

Leading With Inclusion: How Inclusive Leadership and Deaf Space Shape Work Inclusivity Experiences for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Employees in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Inclusion is a critical component of modern, human-centered workplaces, especially for individuals who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DHH). True inclusivity extends beyond policy—it requires intentional leadership and spatial design strategies that empower DHH employees to participate fully and authentically. This study addresses a significant research gap by examining how inclusive leadership and Deaf Space design influence perceived workplace inclusivity among DHH employees in Malaysia. Inclusive leadership involves behaviours that promote openness, psychological safety, and equitable treatment, while Deaf Space incorporates architectural elements—such as sight lines, lighting, spatial flow, and vibration-based alerts—that support visual communication and sensory awareness. These strategies address the unique cultural and communicative needs of DHH individuals, often overlooked in generalized disability inclusion frameworks. Using a quantitative research design, data were collected via an accessible, self-administered questionnaire from 200 purposively sampled DHH employees across Malaysian public and private sectors. Constructs of inclusive leadership, Deaf Space, and workplace inclusivity were measured using validated 5-point Likert scale items. Descriptive and inferential statistical analyses—including Pearson’s correlation and multiple regression—were employed to assess relationships among variables. Findings revealed high levels of perceived inclusivity, with both inclusive leadership and Deaf Space features significantly and positively correlated with workplace inclusivity. Regression analysis identified inclusive leadership as a slightly stronger predictor. These results underscore that DHH inclusion is multidimensional, requiring both inclusive leadership) and physical design efforts. Organizations embracing these strategies are better positioned to create environments where DHH employees thrive.

Keywords: Inclusive leadership, Deaf space, Deaf and hard of hearing, Workplace inclusivity, Organizational ergonomics

INTRODUCTION

Workplace diversity has expanded considerably over recent decades; however, evidence increasingly shows that diversity alone is insufficient to address persistent structural inequalities, implicit bias, and cultures of exclusion

Received February 7, 2026; Revised March 27, 2026; Accepted April 12, 2026; Available online July 20, 2026

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within organizations, particularly for employees with disabilities (Forman et al., 2023; Farias & Bauer, 2025). Among this heterogeneous group, Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DHH) employees remain disproportionately disadvantaged due to communication barriers, limited access to inclusive practices, and inadequate organizational accommodations. Recent global and regional evidence highlights that DHH employees experience restricted job opportunities, occupational segregation, and reduced participation in roles requiring high levels of interaction (Dong et al., 2023; Sommer Lindsay et al., 2023). In Malaysia, despite growing policy attention to disability inclusion, empirical studies focusing specifically on DHH employees' workplace experiences remain scarce, signaling a critical research problem concerning how organizational environments can meaningfully support inclusion beyond formal diversity initiatives.

Recent scholarship indicates that DHH employees continue to face systemic discrimination, lower wages, reduced career mobility, and limited access to informal workplace networks, largely due to ineffective communication systems and low managerial awareness of appropriate accommodations (Dong et al., 2023; Leach, 2025). While studies on workplace inclusion and leadership have expanded, most adopt a generalized disability perspective and rarely address DHH-specific needs, such as spatial design, visual accessibility, and culturally responsive communication practices known as deaf space (Wahat et al., 2023; Bányai & Perlusz, 2024). Moreover, although inclusive leadership has been shown to enhance employee belonging and participation, empirical research clarifying how inclusive leadership behaviors influence workplace inclusivity for DHH employees remains limited (Passos & Monteiro, 2025). These gaps give rise to key research questions examining the levels, relationships, and influence of inclusive leadership and deaf space on workplace inclusivity among DHH employees in Malaysia.

Addressing both theoretical and practical gaps, this study aims to investigate organizational factors that foster workplace inclusivity for DHH employees, with a particular focus on inclusive leadership and deaf space as critical enablers of equitable participation. Guided by contemporary inclusion frameworks and person–environment fit theory, the study seeks to (1) determine the levels of inclusive leadership and deaf space experienced by DHH employees, (2) examine the relationships between these organizational factors and workplace inclusivity, and (3) assess their predictive influence on inclusive workplace outcomes. By centering the lived experiences of DHH employees in Malaysia, this research contributes to the growing body of inclusion literature by offering context-specific empirical evidence and advancing understanding of how leadership and spatial accommodations jointly shape inclusive organizational climates (Widadsyah, 2024; Aguinaldo, 2023).

INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP, DEAF SPACE AND WORKPLACE INCLUSIVITY

Inclusive Leadership and Work Experiences of Deaf and Hard of Hearing Employees

Recent literature increasingly highlights the role of inclusive leadership in shaping equitable and empowering work environments for marginalized populations, including Deaf employees. Inclusive leadership involves intentional efforts to ensure that all individuals feel respected, valued, and integrated, regardless of differences such as disability (Chui, 2020). In their work -on- work integration social enterprises, Chui emphasized the need for leaders to adapt their strategies to account for the communication and cultural needs of Deaf employees, which significantly improves their sense of belonging and productivity. Similarly, Hill et al. (2022) demonstrated how embedding Deaf culture and American Sign Language (ASL) into a medical residency program not only improved access but also fostered stronger team collaboration and inclusion, highlighting the systemic changes necessary to empower Deaf professionals in high-stakes settings.

Moreover, qualitative studies show that leadership attitudes and structural accommodations play critical roles in either enabling or hindering Deaf people's workplace experiences. Svinndal et al. (2020) conducted interviews with managers employing individuals with hearing impairments and found that while many organizations signed inclusive charters, day-to-day practices varied based on leadership engagement. Managers who proactively fostered communication accessibility—via interpreters, visual tools, and Deaf-awareness training—significantly improved job satisfaction and retention rates among Deaf employees. Roy et al. (2021) also emphasized the importance of leadership learning from Deaf and Deafblind individuals themselves to co-create inclusive policies rooted in lived experiences. These findings suggest that inclusive leadership must go beyond symbolic gestures to encompass continuous engagement and adaptive strategies.

Furthermore, inclusion goes beyond technical accommodations—it also involves cultural and social integration within workplace communities. Adjei et al. (2023), in their study grounded in Ubuntu philosophy in Ghana, explored how community-centered leadership approaches can reshape work environments to better suit Deaf employees by emphasizing interconnectedness, dignity, and mutual respect. This perspective complements Western models by stressing relational ethics in leadership. Likewise, Barnes (2017) found that Deaf graduates often encounter environments that prioritize tokenistic inclusion rather than genuine participation, and leadership plays a pivotal role in transforming this dynamic. Overall, literature from diverse contexts converges on a clear insight: inclusive leadership is not a fixed trait but a set of evolving, responsive practices that are central to improving Deaf individuals' workplace engagement, autonomy, and career progression.

Deaf Space and Workplace Inclusivity

Recent literature conceptualizes deaf space as an inclusive design philosophy that prioritizes visual accessibility, spatial awareness, and sensory comfort to support effective communication and participation of deaf and hard of hearing individuals (Wahat et al., 2023; Sommer Lindsay et al., 2023). Deaf space is grounded in five interrelated principles—sensory reach, space and closeness, mobility and proximity, light and colour, and acoustics—which collectively respond to the visual–tactile orientation of DHH individuals and the visual nature of sign language communication (Bányai & Perlusz, 2024). Contemporary studies emphasize that deaf space is not merely an architectural concern but a socio-spatial construct that integrates environmental design with cultural and communicative practices, enabling DHH employees to navigate, interact, and collaborate effectively within organizational settings (Farias & Bauer, 2025).

Empirical research highlights that deaf space design enhances communication accessibility by aligning physical environments with the sensory and spatial requirements of sign language users and hard of hearing individuals. Sensory reach ensures that DHH employees maintain visual awareness of people and activities through open sightlines, transparent partitions, and tactile cues, which support orientation and situational awareness (Wahat et al., 2023). Similarly, space and proximity principles recognize the need for larger conversational zones to accommodate signed communication, influencing furniture layout, seating flexibility, and room configuration (Bányai & Perlusz, 2024). Mobility and proximity further extend this concept by enabling signers to walk and communicate simultaneously through wider corridors and unobstructed pathways, thereby reducing physical and communicative constraints in everyday workplace interactions (Sommer Lindsay et al., 2023).

Recent studies increasingly demonstrate a positive relationship between deaf space and workplace inclusivity, particularly in terms of participation, psychological safety, and equitable access to job opportunities for DHH employees. Appropriate lighting, contrasting colours, and glare reduction are shown to reduce visual fatigue and enhance sustained attention during meetings and collaborative tasks, while acoustically considerate environments minimize auditory discomfort for employees using hearing aids or cochlear implants (Dong et al., 2023; Farias & Bauer, 2025). From an organizational perspective, deaf space signals institutional commitment to inclusion, reducing experiences of marginalization and discrimination by enabling DHH employees to engage on equal terms with hearing colleagues (Widadsyah, 2024). Consequently, recent literature positions deaf space as a critical organizational factor that directly supports workplace inclusivity by bridging the gap between environmental accessibility and inclusive employment practices for deaf and hard of hearing employees (Wahat et al., 2023; Sommer Lindsay et al., 2023).

HSI experts contribute by ensuring that human capabilities and limitations are considered. It has become clear that treating the system as separate from the users results in poor performance and potential failure in the operational setting. Continued growth in technology has not delivered desired results. Systems engineers and others are beginning to understand the role humans play in technology systems. The core challenge is to balance successful hardware and software solutions with human friendly implementations. To

define the requirements of humans as a fundamental system component, it is essential to understand the inherent capacity of user populations and their typical operational environment (Booher, 2003). A description of a population's capacity incorporates more than the basic anthropometrics or the cognitive capability of the average member of the user population (Chapanis, 1996).

THE STUDY ON INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP, DEAF SPACE AND WORKPLACE INCLUSIVITY EXPERIENCES OF DEAF AND HARD OF HEARING EMPLOYEES

The study was conducted based on descriptive, correlational research design, which is appropriate to profile the respondents as well as identify each level and relationships of the variables to understand workplace inclusivity experiences of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DHH) employees in Malaysia. The targeted population in this study were deaf and hard of hearing employees who worked in any sector in Malaysia. Hence the sample of this study reflected the same criterion. Sample random sampling which is probability sampling was applied. Each member of the population had an equal chance to be selected as the participants of this study. Initially in collaboration with the Malaysian Federation of the Deaf, the researcher identified the list of employers which hired DHH employees. The employers were then randomly selected. In the next stage, data were collected from their DHH employees.

The G*Power application was used to calculate the sample size in. A statistical power analysis was performed for sample size estimation, based on data from pilot study X (N = 30). The effect size (ES) in this study was 0.5, which is considered as medium using Cohen's (1988) criteria. With an alpha = .05 and power = 0.95, the projected sample size needed was approximately 176 (N). The data were collected Using a bilingual (Malay and English Languages), structured questionnaire. The questionnaire comprehended demographic profile of the respondents (age, gender, congenital, deaf age, deaf level, higher education, primary/secondary school, communication mode, hearing aids, occupation, job status and business nature). It also measured inclusive leadership that influence workplace inclusivity. The scale consisted fifteen items, featured with five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree). The sample items were as follows: (1) My boss understands my needs as a deaf or hard of hearing employee, (2) My boss provides allocation for sign language interpreter each time I attend training, and (3) My boss facilitates my communication challenges.

The questionnaire also measured the deaf space provided in influencing the workplace inclusivity for deaf and hard of hearing employee. According to Payne (2021), "Deaf space was defined by academics at Gallaudet University in Washington, DC as an approach to architecture and design that is largely inspired by the distinctive ways in which deaf people experience and inhabit space (Vox, 2016). The 8-items were taken from Wahat. N. W. A., et al. and featured with five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree). The sample items were as follows: (1)

There is flashing light to replace emergency fire drill alarm at my workplace, (2) There is proper lighting at my work place that helps my deaf eyes to concentrate in visual communication, and (3) The colour of light at my work place contract my skin tone and facilitate my visual communication. Workplace inclusivity as the dependent variable of this study was measured using 61-item scale (Wahat. N. W. A., et al (n.d). The responses were in the form of a five-point scale with mean score range 1 to 5.

A pilot study was conducted on twenty-eight DHH employees to test the reliability of the measurements. The pilot study later was conducted through an online questionnaire using the Google Form application platform and the respondents are required to answer. After the pilot study data was collected, the data reliability were tested using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The study used Cronbach's alpha to test the internal consistency reliability of the instrument. The measure of scale reliability is considered where it can be correlation efficient in the range in between 0 to 1 as the higher the coefficient, the better the reliability. According to Hair et al. (2003), the reliability is not acceptable if the alpha value is less than 0.6 and will be acceptance if it is more than 0.6. As stated in Table 3.3 which are the rule of thumb on Cronbach alpha value, the Table 3.4 have shown all variables of Cronbach's Value in this study which are consists of item of questionnaire are acceptable and can be used for future analysis.

Data analysis was conducted by using IBM SPSS software. Exploratory Data Analysis (EDA) including normality test (skewness and kurtosis) were first conducted before proceeding with further descriptive (mean, frequencies, percentage, and standard deviations) and inferential statistical analyses (Pearson Product Moment Correlation and Multiple Linear Regression). It allowed the researchers to screen and understand the data better. Data were initially collected from 210 respondents. EDA identified that 10 respondents did not meet the inclusion criteria. Further analyses were conducted with 200 data sets. All value of the data were standardized to z-score. Meanwhile, skewness and kurtosis values for all variables were in between -2 to +2 (skewness) and -7 to +7 (kurtosis). Therefore, the data distribution was proven to be normal.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic Profile of the Respondents

The respondents were mostly male (51%). Out of 200 respondents, 102 respondents were males, and 98 respondents were female. The highest age group of the DHH employees were those at the age of 31 to 40 years old (34.5%). The second highest were those at the age of 41 to 50 years old (25.5%), followed by those in between 21 to 30 years old (22.5%). Only 13.5% were those at the age of 51 to 60, and only one employee was at the age of 61 to 70 years old. In terms of congenital (born with deafness), 134 (67%) responded 'yes' and the rest (65) responded 'no'.

Results also showed that 26% of the respondents were with moderate hearing loss, 23% had profound hearing loss, 16% were with severe hearing loss and 12% of them had mild hearing loss. Unfortunately, 23%

(46 out of 200 respondents) were unsure of their deafness level. Majority of the respondents did not use any hearing aids (52%), followed by 42% respondents using hearing aid. In terms of cochlear implant, 2.5% of the respondents had right cochlear implant, meanwhile 2% of them had the left cochlear implant. Only 0.5% of respondents had both ears cochlear implant. Also, 1% of respondents were using FM system.

In terms of communication mode, half of the respondents used sign language to communicate. The second higher level were those who used both sign language and written language (35.5%), followed by the ones using only verbal language (1%) and KIU speech (1%). A total 4% of them were using a combination of sign language and written language, 1.5% combined verbal language with sign language, 1.5% combined verbal language, sign language, written language and KIU language, 0.5% combined written language and verbal language, and 1% used sign language and KIU speech to communicate. There were 2% of respondents who were using all 4 languages to communicate. Most of the respondents were having permanent job (71.5%). Meanwhile 16.5% of them were contract employees and 10% of them were temporary workers.

The demographic profile revealed a balanced gender representation and a workforce largely concentrated in the 31–50 age range, with a majority having congenital hearing loss. Most respondents experienced moderate to profound levels of hearing loss, and communication preferences were diverse, though sign language was the dominant mode.

The first objective of this study was to determine the level of inclusive leadership, deaf space and workplace inclusivity experienced by the deaf and hard of hearing (DHH) employee in Malaysia. Result showed high level of workplace inclusivity had been experienced by Deaf and Hard of Hearing employees in Malaysia ($M = 3.787$, $SD = 0.636$). Result of frequency analysis reported that 122 respondents (61%) experienced high level of workplace inclusivity, followed by moderate level of workplace inclusivity (37.5%). Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that Deaf and Hard of Hearing employees in Malaysia have good experiences of workplace inclusivity.

Similarly, this study also discovered high level of inclusive leadership experienced by 131 respondents (65.5%), with a mean score of 3.89 and a standard deviation of 0.77. It is followed by moderate level of inclusive leadership. A total of 61 respondents (30.5%) experienced moderate inclusive leadership and 7 (3.5%) of them experienced low level of inclusive leadership. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DHH) employees in Malaysia have experienced encouraging, inclusive leadership during their employment. Hp

Again, this study has discovered that the deaf space level among deaf and hard of hearing (DHH) employees in Malaysia was also high ($M = \text{mean } 3.84$, $SD = 0.80$). Analysis showed highest frequency representing 128 respondents (64%). Then it is followed by 65 respondents (32.5%) experiencing moderate level of deaf space and only 7 respondents experiencing low level of deaf space. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DHH) employees in Malaysia had good deaf space experiences at their work places.

Results from the Pearson Product Moment Correlation with the purpose to identify the relationships of inclusive leadership, deaf space and workplace inclusivity among Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DHH) employees in Malaysia, reported positive, significant relationship between inclusive leadership and workplace inclusivity ($r = 0.894$, $p < 0.01$). There was also a significant and positive relationship between deaf space and workplace inclusivity among Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DHH) employees in Malaysia ($r = 0.775$, $p < 0.01$.) Meanwhile, Multiple Linear Regression was conducted to determine whether or not both inclusive leadership (X1) and deaf space (X2) predict workplace inclusivity among Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DHH) employees in Malaysia. The equation of Multiple Linear Regression:

$$Y = b_0 + b_1X_1 + b_2X_2 + b_3X_3$$

Where Y = Expected Value of Dependent Variable

X1, X2, X3 = Predictor Variables

b0 = Value of Y when all of X1 and X2 are equal of 0

b1, b2, b3 = Estimated Regression Coefficient

According to the regression analysis results, $F = 465.141$, $\text{Sig-F} = .000$, Multiple Correlation Coefficient $R = .775$, and Coefficients of determination $R^2 = .825$. $Y = (-2.635) + .605X_1 + .208X_2$ is the prediction equation derived from the multiple linear regression results. According to the equation, one unit increase in IL increases workplace inclusivity by .605 units, one unit increase in DS increases workplace inclusivity by .208 units.

The standardised coefficients showed that inclusive leadership explained 3.8% of the variance in workplace inclusivity and deaf space explained 3.8% of the variance in workplace inclusivity. The percentage of overall model summary indicated that inclusive leadership and deaf space explained 82.5% of workplace inclusivity, and the remaining percentage (17.5%) was to be explained by others variables not conducted in this study.

The statistical analyses affirmed strong, positive relationships between inclusive leadership, deaf space, and workplace inclusivity. Both inclusive leadership and deaf space significantly contributed to the perception of inclusivity at work, with inclusive leadership having a slightly stronger predictive impact. The regression model demonstrated that these two factors together accounted for 82.5% of the variance in workplace inclusivity, indicating their central role in shaping inclusive work experiences for DHH employees. The positive correlation between these variables emphasizes the need for organizations to adopt leadership practices and spatial considerations that centre DHH perspectives.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study offered compelling evidence that Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DHH) employees in Malaysia experience a generally inclusive and supportive work environment. Employment stability was also notable, with a majority holding permanent jobs. This foundational context underscores

the importance of understanding how inclusive practices—such as leadership styles and environmental adaptations—shape the professional experiences of DHH individuals.

These findings also have significant implications for organizational ergonomics, which emphasizes designing work environments that align with employees' physical, cognitive, and communicative needs. The high levels of workplace inclusivity and deaf space reported by DHH employees suggest that ergonomic principles—such as optimizing communication modes, spatial layout, and job design—are being successfully applied or intuitively practiced in many Malaysian workplaces. For instance, the use of sign language, visual communication tools, and accessible workspace designs supports both functional efficiency and psychological comfort for DHH employees. Inclusive leadership further enhances organizational ergonomics by fostering a culture that proactively adapts systems and workflows to individual capabilities. This alignment between ergonomic design and leadership behavior not only improves inclusivity but also boosts overall engagement, and well-being among DHH employees, emphasizing the importance of integrating inclusive principles into ergonomic planning and policy-making.

Future research could explore additional factors—such as organizational culture, accessibility technologies, or peer relationships—that might explain the remaining 17.5% variance, thereby deepening our understanding of inclusive workplaces for the DHH community.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors would like to acknowledge the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia for funding this research project, as well as the Malaysian Federation of the Deaf (MFD) as the strategic partner of this project.

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