of individuals with disabilities. Thus, focusing on the lived realities of employed individuals with disabilities in a South African township, this study could surface the challenges, strategies, and everyday negotiations that shape their workplace experiences. In doing so, it seeks not only to extend the evidence base on disability and work but also to inform future legislation, organisational practices, and community-level interventions that could promote inclusion. The insights generated from this study are expected to inform policy reform, promote workplace accessibility, and raise awareness of the socioeconomic and psychological barriers this marginalised group faces. Ultimately, the study aspires to contribute to a more inclusive and equitable world of work while advancing the 2030 SDG vision of sustainable development within the South African context.

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