# Searching for Jobs: Experiences of Persons with Disabilities in the Komenda- Edina- Eguafo - Abirem Municipality of Ghana

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#### ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** This study investigated the job search experiences of persons with disabilities in the Komenda- Edina- Eguafo- Abirem Municipality in central Ghana, in order to identify measures to improve their employability.

**Method:** The study was qualitative with a descriptive design. Purposive sampling was used to include people with visual disabilities, people who are deaf and people with physical disabilities who had searched for jobs. Face-to-face interviews were conducted in the local language (Fante) and were audio- and video- recorded. The recorded interviews were then transcribed and translated from Fante to English. Data was analysed using thematic analysis. The transcribed data was coded, grouped into categories, refined, and then organised into various themes based on the study objectives.

**Results:** Findings revealed that employers had negative attitudes towards jobseekers with disabilities. They had low expectations of them, feeling pity rather than considering them productive. This resulted in persons with disabilities being pushed into low paid jobs and feeling dissatisfied. The negative attitude of employers deterred many such job-seekers and they opted for self-employment. Inaccessible workplaces and lack of access to information were also reported as major barriers.

**Conclusion:** Negative attitudes of employers towards job-seekers with disabilities have not changed despite legal efforts being made to change negative perceptions. It is recommended that stakeholders should intensify public

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education on disability issues. The working environment and information on job opportunities and protocols should also be made accessible to persons with disabilities by enforcing provisions in the Persons with Disability Act.

*Key words*: accessibility, barriers, employment, attitudes, persons with disabilities

### INTRODUCTION

Persons with disabilities constitute a substantial component of the population whose needs should be considered in national planning. Around one billion people world-wide have some form of disability (World Bank, 2021) with greater prevalence rates in developing countries (Hanass-Hancock et al, 2017). The 2021 Population and Housing census of Ghana shows that about 8% (2,098,138) of people, 5 years and older, of the population have varying degrees of disability (Ghana Statistical Service, 2023). This is about 3 times the percentage recorded in the 2010 Population and Housing census. Though Ghana's 2021 Population and Housing census report, currently available, is silent on the percentage of persons with disabilities who are unemployed, the 2010 Population and Housing census estimated that 54.1% of persons with disabilities aged 15 years and older are employed (Ghana Statistical Service, 2014). The percentage of unemployed people with disabilities if left unproductive will increase the dependency ratio and place a heavier burden on the working population and society in general. Enhancing the employment of persons with disabilities can help improve their standard of living and reduce the rate of poverty and the number of poor people. Haves et al (2016) argued that employment does not only help in providing necessities of life, but also gives social recognition and increases the level of social inclusion of persons with disabilities. This view was reiterated by Nota et al (2014) who indicated that work is a crucial issue in the lives of persons with disabilities because it helps them construct their identities and find meaning in life.

The importance of work has been highlighted in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 23 (1) of the Declaration states that everyone has the right to work, free choice of employment, and favourable conditions and protection against unemployment (United Nations, 2013). However, persons with disabilities hardly have access to the labour market and its economic benefits due to discrimination from employers (Choruma, 2007). The negative attitude of employers, arising from misconceptions about disabilities, has limited access to

jobs for persons with disabilities. That is, the erroneous perception that a worker with a disability may not be as productive as an employee without a disability has led to employers refusing to employ persons with disabilities (Bamber et al, 2004). This creates unemployment among persons with disabilities.

Despite the fact that persons with disabilities have the right to work and there are several policies and legal provisions backing these rights, little has been achieved regarding the employment of persons with disabilities (International Disability Rights Monitor, 2004). Caswell et al (2003) reported that there are many legislative instruments providing employment quotas for persons with disabilities. Unfortunately, these legislations are underutilised or not enforced, leading to a high unemployment rate among persons with disabilities in society.

For instance, the Washington Times (2005) found that in developing countries 80% - 90% of persons with disabilities of working-age are unemployed, whereas in industrialised countries the figure is between 50% and 70%. Also, a study by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) showed that in developing countries, working-age persons with disabilities experienced significant labour market disadvantages and worse labour market outcomes than working-age persons without disabilities (OECD, 2010). Similarly, working-age people with disabilities have been found to have much lower employment rates than people without disabilities in both developed and developing countries (WHO, 2011). This has led to poor living standards among persons with disabilities. For instance, the United Nations (2009) estimated that about 20 % of persons with disabilities live on less than 1US\$ a day due to unemployment. For this reason, Thomas (2005) argued that persons with disabilities would continue to depend on others for survival since it would be difficult for them to benefit from jobs and escape poverty. Previous studies on employability of persons with disabilities have focused on perspectives of employers (Avoke, 2002; Roessler & Rumrill, 2003; Opoku-Boadi, 2015), that is, willingness of employers to employ persons with disabilities. The current study therefore focused on the job search experiences of persons with disabilities, taking into consideration their own perspectives, in the Komenda- Edina- Eguafo- Abirem municipality.

The current study therefore focused on the experiences of persons with disabilities in their job search.

## Objective

The study examined the job search experience of persons with disabilities, from their own perspectives, in the Komenda-Edina-Eguafo-Abirem municipality of Ghana. It focused on the challenges encountered by these job-seekers and how this influenced their search for jobs in the future.

## METHOD

### Study Design

This was a qualitative study, using a descriptive study design. According to Ary et al (2002), this design helps to study humans and their behaviour effectively and also helps to understand how individuals determine and react to their reality. The design was therefore suitable for the study as it helped to investigate the subjective experiences of persons with disabilities during their job search.

#### Setting

Komenda-Edina-Eguafo-Abirem Municipality, in the central region of Ghana, has been in existence for over thirty-five years. It comprises four distinct traditional areas which have been carved out of the Cape Coast Municipal Council to constitute a political district. Komenda- Edina- Eguafo- Abirem District was one of the forty-six new districts created in 1988 as part of the decentralisation programme in Ghana. This study setting was chosen because of the large number of persons with disabilities, constituting 6.3% out of the total population (144,705) in the municipality as recorded by the 2010 Housing and Population Census (Ghana Statistical Service, 2010).

#### Study Sample

The target population was persons with disabilities (people who are deaf or deaf people. People with a visual disability and those physical disability) of workingage, who had searched for jobs at some time and were residing in the Komenda-Edina- Eguafo- Abirem Municipality.

Twenty participants were purposively recruited for the study, from the street and their homes. The sample size was based on the principle of saturation as espoused by Richards and Morse (2012). Saturation is reached if adding more participants to the sample does not yield any new perspective. The threshold for this study was reached after the 20th person was interviewed, as responses relating to each of the objectives were being repeated.

### **Data Collection**

Feminist scholars claim that interviews are a very good way to study marginalised groups, such as persons with disabilities, because it allows them to tell their stories in their own words (Reuben et al, 2011). Interviews for 20-30 minutes were conducted, using a semi-structured interview guide, among participants in the study area. Participants were asked various questions relating to their experiences, employers' attitudes, and how those experiences influenced the type of work they were doing as well as their future job search plans, and the challenges they faced while seeking employment.

#### Data Analysis

Data was analysed using the thematic content analysis. Thematic content analysis is defined by Cho and Lee (2014) as a research method used for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through a systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns. This was done by first transcribing the spoken responses as well as observations and videos (deaf participants), then classifying the responses into themes, developing categories and coding schemes for themes, pre-testing the coding scheme on a sample, coding all the text, drawing inferences based on themes considering study objectives, and finally presentation of results.

Pre-tests were conducted earlier in the Cape Coast municipality because it shares boundaries with Komenda- Edina- Eguafo- Abirem municipality. For the pretest, twelve participants comprising of four from each of the different groups of people with disabilities considered in the study (people who are deaf, people with visual disabilities and those with a physical disability) were employed. The pre-test enabled the researchers to restructure inappropriate questions to suit the study objectives before the actual field work. Also, member checking was done to increase credibility of findings. This involved sharing the summary of the findings with participants to confirm their responses and correct discrepancies.

#### **Ethical Considerations**

The study protocol was first approved by the supervisor of the study. An approval letter was sought from the Head of Department (HOD) and an introductory letter

from the Centre for Disability and Rehabilitation Studies (CEDRES). As there was no or low risk to the participants, approval from CEDRES and the HOD was enough for the commencement of this study. Participation in the study was voluntary. Participants provided their oral consent and were at liberty not to answer questions at any stage of the interview. Anonymity was assured by the use of pseudonyms such as, for instance, D1= participant number 1 who is deaf and B2 = participant number 2 who has a visual disability.

## RESULTS

### **Demographic Characteristics of Participants**

As shown in Table 1, half of the participants (50%) were within the age group of 20 - 30 years and 65% were males. Concerning the employment status, 50% were employed, 20% were self-employed, 15% were retired and 15% were unemployed. In terms of educational level, 35% had basic education while those with vocational education (10%) and those without any education (10%) were equally represented. Twenty percent (20%) had tertiary education, suggesting that the educational attainment of participants was fairly good.

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Categories	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Age Range (years)		
20–30	10	50
31–40	2	10
41–50	2	10
51-60	2	10
61or above	4	20
Sex		
Male	13	65
Female	7	35
Type of disability		
Deafness	5	25
Visual disability	5	25
Physical disability	10	50
Employment status		
Employed	10	50
Unemployed	3	15
Self-employed	4	20

Table1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Retired Educational level	3	15
Never been to school	2	10
Basic	7	35
Secondary	5	25
Tertiary	4	20
Vocational	2	10

Field data, 2018

#### Attitudes of Employers towards Job-seekers with Disabilities

Attitudes of employers were negative towards persons with disabilities who were searching for jobs. According to the participants, employers expressed pity and surprise when faced with applicants with a disability, and consequently paid more attention to their condition instead of their capacities and qualifications.

"Immediately when they saw me after reviewing my application, the Head started saying 'sorry, sorry', shaking his head. So, I think he didn't expect the applicant to be a person with disability. He was not talking about my pursuit of work but rather my condition and how I am able to survive. In the end, I believe I was offered the opportunity to work with them based on my condition and not qualification or productiveness" (P7).

The findings also indicated that some of the participants were badly treated by employers and felt humiliated.

"The kind of treatment I received makes me feel useless as if for me I am not part of creation. In fact, some of these attitudes are part of people committing suicide because the society does not embrace them. They said if only I was hearing impaired, they could have managed, but visually impaired? They will not employ me and still employ my personal assistant never, they cannot afford, not here" (V3).

Some participants said they were completely ignored by employers.

"Immediately I reached there, they did not even offer me a seat, not to talk of asking me of my mission there. I stood there till I was tired because of the long queue and went back home" (P3).

Another participant with a visual disability added,

"They said because I cannot see I will be delaying their time and work process and did not offer me the chance" (B4).

As a result of this negative attitude exhibited by employers, some of the participants said they resorted to online job application procedures.

"I would rather search online for jobs to avoid the disrespect I will receive in person when I go to drop my job application letter at the job premises" (P6).

This was supported by another participant.

"It helped me to know the trends of reception that is given, that it is not welcoming, and how to carry myself, so I have adopted online job search as compared to physically walking and searching for job where someone may exhibit some attitude that is not welcoming towards you; that will not be pleasant and will not let you get the job" (P9).

#### The Nature of the Physical Environment

The findings revealed that the physical environment at the workplace was generally not accessible to many of the participants. Some of the participants reported that even with the use of assistive devices, they still struggled a lot in accessing some of the workplaces they visited in search of jobs.

"I had issues climbing and walking on the stairs, but I had to adjust my assistive device, that is the crutches, which wasn't comfortable at all and could have caused me to fall" (P8).

Some participants also complained about the rugged terrain that made movement difficult, and the distance they had to cover over such terrain in search of jobs. As indicated, the physical environment was a major barrier.

"The environment I went searching for jobs wasn't accessible, I had difficulty walking, especially whenever I went there alone, but my mother helped me in most instances" (P4).

"The working environment was a big problem; I had my white cane but the place was so crooked that I had to go with a guide before I could send my application" (B10).

#### **Communication Barrier**

Communication was an issue for some participants, especially the ones who are deaf. Some participants also had difficulty in accessing information on jobs; they were mostly people with visual impairment.

"I went through more problems at the places I went to search for the job. For instance, when I asked them questions by signing, no one paid attention to me; they were busily working as if they had not seen me, but even when they came to me after a long time of sitting they could not respond to my questions which I signed and did not understand. But all they say is 'go and come later' in sign language and they always said 'go and come' so I stopped going there again because they only waste my time but cannot talk with me" (D2).

#### Effects of Negative Attitudes on the Kind of Jobs for Persons with Disabilities

According to the participants, employers tended to give low paid jobs to persons with disabilities because of pity and doubts about their working abilities. This led to their working at less satisfying jobs.

"No, I am not satisfied at all because my earnings are not enough, and it is from this same small earning that I will eat from and do other things because am not a child. I am grown, I fend for myself, and as I raise a family in addition to my one child, my expenses will be more and I don't wait for anyone before I eat, meaning I don't wait for people to feed me" (P1).

"I have no option and if even am not satisfied, I have to do because my condition will not let me do any other work" (B5).

These experiences have shaped participants' job-seeking behaviour. For example, most of the participants were unwilling to search for jobs anymore and would prefer establishing their own businesses.

"Because of the treatment from employers, I want to have my own shop. If you work for someone, the person will always dictate for you what to do and what not to do and can sack you at the least mistake and since I have a difficulty in walking, I walk slowly which may not let me be quick about any task I will do, but establishing my own business will not cause me this 'wahala' (problems)" (P1).

"Even before the job, I suffered a lot before getting it, they were always giving me stories, and I was later sacked again because they said I cannot work with them, so I have decided not to work for others again but to establish my own work if even it will earn me little. I started some self petty work and not to search for jobs again" (P1).

"As for me, I will never search for jobs again but I will work hard and raise

money to establish my own business; if even I will start small, I will get there, because now I cannot work in any school and most workplaces do not know sign language so if even I go they cannot communicate with me and they will waste my time as they did in my former job search" (H6).

"I prefer self-established job to avoid maltreatment and disrespect from my boss at a mistake committed. Meanwhile you may even be older than your boss" (P5).

Some also thought that having their own businesses would enable them to generate enough revenue, be independent and avoid the humiliation they encounter.

"A self-established business is better because of the profit you will get from it as compared to a public work where someone will abuse you and pay you and is on monthly basis, but your own work will earn you money daily" (D7).

## DISCUSSION

This study investigated the job search experiences of persons with disabilities in the Komenda- Edina-Eguafo -Abirem Municipality in the central region of Ghana. The findings confirmed findings from previous studies about challenges persons with disabilities encounter when searching for jobs, notably about employers' attitudes towards persons with disabilities and conventional views that persons with disabilities are unproductive, dependent and need assistance (Dovidio et al, 2011). Burke et al (2013) also reported that employers exhibited negative attitudes towards job-seekers with disabilities because they perceived them to be unproductive which, as such, could lower productivity and profit of their businesses.

A report by the Office of National Statistics (2014) in Tanzania indicated that most people showed negative attitudes towards persons with disabilities and discriminated against them in most sectors including education, health, and employment. These findings suggest that even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when the social and human rights models of disability have gained momentum, the charity model is still prevalent and may be responsible for the discrimination of persons with disabilities. Instead of viewing them as productive citizens who can contribute meaningfully to their communities, they are still viewed as victims of circumstances, deserving pity and in need of "help," "care," and "protection" from a benevolent society (Amponsah-Bediako, 2013). This means that employers have still not changed their perceptions about the potential benefits of employing persons with disabilities.

The negative attitude of the employers towards the job-seekers in the study also influenced the kind of jobs they did, confirming previous findings that persons with disabilities were often clustered into sectors offering low-paid jobs and where (low) paid jobs are linked directly to (low) performance (Burchardt, 2000). For example, some participants resorted to small-scale self-employment to avoid being maltreated and humiliated by employers. Most of them also preferred parttime to full-time jobs so that they could have more time to rest and manage their condition. This finding is consistent with a study which discovered that persons with disabilities desire flexibility in work arrangement so that they can cope with their disability (Schur, 2002). This is also consistent with findings by Chia and Kee (2013) whose study discovered that because persons with disabilities were treated negatively or unfavourably during job searches, they were discouraged from undertaking future job searches. This implies that negative attitudes of employers towards persons with disabilities, if not changed, will affect Ghana's efforts at poverty reduction and the achievement of its targeted Sustainable Development Goals. Also, with continuing negative attitudes of employers, those who are likely to be employed would not have adequate protection and employers are unlikely to provide them with the necessary reasonable accommodations.

Analysis of the data revealed that the physical environment was generally not accessible to persons with physical disabilities and those with visual disabilities, and this affected them in their search for jobs. This finding corroborates a survey by Schoof (2006) who noted that physical barriers such as inaccessible public transport, information, housing and workplaces were often the main reasons why persons with disabilities were not employed. It was also discovered that persons with disabilities who wanted paid employment were unable to achieve this goal for reasons unrelated to their condition, but rather due to unfriendly workplaces and discriminatory hiring practices (Brown et al, 2010).

For persons who are deaf, communication with prospective employers was the major challenge encountered during their job search. They also complained of not having enough information about job opportunities. This finding is consistent with Thumann-Prezioso's (2005) work which found that people who are deaf lag behind information on a daily basis and always lack up-to-date information on jobs. This finding points to ineffective implementation of the provisions on accessibility issues in Persons with Disability Act 715 of Ghana which requires that public places should be accessible to all persons with disabilities.

## CONCLUSION

The findings indicated that persons with disabilities had unfavourable experiences during their job searches. They encountered negative attitudes from employers, were posted to low-wage positions and faced barriers relating to the physical environment and information. The study therefore recommends intensive sensitisation campaigns to correct employers' negative perceptions about the productive abilities of persons with disabilities, through a collaborative effort between the relevant Government Ministry, the National Commission for Civic Education and Ghana Federation of Disability Organisations. Also, by implementing and enforcing provisions stated in the Persons with Disability Act 715, the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection should ensure that public places, especially workplaces, are accessible to persons with disabilities. Finally, the National Commission for Civic Education, in collaboration with the Labour Commission, the Ministry of Works and Housing and the Ghana Federation of Disability Organisations, should make information available about job opportunities, in appropriate formats such as Braille and sign language videos, so that there is easy access for persons with various disabilities.

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