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Everyone benefits when we build inclusion into our everyday lives

Budget 2025 aims to strengthen the school-to-work transition for those with disabilities. We can improve how we structure policies in the work and education spaces.

Cananda Chiu



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Jonathan is autistic and needs support in the workplace. This includes getting step-by-step instructions in carrying out his work tasks. This is a reasonable accommodation, but it may not be obvious to, nor deemed necessary by, colleagues.

Like others who were diagnosed only in adulthood, Jonathan – whose name has been changed for anonymity – has navigated the employment landscape by himself.

He has an invisible or non-appearance disability, which means the fact that he is autistic is not immediately apparent to his peers. As a result, he often faces misunderstanding and miscommunication at work, especially when his peers are confused by his frequent requests for clarification on tasks.

He has struggled with how to disclose his disability and communicate his need for reasonable accommodations to his colleagues and employers. This dilemma has been a source of stress, so his colleagues have had to create his needs are understood and considered fairly and seriously.

To me as a disability advocate, Jonathan's account is not uncommon.

In Budget 2025, Prime Minister and Finance Minister Lawrence Wong highlighted the Government's intention to help facilitate a smoother transition from school to work for the disability community – noting that it will be a "multi-year endeavour" that the Government is looking into.

The announcements targeted at the disability community, like extending the Enabling Employment Credit (EEC) to 2026, will help create incentives and heighten economic opportunities for persons with disabilities (PWDs) looking for work after their schooling years. The scheme provides up to 20 per cent wage support for workers with disabilities earning below S\$3,000 a month.

Such individualised financial incentives are necessary. But as Jonathan's experience shows, we also need to consider how we think about – and build inclusion in – everyday spaces like the workplace and educational settings. This will have a significant impact in improving the school-to-work transition not just for PWDs, but also their non-disabled peers.

Structuring our workplaces

A report published in December 2024 by the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) and the National Council of Social Service (NCSS) showed that respondents without disabilities reporting "positive attitudes" towards PWDs in the workplace fell from 88.4 per cent in 2020 to 80.6 per cent in 2023. However, during that period, the overall employment rate of PWDs in Singapore increased.

This begs the question: Why did positive attitudes decrease, and what can be done? This is important, as Singapore plans to increase the employment rate of PWDs from 12.7 per cent in 2022/2023 to 40 per cent by 2030 as one of the goals of the Enabling Masterplan 2030.

To me, the findings show that incentives to increase inclusive hiring such as the EEC can work well in increasing the employment rate of PWDs, but the drop in positive attitudes shows that more can be done to intentionally structure inclusion in Singapore's workplaces.

One way to do this is through carefully crafted workplace protocols. For example, the Disabled People's Association (DPA) has advocated that reasonable accommodation protocols be made mainstream in Singapore workplaces.

Reasonable accommodations are necessary modifications or adjustments to a policy or practice that enables PWDs and other demographics to perform the tasks of a given job. Examples could include the use of screen readers or sign language interpreters, receiving documents in alternative and accessible formats, installing ramps or providing clearer step-by-step instructions.

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Our research, however, shows that a common concern among PWDs is whether they can attain or even request such reasonable accommodations.

Having reasonable accommodation protocols will ensure that requests from PWDs are evaluated fairly and objectively, based on practical criteria rather than general subjective biases. These criteria include the availability of technical or financial assistance to the employer from the Government or disability organisations, the size and capacity of the company/organisation, and the physical constraints of the workplace.

Such criteria will assure employers that any accommodations they provide are reasonable within their capacity while giving assurance to groups like PWDs that their requests will be taken seriously and assessed fairly and objectively. Such guidelines align with international best practice, including those set by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in its General Comments on Employment.

Many other countries have already established reasonable accommodation protocols in law and even mandated or strongly advised workplaces to adopt an "interactive process" – a structured dialogue between employer and employee to assess and discuss requests based on such relevant criteria.

This will hopefully improve communication in workplaces and reduce misunderstandings, ultimately improving relations and reducing reports of "negative attitudes".

Preparing the ground

Besides preparing workplaces with protocols that welcome persons with disabilities, we also need to equip our young with perspectives and experiences to smoothly transition into the workplace.

In schools, promoting interaction and empathy between children with and without disabilities is undeniably vital. But this should be the foundation – not the ultimate goal – of an inclusive education system. We should teach our non-disabled children not only to be empathetic, but also how to be allies and come alongside their peers with disabilities to remove barriers.

Children and youth, both disabled and non-disabled, must learn about the various barriers, whether physical, social or attitudinal, that still exist in our society and how to remove them. Such barriers could include a lack of ramps, websites not designed with accessibility considerations, or pedagogies not designed for neurodivergent learners.

Not doing this will have practical implications. When children with disabilities are not given the vocabulary, tools or channels to articulate the barriers they are experiencing, but are told to "try harder" or that their disabilities are something to "overcome" – as many of us disabled adults were told growing up – it can result in them facing issues naming the barriers they are experiencing – and hence the solutions.

For many of us disabled adults, this affected how empowered we felt growing up in asking for accommodations – something we took with us into working age and had to spend considerable time unlearning later in life.

If we teach our young that disability is solely a "personal challenge", or if we do not teach children that many of the barriers that persons with disabilities face are social and attitudinal in nature – and can be removed – children may believe that little to nothing can be done on a societal level to promote inclusion. In reality, inclusion is a whole-of-society effort.

Other educational settings: an inclusive SkillsFuture system

As skills upgrading will likely be the norm in the employment landscape, strengthening the school-to-work transition will need to include educational settings such as lifelong learning opportunities.

The Government's continued efforts in Budget 2025 to improve the utilisation of SkillsFuture are important. But the SkillsFuture system itself must also be optimised to address the unique barriers facing PWDs.

Our research shows that barriers still remain in the system, with PWDs occasionally facing difficulty in obtaining reasonable accommodations to participate in courses.

According to last December's study by MSF and NCSS, 21.6 per cent of PWDs aged 18 to 64 participated in training programmes in the past year. This participation rate is approximately half that of the resident labour force (43.5 per cent).

Of the PWDs who did not participate in training, 61.6 per cent said their disability made it hard for them to participate, while 14 per cent said the training provider may not be able to accommodate their specific needs, or that the training venues were not accessible.

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Streamlining one level of requirement for reasonable accommodation protocols in SkillsFuture training programmes is one way to boost the participation rate for PWDs.

This is particularly important, as while there is an Enabling Academy – which coordinates courses and services for PWDs – it is ultimately available only to PWDs.

According to the MSF and NCSS report, individuals without disabilities who had more frequent interaction with persons with disabilities generally expressed more positive attitudes towards them compared with those with limited or no contact. So, an inclusive SkillsFuture will strengthen the frequency of interactions between those with and without disabilities.

Amplifying leadership, benefitting society

Ultimately, optimising school-to-work transitions that consider such realities is important to help PWDs pursue work and careers of their interest. When PWDs can not only participate but also thrive, society as a whole benefits.

As I reflect on Budget 2025, I am reminded of the recent theme of the International Day of Persons with Disabilities – commemorated annually in December: "Amplifying the leadership of persons with disabilities for an inclusive and sustainable future".

This suggests that amplifying the leadership of persons with disabilities is not only a good idea, but necessary for an inclusive and sustainable future.

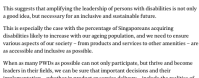
This is especially the case with the percentage of Singaporeans acquiring disabilities likely to increase with our aging population, and we need to ensure various aspects of our society – from products and services to other amenities – are as accessible and inclusive as possible.

When as many PWDs as possible can not only participate, but thrive and become leaders in their fields, we can be sure that important decisions – and their implementation – whether in product or service delivery – include the realities of those living with disabilities.

• Cananda Chiu is president of the Disabled People's Association.

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