



TOWARDS INCLUSIVE GROWTH: REMOTE WORK AND DIGITAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP AS TOOLS FOR PWD EMPOWERMENT IN OMAN

Razeena Rasheed¹
Soha Achi²
Vladimir Simovic³
Marcelle de la Roche⁴
Neena Uthaman⁵
Mohammed Al Haziazi⁶

ABSTRACT

Purpose: This paper investigates the potential of remote work platforms and digital entrepreneurship for the employment inclusion of People with Disabilities (PwD) in Oman. PwD face challenges in the labor market due to social stigma and a lack of awareness about remote work options. This study aims to assess the general digital and digital marketing skills of PwD in Oman, identify the gap between their skills and the requirements of virtual platforms for remote work, and recommend online training programs to bridge the gap.

Method: The study will use a mixed-methods approach with questionnaires and real-life scenarios to assess skills and competencies. This study will employ a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative (questionnaire) and qualitative (real-life scenarios) data collection methods.

Results and conclusion: This study will use structural equation modelling, Linear probability and multiple response regression models to validate and identify predictors of skill levels and potential gaps between self-assessment and performance. This guides in the development of appropriate online training which improves the employment prospects of PwDs.

Research Implication: PwDs can apply knowledge, understanding, and practical abilities gained through competency development initiatives in the business work process. With freedom and autonomy, they can make judgments and decisions that will improve their psychological state of mind and confidence. This also ensures access to equal opportunity, independence, and protection against discrimination.

Originality/Value: The study contributes to Oman Vision 2040 and aligns with national priorities of promoting economic development and empowering vulnerable groups like PwD. This research aims to empower PwD in Oman through skills development and access to remote work opportunities, contributing to their social and economic inclusion.

Keywords: Persons with Disabilities, Remote Work, Employment Inclusion, Skill Assessment, Digital Marketing.

RUMO AO CRESCIMENTO INCLUSIVO: TRABALHO REMOTO E EMPREENDEDORISMO DIGITAL COMO FERRAMENTAS PARA O EMPODERAMENTO DA PWD EM OMÃ

RESUMO

Objetivo: Este artigo investiga o potencial das plataformas de trabalho remoto e do empreendedorismo digital para a inclusão no emprego de Pessoas com Deficiência (PwD) em Omã. A PwD enfrenta desafios no mercado de

¹ Arab open University, Oman. E-mail: razeena.r@aou.edu.om Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3813-9572>

² Arab open University, Lebanon. E-mail: sachi@aou.edu.lb Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-2589-4962>

³ Australian University, Kuwait. Institute of Economic Sciences, Serbia. E-mail: v.simovic@au.edu.kw
Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6441-833X>

⁴ Australian University, Kuwait. E-mail: m.roche@au.edu.kw Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1428-481X>

⁵ Arab open University, Oman. E-mail: neena.u@aou.edu.om Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2063-8170>

⁶ Arab open University, Oman. E-mail: alhaziazi@aou.edu.om Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6413-4903>



trabalho devido ao estigma social e à falta de consciência sobre as opções de trabalho à distância. Este estudo tem como objetivo avaliar as habilidades gerais de marketing digital e digital de PwD em Omã, identificar a lacuna entre suas habilidades e os requisitos de plataformas virtuais para o trabalho remoto, e recomendar programas de treinamento on-line para preencher a lacuna.

Método: O estudo usará uma abordagem de métodos mistos com questionários e cenários da vida real para avaliar habilidades e competências. Este estudo empregará uma abordagem de métodos mistos, combinando métodos de coleta de dados quantitativos (questionário) e qualitativos (cenários reais).

Resultados e conclusão: Este estudo utilizará modelagem de equações estruturais, probabilidade linear e modelos de regressão de resposta múltipla para validar e identificar preditores de níveis de habilidade e lacunas potenciais entre autoavaliação e desempenho. Este documento orienta o desenvolvimento de uma formação em linha adequada, que melhore as perspectivas de emprego das pessoas com deficiência.

Implicação da pesquisa: os PwDs podem aplicar conhecimento, compreensão e habilidades práticas obtidas por meio de iniciativas de desenvolvimento de competência no processo de trabalho do negócio. Com liberdade e autonomia, eles podem fazer julgamentos e decisões que irão melhorar seu estado psicológico de mente e confiança. Isso também garante acesso à igualdade de oportunidades, independência e proteção contra a discriminação.

Originalidade/valor: O estudo contribui para a Visão Omã 2040 e se alinha às prioridades nacionais de promover o desenvolvimento econômico e capacitar grupos vulneráveis como o PwD. Esta pesquisa visa capacitar o PwD em Omã através do desenvolvimento de habilidades e acesso a oportunidades de trabalho remoto, contribuindo para a sua inclusão social e econômica.

Palavras-chave: Pessoas com Deficiência, Trabalho Remoto, Inclusão no Emprego, Avaliação de Habilidades, Marketing Digital.

HACIA UN CRECIMIENTO INCLUSIVO: EL TRABAJO A DISTANCIA Y EL EMPRENDIMIENTO DIGITAL COMO HERRAMIENTAS PARA EL EMPODERAMIENTO DE LAS PERSONAS CON DISCAPACIDAD EN OMÁN

RESUMEN

Propósito: Este trabajo investiga el potencial de las plataformas de trabajo remoto y el emprendimiento digital para la inclusión laboral de las personas con discapacidad (PwD) en Omán. Las personas con discapacidad se enfrentan a retos en el mercado laboral debido al estigma social y a la falta de concienciación sobre las opciones de trabajo a distancia. Este estudio tiene como objetivo evaluar las habilidades generales de marketing digital y digital de los PwD en Omán, identificar la brecha entre sus habilidades y los requisitos de las plataformas virtuales para el trabajo remoto, y recomendar programas de capacitación en línea para cerrar la brecha.

Método: El estudio utilizará un enfoque de métodos mixtos con cuestionarios y escenarios de la vida real para evaluar las habilidades y competencias. Este estudio empleará un enfoque de métodos mixtos, combinando métodos de recopilación de datos cuantitativos (cuestionario) y cualitativos (escenarios de la vida real).

Resultados y conclusión: Este estudio utilizará modelos de ecuaciones estructurales, modelos de probabilidad lineal y regresión de respuesta múltiple para validar e identificar predictores de niveles de habilidad y brechas potenciales entre la autoevaluación y el rendimiento. Esto orienta en el desarrollo de una adecuada formación en línea que mejore las perspectivas de empleo de los PwD.

Implicación de la investigación: Los PwD pueden aplicar el conocimiento, la comprensión y las habilidades prácticas adquiridas a través de iniciativas de desarrollo de competencias en el proceso de trabajo empresarial. Con libertad y autonomía, pueden hacer juicios y decisiones que mejorarán su estado psicológico de mente y confianza. Esto también garantiza el acceso a la igualdad de oportunidades, la independencia y la protección contra la discriminación.

Originalidad/Valor: El estudio contribuye a Oman Visión 2040 y se alinea con las prioridades nacionales de promover el desarrollo económico y empoderar a los grupos vulnerables como PwD. Esta investigación tiene como



objetivo empoderar a los PwD en Omán a través del desarrollo de habilidades y el acceso a oportunidades de trabajo remoto, contribuyendo a su inclusión social y económica.

Palabras clave: Personas con Discapacidad, Trabajo Remoto, Inclusión Laboral, Evaluación de Habilidades, Marketing Digital.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Disability can be a lifelong companion or a latecomer, affecting individuals from birth to old age through various means like accidents, chronic conditions, and the natural aging process (Rahn et al., 2015). This diverse population, referred to as People with Disabilities (PwD), is woven into the fabric of every society on Earth, representing a significant 15% of the global population (WHO, n.d.). Within specific regions, the numbers are even more striking: the EU reported 87 million PwD (European Commission, 2020), while the US has 61 million (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022), and Oman has 42,304, which translates to 15.5 per thousand of their population (e-census, 2020).

PwD encounter various social and psychological barriers across the globe, detrimentally affecting their overall well-being. According to the World Report on Disability (WHO & World Bank, 2011), negative attitudes, inadequate service delivery, lack of accessibility, and insufficient funding represent the primary categories of barriers faced by PwD. Moreover, discrimination in employment settings fuels long-term unemployment and pulling out from the labor market for PwD, with unemployment rates soaring as high as 60-90% in low- and middle-income countries (UN Flagship Report, 2018).

The 2020 census in Oman exposes a stark reality where there is a 67% unemployment rate among PwD. This vulnerability extends to a higher risk of poverty, fueled by a cyclical relationship; disability can exacerbate poverty and poverty can increase the risk of disability (Sen, 2008). This complex link is confirmed by various studies, including those by Mitra et al. (2013) and Banks et al. (2017). To address issues like poverty, inequality, environmental protection, and ensuring that everyone lives in peace and prosperity, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are an appeal for action. Tackle the issues PwD face in any nation, as doing so can also help achieve the SDGs, which were formulated with the idea of "leaving no one behind." The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is quite encouraging for PwC



globally. At the September 2015 UN Summit, Oman was one of the world's countries to acknowledge and approve the SDGs, as well as a Member State that committed to using all available means to achieve these objectives. Thus, Oman was integrated into the main pillars of the Ninth National Five-Year Plan of the Sultanate. The first Voluntary National Report (VNR) reviews the Sultanate's achievement of the SDGs, follows progress made, and sheds light on the challenges facing the implementation.

With about 5.4 billion users globally (Internet World Stats, 2023), the Internet offers a vast array of remote work opportunities and constitutes a sizable virtual labor market. Information Technology (IT) (24.8%), business services (11.3%), and healthcare (4.5%) are the most popular industries in this regard (Zhang, 2021). Widespread employment opportunities are created for those who are interested in the growth of remote work platforms like Freelancer, Upwork, Fiverr, and others, as well as the trend of modern firms to outsource certain aspects of their operations to remote workers (Cedefop, 2020). For remote employees to be able to offer their employers enough services from a distance, they need to have the infrastructure and competency levels in place (Radonić et al., 2021). In addition to remote work platforms, digital entrepreneurship has enormous potential. The proliferation of digital startups can be attributed to the variety of business models that have been developed and adapted for the Internet, as well as the ongoing advancements in information technology.

Technological progress and digital transition impersonate major transformative forces in the contemporary labor market. Remote work platforms' role in facilitating participation in the labor market and ensuring decent work has been recognized quite recently (ILO, 2018; ILO, 2021) and is still reaching its full potential. Remote work is advantageous since it provides almost equal opportunities for all people whether with or without disabilities to participate in the economy, especially in terms of employment inclusion. In the EU 50.8% of PwD are in employment, compared to 75% without disabilities (De Fuentes, & Juanes Calvo, 2022). According to Kadujevich et al. (2020), PwD in Serbia were less employed than PwoD, 54% compared to 93%. In Oman, concerning the working situation, 33% of the total number of PwD in the age group of 15 years and older are employed (NCSI, 2020). Demand for the production of data relevant to the disabled population has increased due to growing interest in and concern about this group of people, their rights, and the significance of integrating them into society. These facts represent the reason why remote work opportunities (remote platforms and digital entrepreneurship) represent an important area of research regarding the employment inclusion of PwD.



This study aims to attain some of the SDGs which are SDG1 (No Poverty), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure), and SDG 10 (Reduce Inequalities). These objectives can be partly met if PwD have access to infrastructure or platforms for competency development, allowing them to seize opportunities from the environment from a remote location using digital technology and engage in digital entrepreneurship despite their limitations. This study focuses on assessing the digital marketing skills and competencies of the PwD as a prerequisite for their inclusion in the remote work market. Digital marketing was selected due to the growing demand for professionals in this field, as the recorded growth of marketing occupations was 29% in the period between 2015 and 2020, with a projected growth of an additional 10% until 2025 (Digital Talent Forecast, 2021).

The main motive behind this study is that PwD are at higher risk of unemployment and consequently at higher risk of poverty. Their position in the labor market is vulnerable and there is a lack of awareness among PwD on employment opportunities existing on remote work platforms and other remote work arrangements (Lazic et al., 2022). Unfortunately, limited data is available for Oman, and there are challenges to obtaining the exact statistics about the types of training provided to PwDs in Oman. This study contributes to the digital inclusion of PwD in Oman and increases their chances of landing permanent employment, on the one hand, while promoting the benefits and potentials of remote work platforms and digital business for employment, on the other. Although limited data exist for Oman, the general impression is that PwDs need empowerment to take part in the virtual labor market. In line with these arguments, this study addresses the need for reskilling and/or up-skilling for PwD.

The main objective of the study will be to develop the mechanisms, based on scientific evidence, to assess the skills and competencies of PwD in the digital marketing area, which will help them to take part in the remote working opportunities existing on various virtual platforms for remote work. This paper represents a detailed plan of the stages the authors are intending to pass through to include the PwDs in the remote work and to reduce unemployment and poverty. To enable PwD to participate in the remote working chances offered on various virtual platforms for remote work, we will first evaluate skills and competences needed in the field of digital marketing. Next, we will evaluate PwD in Oman's general and digital marketing ability and competency levels. Once the gap between the digital marketing competencies and the competency level of PwD in Oman is identified, we aim to complete the last stage and to



recommend the design of an online digital marketing training program for PwDs to help them overcome the identified gap in their knowledge and the requirements of the virtual platforms.

The importance of this study is that it assesses the levels of general digital and digital marketing skills and competencies of the PwD for the first time in the academic literature in Oman. The findings of Adha et al., (2024) suggest the importance of framing the readiness of the actors in formulating strategies through digital platforms. Also, this study generates new knowledge regarding required general digital and digital marketing skills and competencies for remote work on virtual platforms. The literature regarding the specification of necessary skills and competencies to join the virtual labor market is obscure and there is no data on the existence of research focused on identifying the skills and competencies PwDs need to possess to enter the virtual labor market for digital marketing jobs. Furthermore, this study investigates the impact of demographic, socio-economic, and contextual factors on the performance of PwDs in digital marketing competence assessments. Finally, this study is ultimately aimed at empowering PwDs, promoting entrepreneurship skills in them, and enhancing employment opportunities for them.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

According to the World Bank (2022), with approximately 1 billion individuals, PwD represents the world's largest minority. Along with the social challenges, PwD faces workplace bias and discrimination (Davis & Chansiri, 2019). Moreover, PwDs are among those who are less likely to find work since they confront multiple challenges in their job search, ranging from issues using public transportation to appraising their working ability and disclosing their disability status (Zyskowski et al., 2015). In 2019, 28.4% of the total number of PwD in the EU was at risk of poverty or social exclusion, compared to 18.4% of PwD (Eurostat, 2021). According to the 2003 census, PwD in Oman reached 41,303 individuals, representing 2.3% of the total Omani Population (Al-Balushi et al., 2011). The distribution of the disabled by gender shows that disability spreads among males by a slightly higher percentage than among females. Disabled males, whose number reached 23,086 persons, accounted for 56% of the total disabled and 2.3% of the total Omani male population. Disabled females, on the other hand, reached 18,217, or around 2% of the total female Omani population.

The law of care and rehabilitation of persons with disabilities was passed and put into action in the Sultanate of Oman, in the year 2008. As per this law, the Sultanate has paid special



attention to addressing the needs of students with disabilities through a special education policy. Through this policy, the Sultanate tries to integrate young PwDs into mainstream schools thereby eliminating the effects of disability, equipping them with daily living skills, and building upon their confidence. They are being provided with the best outreach and educational programs to make them more productive, and interactive and run a concurrent modern life in a changing world (Alfawair & Al Tobbi, 2015).

Working from remote locations utilizing digital technologies is frequently viewed as a means for empowering, upskilling, and integrating PwDs into the labor market (Forbes, 2022; PWC, n.d.). This type of work has been gaining popularity across developed and developing countries (Margaryan et al., 2020), especially during COVID-19 (Savage & Jarrahi, 2020). Even though not all tasks or projects may be equally suited to crowdsourcing (Kittur et al., 2013), platform work has the potential to perform certain parts of practically every job (Eurofound, 2015). Additionally, UNICEF Oman and the Oman Technology Fund worked together to host the COVID-19 Youth Technology Challenge. Because of their close cooperation, a solid foundation for future cooperative efforts to advance technology and innovation has been established. By inviting ministries and significant business partners to join the panel of judges, UNICEF Oman also effectively brought together the public and commercial sectors for the event (UNICEF Oman, 2020).

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, PwDs were more likely to work from home compared to the general population (6.3% compared to 5.3%) (Economic Innovation Group, 2022), both as employees and self-employed workers (Schur et al., 2020). The share of PwDs in the remote labor market did not decrease even during the greatest job losses (Economic Innovation Group, 2022). Remote work allows PwDs to create a virtual identity that may or may not reflect their physical identity (Davis & Chansiri, 2019). As entrepreneurs, PwDs rely on their creativity and contribution, not on initiative and risk (Boellstorff, 2018).

Besides remote work platforms, digital entrepreneurship also represents a valid employment inclusion strategy for PwD (Simovic et al., 2024). The rising interest of the research community in PwD involvement in digital entrepreneurship (Boellstorff, 2018; Yu, 2019; Gan et al., 2022) brings Digital Entrepreneurial Competencies (DEC) as a prerequisite for digital entrepreneurship into focus. DEC represents a specific combination of general digital and entrepreneurial competencies (Simovic et al., 2022) and a relatively new area of interest in the academic community, imposed by the fast growth of digital entrepreneurship in the world, especially during and after the Covid-19 pandemic (Ahrens et. al, 2021).



Regarding the digital inclusion of PwD in the labor market, the problem of the digital divide as a consequence of inaccessibility, poor digital competencies, and a lack of inclusive education emerges (Simovic et al., 2024). The digital divide between PwD and PwoD is an enduring problem, reaching 30% for internet use (UN Report on Disability and Development, 2018). Cho and Kim (2021) identified gaps in Internet access, skill, motivation, and outcomes between PwD and PwoD, which call for government intervention by providing programs designed to promote Internet usage and enhance the digital skills and competencies of PwD. A recent study (Johansson et al., 2021) on the Swedish population with disabilities also revealed in-group heterogeneity among PwD.

The fact that PwD online economic inclusion is strongly affected by the digital divide indicates that Information and Communication Technology (ICT) training and retraining programs are required to assist PwD in learning how to utilize the internet to land employment and generate additional income (Kim & Hwang, 2018). Based on previous evidence of the lack of digital skills of PwD necessary for their digital inclusion, Mavrou et al. (2017) emphasized the critical role of Information Communication Technology - Assistive Technology (ICT-AT) development for independence, social integration, educational success, employment opportunities, and overall quality of life of PwD. By evaluating the impact of digital competencies training and retraining programs in Cambodia and India, Anderson (2022) identified the potential of digital technologies to boost employment opportunities for PwD. The importance of making the digital economy accessible to PwD was recognized in a report produced by the International Labour Organization's Global Business and Disability Network and Fundación ONCE from Spain (ILO & Fundacion ONCE, 2021). This report emphasizes the importance of PwD DEC development as a means of gaining direct access to employers and flexible work arrangements via remote work platforms.

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 METHOD

This study will employ a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative (questionnaire) and qualitative (real-life scenarios) data collection methods, to gain a comprehensive understanding of the digital and digital marketing skills and competencies of PwD in Oman. This approach allows for triangulation of findings and a deeper exploration of



factors influencing skill development and employment opportunities for PwD in the virtual platform context (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

3.2 DATA COLLECTION

Two tools will be used in data collection. First, a questionnaire will be developed based on the Digital Competence Framework, e-competence Framework, and Entrepreneurship Competence Framework, and will assess the general digital and digital marketing skills and competencies of PwD using the four estimation levels as proposed by Kuzminska et al. (2019) (foundation, intermediate, advanced, and highly specialized). It will utilize a four-point Likert scale and integrate real-life scenarios through practical assignments (Lopez-Meneses et al., 2020; Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2009). Validation of the instrument will be done through a pre-test with freelancers in remote positions requiring similar skills.

Questionnaires will reach PwD through government rehabilitation institutes under relevant ministries (National Economy, Health, Social Development), private rehabilitation institutes, and personal connections with social care centers, NGOs, and voluntary societies. Participation is voluntary and based on interest in skill development and virtual platform employment.

3.3 SAMPLING

Probability sampling will be used for ensuring a representative sample of freelancers working remotely on virtual platforms in Oman. Probability sampling will also be used for the selection of PwDs, with the target population identified through government data sources (e.g., Ministry of National Economy censuses, and vocational assessment centers under the Ministry of Social Development).

3.4 DATA ANALYSIS & INTERPRETATION

The study will use structural equation modelling to validate the measurement scales and to determine the exact number of factors influencing skill development (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). Linear probability and multiple response regression models will be used to identify



predictors of skill levels and potential gaps between self-assessment and performance (Chow, 1960).

Informed consent, data confidentiality, and accessibility for PwD participants are prioritized throughout the research process. The benefits of the current study can be seen in a short-term perspective and the long-term perspective are many. In the short term, the inclusion of PwDs improves their psychological state of mind and confidence: PwDs can apply knowledge, understanding, and practical abilities gained through competency development initiatives in the business work process. With freedom and autonomy, they can make judgments and decisions that will improve their psychological state of mind and confidence. Accordingly, this ensures access to equal opportunity, independence, and protection against discrimination. This study guides in the development of appropriate online training which improves the employment prospects of PwDs. Megha et al., (2023) highlights the importance of skills set development in improving the employability. This step leaps towards satisfying the Oman government's objective of employment inclusion of PwDs and helps to better integrate them into the labor market and society. This will also create a labor market with a skilled and more productive workforce. In addition, this study helps to improve the employability skills of PwDs through digital platforms and promotes digital entrepreneurship or digital startups. They will be able to exhibit the confidence and entrepreneurial skills required to generate their work and employment. This generates employment opportunities and hence will partially unburden the State administrative system to create jobs. Finally, the study allows the Sultanate to know about the trends of remote working and virtual platforms and the opportunities available for people with disabilities to work remotely in the country. This will allow the Sultanate to provide and allocate for this segment of the citizens appropriately.

In the long-term, referring to the Oman Vision 2040, one of the National Priorities of the Sultanate of Oman is to promote the role of citizens and society in advancing economic development. For this, the Sultanate gives importance to imparting high skills to individuals necessary to enter the labor market and raise their productivity thereby improving the efficiency of the whole economy. This study satisfies this objective by building up the competency levels of people with disabilities.



4 CONCLUSION

Oman Vision 2040 stresses the significance of investing in human capital and a commitment to empowering “women, children, youth, persons with disabilities and the most vulnerable groups.” This study attends to the interests of people with disabilities, especially youth, and provides a guarantee for their future. This study aims to capitalize on their skills and capabilities and empower them. This project will also satisfy one of the aims of Vision 2040 of the Oman government that Omanis employment share. Furthermore, well-being, social protection, and promotion of the welfare of people with disabilities. This study aims at the employment Inclusion of disabled persons and enhances their economic and social participation and their contribution to shaping the future of the National economy. This improves the well-being and strengthens the social protection and welfare of this special category of people. Finally, the study aims to give everyone in the world a chance to prosper through access to economic opportunities in the market, new technology, and new and emerging services, which ensures the mobilization of resources and helps in the reduction of poverty.

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