

Work Identity Among Differently Abled Employees

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Abstract

Disability inclusion is increasingly becoming popular among many companies, both in small-scale and large MNCs, as a strategy for competitive advantage in recent years. However, researchers previously have identified a lack of attention to this area in the field of research. Consequently, with the phenomenon not being explored extensively, companies trying to form disability inclusion initiatives have been observed to lack sensitivity to the phenomenon on various levels. To bridge this gap, the present study attempts to understand the concept of disability identity, ableism, and its influence on the perceived inclusion of a differently abled employee within an organisation under different circumstances. Three propositions have been arrived at in this conceptual paper, which indicates the complexity associated with the concept of disability identity, which is eventually supposed to drive disability inclusion initiatives for a given organisation. Implications and future directions indicate the need for more quantitative studies in the area to provide data evidence as empirical support.

Keywords

Disability inclusion, disability identity, ableism, perceived inclusion, diversity, work identity

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Introduction

Disability inclusion as a strategy has increasingly gained importance in the corporate world in recent years. Multiple studies have been conducted in the past decade which has emphasised that the advantages of disability inclusion in the workplace can result in benefits like employees with increased organisational commitment and, most important competitive advantage (Kalargyrou, 2014; Lindsay et al., 2018; Miethlich & Oldenburg, 2019). However, the same studies have also indicated that stereotyping differently abled employees can lead to lesser productivity. As indicated by Ashforth and Mael (1989), aspects like organisational commitment can be potential consequences of work identities formed by employees within an organisation. This suggests that differently abled employees will likely develop identities specific to their workplaces. However, in the context of capabilities, these employees differ from others in an organisation. Since individual capabilities can potentially play a role in the formation of identities, as suggested by Riach and Loretto (2009) in their research where aging workers were observed to have their work identities affected due to their ability to do work, it can be deduced that the work identities formed by differently abled employees can differ from the identities created by other employees in the organisation. Given that disability inclusion has been an essential strategy for various corporate companies in recent times, it would be beneficial or rather crucial for companies to understand the formation of work identities among differently abled employees to continue reaping the benefits of the strategy. Studies on disability inclusion have been qualitative and usually involve the hospitality and medical sectors. This article aims to understand workplace identity among differently abled employees better and proposes that the disability identity for differently abled employees influences their perceived inclusion within the organisation.

Theoretical Background and Propositions

In their research, Stone and Colella (1996) have previously indicated that factors like the nature of job and organisation facilities significantly affect the perception of differently abled employees within an organisation. They further noted that factors like supervisor attitude and co-worker attitude influence differently abled employees the most in creating a liking/disliking for their job role within an organisation. In their research study, Bruyere et al. (2003) also noted that the commitment from top management officials of a firm towards creating a non-discriminating environment for differently abled employees is the key to removing barriers that these employees might possess. Santuzzi and Waltz (2016) recognised that differently abled employees of any organisation form a unique and variable identity in the workplace, dependent on several factors. They further elucidated that this work identity is complex and exists with the integration of several other identities that can be formed in a work context. According to them, the following factors contribute to creating work identity among differently abled employees, which they term 'Disability Identity'.

The first factor is an intraindividual factor which broadly means an individual's personal experience, as perceived by them at a workplace. According to Santuzzi and Waltz (2016), if an individual does not choose to identify with any disability they possess, this factor might be neutralised, which can lead to potential difficulties for the individual that they did not foresee. The second factor is an interpersonal factor which broadly includes the supervisor and co-worker attitudes towards the differently abled employees at the workplace, which can have a significant positive/negative impact on the intended individual. The third factor includes organisational aspects like the nature of the job, work stress, facilities provided to make access to things more accessible for differently abled employees, and job demands/changes. A fourth factor beyond the organisation's boundaries is also included, which involves how the disability for the individual is defined medically and what legal reforms the individual is benefitting from, along with the cultural stereotyping that the individual might be facing outside of the workplace too. According to the authors, the positive disability identity formed from the influence of these factors can increase the individual's self-esteem and improve their psychological health and work. The authors further point out that failing to develop such an identity that is in positive alignment with an individual's position can lead to grievous health risks for the individual, both physically and mentally, thereby potentially affecting the individual's work life.

Two more concepts are pivotal for this conceptual paper's understanding of disability identity. The first concept is Perceived Inclusion, as Chen and Tang (2018) explained. According to the authors, perceived inclusion is an individual's feeling of being accepted/included in a workplace. The authors show that this can significantly increase organisational commitment in their study. For a differently abled employee, it can be argued that factors like the organisation facilities exclusively provided to them for making them feel included, the nature of their job, and the nature of the interaction (specifically how empathetic and inclusive) with their colleagues and supervisors majorly add towards increasing their organisational commitment. These factors, as explained previously, can be categorised under the organisational and interpersonal factors influencing the disability identity of a differently abled employee and workplace. Perceived Inclusion for a differently abled employee can be logically significant when organisational factors and interpersonal factors of the disability identity are positively influencing the individual. Hence the following proposition.

Proposition 1: Perceived inclusion for a differently abled employee increases with the positive influence of organisational and interpersonal factors within an organisation.

The second concept closely related to disability identity is 'Ableism', as explained by Jammaers et al. (2016). According to them, Ableism refers to the ideas, practices, institutions, and social relations that operate with the presumption of able-bodiedness within an organisation. In terms of disability identity, ableism strongly and negatively affects the organisational factors and interpersonal factors for a differently abled employee since, in an organisation that is functioning on high ableism, there

is a tendency to discriminate or disregard the needs of differently abled employees. This can logically affect the disability identity of a differently abled employee within an organisation negatively. Hence the following proposition.

Proposition 2: The positivity of disability identity for a differently abled employee within an organisation increases with a decrease in ableism observed within the organisation.

However, suppose the disability identity for a differently abled employee is negative, that is, In that case, the employee is not open to identifying with their disability (intraindividual factor). The prevalence of ableism within an organisation for the employee can potentially increase the differently abled employee's perceived inclusion. This can be possible due to the organisation and employees' mutual disregard for the disability that is prevalent. Although this can consequently lead to various physical and psychological difficulties for the differently abled employee (based on the nature of disability), the following proposition can imply under these circumstances.

Proposition 3: Perceived inclusion for a differently abled employee increases with an increase in ableism within an organisation, provided that the intraindividual conception of the disability is negative.

Discussion

The three propositions stated in the article help in identifying that the degree of disability identity of a differently abled employee within an organisation ranging from positive to negative based on the factors mentioned, can significantly influence the perceived inclusion of the employee differently under different circumstances. Ableism, which is generally observed to be a discriminatory phenomenon against the differently abled employees of an organisation, can positively impact the perceived inclusion of a differently abled employee under certain specific circumstances (when the disability identity of the employee is negative). All these arguments indicate the complexity of the concept involving disability identity, which influences various factors and is further influenced by several factors during its formation for a differently abled individual within an organisation. This complexity of disability identity consequently leads to the argument on sensitivity. Disability inclusion as a strategy has been gaining popularity among companies in recent years. However, it remains to be verified how many companies are sensitive and considerate when policies and initiatives are designed for disability inclusion. This article's contribution is mainly towards encouraging the sensitisation of the companies while forming and leading disability inclusion initiatives by helping them understand the complexity of disability identity.

The propositions proposed in this article can further lead to a new definition of a positive disability identity for differently abled employees which can say that 'the positive disability identity for a differently abled employee within an

organisation is a function of increased perceived inclusion and decreased ableism within the organisation combined with the external cultural and medical influence on the differently abled individual’.

Randel et al. (2005) integrated role identity theory and status characteristic theory to propose that identity commitment to a particular status characteristic can influence an individual’s perception of task competence and group conformity in a workplace. Suppose this logic is applied to positive disability identity. In that case, it can be noticed that status characteristics for the differently abled employee will be neutralised in the context of disability due to decreased ableism and increased perceived inclusion for the employee in the organisation. This would indicate that a positive disability identity for a differently abled employee can help improve the self-esteem of the individual through increased task competence and group conformity within the organisation, hence confirming the theory of Santuzzi and Waltz (2016) that the positive disability identity for a differently abled employee can increase their self-esteem leading to improved work life for the individual.

Implications and Future Directions

The implication of this study is directly for the organisations looking to maintain the benefits they are receiving since the strategic implementation of disability inclusion at their workplace. The proposed propositions of this conceptual paper can be further hypothesised and tested empirically across different organisations for generalisation since most of the current studies on disability inclusion in organisations are mainly qualitative and are restricted to specific sectors of organisations like hospitality and medical sectors. To explore the area quantitatively, the constructs of disability identity, perceived inclusion, and ableism can be operationalised with specific dimensions for which appropriated scales can be developed. The focus on quantitative studies in the area is emphasised as quantitative studies provide the much-needed data support as empirical evidence for companies to understand, apply and invest in the strategy of disability inclusion, which at present is at a nascent stage in research as well as a strategy for competitive advantage.

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