

Original Article

**BARRIERS AND ENABLERS OF EMPLOYED PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES IN
RWANDA**

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Abstract

Securing and retaining employment remains a significant challenge for individuals with disabilities. It is crucial to recognize the barriers they encounter and the factors that contribute to their success in order to promote equal opportunities in the workforce. This research aimed to investigate the obstacles and facilitators of employment for individuals with disabilities in Rwanda. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with individuals with disabilities in Kigali, Rwanda. The interviews covered various topics, including job search experiences, workplace environments, employer attitudes, and other relevant matters. The collected data were analyzed using thematic content analysis. Two major themes (barriers for employed individuals with disabilities and enablers for employed individuals with disabilities) and eight sub-themes (environmental, attitudinal, personal barriers, transport accessibility, financial challenges, support from employers and colleagues, government support, and opportunities for growth) emerged from the analysis. The primary challenges identified by participants included inaccessible work environments, negative attitudes, financial struggles, and personal barriers such as low self-esteem. The study also highlighted factors that encourage employment, such as supportive work conditions, career growth opportunities, and government backing through laws and policies. This research emphasizes the challenges faced by individuals with disabilities in the workplace, along with the factors that promote employment. Employers can foster a more inclusive work environment by improving accessibility, cultivating positive attitudes, and offering proper support systems, ensuring equal opportunities for all employees.

Key words (MeSH): Barriers, Facilitators, Person with disability ,employment and Rwanda

Introduction

Approximately 16% of the global population consists of individuals with disabilities, a rise from the 10% estimated in the 1970s (World Health Organization [WHO], 2011). A large proportion of this group resides

in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), where the unemployment rate for people with disabilities ranges from 60% to 90% (Mitra, 2018). According to the United Nations Flagship Report (2018), the incidence and unemployment of individuals with disabilities are strongly influenced by the political, social, and economic contexts of each country. Despite the optimism at the start of the 21st century for significant social changes for people with disabilities, including the growing emphasis on employability amidst the realities of the global economy, challenges persist (United Nations, 2018). The World Report on Disability (WHO, 2011) identifies various barriers preventing full participation by people with disabilities, such as negative societal attitudes, financial constraints, inadequate services, accessibility issues, and lack of engagement from the individuals themselves.

To help unlock the potential of older workers and people with disabilities, the International Labor Organization (ILO) has issued guidelines for businesses (ILO, 2019). These are aimed at addressing barriers at the workplace to ensure equal opportunities for all workers. Public policies supporting affirmative action have gained traction globally, focusing on reducing discrimination and promoting equality, ultimately benefiting society as a whole (Kantor, 2019). The Global Report on Disability has put forward several recommendations to tackle the challenges faced by individuals with disabilities (WHO, 2011). Some governments in LMICs have responded by developing laws and initiatives that enhance participation in areas like education, health, and employment (Mitra, 2018). However, barriers still exist that prevent people with disabilities from accessing healthcare, education, and career opportunities (Kantor, 2019).

Even with the protections provided by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), employees with health conditions, including those with mild conditions like back pain or controlled diabetes, still face unequal treatment (Schur et al., 2017). Workers with disabilities tend to earn lower wages, receive fewer benefits, and have less opportunity for career advancement compared to their non-disabled counterparts (Schur et al., 2017). In Rwanda, the Integrated Household Living Conditions Survey (EICV4) indicates that having a disability is not necessarily linked to poverty, as people with disabilities are fairly spread across wealth quintiles (National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda [NISR], 2016). However, people with disabilities make up a larger percentage of households that are severely food insecure, highlighting economic vulnerability (NISR, 2016).

In Rwanda, only 56% of people with disabilities are employed, compared to 75% of those without disabilities (NISR, 2016). Inequality in access to education plays a key role in this disparity. Children with disabilities are much less likely to attend school, with 68% of disabled children attending compared to 89% of non-disabled children (NISR, 2016). The lack of specialized schools and the inability of general education institutions to accommodate students with disabilities lead to high dropout rates (NISR, 2016). Further research is needed to understand how people with disabilities engage with the job market in Rwanda, as this may reveal both barriers

and facilitators of employment. There is limited research focused on the integration of people with disabilities into Rwanda's employment sector, and even fewer studies based on individuals' perspectives of their work experiences (Mitra, 2018).

The aim of this study is to explore the barriers and enablers experienced by employed individuals with disabilities. By gaining insight from first-hand accounts, this research intends to offer a more accurate picture of workplace inclusion and exclusion, which may differ from broader societal or organizational perceptions (Mitra, 2018). It is hoped that reflecting on these experiences will provide valuable recommendations for creating a more inclusive society based on the real-life challenges and opportunities identified by workers themselves. In an effort to enhance the economic participation and self-determination of individuals with disabilities, numerous policies, affirmative actions, and special programs have been established (United Nations, 2018). Rwanda has implemented a national strategy to ensure equitable participation of people with disabilities in its reform agenda and broader societal integration (Government of Rwanda, 2020). Several LMICs have also introduced policies to address challenges faced by people with disabilities, particularly in education, healthcare, and employment (Mitra, 2018). However, despite these measures, significant barriers remain that prevent people with disabilities from accessing health, education, and career opportunities (Kantor, 2019).

Rwanda has made notable progress in disability inclusion, passing policies and laws to integrate people with disabilities into all sectors of society, including ratifying the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Government of Rwanda, 2020). However, the full implementation of these policies is still an issue, and much work remains to ensure that people with disabilities have equal access to the labor market (Kantor, 2019). The issue of employment barriers for people with disabilities in Rwanda is critical as it directly impacts the economic and social well-being of a large segment of the population. This research aims to address these barriers and identify enablers in the workplace that can improve the employment rate for people with disabilities in Rwanda. By doing so, the study will provide recommendations to policymakers and practitioners for enhancing the employment opportunities for people with disabilities in Rwanda.

Research Methods

Study approach and design

This research employed a qualitative approach through in-depth interviews (IDIs) to address the study objectives. IDIs are often preferred over other methods, such as focus group discussions, when dealing with time and budget constraints. They allow for more detailed insights, ensuring participant comfort and confidentiality, and offer flexibility in scheduling while addressing individual needs. This method also reduces

logistical complexities and costs, making it a more cost-effective way of gathering high-quality, comprehensive data.

Study setting

The study was conducted in Kigali, Rwanda, focusing on individuals with disabilities in their workplaces. Kigali was chosen for its proximity to the researcher, which was important given the limited budget and timeframe. Additionally, the city provided a diverse group of people with various disabilities, which made it easier to find a broad sample compared to other methods of recruitment.

Study population

The study targeted individuals with disabilities between the ages of 18 and 64, whether employed or not, and included participants from disability organizations within Kigali, Rwanda.

Sampling method

Purposive sampling was employed to select interviewees. In purposive sampling, the researcher uses their judgment to choose participants who are most suited to providing relevant information related to the study (Patton, 2015).

Sample size

The sample size was determined by data saturation, which occurs when no new information is being gathered from additional interviews (Guest et al., 2020). This indicates that the researcher has reached a comprehensive understanding of the barriers and enablers experienced by people with disabilities in employment.

Inclusion criteria

Participants included individuals within the working age range (18-64 years) who were either currently employed or had worked previously.

Exclusion criteria

Individuals who were employed but unable to provide verbal consent were excluded from the study, as the research lacked sign language interpretation resources and the cost of hiring an interpreter was prohibitive given the budget constraints.

Data collection procedure

Semi-structured interviews were conducted using a pre-designed interview guide based on the study objectives. The interviews were held in Kinyarwanda at disability organizations in quiet locations to facilitate meaningful responses. This method allowed for in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives on the barriers and facilitators within their work environments. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. The interviewer engaged participants on a one-on-one basis, with follow-up probing questions when necessary to obtain more detailed responses. According to qualitative research literature, IDIs are particularly effective for discussing sensitive topics that participants may be reluctant to address in a group setting.

Data analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim by one researcher and translated from Kinyarwanda to English. A second researcher performed back translation to ensure accuracy. The data were then analyzed using thematic content analysis, which involved initial coding and categorizing themes related to barriers and enablers in the workplace. Thematic analysis is commonly used to identify key challenges and facilitators faced by people with disabilities in employment. The study's findings were deemed credible due to the following considerations:

Credibility

Credibility refers to the believability of the findings. In this study, credibility was ensured through prolonged engagement with participants and member checking, where participants were invited to verify the interpretations of their responses.

Transferability

Transferability refers to how well the findings can be applied to other settings. This was addressed by providing a detailed description of the Rwandan context and the specific barriers and facilitators people with disabilities face in Rwanda.

Dependability

Dependability concerns the consistency of the findings over time. To improve dependability, the research process was rigorously documented, and a peer review mechanism was employed to ensure the reliability of the findings.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the extent to which the findings are shaped by participants rather than researcher bias. In this study, confirmability was ensured through multiple data collection methods, including IDIs and observation, and by acknowledging the researcher's biases in both the proposal and final report

Ethical consideration

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the University of Rwanda College of Medicine and Health Sciences Institutional Review Board (UR-CMHS IRB) with the reference number CMHS/IRB 501/7/2023. Permission was also obtained from the relevant disability organizations (reference 1089/NCPD/2024) to conduct the study. Participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study, their rights, and the potential risks and benefits involved. They provided informed consent before participation. Participants were assured that they could choose to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence, and their personal information remained confidential throughout the research process.

Results

Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents

A total of 9 in-depth interviews were conducted. Of those, five participants were male, four were female who were employed in different districts of Kigali city and they were aged between twenty-nine and thirty-eight years' old.

Table 1: Social demographic information of the study participants.

Participants	Gender	Age	Workplace	Residence
P1	Female	32	Private institution	Gatsata
P2	Male	40	Public institution	Nyamirambo
P3	Male	37	Self employed	Nyacyonga
P4	Male	41	Public institution	Nyakabanda
P5	Female	29	Private institution	Kimironko
P6	Male	35	Private company	Kacyiru

P7	Female	38	Public institution	Remera
P8	Male	30	Private institution	Gikondo
P9	Female	34	Private institution	Remera

Themes and sub-themes of the study.

Two themes and eight sub-themes emerged from this study:

Theme 1: Barriers of employed people with disabilities

For this theme, five sub-themes (environmental accessibility, attitudinal barriers, personal barriers, transport accessibility and financial challenges) emerged.

Theme 2. Enablers of employed people with disabilities

Three sub-themes arose from this theme. These sub-themes are support from employer and colleagues, government support and opportunities for growth.

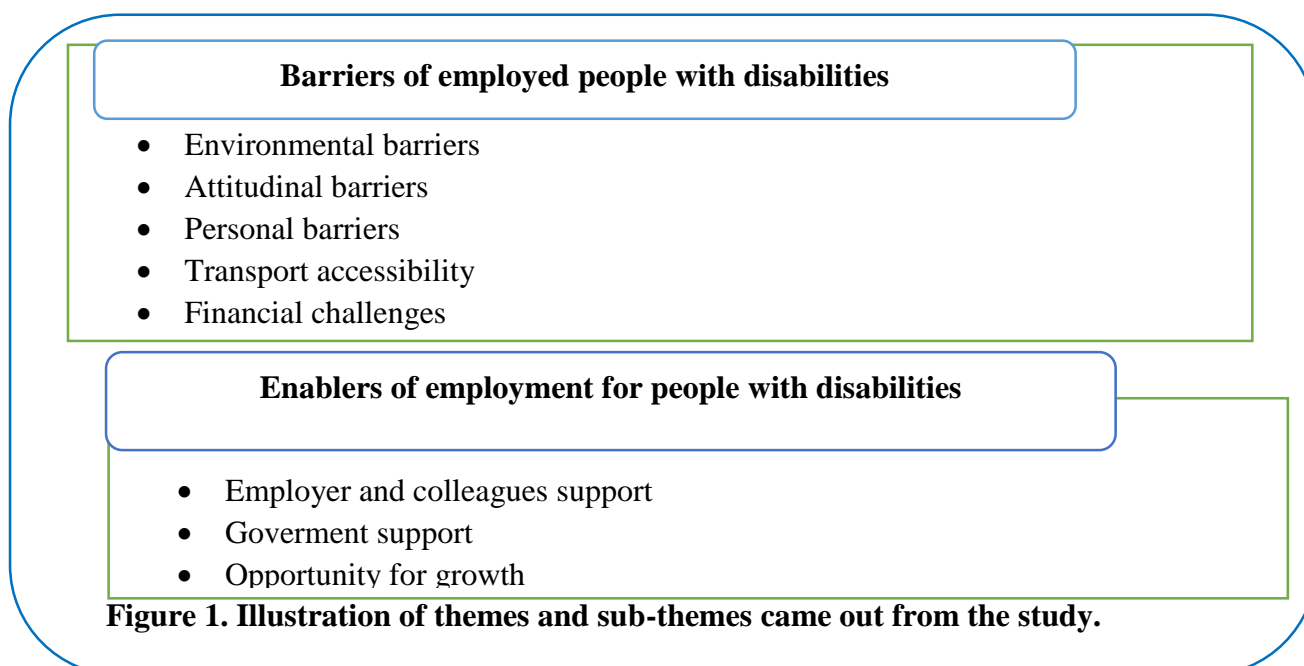


Figure 1. Illustration of themes and sub-themes came out from the study.

Theme 1: barriers of employed people with disabilities

Under this major theme there were emerging of five sub-themes which are, financial challenges, transport accessibility, environmental barriers, attitudinal barriers and personal barriers.

Sub-theme 1.1: Environmental barriers

Regardless of skill, everyone should be able to find opportunity and inclusion in the workplace. Environmental barriers, however, can pose serious difficulties for people with disabilities, making it more difficult for them to carry out their tasks well and realize their full potential. Under **Environmental barriers** sub-theme most of the participants declared that navigating the environment can be challenging because of different obstacles like no elevators and ramps. Some other respondent said that there might also have elevators and they are always closed which make it difficult for them to access different work areas.

“At my work environmental barriers are the most significant which means buildings are not always designed with people like me in mind, here I mean that some workspaces are on other level and we do not have elevators which is hard for me to navigate the place freely and I find it difficult like it can take me twenty minutes to reach the last level while it is not the case for people without disability” (34 years old female participant.)

“At my work the building is very well constructed there is a ramps for wheelchair users and there are also two elevators, however they are always closed they get opened for only very ill patients which restricts me to access the whole building, I actually work on 1st floor which is easier to enter but the sample taking room is above , when I am the one to take sample it's very difficult to go up using stairs as ramps are very far from my work station, one day I felt down coming from sample taking “(35 years old male participant.)

Some other participants also stated that another issue with environment is that they do not have accessible bathrooms which makes people with disability to feel excluded.

"In my job, the bathroom isn't accessible, and there is no designated parking for people with disabilities which I find it difficult because of my disability, using small door bathroom is hard but I have to cope with it because I do not have any other choice as a person with disability you cannot leave work easily because getting a new one is tough." (30 years old male participant.)

Despite many who said that they face environmental barriers there are few who said that they have no physical barriers as their workplace is very inclusive.

“My current employer is great. They have ramps and wide doorways, which makes it much easier for me to navigate the workspace “(30 years old male participant.)

Sub-theme 1.2: Attitudinal barriers

Many persons with disabilities often encounter undervaluation in the workplace, where supervisors and colleagues may not fully recognize their capabilities. Yet, there are also those who don't face such challenges.

"There were some subtle instances. Sometimes, colleagues would talk over me or assume I couldn't handle certain tasks. It wasn't malicious, but it did create a bit of distance and made me feel isolated" **(35 years old male participant).**

"My employer was very understanding and accommodating. However, some extended family members didn't quite understand the challenges I faced at work. They sometimes made comments suggesting I shouldn't be working or that certain jobs were "too much" for me. And also There were a few times when colleagues made insensitive jokes and calling me names, or assumed I couldn't handle certain tasks because of my disability. It was mostly through offhand comments, but it did create a bit of tension" **(29 years old female participant).**

Sub-theme 1.3: Personal barriers

It should be possible for everyone to succeed and use their skills in the job. Personal hurdles, however, might stand in the way of persons with disability realizing their full potential. Under this sub-theme, some of the participants stated that they at some point felt limiting by personal factors like their disability and some by their self-doubt and others they managed to overcome those feelings which held them behind.

"But another issue is needing to lift something and not having the ability to bend down to lift it, causing problems such as accidentally spilling a reagent or medicine on the floor. You would normally clean it up easily, but if you can't bend down, you might struggle to wipe it up. Such things can feel limiting, but they are minor challenges. You might find that it takes longer to do tasks that should take 15 minutes because of the need to move around and deal with various issues that a person without a disability might not face" **(41 years old male participant).**

Sub-theme 1.4. Transport accessibility

An essential component of social inclusion and fair access to opportunities for all people is transport, interviewees of in-depth interviews stated that they face difficulties in accessing transport.

*"Public transportation isn't reliable, especially for persons with disability more specifically for persons with physical disability. For me it is very difficult because I cannot afford to buy my own car and buses are not accessible as I cannot put in my wheelchair easily I always need some people to help me and I cannot take a motorcycle because it cannot carry me with my wheelchair "***(29 years old female participant)**

Sub-theme 5: financial challenges

Some participants who are working in different areas highlighted that the amount of salary they get is small. The majority of interviewees disclosed that they struggle to meet their most basic requirements. Some participants stated that they are living on a meagre daily salary, which prevents them from eating healthfully in terms of both quantity and quality. Others indicated that they have difficulty paying their rental home price.

"Financial strain exacerbated by disability-related expenses and limited income opportunities. Money is always tight! Sometimes it's a choice between food and getting the things I need to manage my disability. For example, my crutches are old and I want to buy new ones but when I think about my salary I do not know what to do as someone who work as soap seller I get some percentage on what I sold, I do not sell many soaps my salary would not even pay my transport fees" (32 years old female participant).

Theme 2: enablers for employed persons with disabilities

Under this main theme they emerged three sub-themes which are, employer and colleagues support, Government support and opportunities for growth.

Sub-theme 2.1: Employer and colleagues support

Under this sub-theme, many participants affirm that getting help from employer and colleagues is one of the facilitators they receive through different corners of work like adjusting their working time, being given opportunities to work from home option and when colleagues explain or do things for them to help.

"My current company is fantastic. They provided me with a special designed ergonomic chair and adapted my desk for better accessibility. They also have flexible work-from-home options, which helps when I'm not feeling my best." (35 years old male participant).

"Thankfully, my current company is much better. They provided me with a flexible work schedule, which helps me manage my disability. My colleagues are also very supportive; they're always willing to lend a hand or adjust their communication style if needed" (38 years old female participant).

Sub-theme 2.2: Opportunity for growth

Under this sub-theme some participants confirmed that they feel safe and supported when they are given the opportunity to grow their skills and knowledge to help them grow professionally.

"They've been very encouraging. I've received several training opportunities and recently got a promotion. They have a program where colleagues can mentor each other, which has been really helpful." (35 years old male participant).

Sub-theme 2.3: Government support

Under this sub-theme, interviewees highlighted that Rwandan government helped them through designing laws and policies to protect their right.

“The government also provides some support by putting laws to protect the rights of persons with disability in place, but there could be more policies in place to ensure equal opportunities for people with disabilities.”
(34 years old female participant).

“There are many things that make it easier for me to do my job. Firstly, as an educated person, I feel secure knowing that there is a law that protects people with disabilities. While I haven't personally encountered these issues, I know that if they were to arise, I could be protected by the law. So, I feel secure knowing that no one can discriminate against me at work because of my disability without facing legal consequences”. **(41 years old male participant).**

Discussion

It is important to acknowledge that every individual attempting to enter the workforce faces obstacles. For individuals with disabilities, these challenges are often more pronounced and complex (Smith et al., 2020). Such barriers include environmental, personal, financial, and attitudinal factors, all of which can significantly hinder the opportunities and capabilities of people with disabilities to secure employment. The research identified five key barriers that individuals with disabilities (PWDs) face in accessing or retaining employment. Environmental barriers, which refer to physical obstacles in the workplace that obstruct movement and task performance, include the absence of essential features like elevators and ramps. These findings align with previous research by Nevala et al. (2018), which highlights the difficulties PWDs experience due to heavy doors, narrow aisles, and inaccessible restrooms.

Accessibility remains a critical issue for people with disabilities. Similar results were observed in Rana et al.'s (2021) study, which emphasized the challenges faced by individuals with disabilities in public transportation due to the lack of ramps, lifts, and designated spaces for wheelchairs. This is supported by Till et al. (2019), who found that physical barriers, such as small doors and the absence of elevators, limit access to both public spaces and workplaces. However, this study's findings differ slightly from those of Nevala et al. (2018) due to the specific socioeconomic and infrastructural context of Rwanda. In Kigali, for example, large, heavy doors are not as common as in some other regions, and the hilly terrain presents its own challenges for PWDs trying to access various institutions. Many buildings, particularly those built before disability inclusion was prioritized, lack necessary accessibility features.

Another significant barrier is attitude-based discrimination. Carr et al. (2017) suggest that recruitment and promotion processes can be biased due to negative stereotypes about the abilities of PWDs. While discriminatory attitudes hinder employment opportunities, inclusive attitudes can break down barriers and promote a more welcoming work environment (Johnson, 2019). In Kigali, many individuals, including employers, may harbor misconceptions about the productivity or accommodation needs of PWDs, leading to subconscious biases during recruitment. Negative societal views often cause further marginalization and exclusion in the workplace. People with disabilities also face personal barriers, such as low self-esteem and a lack of confidence, which can be exacerbated by discrimination. Research by Nevala et al. (2018) confirms that people with disabilities often report experiencing workplace discrimination. Mental health challenges, such as anxiety or depression, can also impede their ability to maintain employment (Jones et al., 2020). Overcoming these personal obstacles through skills training and support services is crucial for securing meaningful employment (Watts et al., 2019).

Lack of confidence, shaped by a history of exclusion and negative societal perceptions, often discourages people with disabilities from seeking employment. Lindqvist et al. (2017) stress the importance of robust support systems in helping PWDs navigate the job market. Social barriers, such as limited access to public transportation, further complicate employment prospects. For PWDs, finding accessible transportation to and from work is a significant challenge, as discussed in the study by Unsworth et al. (2018). Even though some transportation options are available, they may not meet the necessary standards or accessibility requirements, as indicated by Wahyuni et al. (2020). These transportation limitations often force individuals to rely on costly private transport, narrowing their employment search radius.

Financial barriers are also a major concern. People with disabilities often face additional costs, such as for assistive devices or accessible housing, which make it harder to meet daily needs (Williams et al., 2019). Our study found that financial difficulties force PWDs to choose between purchasing essential items or investing in tools that help them maintain employment, aligning with findings from Yelin et al. (2020), who also noted that extra costs hinder PWDs' ability to participate in education and training, thus reducing their competitiveness in the job market.

Despite these challenges, the study identified several enablers that could support PWDs in securing employment. According to Jorgensen et al. (2020), the encouragement of coworkers and leadership fosters a supportive work environment, enhancing morale, job satisfaction, and a sense of belonging. Positive attitudes from both employers and coworkers, as well as governmental support, are key to facilitating PWDs' employment.

In general, at the workplace, particularly through supportive attitudes from colleagues and managers, can significantly impact PWDs' employment opportunities. Research by Hernandez et al. (2018) supports this, noting that understanding and experience with disabilities among coworkers and employers can ease employment processes for PWDs. Similarly, Graham et al. (2019) found that workplace accommodations, such as flexible work hours, help PWDs succeed in their roles and contribute to increased productivity. Government initiatives, such as affirmative action policies and financial support for workplace adaptations, can help level the playing field for PWDs. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2016) emphasizes the role of government in ensuring equal opportunities for PWDs in the workforce. In Rwanda, the National Disability Policy (2021) lays the foundation for such policies, addressing barriers and promoting employment opportunities for PWDs.

Finally, offering professional development opportunities is crucial for retaining PWDs in the workforce. Areheart and Stein (2020) highlight that mentorship programs, clear career paths, and skill development opportunities are essential for fostering inclusive workplaces. Organizations that provide professional development programs ensure that PWDs have access to training and career advancement opportunities, thus enabling them to maximize their potential. Internal job transfers or promotions offer long-term career growth and allow PWDs to apply their current expertise while learning new skills.

Recommendations

To improve transportation accessibility for individuals with disabilities, it is crucial to advocate for laws that mandate accessible public transportation options, such as taxis and buses, and to enforce existing regulations requiring all new transportation projects to be accessible. Additionally, investments should be made in infrastructure improvements like tactile pavements, lifts, and ramps. Public awareness campaigns can be launched to highlight the importance of accessible transportation and to encourage inclusive practices.

It is also important to strengthen and enforce anti-discrimination laws to protect the rights of individuals with disabilities in all areas of life, including employment and education. Addressing prejudice and improving societal attitudes towards disabilities can be achieved through educational initiatives aimed at promoting acceptance and understanding. Media outlets should be encouraged to present positive representations of people with disabilities to further shift public perceptions.

To address significant physical commuting challenges, workplace accessibility can be enhanced through investments in assistive technology and modified equipment, the promotion of remote work options, and the establishment of standards to reduce physical barriers. Employers and employees should undergo sensitivity training to foster an inclusive workplace culture. Additionally, awareness programs that showcase the talents and contributions of people with disabilities can help challenge discriminatory attitudes. Implementing

disability inclusion policies and engaging in targeted recruitment efforts can further promote inclusive employment practices.

The development of inclusive workplace policies that offer support to employees with disabilities should be encouraged, including procedures for reasonable accommodations and flexible work schedules. Peer support networks for individuals with disabilities in the workplace should be established, and awards can be introduced to recognize employers and coworkers who offer exceptional support. Strengthening the legal framework to ensure compliance with international standards and safeguard the rights of individuals with disabilities in the workforce is essential. Providing incentives, such as tax breaks or subsidies, to organizations that hire and support individuals with disabilities can further promote inclusivity. Additionally, public sector and government organizations should be made to adhere to inclusive employment practices.

Conclusion

Improving accessibility in both the community and transportation systems is crucial to enhancing the quality of life and employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities in Kigali, Rwanda. To create a truly inclusive society, significant advancements in legislation and infrastructure are needed. Building such a society requires efforts to combat discrimination and shift societal attitudes, which can be achieved through the implementation of strong anti-discrimination laws, public awareness campaigns, and educational initiatives. Additionally, addressing financial challenges through economic empowerment programs can significantly accelerate this transformation. Overcoming these barriers requires a focus on providing financial support, along with comprehensive social protection systems. Furthermore, promoting workforce inclusion involves tackling various obstacles, including environmental, attitudinal, personal, transportation, and financial barriers. The employment prospects of people with disabilities can be significantly improved by leveraging facilitators such as support from employers and the government, as well as providing opportunities for professional growth. By applying these strategies, we can create a more inclusive and supportive environment that encourages the active participation of people with disabilities in all aspects of society.

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