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Challenges and solutions for blind individuals in acquiring employment opportunities
in Cambodia

ឡាយ សេងថៃ*, និង ម៉ាន សុធី

Sengthai Lay*, and Sothy Mean

មជ្ឈមណ្ឌលស្រាវជ្រាវ នៃសាកលវិទ្យាល័យ សៅស៊ីអ៊ីស៊ីអេសសៀ
ព្រះរាជាណាចក្រកម្ពុជា
Research Center, University of South-East Asia,
Kingdom of Cambodia

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មូលដ្ឋានសង្ខេប

ការសិក្សានេះមានបំណងស្វែងយល់ពីឧបសគ្គដែលបុគ្គលពិការភ្នែកជួបប្រទះក្នុងការទទួលបានឱកាសការងារក្នុងប្រទេសកម្ពុជា។ ដើម្បីយល់ដឹងពីបញ្ហាប្រឈមទាំងនេះ ការសិក្សានេះប្រើប្រាស់ការស្រាវជ្រាវបែបបាតុភូត ដែលការប្រមូលទិន្នន័យរបស់ការសិក្សានេះទទួលបានពីបុគ្គលពិការភ្នែកចំនួន 23 នាក់ ដែលកំពុងមានការងារធ្វើ ធ្លាប់ធ្វើការ កំពុងស្វែងរកការងារ ជានិស្សិត និងម្ចាស់អាជីវកម្ម មកពីតំបន់និងខេត្តផ្សេងៗគ្នាក្នុងប្រទេស។ យោងតាមការស្រាវជ្រាវ ជនពិការភ្នែកប្រឈមមុខនឹងការលំបាកជាច្រើន រួមមានការសន្មតជាមុន ការរើសអើង និងការមើលស្រាលពីនិយោជក ការបញ្ឈប់ខ្លួននៅកន្លែងធ្វើការ អាកប្បកិរិយាមិនអំណោយផលពីមនុស្សជុំវិញនៅក្នុងសង្គម និងបញ្ហាប្រឈមមួយចំនួនទៀត។ លើសពីនេះ ការសិក្សានេះសង្កត់ធ្ងន់ទៅលើរបៀបដែលមនុស្សពិការភ្នែកមិនសូវទទួលបានការគាំទ្រ ការលើកទឹកចិត្តតិចតួច និងការអប់រំមិនបើកទូលាយ កង្វះការបណ្តុះបណ្តាល និងគុណវុឌ្ឍិ ដែលនាំឱ្យជម្រើសការងារនៅមានកម្រិត។ ការសិក្សាបានបញ្ចប់ជាមួយនឹងអនុសាសន៍មួយចំនួនដែលលើកឡើងថាត្រូវតែមានគោលនយោបាយពិតប្រាកដ ការអនុវត្តច្បាប់ និងប្រព័ន្ធគ្រួតពិនិត្យដែលត្រូវធ្វើការតាមដានទៅលើគ្រឹះស្ថានឧត្តមសិក្សា និងកន្លែងធ្វើការដើម្បីរួមបញ្ចូលជនពិការភ្នែកយ៉ាងពេញលេញក្នុងវិស័យអប់រំ បណ្តុះបណ្តាល និងកម្លាំងពលកម្ម។

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* អ៊ីម៉ែលអ្នកនិពន្ធទទួលបានបន្តកន្លឹកស្រាវជ្រាវ: Laysengthai@gmail.com

Abstract

This study explores barriers experienced by blind individuals in accessing employment opportunities in Cambodia. To investigate all challenges in this phenomenological study, data collection was obtained from 23 blind individuals who are employed, have been employed, and in the process of seeking employment, students, and entrepreneurs across the country. According to the findings, blind persons faced a lot of difficulties, including preconception, discrimination and marginalization from employers, limited adjustment at workplace, unfavorable and societal attitudes towards them and some other challenges. Additionally, the study emphasizes how blind persons were less supported, less motivated, and encountered exclusive education, inadequate training, lacked formal qualifications leading to limited work options. The study concludes with some recommendations that there must be genuine policies, implementation of the law and monitoring systems inspected at higher education institutions and workplaces to fully include blind persons in education, training and diversified workforce.

Keywords: *blindness, employment opportunities, Cambodia, barriers, solutions*

Introduction

For one, being able to access and acquire employment opportunities is a basic right that fosters self-reliance, self-respect, and social integration. According to Vornholt et al., (2013), “The personal and social advantages of acceptance seem to be the cornerstone for long-term integration of Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) at work and for employment sustainability”. For Persons with disabilities, finding and keeping a job is still tough, especially for those who are blind or visually impaired. Visual impairment is not a rare issue worldwide. There are an estimated 1.3 billion people suffering from a major impairment, the amounts that is equal one in six of us, or sixteen percent of the world's population (World Health Organization [WHO], 2023). Amongst all forms of disabilities, blindness is regarded as the worst disability of them all. People with disabilities are typically underrepresented in the workforce, and those with severe visual impairments are among the most disadvantaged (Wolffe & Spungin, 2002). According to Lansingh and Eckert (2013), there are over 43 million blind persons in the globe. Varma et al. (2016) conducted a survey and revealed 14.62 million persons in the USA and Canada suffered from some kind of vision impairment. Even in developed countries like America, blind people still encounter several obstacles when looking for employment, according to America with Disabilities Act (ADA). Only 33% of people in the USA between the ages of 16 and 64 were estimated to be employed, with 20% of them holding a full-time job (Bell & Mino, 2015).

Paid employment is widely regarded as being vital to function every day's life. In addition to living, it has a significant impact on a person's abilities, social conclusion, mental health, and socializing and living an independent life. According to Adams et al. (2015), it offers a framework for one's existence, establishes adulthood, citizenship, and social status, and offers the chance to cultivate a positive and valued identity as a contribution into social diversified workforce. In addition to how important is being employed to living, surviving, and reducing poverty, being unemployed is linked to medical and mental illness, as well as other negative social, emotional, and psychological repercussions and a generally bad quality of life (Bánfalvy, 2020). Preconception, social stigma and a lack of awareness are amongst barriers hindering and limiting

blind persons for accessing employment opportunities. According to study by Bergson-Shilcock et al., (2023) a large number of blind persons are passed over for jobs because employers are not aware of the assistive technologies that are available. Blind and partially sighted people have had the highest unemployment or underemployment rates of any group in their culture or community throughout history, and this has been particularly true in recent decades (Rampersad, 2018). Marciano continued that only about 25% of blind and partially sighted individuals who reach employment age are paid employees. “The experience of vision loss can significantly impact an individual’s quality of life, including their access to education, social participation, and job opportunities” (WHO, 2023).

People with disabilities have continuously faced lower labor market participation across the world. Munemo and Tom (2013) found a similar situation in Zimbabwe, where the employment rate for individuals with visual impairment was extremely low. In Hungary, the employment rate of people with disabilities was less than 25% (Fazekas et al. 2021). People with disabilities have been excluded the same benefits and living standards as others, frequently without their knowledge or consent, and from the laws and initiatives (Asian Development Bank [ADB], 2005). People with disabilities confront the same scenario everywhere, yet data on them is difficult to find in practically every country, and their work position is even more difficult to find (United Nations [UN], 2022). The USA has its data on people with disabilities and employment which could be found online. According to the U.S. Department of Labor (2024), the employment rate for individuals with disabilities was just 22.5% though. “In developing countries, 80% to 90% of persons with disabilities of working age are unemployed, whereas in industrialized countries the figure is between 50% and 70%” (UN, 2022).

In Cambodia, it’s even harder to find specific number of blind individuals and the data on employment rate, but according to a report by a local newspaper Khmertimes (December 13, 2024), as of 2020, 1.2% which was equal to 144,000 of total population in Cambodia was blind and only 9,500 people with disabilities were employed in private and public.

So far, there have been laws passed in order to include and promote People with Disabilities (PWDs) in society and employment opportunities. According to Article 27 of the UN (2006), state parties are required to acknowledge the right of individuals with disabilities to work alongside others on an equal basis. Similarly, according to Article 74 of the Cambodian Constitution, the government must assist those with disabilities and that there are provisions pertaining to employment in the Law on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities as well. Even though, the law state all of these, PWDs, visually impaired persons, especially blind individuals are facing barriers in accessing employment opportunities due to different reasons such as societal and attitudinal barriers, technological barriers, educational and skill development barriers, legal and policy barriers, etcetera.

The inclusion of people with disabilities, particularly visually impaired and blind individuals in the workforce has been topics of increasing concerns for scholars, policymakers, and advocacy groups. So far, there have been a lot of studies about major challenges to provide some challenges for visually impaired and blind individuals in accessing job opportunities in different countries. In Cambodia, there have also been some similar studies on those who are visually impaired but not specifically for those who are totally

blind yet. As totally blind and blinded job seekers often face more difficulty than persons with low vision in terms of seeking jobs, there is an immediate requirement for a comprehensive examination of the current situation and obstacles encountered by blind individuals regardless of their nature. So, there's some missing and it's not easy to find a related study on this specific or target group which was taken in Cambodia's context. Some existing and already mentioned studies can be used to relate or compare to what current situation for blind individuals be like in Cambodia.

The purpose of this study was to explore the barriers experienced by blind individuals (working age group) in accessing employment opportunities, and roles that societal attitudes and views play in limiting job opportunities for totally blind and blinded job seekers in Cambodia. And the study aimed to gather and provide recommendations to overcome those challenges.

Methodology

Research Design

A qualitative research approach is designed for this phenomenological study to gain extensive knowledge into the societal barriers, perceptions, and practical experiences faced by the blind individuals in accessing job opportunities and to explore challenges and provide some genuine and potential solutions for full inclusion society, education, and employment. Moreover, the qualitative research design enables a more comprehensive grasp for cultural, social, and institutional complexity and factors that influence the employment situations for blind population.

Population and Sample

The population for this study mainly based on blind individuals who are in legal working age group (18 years old or above) and residing in Cambodia. This samples selected for semi-structure interview are blind undergraduates, employed individuals, business owners or those who are in the process of seeking a job.

Participants chosen only those who could bring good relevance, most up-to-dated situations of blind individuals in Cambodia. The sample involved:

Table 1

Sample Size of the Study

Categories	Employed		Unemployed		Total
	Male	Female	Male	Female	
Born blind	2	0	1	0	3
Became blind	7	2	5	1	15
Unknown	1	0	4	0	5
Total	10	2	10	1	23

Research Instrument

To collect data, open-ended questions were predetermined and designed for that semi-structured interview to make sure there was consistency from each response. The interview questions were aimed to reflect on personal and lived experiences, societal treatment, and employers' attitudes, main challenges at higher education and some suggestions for improving employment opportunities for the blind individuals.

The interview sections were properly categorized as followed:

- Educational background of each blind individual
- Challenges in accessing higher education
- Job opportunities and employment-seeking experiences,
- Barriers in receiving job announcement in the first place,
- The use of technology and social media in facilitating study and employment opportunities
- Constructive suggestion from each individual

All questions in each section were thoroughly reviewed by the researcher before they were sent to three external experts for a revision and edition to avoid distraction and marginalization amongst blind persons. All questions were revised and feedback has positively provided before going to the next processes.

Data Collection Procedure

Due to work commitments, social platform called Telegram was mainly used to send voices to the responders besides, phone calls. Voice messages were recorded and sent to the participants, so that they could find convenient time later to provide responses, for responders based in Phnom Penh and selected provinces in the Kingdom. Whereas face to face interviews were done with blind persons in Siem Reap. The questions and interviews were conducted in Khmer to ensure cultural and linguistic accuracy. The researcher had to listen to the participants' voice message and took a record to assemble the data. The total process of collect data took two and a half months to complete.

Data Analysis

The voice message from the blind individuals as well as voice records from the face-to-face interview from the participants involved in the data collection process were then listened over and over again before they were noted as verbatim. Responses from each category was later classified and grouped them as answers aligned with research questions. The collected data were finally analyzed using the phenomenological analysis method.

Findings

Main obstacles blind adults in Cambodia experience while trying to find employment opportunities include:

Limited Accessibility of Online Job Agency Platforms

Local websites for job recruitment agency platforms, mostly in English, aren't fully exclusively designed for general public leading to another barrier or even exclusive to navigate for blind individuals who rely solely on-

screen content, screen reading-software and other assistive and electronic materials. The absence of these essential tools to access job announcements such as Braille, large print, simplified text, and audio formats make it unable for blind job-seekers to read and listen to announcements. CV templates and other application forms are only available in ether PDF or image which can't be easily readable by software. Even with assistive technologies such as screen reader, Braille, or audio note-taking tools available for purchase, blind individuals would still find it unaffordable with very limited resources. Training how to use the technology can be a stumbling block as well, as they have very poor command in English or have no knowledge in the language at all.

Discrimination and Misunderstanding

There is bias in every step of hiring process starting from job announcement to interview due to misconceptions, social stigma, marginalization, underrepresentation and even discrimination amongst blind individuals from employers who misunderstand about the capabilities of blind individuals which leads limited access in employment opportunities, low apprenticeship and internship opportunities. Most employers falsely presume that blind persons have very low rate of productivity, adaptations at workplace as one main concerns as well. Their resilience, diverse skills and awareness have been overlooked. Furthermore, these stereotypes about blind individuals for workplace inclusion prevent them from contributing in diversified workforce and society as whole. When questions were asked in order to understand about the discrimination, a male blind participant explained:

“Some job announcements are intended to show discrimination against persons with disabilities which announcement are specifically pronounced as the jobs are for those who are non-disabled. I think even though, some companies have announced that persons with disabilities are encouraged to apply for the jobs, they are disappointed to see totally blinded job seekers turning up as their expectation is to just open for those who have low vision or other types of disabilities.”

In addition to this, another blind person added:

“When I arrived at place for interview after getting off the motordub (motor taxi), there was a difficulty as the place was unfamiliar. I did not know where to go and there was neither help nor guidance.”

Lack of Job Opportunities

Employment opportunities are scarce which blind individuals are mostly employed by state institutions rather than private companies and industries. Most employers are unable to provide assistive devices or technology like Braille materials and tactile aids etc. to accommodate their needs in order to employ them. Additionally, some companies and industries aren't able to ensure a provision of accessibility, necessary resources, and training supporting blind individuals to thrive. These obstacles hinder them in their efforts to find suitable positions in vacant opportunities.

Educational Barriers

People of any types of disabilities encounter barriers in accessing education at tertiary level which is essential for employment opportunities. For blind individuals, difficulties they face on daily basis include insufficient institutional support such as scholarship, tuition fees, deficient training for staff and educators for

inclusivity in both education institutions and classroom environment. Moreover, they aren't supported with necessary learning materials like Braille materials, audio recordings, notetakers, and tactile aids. Most blind population has neither encouragement to continue nor support to successfully complete their higher education and some drop out halfway through a program. Currently, very few state-run higher education institutions, mainly based in Phnom Penh, can provide inclusivity such as scholarship and some support for the blind students. Some other private institutions may reject their enrollment right away concerning over inadequate essential materials, untrained staff and lecturers to fully facilitate and include them in classroom. All of these retards their ability to obtain essential skills, and acquire proper qualifications for job opportunities which becomes main obstacles for independent life and income. Regarding this, a female student responded:

“I was over the moon when I was told I had passed the baccalaureate exam. I went to a university to find out some information about field of study and majors, but I was told that the university couldn't provide necessary facility to accommodate blind students.”

How societal attitudes and views play in the restricted job opportunities for blind individuals in Cambodia:

Lack of Role Model and Representation in Workforce

The presentation of the blind individuals who can act role models in the workforce is of paramount importance for an inspiration. Government officials, successful entrepreneurs, teachers, and managers etc. all play a significant role for inclusion of blind individuals in workforce and society. Yet, blind persons are rarely seen holding such positions that can inspire the others. The young blind individuals grow up without an inspiration from a role model, who may motivate and share practical experience, making it hard for them to think positively and anticipate themselves succeeding in life and economic independence.

Narrow Policy Enforcement

Cambodia has law that protects right of (PWDs) and their inclusion in employment in both public and private sector, for example the Law on Protection and the Promotion of Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2009) which encourages employers to provide employment opportunities to persons with disability without discrimination. However, there has been insufficient oversight of the law enforcement as employers' ignorance leading to narrow implementation. Without accountability, hiring people with disabilities is still seen as a charity rather than equity. Therefore, societal attitude deprioritizes the PWDs, especially blind individuals encounter more challenges than any other form of disabilities.

Inadequate Support from Community and Family

Immediate family and community play a vital role in providing encouragement that can significantly lead to full inclusion of blind individuals in education, workforce diversity, and society. Prejudice, stereotypes and negative perceptions and treatments of blind persons usually cause a form of social marginalization and underestimation which lead to obstacles in higher education pursuit, professional training, and development causing employment scarcity and difficulty in securing and retaining jobs for blind individuals.

Low Self-Esteem and External Dependence

Some blind persons find it hard to get out of comfort zone. With low self-esteem and self-confidence, blind job-seekers remain struggling in accessing employment opportunities. Overprotection from immediate families hinders their full inclusivity in society and employment as much as social stigma. As a result, some blind persons have neither confidence, nor self-belief to find opportunities causing a fear or feeling incapable of doing work without continuous family assistance.

Discussion

The findings show a lot of main challenges that blind individuals in Cambodia encounter in accessing equal employment opportunities from exclusive job-seeking platform, profound societal prejudice, misconception, marginalization, inadequate higher institution support, ineffective law implementation and enforcement and accountability. The integral part of these barriers is endemic in social attitudes and stigma hindering vacant opportunities, preventing from participating in workforce at full capacity, and marginalizing blind individuals at multitudinous stages from education to job-seeking and community engagement.

For blind individuals, seeking jobs through online platforms, which assistive technologies like Braille, audio, or simplified text, remain a huge challenge to access as a majority of local websites are written in English with lack accessible design features. Even with availability of these devices on sale, how they cost and the low proficiency in English severely hinder blind persons to seek and apply for jobs independently.

Discrimination and misconception remain continuous concerns influencing employers' perception and apprehension before making a decision to hire the blind individuals. Blind graduates are viewed through social stigma despite their potential and resilience. These preconceptions are frequently brought by both employment and society leading to extensive bias and rejection from hiring process and apprenticeship. Employers' ignorance also reflects systematic barriers disrupting and narrowing employment opportunities for the blind individuals in the labor market.

Shortage of employment opportunities – while some blind individuals are able to find jobs in public institutions or non-government organizations (NGOs), they find it hard to get opportunities to get employment in private sector as there is a disinclination and hesitation to fulfill some necessity like assistive technologies and Braille materials to accommodate and facilitate the blind individuals. Moreover, there are more concerns about productivity, financial burden and insurance if the blind individuals are employed. That failure in providing accessibility for the vacant opportunities for blind persons not only reflect exclusion, but also their fundamental right.

Higher education, which is seen as a stepping stone to obtain a career for most people, instead becomes exclusive for the blind students particularly in private higher education institutions. The absence of systematic and inclusive policies in providing necessary infrastructure, supported classroom resources, trained academic staff and lecturers hinders and impedes blind persons to pursue higher education to obtain qualifications required for future careers, professional employment and growth. When a higher education itself shows a lack of inclination and its full capacity to admit blind students, it not only automatically creates a cycle of under-qualification and unemployment, but also a never-ending social stigma.

In addition to education, the underrepresentation of blind individuals in professional roles and leadership in workforce lessens motivation and inspiration for new generations. Near-absence of blind persons, who are seen as role models and concrete evidence, negatively influence the mindset and anticipation of what is possible for future success in achieving economic independence and self-esteem. The shortage of representation is not only a consequence, but also a cause of long-lasting discrimination.

Despite the introduction of Law on the Protection and the Promotion of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, according to Article 74 of The Constitution of the Kingdom of Cambodia (1993) aimed at promoting inclusivity of disabilities of any forms, including blind persons in employment opportunities, poor enforcement and implementation of the law remains a stumbling block to include blind persons in labor market. With inadequate or defective monitor and penalties, the legal framework does not do enough to tackle marginalization, and the deprioritization of blind persons across the country remains on national employment agendas.

The role of family and community is vital and cannot be underestimated. When families approach and treat blind persons with preconceptions and prejudices, that impedes and limit blind persons' progress and anticipation from a young age. Without emotional support, motivation, and inspiration, they are rejected with the fundamental right in accessing social inclusion and having little basic confidence to pursue education leading to very low rate in employment opportunities.

Finally, internal factors such as low self-esteem and limited self-motivation due to social stigma and dependence on family support leads to poor attitudes toward employment opportunities with a negative perception of success without a favor of someone, further hindering their opportunities.

The findings of this study were in line with (La Grow & Daye, 2005; Castle, 2024; Daniel et al. 2007; Makondo et al., 2024) who conducted research studies in different corners of the world and found similar barriers in limited access in employment opportunities, societal attitude, and exclusive education amongst persons with low visions and blind individuals.

To sum up, the findings reveal social attitudes, inefficient institutional support, social stigma hindering full inclusivity of blind persons in Cambodia's workforce. Once promotion and enforcement of the law and right of blind persons are genuinely enforced, incentives and penalties given to employers, blind persons will become actively promoted and engaged, therefore they are seen as valuable and capable contributors to society.

Conclusion

Blind individuals in Cambodia encounter a lot of structural and social challenges that critically hinder blind job-seekers. One of the primary challenges is the exclusivity of accessing online job platforms, which are infrequently created with accessible content formats such as audio, Braille, screen-reader, or simplified English-Khmer audio translator. The absence of the assistive devices, low command in English, or the high cost of these assistive materials impedes the accessibility to successfully seek the opportunities independently and therefore further cut off blind persons from getting into workforce equally in rapidly digitalizing job market.

Behind technological barriers and capability, blind persons also face endemic discrimination, prejudice, misconception, and social stigma. They are frequently overlooked and underestimated by employers or recruiters, assuming that accommodation is costly and poor productivity leading to very low employment rate,

especially in the private sector. Furthermore, a lack of foundation for employment opportunities which is access to higher education as it is served as a catapult to propel blind individuals to equally compete in labor market. However, without sufficient support with assistive learning materials, shortage of supporting policies at most higher education institutions, these further limit a number of blind students. With no proper qualifications, most blind adolescents and adults are left with career prospects leading to a new wave of unemployment.

Besides, external barriers, inner conflict includes low self-esteem, lack of representation and inspiration, and overdependence on family support further prevail and prevent blind persons from actively accessing opportunities and securing employment. Since the introduction of the law, which aims to promote and include PWDs, deficiency of enforcement and implementation, inadequate public awareness, lack of monitoring, no penalties and encouragement, undermine effectiveness or law endorsement. To break these cycles, there must be advocacy, endorsement and genuine endeavors to reform the inclusive policies in both education and employment enabling to promote blind persons with provision of practical training and assistive materials to fully include them in classroom, society and employment. Changing public and social attitudes, empowering PWDs, especially blind individuals, and enforcing employers are giant steps to break unemployment cycles and to ensure equal rights in Cambodia.

Recommendations

To promote and broaden more equal and employment opportunities for PWDs, especially blind persons in Cambodia, multitude of endeavors are required from stakeholders involved such as education institutions, private companies and industries, public institutions, profit and non-profit organizations and the whole community. The following recommendations aim to broaden the inclusivity and support:

Adopt Best Practices and Inclusive Workplace

Companies and enterprises must actively endorse and implement inclusive policies, and improve awareness and attitude towards blind persons at workplace:

- Enforcement of the law: Fully Endorse the Law on the Protection and the Promotion of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2009)
- Respect for equal rights and dignity: Recognize PWDs, especially blind persons as capable and potential individuals.
- No discrimination: Make sure that recruitment and promotion are equal, based on work ethic and qualifications rather than no disability status.
- Provision of essential accommodation: Provide assistive materials and technologies, spaces, flexible arrangements.
- Raising awareness: Organize training or workshops to raise awareness of the rights and to eliminate prejudice, misconception and social stigma.
- Inclusive culture: Support and respect diversity and appreciation.

Create more Inclusive Education

Higher education is a stepping stone for preparing blind students in labor market. Higher education institutions should:

- Ensure fully inclusive environment: Establish policies and equal access at own institutions.
- Provide essential training and skills: Offer vital skills and training which are required for employment opportunities.
- Conduct career counseling and guidance: Provide assistance in creating a resume, job orientation, career prospects and readiness, interview preparation.
- Create networking with private sector: Build network with recruiters and employers and organize job fairs, apprenticeship and internships etc.
- Partner with organization: Work closely with local and international organizations to broaden more employment opportunities.
- Collaborate with job agency: Connect with agents for job placement service.

These recommendations can have significant impacts on blind individuals in Cambodia through allowing more access to higher education leading to wide employment opportunities and empowering them in society and workforce diversity which contributes to reduce unemployment rate amongst persons with disabilities.

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