

Disclosure or nondisclosure - is this the question?

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Disclosure or Nondisclosure – Is This the Question?

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In their focal article “Invisible Disabilities: Unique Challenges for Employees and Organizations,” Santuzzi, Waltz, Finkelshtein, and Rupp (2014) argue that people with invisible disabilities are insufficiently protected by legislation and policies at their workplaces. Accordingly, they suggest that

existing acts such as the ADA and ADAAA (ADA, 1990; ADA Amendments Act, 2008) need to be substantially adapted. We concur with their argumentation and agree that legislation and policies, in their current form, rather impede the process of disclosing a disability instead of contributing to an improved situation of people with invisible disabilities at work.

In our commentary we extend Santuzzi et al.'s work by highlighting the role of the employing organization itself, particularly the organizational culture and climate, in facilitating disclosure of invisible disabilities, an aspect that the focal article only slightly touches upon. Furthermore, we argue for taking a more international perspective on factors that may help or hinder the process of disclosing disabilities at work.

Looking Beyond Legislation

Santuzzi et al. discuss factors that inhibit employees with invisible disabilities from disclosing. In doing so, they focus on legislative issues as well as on factors such as expected stigma and unfairness perceptions. We aim to contribute to this discussion by emphasizing organizational aspects that may facilitate disclosure. By taking this perspective, disability research can build more strongly on the existing knowledge base in industrial–organizational (I–O) research on organizational factors that affect employees' attitudes, behaviors, and eventually well-being. There is a need to stimulate knowledge on how the integration of individuals with disabilities into the work context can be facilitated on the individual, team, and organizational level of analysis.

First, on the individual level, stereotypes, attitudes, empathy, and knowledge can have a profound impact on the disclosure decisions of employees with disabilities. Those who expect to be judged by their peers may experience stigma by being perceived as different and devalued, which will consequently negatively affect their well-being (Bos, Pryor, Reeder, & Stutterheim, 2013). In I–O literature there

are a large number of studies demonstrating the impact the organization and its leaders can have on employee attitudes. One of the possibilities is to implement interventions to influence employees' stereotypes, attitudes, and general awareness disabilities. Previous research suggests that feelings of empathy work as a catalyst to improve attitudes toward a stigmatized group (Batson et al., 1997). When individuals come into contact with and receive information about people with disabilities, their attitudes will change in a favorable manner (Anthony, 1972). For instance, Hunt and Hunt (2004) devised an educational intervention that increased knowledge on and subsequently yielded positive attitudes toward people with disabilities in the workplace. Notably, there is also evidence that suggests that acknowledging a disability will lead to more liking by their peers (Hastorf, Wildfogel, & Cassman, 1979), which stresses the positive consequences of disclosure.

Second, on the team level, there is initial evidence that climate perceptions on justice and inclusion are important for the well-being of people with disabilities. Studies on the consequences of a justice climate highlight the relationship with citizenship behavior, well-being, and team performance. A recent study shows that work environments that are fair and responsive are specifically beneficial for people with disabilities (Schur, Kruse, Blasi, & Blanck, 2009). Literature on employees with disabilities stresses the importance of a climate that fosters inclusion in work teams. Inclusion refers to the "extent to which people with disabilities are accepted, helped, and treated as others by their coworkers" (Colella & Bruyère, 2011, pp. 492–493). An inclusive climate will therefore be vital to the well-being of people with disabilities at the workplace. Existing literature emphasizes the role of leaders and supervisors in structuring the daily practices and procedures that constitute a climate. Therefore, supervisors need to be made aware of their facilitating role in creating a climate that fosters inclusion and thereby mitigates the negative outcomes of disclosing.

Third, on the organizational level, corporate culture can have a profound effect on the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors toward people with disabilities. Research shows that the adoption of corporate social responsibility as part of an organizational identity leads to favorable evaluations by the organization's stakeholders (Martínez, Pérez, & Rodríguez del Bosque, 2013). An alignment of goals throughout the organization is likely to facilitate the inclusion of people with disabilities, as employees will act according to the values set by the organization (Aguilera & Rupp, 2007). Thus when organization culture and team climate promote positive attitudes toward people with disabilities as coworkers, the negative consequences of disclosure can be mitigated.

An International Perspective

A second point we want to address is that the focal article is strongly based on the specific U.S. labor market situation and U.S. legislation. This is regrettable for at least two reasons. First, because the labor market situation may differ from country to country, a single U.S. solution may not be generalizable to other countries. Second, given the heterogeneity of legislation regarding employment of people with disabilities among countries, it would be worthwhile to study and compare these different types of legislation in order to come to more informed decisions.

From a European perspective we can add experiences showing the ineffectiveness of interventions that are aimed at fostering the integration of people with disabilities but are exclusively based on legislation. Due to demographic changes, such as the retirement of the baby-boom generation and an ageing workforce, a number of European countries anticipate a considerable decline in the working-age population by 2020. As a result, governments have implemented legislation to motivate organizations to employ people with disabilities. However, despite these policies, hardly any country was able to boost the inclusion of people with disabilities into regular organizations (European

Commission, 2008). The overall level of work participation of people with disabilities is still very low (45% compared to 75% employment in nondisabled people).

An approach that has been implemented, for instance in Germany, France, and Poland, is a disability quota system that forces companies to employ a minimum amount (5% or more of the workforce) of people with disabilities. With this form of legislation it is favorable for a company when employees disclose their disability as this helps them to attain their quota. Unfortunately, even in countries that have installed quota systems, the employment rate of people with disabilities is still considerably lower compared to the employment rate of nondisabled people (Shima, Zólyomi, & Zaidi, 2008). Moreover, a quota system can have the negative side effect of stimulating negative attitudes toward people with disabilities by both employers and coworkers. Companies faced with quota systems often experience people with disabilities as a burden instead of a valuable contribution to their workforce, and nondisabled workers may perceive the quota job placements as creating an unfair division in the labor market.

Due to the expected decline in the working-age population in several European countries, there is an increasing recognition visible, both in governmental policies and in organizations, that people with disabilities can provide added value to an organization. Demographic changes are expected to negatively influence the competitiveness of one third of the European regions, and the extent to which these developments will affect economic growth depends considerably on labor participation. From this perspective, people with disabilities do not only constitute a valuable contribution to the workforce of a company, they are also indispensable.

An important challenge to the successful inclusion of people with disabilities arises from a mismatch in the labor market due to the rapid shift of primary sector industries toward a service oriented and knowledge-intensive economy (European Commission,

2008). The consequence of this shift is an increase in the complexity of work and job demands. As a result, employers search for people with high levels of education and competences, requirements that especially people with disabilities are often not able to meet. Interventions at the organizational level, such as the redesign of work and work processes, can help to overcome these difficulties (Van Ruitenbeek, Mulder, Zijlstra, Nijhuis, & Mulders, 2013). Merely adapting legislation will not establish a sound base for disability disclosure.

Final Thoughts

As a last point, we would like to draw attention to a broader perspective of research on people with disabilities at work. We concur with the authors that it is a challenge for researchers and practitioners to understand the experiences of, and accommodate individuals with invisible disabilities. However, knowing more about the challenges of having disabilities in general in organizations, how these individuals are treated, and what helps or hinders their functioning in organizations, is needed before addressing the unique challenges of individuals with invisible disabilities. The decision to disclose a disability is likely to depend on the general treatment of people with disabilities within organizations as disclosing is eventually a decision to become part of the recognized group of people with disabilities. It is therefore necessary to look behind the scenes and understand the complex network of social relationships within organizations, and most prominently we need to understand why people with disabilities are often excluded from these networks and what we can do about this. Given the overall paucity of research on disability and employment in I–O psychology, we should not focus too narrowly on the issue of disclosure of invisible disabilities but also find out more about integration processes in general, such as acceptance, socialization, and so forth considering various levels of analysis. A sound base of knowledge on

factors related to the integration of people with disabilities in general can set the stage for addressing the challenges faced by people with invisible disabilities more in particular.

In their focal article, the authors take the perspective that the adjustment of legislation and policies facilitates the decision of people with invisible disabilities to disclose their disability. In our comment we add, on the one hand, the important role of the organization itself in the process of disclosure, and on the other hand we express our doubts about the success of exclusively legislation based interventions when comparing different European countries. Therefore, we certainly agree with Santuzzi et al. that legislation does not yet sufficiently protect people with invisible disabilities and that more research is needed on this topic, but we would advocate a greater focus on multiple perspectives on barriers and enablers of disclosure and, to go beyond the question of disclosure, taking into account and putting greater emphasis on the social aspects of the integration process of people with disabilities within an organization.

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