



Research on the transformation of employment concept and practical path of the disabled

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Abstract

Employment for persons with disabilities (PWDs) constitutes both a matter of personal survival and social equity, as well as an issue of mutual acceptance. While the position-focused employment philosophy centered on job opportunities and income has significantly boosted PWDs' employment rates, it has also revealed inherent limitations. First, mismatches between PWDs' capabilities and job requirements create market barriers to employment. Second, although placement policies have expanded employment numbers, gaps persist in both job supply and demand beyond these statistics, failing to meet the integration-oriented employment needs of PWDs. To address these challenges, this paper proposes a disability-inclusive employment framework, advocating for PWD employment as a vital institutional activity that facilitates equal social interaction and shared societal benefits. It synthesizes existing research and practical consensus, identifying notable progress in transforming employment concepts, implementing inclusive services, and adopting tiered support strategies. The study highlights beneficial explorations in bridging professional institutions and social enterprises, as well as leveraging technological tools to develop high-quality jobs and assistive technologies. However, shortcomings remain in performance evaluation systems, multi-channel service selection, and specialized technical applications. In light of these findings, the paper proposes a comprehensive solution and action framework for inclusive employment of PWDs. Under the new framework of diversified support systems, integrated policies and services, professional institutional initiatives, digital-era social opportunities, and the interdependent cycle of education, rehabilitation, and employment, we must dismantle institutional barriers to disability. This involves shifting from passive exclusion to proactive inclusion, transforming individuals into active participants. By exploring empowerment-based employment strategies tailored to individual capabilities, people with disabilities can gain respect through inclusive integration, thereby rebuilding dignity and better reintegrating into families and society. This approach redefines social inclusion by addressing the harsh realities of disability while establishing a people-centered integration paradigm that embodies both theoretical logic and practical feasibility.

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Introduction

Early studies on employment for people with disabilities were framed within a three-stage logic of "market, position, and income" –where meeting job requirements is the prerequisite, entering competitive markets constitutes the process, and earning wages represents the outcome. While this framework explains the mobility patterns and social stratification paths of most individuals, it reveals two critical issues when applied to people with disabilities.

The fundamental issue lies in the misalignment between institutional frameworks and individual capabilities. Standardized job roles, combined with an efficiency-driven environment, have created a vicious cycle for people with disabilities: positions designed for able-bodied individuals, resulting in passive skill gaps when compared to their needs, and subsequent elimination from the job market. This reveals that a linear career progression tied to occupational requirements proves unrealistic for most disabled individuals. When success is still measured by securing employment to sustain livelihoods, it inevitably leads to institutionalized adaptation rather than exclusion. This misguided approach misplaces aspirational goals onto flawed premises, creating contradictions when detached from the authentic skill spectrum and social realities of the community. Therefore, developing alternative pathways becomes imperative.

Secondly, the disconnect between policy instruments and service provision. The incremental value derived from traditional proportional allocation and centralized

resettlement mechanisms only provides superficial solutions. Without sustained service networks and personalized support programs, individuals cannot achieve retention, social integration, or sustainable development at the micro level. This often creates a governance paradox: "policy compliance → individual instability → ineffective social integration." The crux lies not merely in job availability but in whether pre-employment capacity-building, workplace adaptation support, and post-employment social connections can achieve seamless integration. How can employment positions themselves serve as entry points to address individual development, family adaptation, and holistic social integration? This challenges the tension between policy and service delivery, requiring a shift from parallelism to synergy. Addressing this tension, we propose moving beyond career-focused research and practice to prioritize integration-oriented approaches. Emphasizing integration does not negate career's significance; rather, it recognizes employment as both a job and a pathway to socialization - a form of equal opportunity and shared rights. While acknowledging its fundamental contributions to personal growth and social value creation, we also view employment as a mechanism for social participation. The traditional performance evaluation system, which primarily focused on a single economic metric (mainly compensation), has been expanded into a multidimensional framework. This new approach evaluates four key aspects: individual job fit, institutional fairness, labor relations stability, and adaptability to new

environments. These improvements require restructuring resource allocation, institutional support, and technological empowerment based on principles of equality, participation, and shared benefits.

Review of the literature

In recent years, scholars have recognized that purely position-and income-focused approaches to vocational programs fail to comprehensively address the needs of people with disabilities. They advocate for inclusive systems prioritizing social participation and equal access, viewing employment as a process of social integration. Zhou Pei (2025) ^[1] suggests expanding integration methods across sectors through social support networks. Beyond policy guarantees like quota-based employment and disability subsidies that safeguard basic employment rights (Gong Yan, 2024) ^[2], individuals with disabilities require community support, social organizations, and family services as essential catalysts for stable career development. Only through coordinated efforts between public and private sectors, combining rigidity with flexibility, can barrier-free integrated employment be achieved (Ma Dehao, 2020). To this end, a tiered support system is recommended: those with stronger capabilities should pursue vocational training and career advancement opportunities to realize work aspirations, while others with limited skills should be placed in labor-intensive, community-based, supportive, or sheltered positions to facilitate smoother integration without over-reliance on welfare. Additionally, professional disability assistance organizations and social enterprises can play irreplaceable roles by actively developing job opportunities, integrating resources, and providing sustained guidance, thereby promoting sustainable and higher-quality employment for people with disabilities.

In the current digital economy era, remote work, e-commerce operations, and platform-based employment opportunities have opened new avenues for people with disabilities. With advancements in artificial intelligence and accessibility technologies, entry barriers are gradually diminishing. However, scholars caution about emerging challenges such as the "digital divide" (Zhang Luyao, 2024) ^[4], emphasizing that true inclusion must be achieved through training programs, accessible equipment, and specially designed job positions. The synergy between education, rehabilitation, and employment has become a key focus in research. Establishing an integrated framework requires coordinated efforts across three dimensions: learning new skills, providing job placement support, and implementing practical solutions. Current studies generally acknowledge that inclusive employment for people with disabilities necessitates conceptual shifts from traditional placement models to comprehensive solutions addressing shared prosperity goals. This demands collaborative governance involving government leadership, multi-stakeholder participation, and coordinated efforts within social security systems and welfare policies. Specific approaches include differentiated auxiliary employment programs, technology-driven smart solutions, and data-driven strategies to enhance employability. Yet existing literature lacks sufficient discussion on performance metrics and customized support policies tailored to diverse disability types, severity levels, and employment needs. These areas warrant further exploration and innovation in both policy design and implementation.

The particularity of employment for persons with disabilities

In sociological terms, employment serves dual purposes: as a means of livelihood and as a social identity marker. It represents a practical mechanism and social process through which individuals navigate social networks and channels to establish relationships. While fundamentally enabling people with disabilities to transition from homes into society, employment dynamics reveal multiple vulnerabilities. These include physical limitations (both congenital and acquired), socioeconomic barriers, and broader institutional frameworks. Compared to able-bodied individuals, people with disabilities often find themselves in disadvantaged positions across these dimensions.

The most prominent and crucial characteristic lies in the disparities in capabilities and competencies shaped by different endowments. People naturally seek jobs that suit their aptitudes, working for compensation through employment, labor, entrepreneurship, or business ventures. However, for individuals with disabilities, the persistent challenges of knowledge gaps, technical deficiencies, and skill limitations across various dimensions—leading to asymmetric competition—are unavoidable at every level. This remains a long-standing issue for people with disabilities! The gaps in individual or group capabilities, as well as overall competencies, often stem from their physical conditions or structural limitations. This presents inherent challenges for them, particularly as modern society increasingly embraces service industries and high-tech sectors that prioritize intelligence. Such demands inherently require professionals to possess strong learning abilities and adaptability. For people with disabilities, these are clearly inherent disadvantages.

Second, the mismatch between job structures and disability types. Most workplace positions in the market are designed according to able-bodied standards, emphasizing efficiency, rapid transitions, and multifunctional adaptability. This inadvertently excludes some workers with disabilities. Due to physical limitations such as reduced strength, slower reaction times, and difficulty sustaining work commitments, people with disabilities face a significant gap in job adaptability. Such structural misalignment narrows their career options and leaves them trapped in uncertain employment situations.

Third, the implicit exclusion in social environments and inadequate institutional support. Although China has enacted numerous laws and policies regarding employment for people with disabilities, explicitly safeguarding their right to fair employment opportunities, deep-seated misconceptions and discrimination persist in public consciousness. Employers' biases, colleagues' stereotypes, employers' ceremonial tolerance, or token workplace accommodations create persistent invisible pressures for many individuals with disabilities during job searches and employment. The absence of accessible facility designs and inadequate public service infrastructure objectively impose hidden barriers and discriminatory perceptions on this community, collectively hindering the sustainable development of employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

Fourth, the devaluation of employment income and the degrading social status. People with disabilities are predominantly employed in low-skilled, low-paying

positions. Despite their hard work, they often receive inadequate economic compensation that fails to match their contributions. This income disparity prevents them from achieving financial independence and hinders their ability to gain social recognition through labor. The unequal employment outcomes trap individuals with disabilities in a vicious cycle: forced into passive employment, trapped in low-income jobs, and ultimately labeled as "inferior individuals."

Fifth, the pressing nature of the macro employment situation. The current overall employment situation in China is directly affected by the transformation of new and old growth drivers, industrial restructuring, and the continuously expanding labor force. With the annual increase in college graduates and the continuous expansion of flexible employment positions and non-standard employment types through diverse forms in the job market competition, the employment competitiveness of people with disabilities, who are already at a disadvantage, has been further weakened. Even for policy-based or public welfare positions, the proportion of people with disabilities remains negligible, failing to expand and form a scale competitive advantage.

This demonstrates that the unique challenges faced by people with disabilities in employment stem not merely from physical limitations, but from a combination of individual disadvantages and systemic social exclusion. The obstacles they encounter are fivefold: inadequate skills, mismatched job roles, environmental discrimination, low pay, and macro-level pressures. These compounded challenges not only highlight the vulnerability of people with disabilities in the workforce, but also form the practical foundation for implementing inclusive employment strategies. Only by recognizing these distinctive characteristics and dual pressures can we identify key areas for breakthroughs in employment initiatives.

Ideological expansion

Employment serves as both a value proposition for workers and an institutional stance toward marginalized groups. For people with disabilities, it forms the foundation for self-understanding and equality. The distinction between career-oriented and integration-oriented approaches reflects different priorities: whether emphasizing market mechanisms or social frameworks. This divergence mirrors the evolving circumstances society imposes on individuals with disabilities and mirrors the broader transformation of social governance. Let us first examine the logic and limitations inherent in career-oriented approaches.

First, the employment-oriented approach prioritizes livelihood. This framework emphasizes securing jobs and earning wages to sustain basic needs, aligning with modern division of labor principles and the survival logic of most workers. However, when employment becomes solely about survival, the plight of people with disabilities becomes glaringly evident. This approach has three limitations: First, it's overly instrumentalized, focusing solely on obtaining livelihood resources while neglecting broader aspirations of individuals with disabilities. Second, it exhibits narrow competitiveness, evaluating candidates based on functional capabilities (i.e., skills) and prioritizing efficiency and production tasks, thereby overlooking employment demands for people with disabilities who cannot be compared to able-bodied individuals. Third, it creates exclusionary outcomes

by failing to meet "standardized" job requirements in the labor market, trapping them in a vicious cycle of "underparticipation–low earnings–loss of identity." As the saying goes, "Disability itself is an obstacle."

Second, the concept of "integration as the foundation" has emerged. This approach does not negate the significance of professions but emphasizes multiple dimensions of employment, integrating disability employment into broader social inclusion. Firstly, transitioning from subsistence to participation: Employment is no longer solely about supporting families or acquiring job skills, but rather focuses on enhancing personal and community connections and expanding civic engagement. Secondly, evolving from competition to inclusion: Recognizing the unique characteristics of people with disabilities in employment, we advocate institutional and environmental adjustments such as barrier-free facilities, auxiliary positions, and improved social support systems to reduce unequal competition pressures. Thirdly, shifting from individual efforts to collective participation: The goal extends beyond helping individuals find jobs, but rather enabling them to integrate into communities. Through employment, people with disabilities can actively contribute to economic development and access social benefits. Simultaneously, society becomes more diverse and respectful, fostering a robust social governance system.

Fourth, the sociological significance of concept transformation.

This paradigm shift from a profession-centric to an integration-centered approach signifies the completion of three crucial transformations in social governance logic. First, a value transformation: transitioning from preconceived, singular, and intense economic rationality to dual economic and social value rationality, with greater respect for employment's social value. Second, institutional evolution: moving from rigid policy-based placements to flexible, progressive service-oriented support that better addresses the diverse developmental needs of people with disabilities. Third, societal recognition: evolving from unilateral sympathy and relief-oriented employment to inclusive social sharing positions based on equality principles, thereby fostering public awareness of disability resilience and equal respect while helping eliminate discrimination and marginalization caused by social identity. Fourth, contemporary conceptual expansion: to truly implement the integration-centered perspective, four fundamental reforms are required: First, conceptual innovation through public discourse and education to make the general public aware of the universal significance of disability participation rights, specifically the equal right to work. Second, environmental development: actively creating accessible facilities and inclusive job opportunities that enable people with disabilities to engage in work with possibilities and opportunities. Third, value prioritization: shifting focus from monetary evaluation of employment outcomes to recognizing the depth of participation and social impact achieved by individuals with disabilities, including their societal engagement, personal well-being, and sense of self-fulfillment and pride. Fourth, strengthen public responsibility. That is, change the old thinking and practice that only the disabled persons' federation or government agencies are responsible for the disabled, and emphasize that the whole society should take responsibility for helping the disabled.

It is crucial to recognize that "career-oriented" is not an alternative interpretation of "integration-oriented." The transition from career-focused approaches to integration-oriented strategies represents an evolutionary progression from survival-oriented logic to comprehensive social integration. While career-oriented approaches embody the economic agent role of individuals, integration-oriented approaches emphasize the social identity of human beings as social beings. This conceptual expansion serves not only to alleviate employment challenges for people with disabilities but also to propel society toward a more inclusive development path that transcends singular economic priorities. Such transformative focus and solutions must be realized through disability advocacy initiatives and social transformation processes.

Practical paths

The integration-oriented employment philosophy provides people with disabilities with a value-driven ethical framework that enables social participation through labor and equitable development opportunities. However, such concepts cannot take root without institutional support, professional services, and effective social interventions. Following sociology's tripartite logic of "institution-action-culture," promoting inclusive employment for persons with disabilities requires coordinated efforts across five key dimensions: institutional frameworks, professional training programs, community support networks, social advocacy initiatives, and policy advocacy campaigns.

First, differentiation and flexibility. A one-size-fits-all approach cannot accommodate individual differences within the disability community. Support structures should be tailored according to factors such as disability type, severity, and potential. For example, young people with disabilities who have higher education levels could emphasize vocational training and career advancement pathways. Those with severe disabilities should be provided with more community-based supported employment and sheltered work opportunities. While these individuals may lack sufficient skills and physical stamina to compete in the job market, they can still gain limited participation opportunities and social support within defined boundaries. Stratified yet effective support not only avoids excessive consumption of policy resources but also enhances the alignment between employment opportunities and social integration, preventing resource waste.

Second, policy and service efforts should work in tandem. Inclusive employment cannot rely solely on policy-based placement and relief measures; it requires a dual approach. First, in terms of policy, we must maintain existing systems like proportional employment quotas and security funds, while developing soft solutions such as community employment guidance, psychological support services, family connections, neighborhood assistance, volunteer involvement, or organized social services. Only by coordinating these two aspects can we truly realize the rights of people with disabilities. Second, in fostering relationships between individuals, the roles of communities and organizations cannot be underestimated—they can directly provide life-oriented work and bridge the gap between individuals. Third, developing niche positions. Can existing cultural product development and service industries open up new markets for people with disabilities? For instance, crafts, traditional culture, landscaping, cleaning

services, green conservation sectors, museums, and archives could all become emerging employment fields. Identifying and creating specialized positions tailored to the characteristics of people with disabilities in these areas is a crucial consideration.

Third, professional institutions and social enterprises can serve as crucial intermediaries. Specialized disability support organizations, non-profit entities, and socially enterprise-style companies play vital roles in bridging these groups. Firstly, they leverage their resources to facilitate job opportunities for people with disabilities while developing innovative products tailored for them. Secondly, these organizations discover their own value through engaging with individuals with disabilities. Thirdly, disability-focused initiatives can become integral components of their service portfolios. Notably, social enterprises demonstrate dual functionality (social mission and profit generation) in both the disability community and broader market, functioning as a dynamic catalyst for advancing employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

Fourth, expanding digital and remote employment opportunities. First, focus on developmental policies that integrate employment with education, rehabilitation, and social participation. With the advent of the digital society, remote work, internet entrepreneurship, e-commerce, and data annotation are no longer limited by physical conditions or geographical location. People with disabilities can enter the labor market at lower costs and lower barriers through artificial intelligence and assistive technologies (voice recognition, accessibility software). However, we must prevent new "digital divides" by enhancing digital skills training for people with disabilities or encouraging enterprises and development organizations to create accessible technical positions, ensuring they truly benefit from digital advancements. In short, promoting inclusive employment requires a holistic approach rather than isolated solutions. This should be combined with disability education, rehabilitation, and participation in community culture and public life. For example, integrating vocational enlightenment or skill development into special education prepares children for potential future careers; providing vocational assessments and training during rehabilitation helps demonstrate employment potential; increasing participation in community activities, public cultural events, and social interactions allows people with disabilities to engage more comprehensively through the "employment-rehabilitation-community engagement" cycle.

In essence, disability employment rooted in integration is not merely about assigning individuals with disabilities to work placements, but rather a social project requiring collaborative efforts from multiple stakeholders across societal levels. This approach demands robust policy safeguards from the state, community and institutional support, innovative empowerment through market mechanisms and digital technologies, as well as transformative shifts in cultural perceptions. Only through such multifaceted synergy can we achieve a paradigm shift from passive to proactive employment models that ensure accessible job opportunities and effective participation for people with disabilities. This transformation will pave the way toward a virtuous cycle that promotes both social equity and sustainable development.

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