



Theorizing managerial perceptions, enabling IT, and the social inclusion of workers with disabilities



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1. Introduction

An enduring challenge in information systems (IS) research is understanding how information technology (IT) can be best leveraged to advance the strategies of organizations. Diversity and inclusion are increasingly important organizational strategies woven into every aspect of the talent management lifecycle. A 2017 survey by Deloitte shows that the proportion of executives who view social inclusion (SI) as a top priority has grown 32% in the past 3 years (Bourke, Garr, van Berkel, & Wong, 2017). More diverse and inclusive organizations are believed to enjoy greater customer orientation, increased employee satisfaction, improved decision-making and greater ability to attract top talent (Hunt, Layton, & Prince, 2015; Rock & Grant, 2016). Despite growing recognition of the benefits of diversity and social inclusion, organizations have failed to proportionately include people with disabilities (Chan et al., 2010; Institute on Disability, 2016; McDonnall, Crudden, & O'Malley, 2015; UNCRPD, 2008). A comprehensive study by the U.S. Department of Labor involving 3,797 U.S. managers found fewer than 20% employed workers with disabilities (Domzal, Houtenville, & Sharma, 2008). Managers have thus far been challenged to develop effective strategies for the inclusion of people with disabilities (Domzal et al., 2008; Erickson, Lee, & von Schrader, 2014a; Nota, Santilli, Ginevra, & Soresi, 2014; World Blind Union, 2010). What role can IS researchers play in helping organizations enact better strategies for the social inclusion of workers with disabilities?

Advances in enabling IT have dramatically increased the capabilities of workers with certain disabilities. Projects such as Microsoft's "Seeing AI", Toyota's "Project Blaid", NVIDIA's "Horus", Apple's talking iProducts, Google Glass, AIRA, and others demonstrate the high degree of commitment of the IT industry to redefine disability through the use of enabling IT (Apple Inc., 2017; Beckett, 2016; Duffy, 2017; D. Lee, 2016; Smith, 2017). Some of this technology is relatively mature. Commodity devices such as smartphones, with their built-in screen readers, cameras, speech synthesizers and enabling apps comprise a mobile IT bundle have been shown to afford blind workers new capabilities (Babu & Heath, 2017). Organizational strategies toward diversity and inclusion stand to benefit from these developments. IS research is needed to inform organizations regarding how to leverage enabling IT to include workers with disabilities.

Current IS research on SI in the organizational context has largely focused on issues such as gender, racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic imbalance within the IT field (Ahuja, 2002; Trauth, 2017). For example, Trauth and Graham (2015) studied if veterans with disabilities see themselves as future IT professionals. This stream of research focuses primarily on social and structural factors behind inclusion/exclusion practices, underemphasizing the role of IT as an enabler of SI. A second stream of SI research addresses technology enablement primarily as a design issue concerned with IT accessibility and usability for users with disabilities, rather than as a vehicle for SI (Cushman & Mclean, 2008; Trauth & Graham, 2015). There exists an opportunity for IS researchers to bridge these two streams and develop new SI theories on the role of enabling IT in advancing organizational strategies on diversity and inclusion regarding workers with disabilities.

The problem of IT-enabled social inclusion of workers with disabilities is socio-technical at its core. Many organizations have

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limited experience hiring and managing workers with disabilities (Domzal et al., 2008). The UN Commission on the Rights of People with Disabilities observes managers often fail to appreciate that when enabling IT is made available, workers with disabilities are able to work as effectively as their non-disabled colleagues in a wide range of industrial, commercial, managerial and professional jobs (2008, Article 27 section 2.2). In fact, research has shown that managers often invoke negative stereotypes when evaluating workers with disabilities (Crudden & McBroom, 1999; M. McDonnall et al., 2015; Ren, Paetzold, & Colella, 2008a; Stone & Colella, 1996). Negative disability stereotypes have a profound effect on managers expectations regarding the ability of a worker with disability to perform a job, and are a major barrier to their workplace inclusion (Crudden & McBroom, 1999; Crudden, Williams, Moore, & McBroom, 2002; Kirchner & Harkins, 1997; Louvet, 2007a). While disability stereotypes are not necessarily true, these are extremely resistant to change by disconfirming information (Brewer & Miller, 1984; Stone & Colella, 1996). Though enabling ITs are redefining what it means to be disabled, it is not known whether disability stereotypes held by managers are sensitive to disconfirming information regarding the new capabilities these technologies might afford. New theorization is needed to account for managerial perceptions and their impact on IT-enabled workplace inclusion of people with disabilities.

This study explores how increased awareness of enabling IT can impact the disability stereotypes of managers. Specifically, it addressed the following questions: (1) *how does increased awareness of enabling IT and the capabilities it can afford impact the stereotypical beliefs of managers toward workers with disabilities?* And (2) *does a better-informed stereotype increase the likelihood of their workplace inclusion?* Workplace inclusion, in this study, refers to employment, participation in workplace activities, and the potential for career advancement. The context of our investigation was blindness as a type of disability. There are several factors which motivate the selection of blindness as the context. First, much is known regarding the blindness stereotypes held by managers (American Foundation for the Blind, 2014; M. McDonnall et al., 2015; National Industries for the Blind, 2012; World Blind Union, 2010). Second, there has been explosive growth in the number of enabling applications available to blind smartphone users. AppleVis, a community-powered website dedicated to blind users of Apple products, has catalogued over 120 commercially available apps developed specifically to empower blind people (AppleVis, 2016). Finally, > 160 million people around the world are blind or severely vision impaired (World Health Organization, 2010). Only 25% of the working age adults in this group are employed (Institute on Disability, 2016). Among those who are unemployed, nearly three-quarters express their desire to work (Ren, Paetzold, & Colella, 2008b). Research on the IT-enabled inclusion of blind workers is a potentially high-impact area of investigation. Unraveling this puzzle could help organizations leverage IT to reach a large and untapped pool of talent which has been historically underrepresented in the workplace.

The research questions were investigated quantitatively using a quasi-experimental pre and post research design. Research participants included 235 managers of organizations spread across the U.S. Results showed that increased awareness of enabling IT and the capabilities it affords can significantly reduce the negative disability stereotypes held by managers. IT-enabled workers were deemed more capable, more independent, and easier to accommodate in the workplace than their unassisted peers. They were seen as a better fit with the work and workplace. Participants professed greater willingness to include these workers in the work activities in their organizations. The findings suggest negative disability stereotypes held by managers are vulnerable to educational interventions.

The balance of the paper is organized as follows. The first section provides a review of relevant literature on disability stereotypes and social inclusion of people with disabilities. Next, the conceptual model is presented with related hypotheses. Following this is a discussion of the methods. Next is a description of the data analysis and results. This is followed by the discussion, implications, and conclusion.

2. Review of literature

2.1. Stereotypes and social inclusion in the IS literature

There is a significant body of IS research dedicated to understanding how cultural, social, and organizational stereotypes influence the social inclusion (SI) of underrepresented groups in the IT profession. IS research on SI often investigates the intersectionality of stereotypes about marginalized groups (e.g. gender, race and ethnicity) with stereotypes related to the profession. A number of studies have examined how gender stereotypes and stereotypes of IT work have discourage the entry of women into the IT workforce (Adya, Kaiser, Adya, & Kaiser, 2005; Ahuja, 2002; Annabi & Lebovitz, 2011; Clayton, Beekhuizen, & Nielsen, 2012; Trauth, 2017). Identity factors such as ethnicity and race have also been examined in relation to participation in the IT profession (Cain & Trauth, 2013; Joshi, Kvasny, Unnikrishnan, & Trauth, 2016; McLaurin, Carte, & Randolph, 2015). For example, Kvasny, Trauth, and Morgan (2009) investigated power relations in IT education and work as experienced by black women who were both developers and users of IT. Morgan and Trauth (2013) examined the intersectionality of gender, race, and socio-economic factors in the use of IT for health information search and retrieval. Trauth, Cain, Joshi, Kvasny, & Booth (2016) investigated gender-ethnic intersectionality in their study of university students and their stereotypes regarding the IT profession. Despite this interest in stereotypes and their relationship with SI, the IS literature is largely silent on disability-related stereotypes and the inclusion of workers with disabilities. Based on a thorough review of IS literature, we found only two relevant articles. These studies dealt with the self-perceptions of military veterans with disabilities and their ability to “see themselves” in IT careers (Trauth, 2017). These studies focus on the perspective of an individual experiencing a disability, and not that of the observer (e.g. the manager of an employee with disability). Since managers serve as gate-keepers of a firm who decide whether an individual with disability may be included or not in their workforce, their perspective on workers with disabilities assumes critical significance for SI within the organizational context. As existing IS literature does not throw any light on this critical managerial perspective, we turn to literature from other disciplines to

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