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Invisible Disability: A Review of Hearing and Vision Impairment Challenges in the Workplace

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Invisible Disability: A Review of Hearing and Vision Impairment Challenges in the Workplace

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Abstract

This thesis explores the factors related to individuals with vision and hearing impairments in organizational contexts within the United States. It overviews the definitions, current state, and U.S. legislation pertaining to individuals with disabilities in the workplace. The thesis reviews disclosure practices, psychological theories, and recommendations for supporting and accommodating individuals with hearing and vision disabilities. In reviewing these factors, this research aims to enhance understanding of the challenges faced by individuals with hearing and vision impairments in organizations and contribute to fostering inclusive and supportive work environments. The thesis also identifies areas for further research in order to advance knowledge and practice in this field.

Introduction

The U.S. workforce participation rate is projected to continue increasing among individuals 65 and older, with estimates indicating a rise from 18.9 percent in 2021 to 21.5 percent by 2031 (Dubina et al., 2022). As employees age and experience age-related sensory, cognitive, and physical changes, maintaining workplace effectiveness may become increasingly difficult. (Wagner-Hartl et al., 2018). The age-related impairment of the five classical senses (sight, smell, hearing, touch, and taste) significantly burdens older populations (Wagner-Hartl et al., 2018). The older population is not the only groups affected as the World Health Organization (2023) also estimates that over 1 billion young adults are also at risk for permanent hearing loss due to unsafe listening practices. Therefore, there is a growing need for more research on disability prevalence and disclosure across various age groups in the workplace.

The present thesis will examine the prevalence of hearing and vision impairments in the workplace. Vision and hearing impairments are prevalent sensory impairments that impact many individuals in the workforce. Research on this topic has revealed that vision and hearing impairments profoundly affect communication, information processing, and overall job performance (Dobie & Van Hemel, 2004; Svinndal et al., 2020; Wagner-Hartl et al., 2018). As a result, these sensory impairments can significantly impact an individual's ability to navigate the work environment. Addressing the specific challenges of vision and hearing impairments can lead to more tangible and practical outcomes in improving workplace accessibility and effectiveness for other persons with disabilities.

The ADA defines an individual with a disability as "a person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a person who has a history or record of such an impairment, or a person who is perceived by

others as having such an impairment" (Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990, p. 7). For

this thesis, medical, ADA, and social definitions are explored in the following

sections. *Hearing impairments* impact a person's hearing frequency and intensity (World

Health Organization, 2023). The severity of hearing loss might range from mild to

profound, affecting one ear or both ears. Hearing impairment may also impact the ability

to hear in conversations or during the occurrence of loud noises. Hard of hearing is a term

familiar to those with hearing loss. Hearing aids, cochlear implants, and other technology

are commonly used among individuals with hearing loss, but most still rely on verbal

communication (World Health Organization, 2023). Another term used among

individuals with profound hearing loss is 'Deaf.' Deaf commonly applies to those with

little or no hearing and Deaf individuals commonly use sign language to communicate

(World Health Organization, 2023). On the other hand, The World Health Organization

defines *vision impairment* as the inability of a person's eyesight to be corrected to a

normal level (World Health Organization, 2022). Vision impairment can also be

described as the loss of the visual field which makes it difficult to see without moving the

head in cases like tunnel vision.(World Health Organization, 2022).

    With disability experiences varying widely, the workforce needs to accurately

understand and define hearing and vision impairments to design disclosure initiatives and

accommodations. Many factors may impact a person's willingness to disclose, such as the

visibility of a disability, stigmas attached to their conditions, and situational contexts

(including status at work, amount of support, and opportunities) (Southall et al., 2011;

Syma, 2018; van Beukering et al., 2022). Many disabilities are invisible to most people,

including vision and hearing impairments. Therefore, invisible *disabilities* refer to a

physiological and psychological conditions that tend not to reveal outward signs connected to an impairment (Santuzzi et al., 2014). As a result, those with more visible disabilities may make different decisions regarding disclosure compared to those with an invisible disability.

Current legislation protects individuals with any disability, allowing them the opportunity to disclose their disability at work. However, this creates a situation where if an employer is uninformed of an impairment, there may be no obligation to make reasonable accommodations. (Prince, 2017). Furthermore, managers often only learn about disclosures when they are done through human resource departments which can also leave them in the dark about making appropriate recommendations. As a result, the choice to directly disclose to work relationships like managers and colleagues are less scrutinized under the law compared to disclosing to HR departments, leaving the disabled individual more susceptible to adverse reactions (Patton, 2019). While laws are necessary to protect people with disabilities from discrimination at work, they frequently fall short of capturing the realities and dynamics present in modern organizational life (Santuzzi et al., 2014). Workplace dynamics play a significant role in career advancement as task performance is not the only measure used in today's workplace to assess employee success. Workers must be proficient in soft interpersonal skills related to their job duties to be deemed good workers (Patton, 2019). Workplace relationships are at the center of disclosure. As a result, social interactions play a significant role in influencing those with invisible health conditions.

Overall, this paper will explore the concepts, findings, and gaps regarding the prevalence of hearing and vision impairments in the workplace. The subtopics include

examining the definitions, history of the legislation and enforcement of laws protecting against disability, and experiences of disability disclosure in greater detail. Additionally, this paper will review the organizational benefits of inclusion, followed by intervention recommendations, and report on the directions for future research regarding this topic.

History of ADA and EEOC

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was signed into law in 1990. The ADA was intended as an equal opportunity law for people with disabilities, affirming and protecting the rights of those with disabilities concerning employment, government services, and other facets of public life (Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990). In 2008, an amendment to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADAAA) was signed into law to address certain limitations and interpretations that had emerged since the ADA's initial enactment in 1990 (Rozalsk et al., 2010). Supreme Court decisions before the amendment limited the scope of the ADA and narrowed the definition of disability (Rozalsk et al., 2010). The goal of the amendment was to interpret the definition of disability more inclusively while also ensuring that individuals with disabilities receive the necessary accommodations and support. The need for broad a broad definition can help explain why there is no definite list of disabilities that the ADA covers, as the amendment aimed to correct any restrictive readings of the ADA and further equal opportunities and rights for people with disabilities.

According to the ADA, a disability is an impairment that severely limits one or more main life activities. Major life activities include a broad range of essential functions that people typically perform every day (Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990). Mobility, hearing, vision, communication, breathing, carrying out manual chores, and caring for oneself are just a few examples. The ADA assures that people with disabilities,

which affect these core areas, are protected by the law by defining the scope of

significant everyday activities. Additionally, a significant factor in the definition of a

disability that the ADA implemented in the 2008 amendment was omitting any mitigating

measures (Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990). For example, the advantages of using

a hearing aid or having a cochlear implant are ignored when deciding whether a hearing

impairment is substantially limiting.

      On the other hand, mitigation for vision impairments is more complex because

not all individuals who wear glasses are regarded as disabled (Equal Employment

Opportunity Commission, 2023). As a result, the legislation mandates that one should

consider the benefits of wearing regular eyeglasses or contact lenses (Americans with

Disabilities Act, 1990). An individual's vision impairment does not qualify as a disability

under the first part of the ADA's definition of disability if wearing regular lenses does not

significantly limit a significant life activity. Overall, the ADA implemented a broad

definition by focusing on major life activities. This allows individuals to create a case for

their disabilities and acknowledges the importance of equal access and opportunities for

all, regardless of their specific impairment or condition.

      A crucial part of enforcing the Americans with Disabilities Act's (Americans with

Disabilities Act, 1990) employment rules is the US Equal Employment Opportunity

Commission (EEOC). The EEOC guarantees that companies abide by the ADA's

requirements and that people with disabilities are protected from discrimination in its role

as the central federal agency concerned with combating workplace discrimination (Equal

Employment Opportunity Commission, 1992). The EEOC takes on several

responsibilities to uphold the ADA. In this sense, the EEOC is responsible for many

tasks. Primarily, the EEOC investigates complaints made by workers who claim to have encountered disability-related discrimination at work. The EEOC obtains information, conducts interviews with relevant parties, and determines if discrimination has occurred through this process (Modesitt, 2010).

The EEOC guarantees equal opportunity and fair treatment for people with disabilities by enforcing the ADA's employment provisions. The EEOC also offers guidance and resources to employers and employees, helping them understand their rights and responsibilities under the ADA (Modesitt, 2010). This involves offering instructional resources, holding workshops, and providing technical support (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 1992). Additionally, when required, the EEOC may take legal action against employers who failed to comply with the ADA, including mediation or lawsuits.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990) has profoundly affected workplace inclusion and accommodation practices. The legislation has increased employment opportunities and supported people with disabilities. The ADA has made workplaces for people with disabilities more inclusive and accessible by mandating companies to make reasonable accommodations. A reasonable accommodation can be considered an adaptation to work tasks or the environment that allows any qualified individual with a disability equality in hiring decisions, performing job responsibilities, and accessing employee benefits as any other non-disabled employee (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 1992). However, accommodations also need to consider resources and circumstances and should not create undue hardship to an organization, such as being too expensive (Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990).

Overall, anti-discrimination legislation alone still appears inadequate in guaranteeing the successful inclusion of individuals with disabilities.

The latest statistics in 2022 reveal that individuals with disabilities are employed at a lower rate (21.3%) compared to non-disabled individuals (65.4%) (US Department of Labor Statistics, 2023). A potential concern behind these numbers is the influence of disparate treatment by employers. This can result from unfamiliar and negative attitudes about disabilities, a perceived lack of skills among disabled employees, and concern over accommodation costs (Domzal et al., 2008; Von Schader et al., 2014). Research to establish best practices for integrating disabled workers into the workforce continues to fall short compared to other protected groups. Further statistics reveal that 44% of the US with a visual impairment is employed (Mcdonnall & Sui, 2019).On the other hand, 53% of deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals were employed (Garberoglio et al., 2019). This reveals that almost half of all hard-of-hearing and vision-impaired populations do not participate in the labor force or have not disclosed their disability in surveys. The reasons behind this can be explained by Santuzzi et al. (2014) who emphasizes that the existing legislation does not cover the varied social experiences of employees with invisible disabilities and hesitations towards disability disclosure.

<div align="center">**Disability Disclosure**</div>

Employees with disabilities often face the challenge of managing their conditions while at work and deciding whether to disclose this information to their employer or colleagues. According to Santuzzi et al. (2016), disclosure broadly refers to revealing or confirming a characteristic. Disclosure is seen by many as a challenge, and individuals desire to keep their conditions hidden whenever possible due to fears about identity crisis, discrimination, and dismissal. This can be classified as the denial of a meaningful self-

concept that is considered central to a person's identity (Conroy & O'Leary-Kelly, 2014).

On the other hand, legal protection can be gained by revealing a disability, but the

situations and variables that trigger disclosure differ widely. This is particularly relevant

for those with stigmatized identities that can be concealed (Chaudoir & Quinn, 2010).

The decision to disclose allows workers to be honest with their peers and puts them at

risk of suffering adverse outcomes like prejudice from others (Jones, 2017). Thus, one of

the most complex decisions these employees must make is when, how, and to whom to

disclose information.

Studies have explored the factors influencing the differences in disclosure and

accommodation requests among individuals with disabilities. Research indicates that

workplace disclosure is less common for acquired disabilities when compared to

disabilities that people are born with (Baldridge & Swift, 2013). Similarly, concealable

disabilities are disclosed less frequently than visible disabilities (Colella & Stone, 2005).

These two reasons are particularly relevant to vision and hearing impairments as they are

often acquired later in life (Dillon, 2010; Madans et al., 2021). Other ways disclosure

decisions can be influenced are through self-identity, workplace contexts, and past

experiences (Santuzzi et al., 2014).

Overall, the disclosure process is unique to all individuals, and therefore

employees must consider the many advantages and disadvantages of disclosure and non-

disclosure (Jans et al., 2012). Examples of positive outcomes of disability disclosure in

research have shown that an organization's willingness to develop "social support,

technical adjustments of the workplace, flexible working hours, or a change of work

tasks" are a way of creating and maintaining performance and overall well-being

(Baumgärtner, 2012 p. 355). In addition, disclosure of a disability can bring about a range of emotional experiences. One potential outcome is a sense of relief (Clair et al., 2005). By disclosing their disability, individuals no longer need to expend energy hiding or pretending to be someone they are not. They can embrace their true selves and foster greater authenticity in their interactions with colleagues and supervisors. In addition, when individuals feel validated and accepted for who they are, it can positively impact their self-esteem (Chadoir & Quinn, 2010). The support and understanding from others can provide a sense of belonging and reduce the emotional burden of hiding one's disability.

On the other hand, potential adverse outcomes to disclosure can be sourced from the workplace culture and environment. This can harm employees, resulting in exclusion and stigmatization, influencing career advancement and well-being (Beatty & Kirby, 2006; Santuzzi et al., 2014). Furthermore, employees do not always have the choice of when to disclose, as specific situations can result in the inability to conceal their disability (Southall et al., 2011). The decision to disclose or not disclose a disability in the workplace can have significant emotional consequences for individuals. When individuals with disabilities choose not to disclose, there can be a sense of incongruence between their self-perceptions and others' views. They may feel compelled to hide or conceal a vital aspect of their identity, leading to insecurity and a lack of authenticity in their interactions with others. Therefore, a workplace culture that emphasizes trust and inclusion can be beneficial to counteract the negative consequences of disclosure and centering the importance of health at work (Follmer, 2020).

Employers and colleagues can play a significant role in fostering an atmosphere of acceptance and understanding, which can help individuals with disabilities navigate the emotional challenges associated with disclosure. The motivations behind creating a positive work environment are not an easy feat as it requires significant restructuring of organizational culture. Legislation and workplace policy cannot reach their potential if the workplace environment attitudes do not support reducing the stigma against disabled individuals. It is essential to recognize that the emotional consequences of non-disclosure or disclosure are not universal and can vary depending on individual experiences and workplace dynamics. Some individuals may find empowerment and a sense of control in choosing not to disclose, while others may experience a sense of liberation and connection through disclosure. However, most research on this topic has brought to light that although the law protects people who identify as having a disability against discrimination, many do not disclose it because they fear stigmatization.

Stigma Theory

Stigma is a social construct that labels people as either "normal" or "abnormal" (Follmer et al., 2020 p. 170). As a result, people who do not meet expectations of normalcy are often thought of as having a flawed or negative identity (Goffman, 1963). A stigma can be stigmatizing even if it is not apparent (Goffman, 1963). According to stigma theory, having a stigmatized identity can lead to bias and discrimination from people who view it as abnormal (Goffman, 1963). Research by Jones' (2017) examined how people with concealable disabilities were concerned about adverse reactions and prejudice that could result from disclosure, such as exclusion or having fewer opportunities (Jones, 2017). This is relevant to understand why employees hesitate to disclose their disability because of the negative stigma attached to their conditions.

Negative stereotypes and prejudices are attached to individuals with loss of hearing and vision. Multiple studies reveal that a significant bias that affects the acceptance of people with hearing and vision loss is that they are viewed as dependent, poor communicators, and old (Fraser et al., 2019; Southall, 2011). Research on sensory-specific disabilities has revealed underemployment relative to their education and work experience, lower career advancement opportunities, and overall job security (Baldwin & Cho, 2013). Current wage gap statistics act as existing evidence that people with vision and hearing impairments are facing discrimination. "Full-time, year-round workers with a disability earn 87 cents for every dollar earned by those with no disability" (Day & Taylor, 2019 p.1).

The successful integration of people with disabilities into the workforce heavily relies on the support of employers. Stigma from employers can also be a significant barrier to the employment and career advancement of persons with disabilities due to a lack of knowledge. Costs required for accommodations were a significant issue that organizations frequently bring up concerning the accommodation process (Fraser et al., 2010). However, research has consistently shown that accommodation cost is low while the benefits are substantial. A survey conducted by the Job Accommodation Network of over 3,000 organizations across the U.S. revealed that most employers report no cost or low cost for accommodating employees with disabilities (Job Accommodation Network (U.S., 2010). In addition, most respondents report that accommodations were very practical or highly effective. The unwillingness to create accommodations can result from negative stigmas and the need to educate employees that accommodations can be helpful and affordable.

Coffey et al. (2014) identified two primary barriers commonly reported by visually impaired individuals when seeking employment: the requirement for specialized equipment or workplace adjustments and negative attitudes exhibited by employers. In this study, the respondents mentioned that employers lacked awareness and understanding of what a visually impaired woman may accomplish, which was the most significant barrier. This was also found in Lindsay et al. (2019) with quotes from individuals speaking on their challenges in navigating a workplace with vision and hearing impairments. Some examples of hostile confrontations include interactions of supervisors labeling disabled workers' angry' or 'unapproachable' due to squinting as a symptom of their vision impairment. In addition, another individual with a hearing impairment spoke on the experience that coworkers would take away their autonomy by going to a higher-level supervisor to discuss their concerns about their disability is an issue instead of speaking with them first (Lindsay, 2019).

Overall, it is apparent in past research that employers have expressed worries about the quantity and quality of work done by workers with a disability. Supervisors are tasked to oversee financial objectives and operational effectiveness. Therefore, managers are sensitive to the perceived incompetence of persons with disabilities as it may negatively impact their leadership abilities (Krupa, 2009). When predicting future work performance, people frequently appear to rely on stereotypes they may have about individuals with impairments (Colella & Varma, 1999). This also includes high-qualified university graduates with disabilities (Vornholt et al., 2018).

Further research supports that coworkers' attitudes and prejudices are among the most significant obstacles encountered by individuals with a disability while in the

selection and application stage of finding work (Colella & Bruyère, 2011). Among these barriers is a biased view of the abilities of disabled employees as they do not get the chance to prove otherwise (Bowman, 1987), leading to the assumption that people with disabilities are unable to perform at a level on par with their coworkers (Vornholt et al., 2018). According to research conducted by Vornholt et al. (2018), individuals often perceive a coworker with a disability as being responsible for them handling a more challenging job with a heavier workload. Consequently, they tend to have low expectations for this coworker and exhibit more negative attitudes towards both the specific individual and employees with disabilities as a whole.

Lastly, the presence of stigma influences how individuals view themselves and others. When individuals experience self-stigma, it can result in the 'Why Try' effect (Corrigan et al., 2009), which creates a downstream lack of motivation and effort to maintain employment. The 'Why Try' phenomenon emerges due to self-stigma, where individuals internalize stereotypes about their condition, leading them to believe they are undeserving or incapable of achieving personal goals (Corrigan et al., 2009). This experience of self-stigma can cause individuals to doubt their aspirations, triggering the 'why try' effect. Consequently, this discouragement can contribute to difficulties in finding and retaining employment, which helps explain the higher rates of unemployment observed among individuals with disabilities.

These empirical studies provide robust evidence of the detrimental effects of stigma on disability disclosure and its consequences in the workplace. They demonstrate the negative impact on self-perception and interpersonal relationships. Understanding the influence of stigma is crucial for creating a supportive and inclusive workplace

environment that promotes disclosure, challenges discriminatory attitudes, and fosters equal opportunities for all employees. Individuals with hearing and vision disabilities are susceptible to stigmatized treatment in the workplace. Thus, stereotypes, prejudices, and misconceptions surrounding hearing and vision disabilities can create an environment where individuals hesitate or feel reluctant to disclose.

Social Identity Theory

According to social identity theory (SIT; Turner, 1982), individuals identify as members of particular social groups, and this categorization influences the perceptions of individuals. Particular identities, such as color, gender, and age, can be observed by others, making it more challenging to conceal associations in these groups (Follmer et al., 2020). However, with concealable identities that are not easily observed, like hearing and vision impairments, individuals must personally reveal their social membership. SIT can also explain why people would decide not to reveal a disability since their social identity can affect how they are treated concerning the stigmas attached to their conditions. Overall, according to Turner (1982), people are drawn to those who are like them and are more likely to discriminate against those who are different. A person may become vulnerable to discrimination if they identify as a part of an outgroup by peers after learning they have a disability.

One prevalent misunderstanding is that individuals place their disability identity at the forefront of their defining characteristics over other central aspects, such as race (Galer, 2012). For instance, when a worker acknowledges having a disability that qualifies under the ADA, it does not automatically imply that they will primarily define themselves as a person with a disability (Mpofu & Harley, 2006). According to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), individual differences play a significant role in

determining the social identity groups a person associates with. In other words, how people perceive themselves and the groups they feel aligned with can influence how they approach accommodations and social consequences related to their disability status. Major and O'Brien (2005) explored the role of social identity in disability disclosure among individuals with concealable stigmatized identities. They found that individuals who strongly identified with their disability group were more likely to disclose their condition in the workplace. At the same time, those with weaker identification were more hesitant to disclose. This study supports social identity playing a crucial role in the disclosure process. Depending on how a person with a disability identifies, they ultimately have two strategic choices in social interactions at work: to hide or to disclose their invisible social identity. The first option of 'hiding' is also known in the literature as 'passing.'

According to Leary (1999), passing is "a cultural performance in which one member of a defined social group appears as another to benefit from the privileges granted to the dominant group (p.85)". When someone passes, another individual mistakenly categorizes them as having no distinctive or low-value social identity. The definition above implies that passing is done on purpose, yet passing can also happen unintentionally (Beatty et al., 2019). The term passing was first introduced in Larsen's (1929) book that details passing in respect to race among Black individuals who also have common features to White individuals. The novel shows the impact of disclosure among two similar biracial women but what separates them is their assertion on identifying as a Black and the other as White and their different treatment in the 1920's despite their identical appearances. This term is also familiar to other concealable

identities such as sexual identity and shows how claiming an identity or having an identity exposed can negatively or positively impact the treatment of the individual in question. This shows the nature of socially constructed stigma and provides an example to why individuals choose to hide an aspect of themselves. In line with theories on stigma and social identities, individuals with stigmatized invisible social identities often feel compelled to hide these aspects of themselves in the workplace to avoid potential consequences and uphold their reputations.

Passing comes with both interpersonal and individual risks. For the individual, passing involves a disconnection from their authentic self, raising questions on the genuineness of their interactions (Leary, 1999). Consequently, passers could experience stress dealing with dishonesty, as they must consistently and convincingly fabricate aspects of their lives to keep their invisible differences concealed from coworkers (Goffman, 1963). The urge to keep others at an emotional distance to mask may put the passer in a position where they feel alienated from their peers in interpersonal connections (Kulkarni, 2022). In addition, colleagues at work anticipate some level of personal information sharing. This information facilitates the development of solid professional relationships (Clair et al., 2005). Relationships might become strained at work when coworkers grow suspicious due to a lack of personal transparency (Clair et al., 2005). As a result, social interactions become uncomfortable for the passer (Jones et al., 1984). Additionally, passers might only have access to fewer networks and mentoring relationships (Clair et al., 2005), which could negatively affect professional advancement.

A review has highlighted that a primary reason for individuals not wearing hearing aids is to avoid stigma (David &Werner, 2016). The main factors contributing to

this reluctance are the size and visibility of the hearing aids, which are strongly associated with the stigma surrounding their usage. This shows that individuals would rather omit their accessibility equipment to hide their disability identity than deal with the stigmas associated with their disability. These findings were also similar in vision impairments, with qualitative data showing that individuals avoid using white canes to prevent stigmatization and attracting unwanted attention (Hersh, 2015). Individuals anticipate disclosing their social identity as a person with a disability may lead to discrimination. As a result, they may withhold information to avoid potential negative consequences. In this case, the desire for self-consistency and maintaining a positive social connection may outweigh the need for self-verification.

Although these empirical studies are not explicitly focused on the passing of vision and hearing impairments, they provide evidence supporting the application of SIT to disability disclosure in stigmatized concealable identities. They highlight the role of social identity in shaping disclosure decisions.

Self-verification Theory

Swann's self-verification theory (1983) states that people are motivated to ensure that how others perceive them and their surroundings is consistent. The idea behind self-verification is that discovering discrepancies between their perceptions of themselves and those of others can cause insecurities and prevent social interaction (Swann, 2012). In essence, this theory claims that people desire to be seen by others in the same light as they see themselves (Swann, 1983, 1987). According to this perspective, people need to affirm their identity if that identity is considered negative (Swann, 1987). Similar to social identity theory, SVT differs in that people are motivated to have others see them as

they see themselves, making self-perception essential to this process. However, those whose identities are crucial to their self-worth seek validation and may foster a greater willingness to reveal their stigmatized identities. Reviewing SVT compared to the previous two theories reveals possible outcomes and responses to disclosure. The importance of self-verification in the context of disability disclosure is particularly significant because by disclosing their disability, individuals seek to be seen and understood for who they are while desiring acceptance and inclusion in the workplace. The decision to disclose becomes a strategic choice influenced by the desire for self-consistency, outweighing the potential risks of stigma or discrimination. Disclosure is a double-edged sword, as the decision to disclose or not disclose can have profound consequences.

SVT asserts that relief for disclosers may improve their psychological health and well-being (Sabat et al., 2014). Increased self-esteem and affirmation, as well as closer interpersonal interactions, can come from disclosure (Corrigan & Matthews, 2003). According to some researchers (Clair et al., 2005), disclosure could decrease the stress caused by concealing a stigmatized identity or balancing multiple identities. People may perceive disclosure as a method for influencing their surroundings, which is another anticipated benefit. Disclosure can offer relief and access to resources, methods, and mentoring, enabling people with invisible stigmas to connect with and associate with one another (Meyer, 2003). Disclosure can raise awareness, affect organizational culture, and bring social and institutional change (Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010). Although people can feel motivated to reveal their invisible stigmatized identity, they may also fear unfavorable

outcomes. These worries are valid, given that stigma disclosure can have unfavorable effects in both professional and personal spheres.

According to the self-verification theory, when people see differences between their perceptions and those of others, it can cause uneasiness and make it harder to form social connections (Swann, 2012). As a result, people with impairments may struggle to decide whether to reveal their disability at work. One way disclosure might help someone self-verify is by allowing others to recognize and accept their identity as a person with a disability. As a result, they may feel validated, and their self-concept may be strengthened.

Understanding the role of self-verification and the need for congruence between self-perceptions and others' perceptions can shed light on the complexities of disability disclosure in the workplace. It highlights the psychological factors that individuals with disabilities consider when making disclosure decisions and the potential impact on their sense of identity, social interactions, and overall well-being. These empirical findings provide valuable insights into applying SVT in the context of disability disclosure in the workplace. They underscore the importance of self-verification in guiding disclosure decisions and emphasize the positive outcomes that can result from aligning one's self-perceptions with others' views. By understanding and acknowledging the role of self-verification, employers and organizations can create an environment that supports individuals with disabilities in their disclosure decisions, promoting a culture of acceptance and inclusivity.

Recommendations for Organizations

Organizational spaces are generally designed for 'normal' bodies (Van Laer et al., 2022) that assume the workforce is able-bodied. However, the physical work

environment can unknowingly impair productivity and create obstacles to job tasks. This can negatively impact performance on tasks to take longer, which others can perceive as *lagging behind* (Van Laer et al., 2022). Thus, compensating by working longer hours could sacrifice one's work-life balance and overall well-being (Van Laer et al., 2022).

First, the overall organizational environment can have a disabling impact. A review by Newton et al. (2007) describes how different spatial elements can further disable people with disabilities. One example of a common complication is the need for clear signage or captioning. Overall, the work environment can reduce effectiveness by making it harder to complete a job, leading to unequal power dynamics between disabled and non-disabled employees.

Ultimately, organizations implementing specific strategies can aid in reducing turnover, developing a knowledgeable workforce, decreasing litigation costs and boost employee morale (Nafukho et al., 2010). The workforce will continue to grow in diversity, including individuals with disabilities. Therefore it is relevant for HR professionals to adapt and educate on the importance of inclusion in all aspects of the workplace.

Environmental recommendations

Organizations can be more accommodating to persons with hearing and vision impairment by being more aware of universal design. "Universal design (UD) is a practice that makes the environment usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without needing adaptation or specialized measures" (Sheppard-Jones et al., 2021 p.73). UD aims to accommodate all individuals, focusing on individuals with disabilities. By addressing the structure of organizational spaces, all employees can benefit from its intuitive design and are made further aware of the slight changes and minimal costs that

can make workplaces significantly more inclusive. UD considers all aspects of an environment, including virtual and in-person communication.

Implementing UD at an organization's development stages can eliminate the need to make modifications and draw attention to individuals who may need accommodations. In essence, Universal Design fosters an inclusive and accessible environment from the very beginning, avoiding the need for constant adaptation. Instead, it establishes an all-encompassing approach that benefits everyone, regardless of their unique abilities and characteristics. There are seven guiding principles in universal design that organizations can consider when developing a workspace (see Table 1).

Table 1 *Seven Guiding Principles for Universal Design adapted from Sheppard-Jones et al. (2021)*

Principle	Definition	Example
Equitable use	The design is marketable to all and avoids stigmatizing people.	An individual is not segregated from the group for having to use electronics such as a wearing a headset in the front where they may feel uncomfortable
Flexible use	The design provides options in its use. It is adaptable to the user while still maintaining accuracy	An individual should be able to gather information from both an auditory announcement and a visual display
Simple and intuitive use	The design is easy to use regardless of previous experience. The design accommodates to any language or knowledge levels	An individual can use a remote control with clearly labeled/ tactile buttons and symbols
Perceptible information	The design communicates information using images, speech, or tactile guidance.	An individual can gather information from tactual signs such as raised characters or braille

Tolerance for error	The design minimizes risk and warns of hazards or errors while providing features that promote safety.	An individual can notice a detectable warning surface felt under foot or using a cane.
Low physical effort	The design allows for use with minimal fatigue. The user can remain in a body neutral position and does not require repetitive action	Individuals can utilize automatic door openers in any space
Size and space for approach and use	The design provides all users, to approach, reach and manipulate products in the environment. The design provides built in accommodations.	All individuals are provided a clear line of sight to important information, seating or standing

Following these guidelines for universal design can help reduce the perception that people with disabilities create issues for themselves and others at work. (Story, 2001). By incorporating a range of accommodations, such as large print, and audio technology, workplace environments become more inclusive and accessible to employees. These measures ensure that all workers can fully participate and engage in the workplace without facing unnecessary barriers, regardless of their abilities.

Hearing and vision-impaired workers have reported that there is still a sizable portion of unmet needs regarding workplace accommodations—for example, the difficulty of offsite meetings. While workplaces can easily find interpreters using online translation programs or closed captioning in Zoom. However, some potential UD critiques are similar to the ADA laws. Even with the implementation of UD, only so much can be achieved without changing the attitudes within workplaces that perpetuate stigma against individuals with a disability. An important aspect for organizations to consider is that technology can further exclude disabled people and can only benefit if traditional disabling barriers, such as the negative attitudes of employers, are resolved.

Although technological advancements have made strides in convenience and efficiency, it also has the potential to diminish the need for social change and relationship-building to break down the barriers of stigma.

Recommendations to Workplace Culture and Attitudes

Currently, around 67% of organizations throughout the US utilize some form of diversity training (Phillips et al., 2016). Although issues related to more easily observable characteristics such as gender and race have been given more attention within these programs, workers with disabilities tend to be overshadowed in the inclusion conversations (Phillips et al., 2016). An explanation for this oversight may stem from the perspective that disability is often considered 'distinct' or unique from diversity.

This idea is supported by findings from a study involving focus groups. Qualitative data from the study revealed that employers viewed disability differently from other diversity aspects. Rather than recognizing disability as a valuable difference, participants viewed it as a problem (Bonaccio et al., 2020). Therefore, a recommendation for developing workplace culture and attitudes to be more accepting is addressing disability as a form of diversity within diversity training. In addition, according to McMahon et al. (2008), 3-5% of employers who incorporate disability within diversity programs are more likely to recruit individuals with disabilities consistently. This could be from a shift in recruiter perspectives and the marketing of an organization that provides equal opportunity to workers with disabilities. However, not enough research has been conducted to confirm the lasting effects of such training as the same study by McMahon et al. (2008) highlighted that 21% of employers still expressed unmet needs regarding coworker support and added that coworkers still showed reluctance to adjust and aid to the needs of individuals with disabilities.

Another explanation for the lack of coworker support is the misunderstanding and lack of knowledge about the effects of vision, hearing loss, or any other disability. Thus, promoting awareness and understanding of disability-related issues can clear up misunderstandings common among hearing and vision-impaired workers. For example, providing scenarios of why a person might look at someone rudely or strangely can be attributed to their poor eyesight or assuming someone can read lips versus taking the time to communicate in other practical ways.

Many ways exist to define and create an inclusive organizational culture. Mor Barak (2014) describes an inclusive organization as fully involving all workers in both formal and informal processes. In addition, the benefits of developing an inclusive organization are supported by Jansen et al. (2014) that experiencing belongingness and authenticity among their peers in a work environment significantly predicted job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and interpersonal trust. Notably, these experiences also extend into disclosure situations for individuals with disabilities as they do not feel the threat and barrier of being stigmatized by their identity (Cappell et al., 2016; Newheiser et al., 2017). In other words, when a workplace fosters inclusivity, it creates a supportive environment that encourages supervisors and coworkers to respond to disability disclosure positively and reduces fears while building confidence in needing to request accommodations or share their identity with others openly.

These recommendations support existing research that has found that workers with disabilities are more willing to disclose their disability when they feel the organization supports their needs. Furthermore, the perception of support from supervisors and coworkers emerged as a significant factor influencing the decision to

disclose a disability (Von Schrader et al., 2014). When individuals feel supported by their colleagues and superiors, they are more inclined to be open about their disability. On the other hand, the fear of a lack of support and the anticipation of encountering stigma was a primary reason for withholding disclosure of a disability (Von Schrader et al., 2014).

In conclusion, creating a supportive and inclusive organizational culture where disabilities are embraced without stigma encourages workers to be more comfortable and forthcoming about disclosing their disabilities. This positive atmosphere can lead to better employee well-being, increased trust, and enhanced collaboration within the workplace.

Disability Measurement Recommendations

Disability prevalence within the US is significantly underreported and is a significant challenge in ensuring fair treatment and reveals the urgency of developing inclusive work environments for individuals with disabilities. When an organization clearly understands which employees have disclosed and need accommodations for their disability, they can develop more effective policies. Moreover, accurate data allows organizations to tailor their developments to the unique needs of their employees, leading to higher levels of productivity and a more positive workplace atmosphere for all (Santuzzi et al., 2022).

The significance of accurate disability measurement is particularly emphasized for federal organizations mandated to have 7% of their workforce comprise of individuals with a disability (US Department of Labor, 2014). However, as mentioned in the previous sections regarding disclosure, if employees with disabilities face discomfort or apprehension during the data collection process due to societal stigma, they may refrain from fully disclosing their disabilities, undermining the credibility of the collected data.

To ensure a more precise representation of disability within the workforce, organizations should prioritize fostering an environment of support and inclusivity. By cultivating a workplace culture where employees feel safe and encouraged to share their disability status, organizations can obtain reliable and comprehensive data.

The most common way that organizations have collected data involves inviting employees to voluntarily disclose their disability status through surveys (Santuzzi, 2022). It is essential to emphasize the voluntary and anonymous aspect of these surveys and the crucial role of employees accessing this information in maintaining the confidentiality of disclosure information and any associated medical records. In larger organizations, basic demographic data, such as race and gender, allows for tracking for individuals with disabilities, similar to how other focus groups like women and minorities are monitored for retention or advancement purposes as it would be difficult in pinpointing specific individuals (Santuzzi, 2022). Another standard approach organizations utilize is the Voluntary Self-Identification of Disability (VSID) disclosure form, frequently implemented in US employment settings. This allows employers to collect disability-related information and compare it to data from employees without disabilities within the application stage. By employing such practices, employers can better understand disability representation from their incoming applicants and make informed decisions about relevant policies and practices. Ultimately, this aids in creating a more inclusive and supportive work environment.

Discussion of Future Research

One area of research that warrants further investigation is the concept of fairness in accommodations. Understanding how coworkers perceive and evaluate accommodations can provide insights into the factors influencing fairness judgments. In

addition, exploring what factors influence coworkers' perceptions of fairness, how these judgments impact relationships, and how organizations can promote a sense of fairness in the accommodation process can shed light on the social dynamics surrounding disability disclosure.

Future research can explore the concept of distributive fairness or procedural justice perceptions on accommodation. The way coworkers perceive how an organization handles decisions regarding accommodations is known as procedural justice, as described by Colella (2001). On the other hand, distributive fairness is another aspect that focuses on how coworkers perceive the fairness of an accommodation based on the distribution of rewards compared to existing resources (Colella, 2001). Studying employees' perceptions of the fairness of the accommodation process is valuable in understanding their overall treatment within an organization. Additionally, investigating how individuals with vision and hearing impairments perceive procedural justice in accommodation decisions could aid in developing more targeted accommodation practices.

Overall, future research could focus on expanding knowledge of fairness in accommodations, exploring procedural and distributive justice perceptions, and gaining a deeper understanding of the experiences and challenges faced by individuals with vision and hearing impairments in the workplace. Addressing these gaps in the literature can further research the understanding of disability disclosure and contribute to creating more inclusive and supportive work environments.

As mentioned in previous sections, another area of interest for further research is the potential for disability-focused diversity training. These trainings, also called sensitivity training or cross-cultural training, can facilitate organizational growth by

fostering a diverse and inclusive environment that embraces individuals from all backgrounds (Phillips, 2016). Disability-centered programs can potentially decrease negative attitudes in the workplace by creating knowledgeable and unbiased employees, especially by bringing to light the 'invisible' nature of disabilities such as vision and hearing impairments. It could be beneficial to conduct how effective these potential trainings are through a longitudinal data collection study on attitudes towards people with a disability. This could be especially relevant to federal organizations that have a quota of individuals with disabilities and receive their firsthand reactions through a company-wide diversity and inclusion survey.

However, many areas still need further exploration regarding diversity training. For example, organizations need to consider how existing workplace cultures can predict the acceptance and retainment of diversity training. Additionally, it is essential to consider whether diversity training influences coworker attitudes and behaviors differently for specific disability groups, such as vision and hearing impairments, compared to mental health. Disability diversity training aims for concrete and measurable outcomes. Therefore, there are still many ways to understand how disability diversity trainings can be beneficial for hearing and vision impairments.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this thesis has addressed many issues surrounding individuals with hearing and vision disabilities within organizational contexts in the United States. By providing an in-depth exploration of definitions, and US legislation, this review has covered the complexity of navigating a workplace as a person with a disability. In addition, by analyzing disclosure practices and psychological theories and providing recommendations for support and accommodation, this research aimed to enhance the

understanding and contribute to creating inclusive and supportive work environments. Continued research in this area will undoubtedly lead to further advancements in fostering inclusivity, enabling individuals with hearing and vision disabilities to thrive professionally.

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