

WHITE PAPER

# RE-THINKING THE FUTURE OF WORKPLACE INCLUSION FOR PWMS



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IN COLLABORATION WITH



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This white paper has been developed to improve the workplace experience and workforce participation of People living with Multiple Sclerosis (PwMS) in the UAE. This document presents the findings from a survey of 402 respondents across the UAE, 96% of whom identified as PwMS. Additionally, in-depth interviews with PwMS were conducted to gain qualitative insights into the challenges they face in the workforce. Employer perspectives have also been sourced through focus groups conducted by the Behavioral Science Group (BSG), a specialized entity within the Office of Development Affairs. The findings from these sources informed talking points during a multi-stakeholder round-table discussion held that enabled reaching a consensus on recommendations put forward in this paper, to achieve aforementioned outcomes.

In the UAE, three laws are in place to safeguard the rights and well-being of People of Determination (PoD) including PwMS in the workplace. However, opportunities exist to further enhance regulations by developing a unified framework across the UAE to ensure seamless access to services and rights across all Emirates. Enforcement of existing regulations could also be strengthened through increased awareness of PwMS rights and increased oversight.

Our research findings identified that a critical lack of awareness (amongst employers and PwMS themselves) about MS as a disease, and the associated protections granted to PwMS, leads to an environment conducive to intentional and / or unintentional discrimination and use of unfair practices in the workplace. This in turn contributes to the attrition of PwMS from the workforce.

In the UAE, many employers lack tailored strategies to address the specific needs of PwMS. Structural barriers limit employment opportunities while a lack of standardized processes to assess employee well-being, resulting in PwMS being overlooked and unable to communicate their needs. The capacity of the employer to implement workplace accommodations such as remote working or accessible office facilities is limited which adversely impacts their ability to continue working.

The recommendations to increase awareness around MS in the workplace include building a single window MS platform for dissemination of information related to the condition and the rights of PwMS. Another recommended initiative is the adoption of occupational health practices in workplaces to ensure that MS awareness is integrated in a sustained manner within companies.

To build equitable workplaces, there is a need to have clearly defined escalation pathways to report non-compliance with accommodation requirements, leverage digital technologies to normalize remote working and to develop organizational structures that provide flexibility in developing career paths based on emerging needs.

Although this white paper is targeted at enhancing the experience of PwMS, a much broader slice of the population in the UAE, including other PoD and those that suffer from physical and mental health challenges, stand to benefit from the implementation of the discussed recommendations.

## INTRODUCTION

The UAE National Multiple Sclerosis Society (NMSS) operates under the Ministry of Community Empowerment (MoCE) with the aim of enhancing the well-being of PwMS in the UAE. This is achieved through the provision of support and resources for those living with MS, as well as activities focused on raising awareness and combating the stigma associated with the condition.

### 402

participants from across the UAE surveyed by NMSS to understand workplace challenges for PwMS.

### ~26 YEARS

average age at which MS typically manifests in the UAE, impacting a significant portion of the workforce.

To gain insight into the perspectives of PwMS regarding their workplace, NMSS conducted a survey that covered n=402 participants from across the UAE. The goal was to identify the challenges, obstacles, and enablers present in workplaces for PwMS. Concurrently, BSG conducted an evidence-based evaluation of workplace inclusion policies globally and subsequently led focus group discussions with employers in across sectors within the UAE to gain a local employer perspective. The importance of fostering workplace inclusivity and challenges PwMS encounter in professional environments has been highlighted by these focus groups.

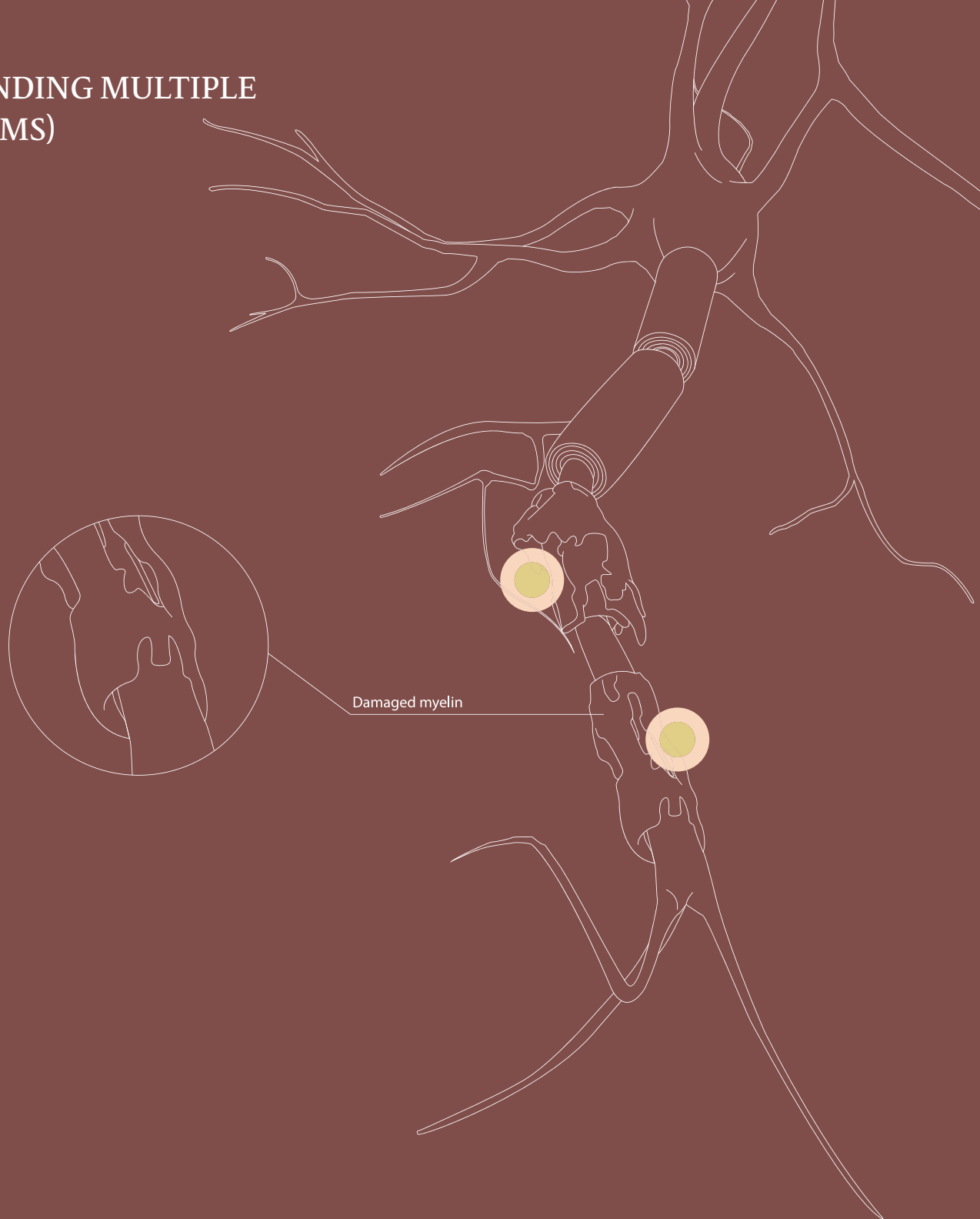
Subsequently, NMSS convened a round-table discussion with multiple stakeholders, including policymakers, healthcare professionals, MS ambassadors, and employers. The objective was to develop recommendations aimed at improving workplace conditions for PwMS in the UAE.

The rising prevalence of MS and the young age at which the disease typically manifests (~26 years), thereby impacting a significant portion of the workforce, highlighting the need for urgent attention.<sup>1</sup> This document offers an overview of the current policy landscape in the UAE, insights from interactions with PwMS, findings from interactions with employers representing multiple sectors and recommendations coming out of the round-table discussions.

The target audience for this white paper are the MoCE, Ministry of Health and Prevention, Ministry of Human Resources & Emiratization, community development authorities, health insurance entities, non-governmental organizations and local employers.



## UNDERSTANDING MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS (MS)











MS is a chronic autoimmune condition affecting the central nervous system. In MS, myelin - the protective covering for nerve fibers- becomes damaged. Without protection, demyelinated nerves cause communication problems between the brain, spinal cord and rest of the body. It primarily affects the brain, the spinal cord, and the optic nerves in the eyes.<sup>2</sup>

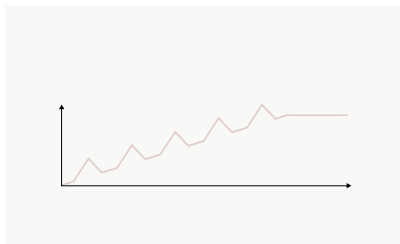
At present, **there is no cure for MS**. Some therapies **alleviate and improve** some symptoms.

## SYMPTOMS OF MS

Among the various symptoms of MS, these 8 are considered to be the most common.

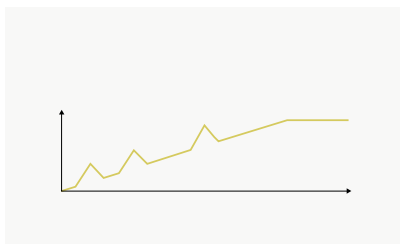
01	Fatigue	
02	Movement and coordination issues	
03	Cognitive impairment	
04	Pain	
05	Visual problems	
06	Bladder and bowel issues	
07	Emotional changes	
08	Clinical depression	

## TYPES OF MS<sup>2</sup>



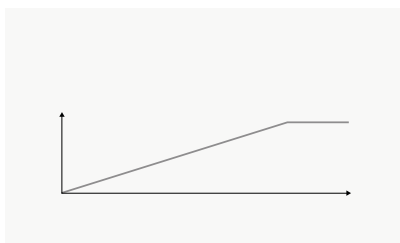
### Relapsing-Remitting MS (RRMS)

Experienced relapses followed by a period of recovery. Approximately 85% of people with MS are initially diagnosed with RRMS.



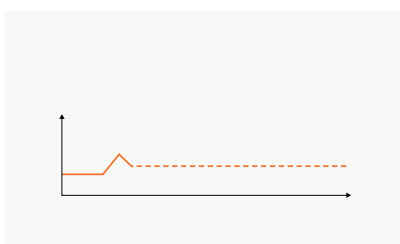
### Secondary Progressive MS (SPMS)

RRMS can progress to SPMS, where neurological function declines progressively and disability increases by time.



### Primary Progressive MS (PPMS)

Neurological function worsens or disability accumulates as soon as symptoms appear, without early relapses or remissions.



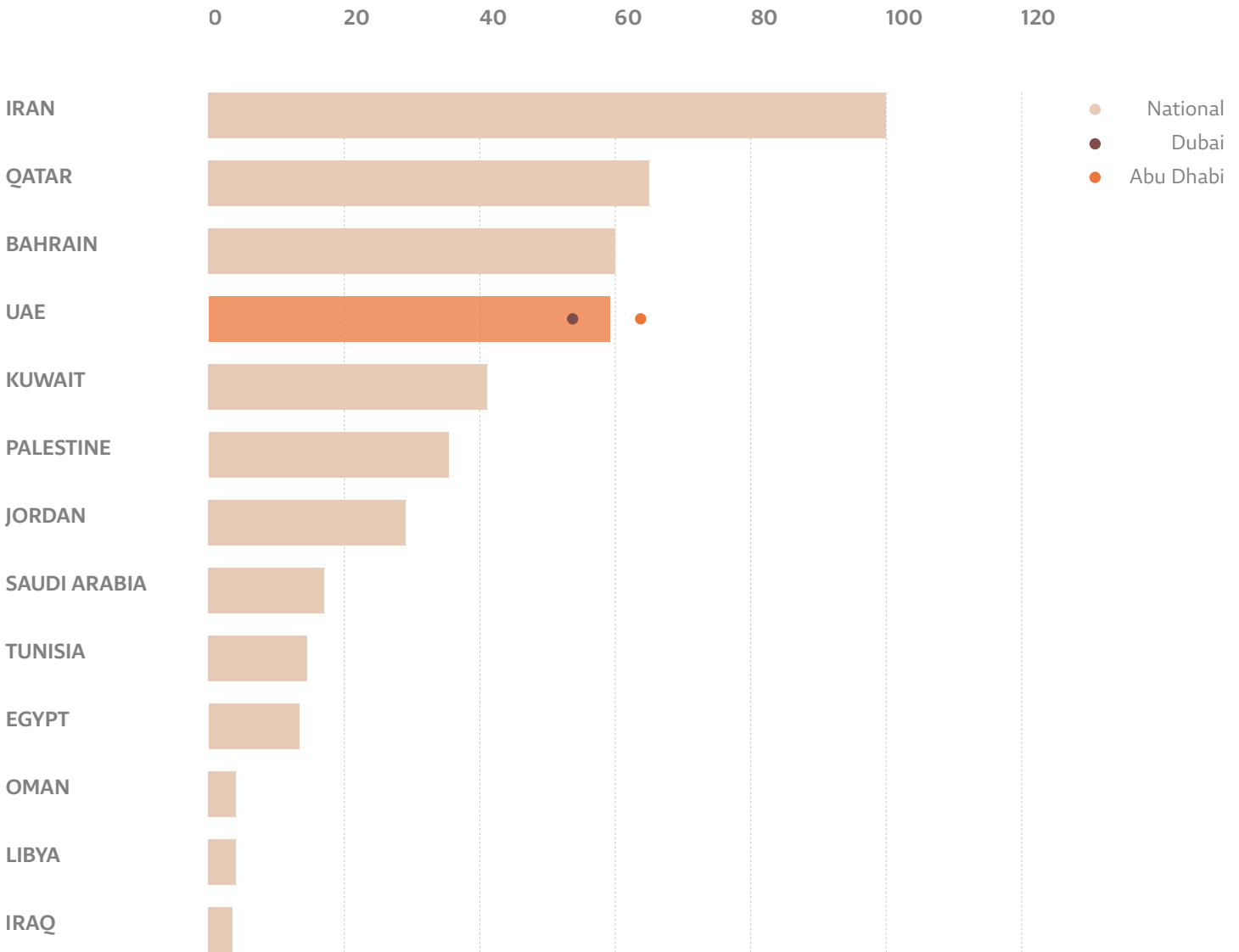
### Clinically Isolated Syndrome (CIS)

An initial episode of neurological symptoms caused by inflammation and demyelination in the central nervous system. This can possibly lead to an MS diagnosis.

# QUICK FACTS ABOUT MS IN THE UAE

MS prevalence in the UAE ranks amongst the highest in regional countries. \* 3,4

FIG 1. PREVALENCE OF MS IN MENA REGION / 100K POPULATION



## ESTIMATED ECONOMIC BURDEN OF MS IN THE UAE

114.7M\*\* AED / YEAR<sup>5</sup>

93%

of Emirati PoD are unemployed.<sup>6</sup>

### Footnote

\* Prevalence based on studies conducted on Emirati nationals in the UAE.

\*\* Based on using KSA economic burden / patient and using an estimated prevalence of 2000 MS patients in the UAE with the SAR to AED conversion rate of 0.98.

# Current policy landscape in the UAE

- 
- 01 Existing regulatory framework for People of Determination (PoD)

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  - 02 Key institutions implementing existing laws

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  - 03 Global perspective on regulatory frameworks for workplace inclusivity

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  - 04 Opportunity to enhance the MS Policy landscape in UAE

# EXISTING REGULATORY FRAMEWORK FOR PEOPLE OF DETERMINATION (POD)



## 03

key laws that aim to safeguard the rights and well-being of PoD.

The current regulatory framework related to PoD in the UAE consists of three key laws, including two at the federal level and one at Emirate level. These regulations aim to safeguard the rights and well-being of PoD. PwMS are included in the PoD classification under this framework.<sup>7</sup>

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### FEDERAL LAW NO. 29 OF 2006

Federal Law No. 29 of 2006 addresses the rights of PoD across various aspects such as education, employment, healthcare, rehabilitation services, cultural activities, sports, and leisure pursuits. Notably, this law ensures that Emirati citizens with special needs have equal opportunities in the workplace and are protected from discrimination.<sup>8</sup>

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### CABINET DECISION NO. (43) OF 2018

Cabinet Decision No. (43) of 2018 (also a federal level legislation), specifically focuses on the employment rights of PoD, emphasizing their access to the labor market. Employers are mandated to adhere to clear guidelines that prohibit discrimination based on disabilities during recruitment and promotion processes as well as ensure equitable remuneration and benefits for PoD. Additionally, employers are required to make reasonable accommodations in the workplace to create a fair and inclusive environment for all employees.<sup>9</sup>

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### DUBAI LAW NO. (2)

Dubai Law No. (2) of 2014 concerning the Protection of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is the only Emirate level legislation in the UAE. It establishes mechanisms for individuals in Dubai to assert their rights as provided by existing legislation. It includes avenues for reporting violations and maintaining registries to monitor the affairs of PoD effectively.<sup>10</sup>

# KEY INSTITUTIONS IMPLEMENTING EXISTING LAWS



## 09

workshops conducted to enhance workplace awareness.

## 1,500+

government employees benefited from DCD and ZHO workshops.

There are various institutions within the UAE dedicated to upholding the rights (including workplace rights) of PoD. At the federal level, MoCE is responsible for issuing PoD cards, which provide exclusive services and incentives.<sup>11</sup> To enhance their employability, the MoCE has launched a job portal that connects both public and private sector employers, such as Dubai Water and Electricity Authority (DEWA), with PoD seeking employment opportunities.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, they have published a manual aimed at educating employers and PoD on their rights in the workplace.<sup>13</sup>

The Department of Community Development (DCD) has meticulously developed the Abu Dhabi Strategy for People of Determination 2020-2024, outlining employment for PoD as one of the six strategic pillars.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the DCD has collaborated with Zayed Higher Organization for People of Determination (ZHO) to enhance workplace awareness through the facilitation of nine workshops benefitting over 1,500 Abu Dhabi government employees.<sup>15</sup>

ZHO is actively engaging with a multitude of stakeholders by partnering with employers to evaluate workplace readiness for PoD.

Simultaneously, they are working closely with PoD to provide PoD-cards and establish a platform for facilitating employment opportunities. Noteworthy partnerships with companies like Silal (an agri-tech food company) have resulted in expanded employment opportunities for PoD across Abu Dhabi.<sup>16</sup>

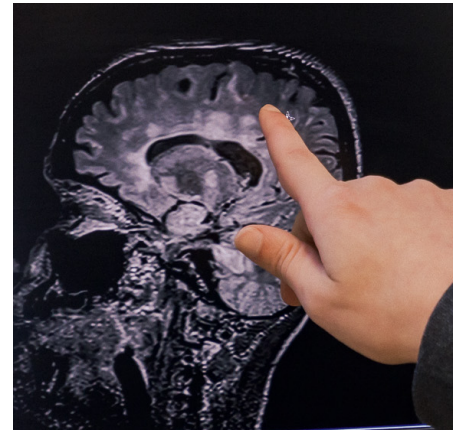
The Advocacy Committee at The Community Development Authority (CDA) in Dubai collaborates with private sector entities such as Emirates NBD (banking), Emaar (construction), and Aramex (logistics) to foster an inclusive work environment for PoD.<sup>17</sup> CDA also issues the Sanad card which offers benefits and incentives.<sup>18</sup>

# GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE ON REGULATORY FRAMEWORKS FOR WORKPLACE INCLUSIVITY

## 05%

employment quota in Germany for companies with 20+ employees to include individuals with disabilities.

**During the 1990s, several countries enacted legislation to protect individuals with disabilities.** Examples include the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in the USA in 1990 and the Disability Discrimination Act in the UK in 1995.<sup>19,20</sup> Employers were mandated to provide “reasonable accommodations” in the workplace, such as flexible working hours and physical accessibility, to foster a more inclusive work environment. Subsequent regulations and amendments have expanded the definition of disability to encompass impairments that hinder activities like reading, focusing, and cognitive tasks.



## 2.5%

Japanese companies with 300+ employees required to employ people with disabilities.

In the UK, caregivers have been safeguarded against workplace discrimination since 2010 under the Equality Act.<sup>21</sup> Challenges persist in uniformly enforcing legal frameworks across countries, even in nations with longstanding disability laws. For instance, some European countries, like Germany, impose a statutory employment quota of 5% for individuals with disabilities in both public and private sector companies with a minimum of 20 employees in order to increase representation of people with disabilities within the labor market.<sup>22</sup>

Similarly, Japanese law mandates that companies with over 300 employees employ 2.5% of their workforce who can be designated as disabled<sup>23</sup> Singapore has previously safeguarded vulnerable populations in the workplace from discrimination under the General Employment Act, promoting workplace inclusivity through Fair Employment Practices guidance to employers, and offering financial incentives via the Enabling Employment Certificate (EEC) for hiring individuals with disabilities. Anticipated legislative changes are expected to further solidify these guidelines into law by the conclusion of 2024, providing enhanced protections for people with disabilities.<sup>24</sup>

# OPPORTUNITY TO ENHANCE THE MS POLICY LANDSCAPE IN UAE



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## 01

**Develop** policies specifically for PwMS in the UAE which will lead to higher awareness and understanding of their specific needs.

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## 02

**Create** a unified law that addresses the rights and needs of PwMS across UAE.

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## 03

**Implement** and enforce policies within workplaces and the public domain. However, this is dependent on stakeholders' level of awareness related to the rights of PwMS.

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## 04

**Faciliate** continuous access to services by improving PoD status renewal procedures that require updates on a quarterly basis through public hospitals.



# NMSS SURVEY: RESPONDENT SNAPSHOT

The survey represents respondents from across the UAE, hailing from diverse national backgrounds and from multiple professions / trades.

## ABOUT RESPONDENTS

**96%**

of respondents were PwMS and 4% were caregivers.

**66%**

of respondents were employed PwMS.

**85%**

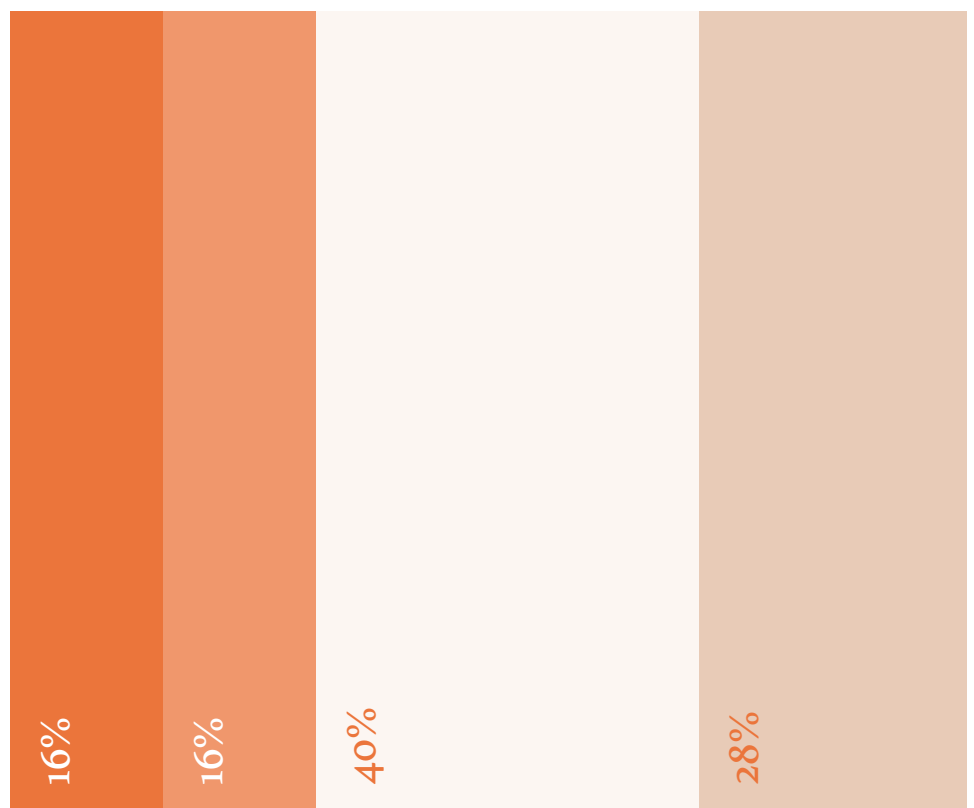
of respondents were working full-time.

## REPRESENTATION BY EMIRATE

**N=402**

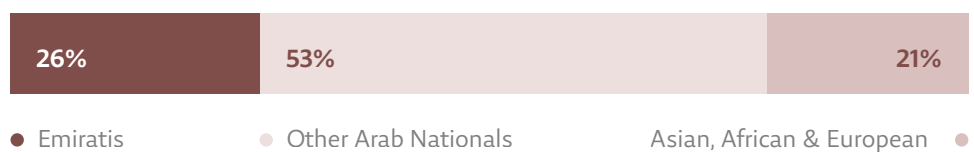
The survey consisted of 402 respondents with representation across all Emirates and included PwMS and their caregivers.

- Sharjah
- Northern Emirates
- Abu Dhabi
- Dubai



## NATIONALITIES

26% of the respondents were Emiratis, 53% other Arab nationals, 21% Asian, African and European.



# CHALLENGES IN THE WORKPLACE FOR PWMS

26%



of employed PwMS  
**experienced discrimination**  
in the workplace.

## LACK OF AWARENESS AMONG EMPLOYERS AND PEERS

According to the survey conducted by NMSS, 26% of employed PwMS experienced discrimination in the workplace which stems from limited understanding of MS as a disease. Forty percent of employed PwMS surveyed considered colleague awareness a crucial factor for workplace success. The lack of understanding related to symptoms makes it difficult for managers and colleagues to create an inclusive work environment that considers the special needs of PwMS. Consequently, 36% of surveyed PwMS who reported currently not working due to MS attribute their departure from work to insufficient employer support.

40%

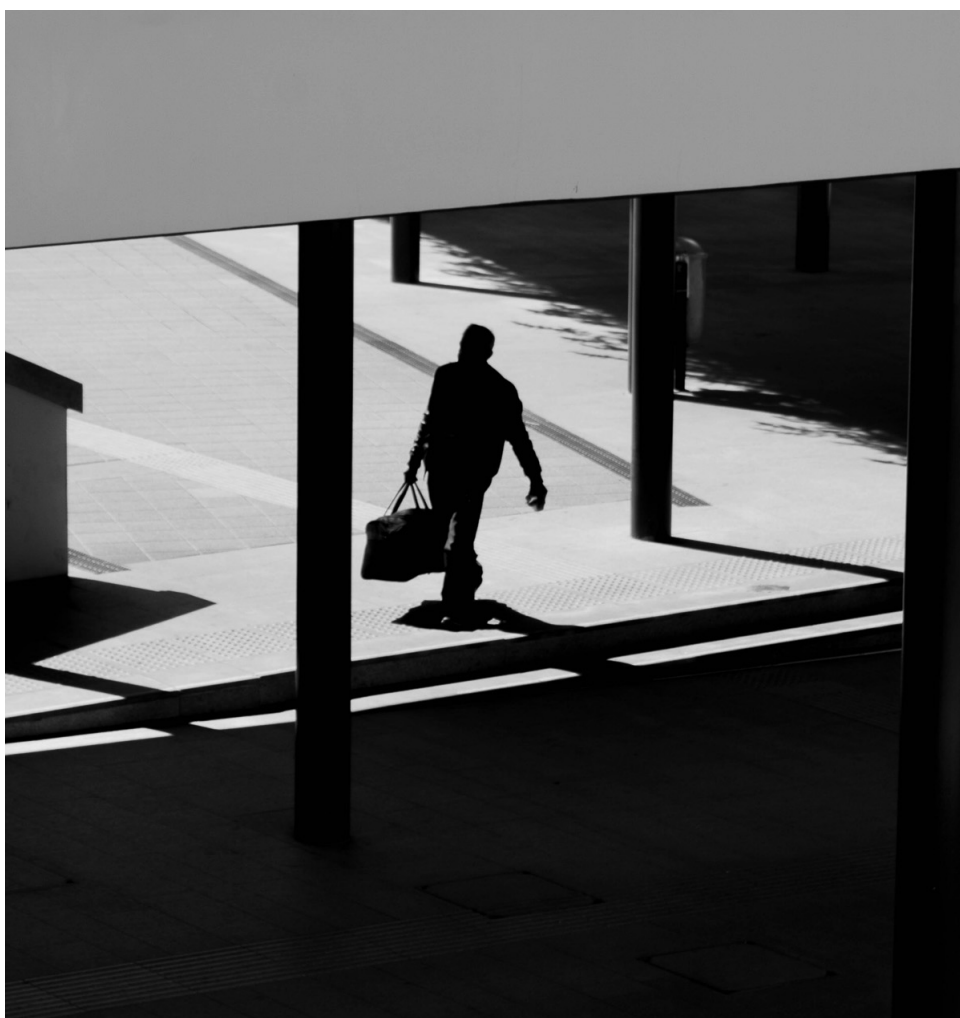


of employed PwMS say  
**awareness of colleagues is**  
**crucial** for success at work.

36%



of unemployed  
PwMS reported **lack of**  
**employer support** as reason  
for leaving work.



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Symptoms such as **fatigue, clinical depression and emotional changes** are often overlooked by managers and colleagues, which adds to the frustrations of people living with MS.

# 48%

unemployed PwMS reported **fatigue** as a factor **affecting their ability to work**.

This has an adverse impact on the mental and physical wellbeing of employed PwMS and leads to lower morale and engagement with work, resulting in possible attrition from the workforce. Unemployed PwMS in the survey who identified MS as the reason for leaving the workforce reported fatigue (48%), depression (46%) and cognitive impairments (40%) as factors that affected their ability to work.

Lack of employer support in the workplace can manifest in various ways, such as providing a sub-optimal work environment (e.g., inaccessible transport, lack of amenities) or penalizing PwMS for necessary absences from work by reducing monetary incentives. According to the survey, 32% of unemployed PwMS reported feeling demotivated and started viewing their work negatively before resigning. The data indicated that PwMS leave their jobs within five years of being diagnosed.

“My manager did not know what MS was when I first told him about my condition. It was very difficult for him to understand what I was going through.”

**MS AMBASSADOR**

The same is validated by a global survey conducted by the MS International Federation (MSIF), which states that 27% of unemployed individuals with MS indicate that a greater awareness of MS among their colleagues would help them stay in work. Additionally, 42% reported that having supportive employers and colleagues has helped them to remain in their jobs. However, it is important to note that these findings are based on self-reported data from the survey, and the term “awareness” was not explicitly defined.<sup>25</sup>

# 56%

unemployed PwMS **needed a resting place** to manage fatigue.

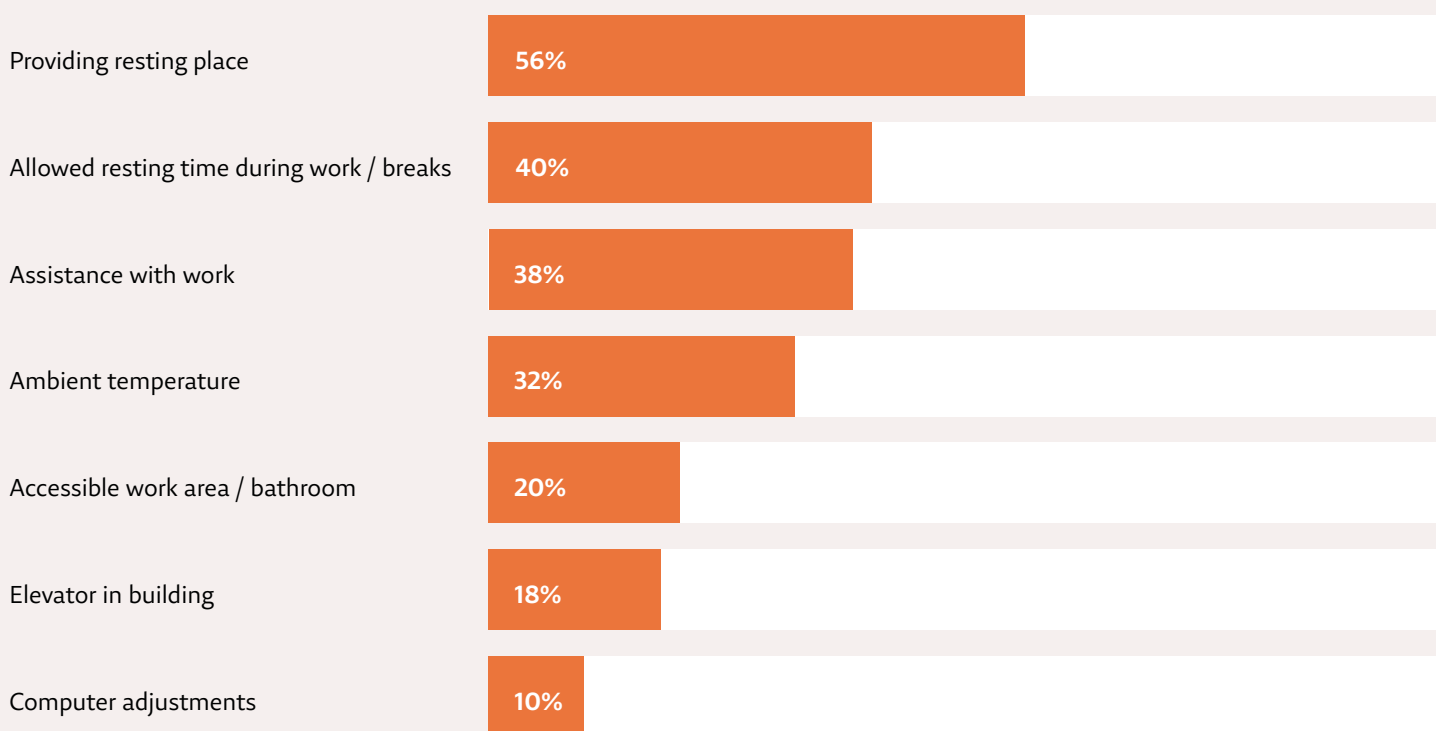
## LIMITED WORKPLACE ACCOMMODATIONS

NMSS's survey found that **56% of unemployed PwMS required a resting place and 40% required breaks to manage experienced fatigue**. The physical work environment also requires adjustments such as temperature control, accessibility to workspaces, bathrooms and elevators in buildings.

Additional accommodations such as remote working and flexible work hours could facilitate PwMS to continue working. In reality, full time employees are often denied flexibility in managing work hours or location.

Furthermore, many workspaces are not designed to cater to people with special needs who require physical aids for movement (e.g., ramps for ease of access for those in wheelchairs) which in turn leads to absenteeism and low employee morale. Modifications to the work environment can enable employed PwMS to perform their jobs more effectively.

**FIG 2.2. ACCOMMODATIONS REQUESTED BY UNEMPLOYED PWMS THAT WOULD HELP THEM RETURN TO WORK**



From the employer’s point of view, a US survey found that implementing workplace adjustments retains qualified employees, increases productivity, and eliminates the cost of training new employees. Employers also indicated that adjustments could improve interactions with coworkers and increase company morale.<sup>26</sup>

However, one US study also found that these adjustments do not promote job satisfaction or longevity for people with MS.<sup>27</sup>

### **LACK OF UNDERSTANDING OF POD RIGHTS**

PwMS and employers are often unaware of the rights of PoD and protections granted to them by Federal and Emirates level laws that prohibit exploitation and discrimination in the workplace. There have been reports of employees being denied “reasonable” adjustments at the workplace, withholding of promotions, lowering of performance ratings and termination.

### **LIMITED SUPPORT SYSTEMS**

PwMS have limited support pathways (within and outside of their workplace) to escalate any violations of rights and report discrimination. Many companies lack formal standardized HR policies for addressing health concerns of employees and managing requests for accommodations which can lead to exploitation in the workplaces.

Medical insurance companies often impose separate eligibility criteria for PwMS, resulting in high premiums, inconsistent coverage, and benefits that may not be comprehensive. Notably, financial assistance ranks among the top three enabling factors cited by PwMS for their continued participation in the workforce.

“Sometimes employers require medical reports despite having the PoD card from relevant authorities but there is no hotline (to call) to escalate these matters quickly.”

MS AMBASSADOR

3/5



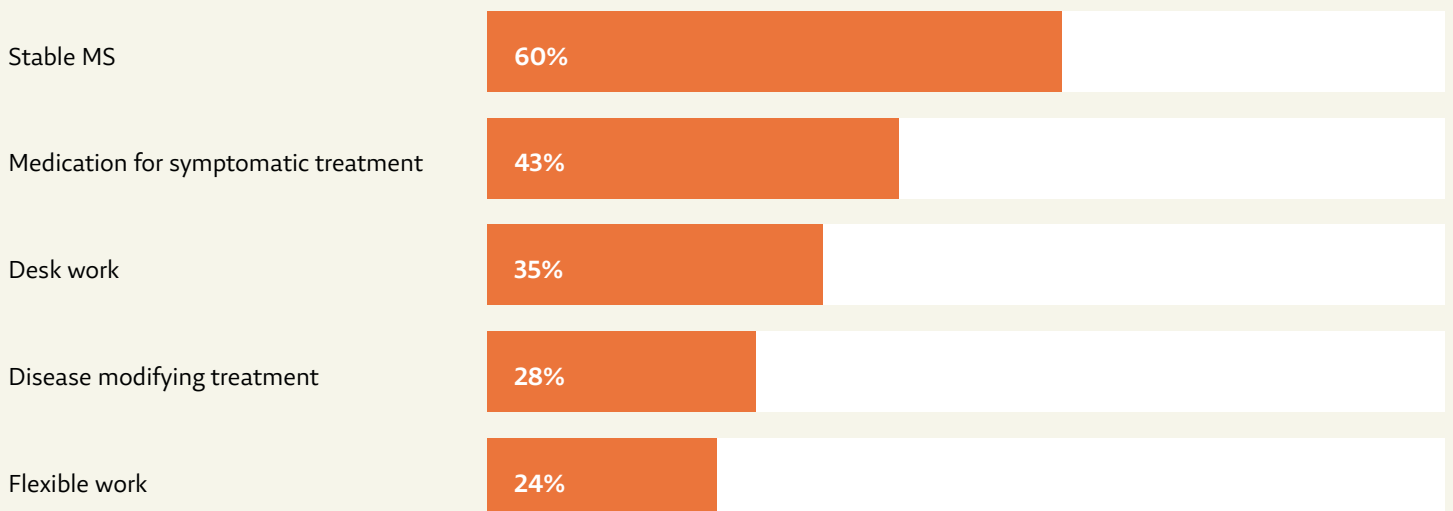
top factors aiding employed PwMS are related to MS treatments.

### SPORADIC HEALTH COVERAGE AND UNCERTAINTY FOR EXPATRIATES

Studies have indicated that expatriates who develop MS often travel back to their home country either to get treatment or due to their inability to work because of their symptoms.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, since employment is linked to healthcare coverage, many expatriates return to their home countries for treatment.

Given **that 3 out of the top 5 factors that aid employed PwMS at work are directly related to MS treatments**, facilitating insurance coverage and healthcare access would aid in supporting PwMS in the UAE workforce.

FIG 2.3. TOP 5 FACTORS REPORTED THAT AID EMPLOYED PWMS REMAIN AT WORK



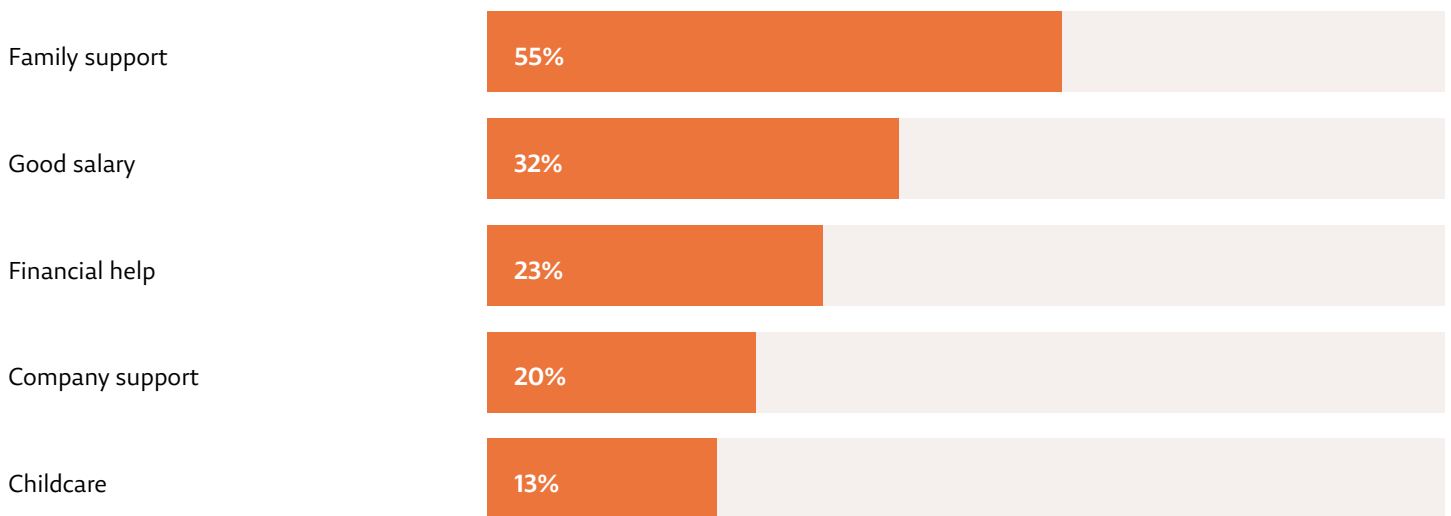
## EMOTIONAL AND FINANCIAL DISTRESS

Emotional distress in the form of anxiety and depression may manifest in PwMS due to uncertainty about the future and daily frustrations from not being able to perform routine tasks. This is further compounded by feelings of isolation and loneliness when faced by social stigma or lack of understanding from friends, family, colleagues and employers.

Financial distress can be caused by costly medical expenses for MS treatments, including out-of-pocket medications and rehabilitation services, which may not be fully covered by insurance. This also increases reliance on family members or caregivers to cover living expenses and healthcare costs because of loss of income due to reduced work hours, disability-related unemployment, or inability to work altogether.

There may be additional costs associated with mobility aids, assistive devices, and home modifications to accommodate changing needs. Based on the NMSS survey findings highlighted in Figure 2.4, financial incentives such as good salary and financial help are amongst the top 5 factors aiding employed PwMS to continue employment.

**FIG 2.4. FACTORS AIDING EMPLOYED PWMS AT WORK**



## RELUCTANCE TO DISCLOSE MEDICAL CONDITION

PwMS are hesitant disclosing their condition to employers because they believe that the employer will not offer the required assistance. Consequently, PwMS feel compelled to maintain performance levels comparable to other colleagues to avoid scrutiny and the necessity of disclosing their condition.

This situation may contribute to compounding stress levels, potentially leading to worsening of symptoms or flare-ups.<sup>29</sup>

# EMPLOYER PERSPECTIVES ON WORKPLACE INCLUSION

The Behavioral Science Group conducted two remote, semi structured focus group discussions with employers with a total of 16 participants. Participants were representing employers of various sizes and industries across the UAE. The point of view of employers was incorporated to determine the current state of policies and systems in place to support PwMS and to identify the challenges and barriers faced by employers in their ability to provide accommodations in the workplace.

**“It is important to make it clear you’re a PoD friendly employer.”**

**EMPLOYER REPRESENTATIVE**

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## SETTING THE SCENE

Changes for PwMS should come under wider inclusivity initiatives. Policies need to be co-designed with PoD, and those in power, to ensure that they cater to their needs.

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## DISCLOSURE

Employers ask about health needs on an ad hoc basis. A fragmented approach for assessing the well-being status of employees results in employees not receiving necessary support and entitlements.

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## POLICY

The policy ecosystem is viewed by employers as complex to navigate due to laws existing at both Federal and Emirate level. Large companies have the added complexity of bodies and committees tasked with furthering D&I initiatives.

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## FLEXIBLE AND REMOTE WORK

Remote work arrangements are negotiated on a case-by-case basis with managers in the absences of established standard operating procedures.

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## RECRUITMENT

More can be done to recruit PoD in a structured and inclusive way. Employers lack a clear understanding of the structural barriers which hinder employment opportunities for PoD. Additionally, there are no specific targets for recruiting PoD.

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## WORKPLACE ADJUSTMENT

There are different worlds of workplace accessibility in the UAE. Older office buildings lack accessible facilities and features which require investments for upgrades. A dedicated Equal Opportunity Officer can assist with adjustment requests.

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## RETENTION

Limited insights on PoD employee retention on progression, due to the lack of structured monitoring and target setting.

# ROUND TABLE CONSENSUS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A round table discussion was held with representatives during which UAE employers, government entities and PwMS discussed the challenges encountered in the workplace and reached a consensus on constructive next steps to help chart a course towards addressing them. The outcomes of the discussions are summarized in this section.

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## 01

### HOW DO WE BUILD AWARENESS OF MS IN THE WORKPLACE?

#### 1.1

##### **ESTABLISH A SINGLE WINDOW MS PLATFORM.**

This platform covers all aspects of information for PwMS including but not limited to legal concerns, links to resources for information on their condition and its management, and local medical personnel who can be contacted for help. The platform should offer multilingual support to cater to the UAE's diverse resident population. Employers should be mandated to ensure PwMS are made aware of said platform upon any event of disclosure of condition.

#### 1.2

##### **EMBEDDING OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH PRACTICES FOR INCLUSIVE WORKPLACES.**

Occupational health experts will be tasked with assessment of employee well-being and identifying any health concerns in employees. They would also advocate for accommodations for enabling employees with health concerns to work while addressing their health needs. For smaller organizations that do not have internal resources to dedicate, outsourcing to third party vendors or government sponsored bodies should be used to bridge the gap.

#### 1.3

##### **ENABLE ACCESS TO FREE LEGAL SERVICES.**

PwMS are often unaware of the rights, protections and accommodations that are granted to them under the UAE regulatory framework. This would be especially beneficial to expatriates who face financial constraints and are vulnerable because of visa sponsorships from their employers.

#### 1.4

##### **TRAINING TO INCREASE AWARENESS OF MS AND SUPPORT OTHER INITIATIVES.**

Training for all employees can raise awareness and help activate other solutions to promote diversity in the workplace. Awareness training can provide staff with information about MS and address questions and concerns about working with PoD. This training can cover topics such as anti-discrimination laws, workplace adjustments, and specifics on how to collaborate with colleagues affected by MS. To ensure uptake across all levels, it could be embedded in other core training programs.

UAE employers have shown an appetite for this solution, requesting training that covers both MS and working with PoD more broadly. Yet, some studies have found that such trainings can be ineffective and even damaging<sup>30</sup>. To navigate this, the content should be co-designed with experts, such as the NMSS. Ideally this training would be integrated into other core training, such as management training, rather than as a standalone training. This would both increase uptake and engagement, as well as reduce the risk of these interventions backfiring.

1.5

**DEVELOPING A COALITION OF VARIOUS PUBLIC AND PRIVATE ENTITIES WORKING FOR PWMS.**

This approach aims to achieve transparency by sharing information across different entities. It involves aligning efforts and initiatives related to regulations across entities. Additionally, best practices and lessons learned can be disseminated among coalition members. Employers who demonstrate exemplary practices in promoting workplace inclusivity will receive recognition within the coalition.

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## 02

### **HOW TO BUILD EQUITABLE WORKPLACES THROUGH ACCOMMODATIONS?**

2.1

**ESTABLISH CLEARLY DEFINED ESCALATION PATHWAYS TO REPORT NON-COMPLIANCE WITH ACCOMMODATION REQUIREMENTS.**

Incorporating an escalation pathway should encourage PwMS to easily disclose their conditions to employers with a lower risk of adverse outcomes. Recognizing that there is a well-documented risk of internal legal escalations having adverse consequences on vulnerable employees, escalation pathways should be independent of the legal structure of the employer. It is recommended that they sit within the external authorities' domain that has jurisdiction over both employers and employees.<sup>31</sup>

There is an opportunity to strengthen governance mechanisms where PwMS can formally report their diagnosis and the employers' subsequent actions are well documented to monitor outcomes and response of the employer. The process should be transparent and provide real-time updates to all the relevant stakeholders involved.

2.2

**ENSURING FLEXIBLE WORKING IS TREATED AS A NECESSARY ACCOMMODATION**

Flexible working can alleviate some of the challenges faced by PwMS such as mobility restrictions. In the absence of infrastructure modifications that require time and investment, providing PwMS greater flexibility in work hours, changes to work schedules and remote working arrangements can provide support to PwMS on an urgent basis. Digital technologies should be leveraged to facilitate remote work.

Flexible work hours can allow PoD to modify their work schedule around their needs. This includes allowing absences for rehabilitation, treatment, or assessment during regular working hours. Working from home or hybrid models can also help reduce the burden of travel for PoD.<sup>32</sup>

There is a need for alignment between PwMS and employers on the needed adjustments and documentation to facilitate implementation. Employers should develop and put in place clearly defined guidelines on flexible work accommodations that are accessible to all qualifying employees.

A study at a Chinese company found that employees working remotely were 13% more effective compared to those who worked in the office.<sup>33</sup> The study also showed that despite the success of remote working, promotion rates fell for participants working remotely. This may be due to fewer opportunities for interactions with managers and senior leadership, negatively affecting promotions and bonuses.<sup>34</sup>

Organizations can reduce this stigma by offering flexible working arrangements to everyone, avoiding strict office attendance policies, assessing staff based on objective performance rather than facetime, and facilitating interactions regardless of location.<sup>35</sup>

### 2.3

#### **PROACTIVE CO-CREATION OF CAREER PROGRESSION PLANS.**

Working actively with PwMS to chart out the future of their existing role in the organization and providing alternative pathways will allow employees to understand their options and choose the best suited roles to their condition. By implementing this approach, organizations can create a win-win situation for both PwMS and the organization.

### 2.4

#### **PUSH FOR REPRESENTATION OF POD IN THE C-SUITE AND BOARDS.**

Such an initiative would steer typically unfavorable power dynamics within organizations in the direction of PoD by giving them a voice in seats of power that can drive change. Initiatives passed from higher levels are more likely to be implemented and adhered to in large corporate structure over grass-roots initiatives.

Managers will also be more likely to support accommodation requests if they have a clear view on the company's stance on PwMS.

### 2.5

#### **ACCESSIBILITY ACCREDITED WORKSPACES.**

New workspaces, and old retro-fits should be first evaluated using a comprehensive framework that maps out employee movements and functions across a facility. This in turn should be leveraged to design accommodations that will support PwMS, as well as PoD, to navigate the workplace. The facility should seek out accessibility standards certification and if accredited be recognized by regulators to encourage other employers to also emulate.

Researchers found that in South Korea PoD who work in offices with accessible facilities (e.g., ramps, accessible bathrooms) were more satisfied with their employers and more likely to stay at their job.<sup>36</sup>

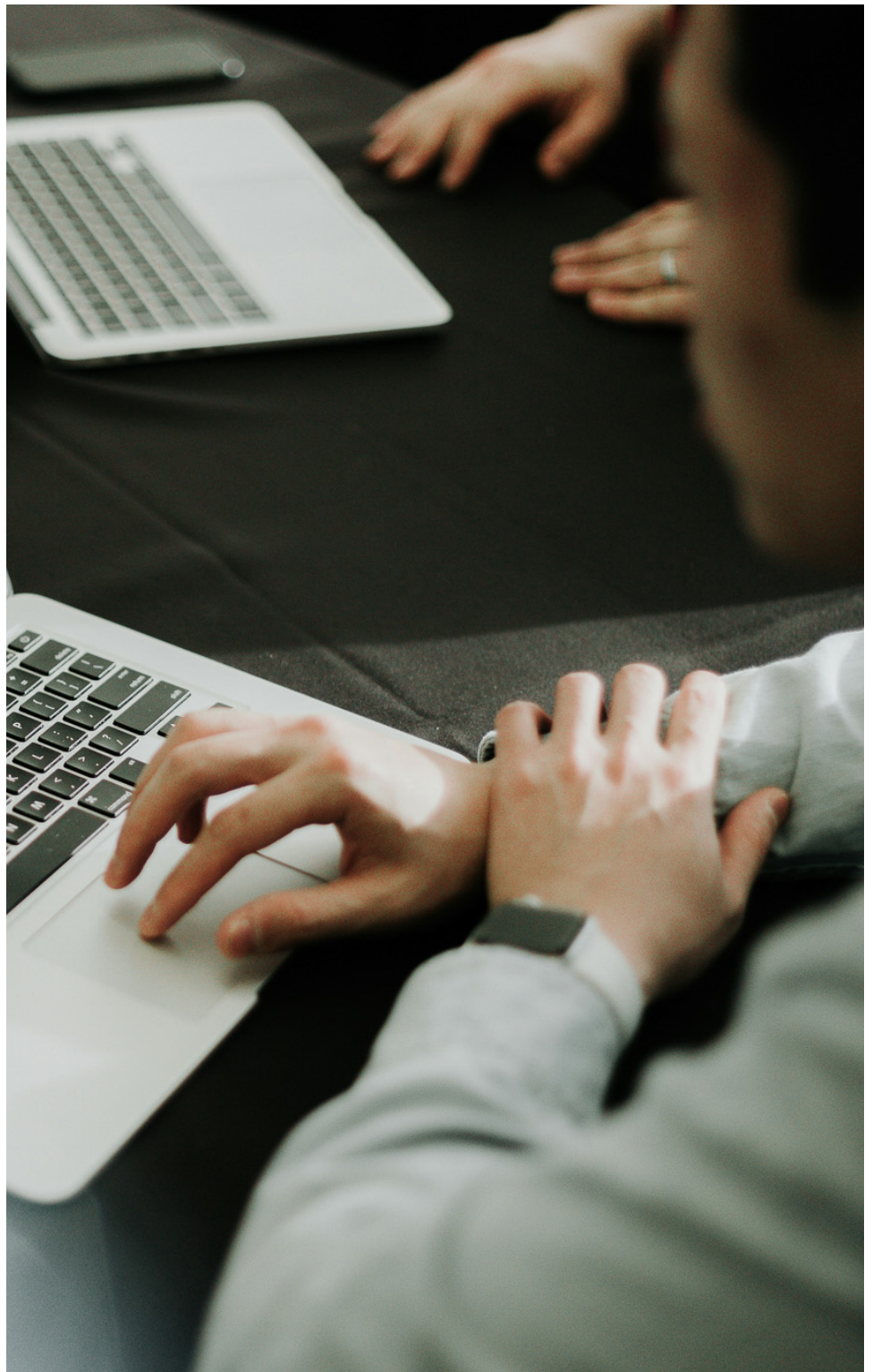
A global survey found that being able to sit while working was the top work-related factor that has helped employed people with MS stay in employment.<sup>37</sup> Additionally, 15% reported an elevator in the building and an accessible bathroom help them stay in their job. PwMS with progressive MS, cognitive impairment, or more severe MS symptoms were more likely to use work adjustments.<sup>38</sup>

**RALLYING SUPPORT FOR PWMS  
BY BUILDING AN ADVOCACY  
COALITION WITH OTHER  
ORGANIZATIONS WORKING FOR  
POD TO EXPAND INFLUENCE  
WITHIN POLICY MAKING CIRCLES.**

The need for workplace accommodations often overlaps across various disability groups. While this recommendation focuses on PwMS, the adjustments required (e.g., flexible work hours) can benefit a wider range of employees.

“Inclusive changes have positive ripple effects for all”

**EMPLOYER REPRESENTATIVE**



## NEXT STEPS

Creating inclusive workplaces for PwMS in the future requires a collaborative approach involving regulators, employers, and society across the UAE at large. This collective effort is essential to effectively realize the initiatives recommended in this white paper.

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### POLICYMAKERS

1. Set up a series of workshops with stakeholders to inform the development of a unified law.
2. Map PwMS journeys in accessing services (e.g., PoD cards) to facilitate seamless access.
3. Develop systems to monitor and appraise the implementation of the regulatory framework to drive transparency and accountability for employers across the UAE.
4. Build an advocacy coalition with other organizations working for PoD or based on symptoms to expand influence within policy making circles.

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### EMPLOYERS

1. Build systems and processes for better monitoring of PoD in organizations to set targets and measure performance (disclosures are a sensitive matter therefore leveraging methods such as anonymous surveys, informal conversations with the PoD to build trust, or formal disclosures for national reporting).
2. Fostering an empathetic approach to disclosures through introducing the concept of “workability” by which the conversation between the employer and employee focuses on what the individual needs to work rather than the binary categorization of PoD.
3. Re-design organizations through digitally enabled ways of working i.e., remote working to facilitate PwMS.
4. Assess the feasibility of alternative organizational structures that support PwMS to co-create career pathways that place diversity and inclusion at the heart of the way business is conducted in the UAE.

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Monitoring new policies and evaluating programs helps uncover issues and prioritize resources effectively. Setting targets fosters accountability and drives organizational change. Some of these targets should have.

#### SPECIFICITY

Specific targets are more likely to motivate than general goals.

#### AMBITION

Targets based on current performance or in line with external standards.

#### DEADLINES

Targets with realistic deadlines are more likely to be achieved.

#### MONITORING

Promoting accountability using goal setting and rewards / recognitions.

## SOCIETY

1. Engage with national bodies to develop an understanding of MS and deploy social media to influence and drive awareness.
2. Nurture empathy and inclusivity as core values to be disseminated across the UAE.
3. Support and recognize people, organizations and elements of society working towards enhancing workplace inclusivity in the UAE.<sup>39</sup>



## CONCLUSION

The future of workplace inclusion for PwMS hinges on increasing MS awareness in the workplace and by building equitable workplaces through accommodations.

Building upon the existing regulatory framework in the UAE that safeguards the rights and well-being of PoD (including those living with MS), concerted efforts across various entities present an opportunity to enhance and reinforce these policies.

In addition to regulatory measures, collaboration with key stakeholders including PwMS, employers, and the broader society is essential to drive impactful change on a broader scale. NMSS being at the nexus of these stakeholders can play a vital role in supporting initiatives by amplifying the voices of PwMS and facilitating meaningful dialogue.

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MS Ambassadors

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Al Dar

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TAQA

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Ledgers

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Takalam

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## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

ADA	The Americans with Disabilities Act
BSG	Behavioral Science Group
CDA	Community Development Authority
DCD	Department of Community Development
D&I	Diversity & Inclusion
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MoCE	Ministry of Community Empowerment
MS	Multiple Sclerosis
MSIF	MS International Federation
NMSS	National Multiple Sclerosis Society
PoD	People of Determination
PwMS	People Living with MS

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