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## Stand Up and Be Counted: In the Long Run, Disclosing Helps All

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Over 20 years after the implementation of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), as the Santuzzi, Waltz, Finkelstein, and Rupp (2014) focal article highlights, the employment rate for individuals with disabilities remains lackluster. Only one in five adults with disabilities has paid employment, compared to 7 in 10 adults without disabilities (Jans, Kaye, & Jones, 2012). The figure of 6.8% of the 2010 U.S. workforce that report having a disability is likely an underestimate—particularly for invisible disabilities (Santuzzi et al., 2014). Among many of the hindrances to diversifying the workforce by including

individuals with disabilities is the difficulty that many have with voluntarily disclosing their status.

There are a myriad of reasons why employees might shy away from disclosing, including employer reluctance to hire or more overt discrimination, exclusionary corporate cultures, and public policies that create work disincentives (Jans et al., 2012). These reasons exclude some societally based and relevant environmental barriers such as a lack of training, absence of support services, barriers to transportation, physical access, healthcare, and accommodations needed to be able to complete work (Jans et al., 2012). Some jobs/workplaces require a certain amount of disclosure through their selection processes due to requirements for the job and safety considerations. However, in general, disclosing during the interview

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process can be stigmatizing and even detrimental to securing employment (Hebl, Foster, Manniz, & Dovidio, 2002).

Although the negative impact of possessing a stigmatized quality may hamper employment opportunities for individuals (Hebl et al., 2002), once they have been hired by the organization, we strongly recommend that they disclose. The more people who disclose, the stronger the social movement that informs and changes companies' policies and status quo. In service of this more long-term, permanent shift, we strongly encourage everyone with a disability(ies) to disclose—to stand up and be counted. We endorse this strategy for a number of reasons, which we will outline in this commentary, including: (a) benefits that disclosure can have for the self, (b) benefits that disclosure can have for others, (c) benefits that disclosure can have for the organization, (d) benefits provided by organizations adept at implementing protective policies, and (e) the potential for universally reducing stigma.

### **Disclosing Helps the Self**

The first reason to disclose is the benefit that disclosure of an invisible disability can have for the self. This benefit is mirrored in the available literature on invisible identity. From work done on LGBTQ communities, research has demonstrated that disclosure behaviors are linked to higher job satisfaction and lower job anxiety (Griffith & Hebl, 2002).

One of the most important reasons for individuals to disclose their identities is the centrality of these identities to the individual's self-concept—the collection of beliefs individuals have about themselves (Markus & Wurf, 1987). Centrality, the extent to which an individual defines themselves in terms of an individual difference, relates to individuals' willingness to disclose (Griffith & Hebl, 2002). For individuals who see their invisible disability(ies) as integral parts of themselves, disclosure may be particularly important to furthering their personal well-being. Disclosure of

an invisible disability, particularly one that is central to the individual's self-concept, may allow that individual to have closer personal relationships with their coworkers and supervisors (Ragins, 2008). In addition, disclosure may induce a sense of relief from being "out" and lower stress personally and professionally (Bowen & Blackmon, 2003). Professionally, failing to disclose one's personal identity has been linked to lower performance, perhaps due to the depletion of cognitive resources that comes from having to maintain one's secret identity (Bowen & Blackmon, 2003; Major & Gramzow, 1999; Smart & Wegner, 1999). Instead, disclosing frees these resources so that they can be reallocated to the job.

We are aware that by recommending disclosure as a personal strategy for every individual that there will be cases in which disclosures are actually harmful to the individuals. That is, there are stigmas for which people have limited or no legal protection (e.g., certain mental illnesses; Martin, 2010), and disclosing may lead employers to legally terminate them—particularly if managers report a more internal locus of control, higher levels of stress, less familiarity with the mental illness, and a reluctance to seek help (Martin, 2010). Further, some disclosures, particularly those that disconfirm listeners' expectations, may increase rather than decrease uncertainty (Lazowski & Andersen, 1990). Potential fall out from this includes increased anxiety and stress, decreased interpersonal interactions, eliciting the expectation that the person being disclosed to may have to be more involved with the hire than he/she originally thought, and heightened levels of ambiguity. Because individuals attend to negative information longer than they do to positive, negative information has a disproportional impact on impressions and creates impressions resistant to later improvement (Lazowski & Andersen, 1990). In the disability literature, job coaches are advised that ADA gives employers no right to information about a person's disability (Institute for Community Inclusion (UCE), 2013). Additional short-term downsides to disclosure

may include not being hired (if disclosing during the interview process), being socially isolated by supervisors or coworkers, not being given the opportunity to grow on the job due to misconceptions about the disclosed disability, discrimination by the public, and relapses being more widely known than the individual would prefer (Corrigan & Deepa, 2012).

However, we argue that with more individuals independently deciding to disclose, each additional individual who discloses potentially faces fewer negative consequences as social norms change and protective policies follow. The Institute for Community Inclusion recommends that disclosure should be done with discretion if it is done at all, the employer does not need to know everything about a person's disability, and that not everyone in the workplace needs to know about the disability (UCE, 2013). Additional research on self-stigma shows that coming out of the closet with mental illness is associated with decreased negative effects of self-stigmatization on quality of life, a reduction in personal worry and concern, individuals finding peers or family members who will support them, and the openness of these individuals promoting a sense of personal power and control over their lives (Corrigan & Deepa, 2012).

### **Disclosing Helps Others**

The second reason individuals should disclose is the impact that disclosure can have for current and future others. Ragins (2008) describes the influence that individuals have on their environment when they disclose as one of its positive consequences. When individuals with invisible disabilities choose to stand up and be counted, they show the significant number of total individuals who are impacted by different disabilities. Examples of this in practice are recent admissions by several celebrities who have invisible disabilities. The public feels a connection with celebrities (Fowles, 1992), something that has often been used in advertisement endeavors but

can also act as a catalyst to kick start social change. When Earvin "Magic" Johnson "came out" as having the AIDS-causing virus HIV in 1991, he became an important celebrity advocate for HIV/AIDS and helped to change opinions of HIV/AIDS in the United States (Basil, 1996). More recently, the actress Catherine Zeta-Jones revealed that she has struggled with bipolar disorder and has been in and out of treatment centers (Serjeant & Dobuzinskis, 2013). And most recently, Darryl Hannah "came out" when she described her difficulties as someone on the autism spectrum (Willingham, 2013). Thus, celebrities can publically address invisible disabilities that have historically been heavily stigmatized, giving their conditions a face and a voice that may make the conditions more relatable to others. In addition, when other public figures are seen supporting individuals with invisible disabilities there is a decrease in negative attitudes due to public awareness (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010). Photos of Princess Diana of Wales hugging individuals with HIV/AIDS showed the public that these people were safe to touch and deserved companionship and compassion (Elwood, 1999).

Mental illness (e.g., bipolar disorder) and cognitive disabilities (e.g., autism) are areas of invisible disability that have been heavily stigmatized because of the historic perception that they are exaggerated, under the individual's control, and/or the individual's fault. For example, many individuals suffer from mental illness, particularly depression (Paykel et al., 1997); however, its sometimes episodic occurrence and intangible nature make it difficult for others to understand—attributes that are common to many invisible disabilities. With mental illness and other invisible disabilities, the number of individuals living with the condition can often be difficult to ascertain because reporting is low. This is yet another reason we encourage all individuals with invisible disabilities to stand up and be counted!

### **Disclosing Helps Organizations**

A third reason we encourage people to disclose is that it improves organizational policies and social norms. Employers report significant knowledge gaps regarding the numbers and needs of people with invisible disabilities (Rudstam, Gower, & Cook, 2012). In addition, employers often report being largely unaware of accommodation resources (Rudstam et al., 2012). Taken together, this indicates that what initially seems like an intention to avoid hiring individuals with invisible disabilities may actually be due to a lack of experience that employers have with employees who have invisible disabilities.

This interpretation suggests that one of the main ways to change such attitudinal barriers is for employees to disclose their invisible disabilities to employers. Parry, Rutherford, and Merrier (1995) found that HR professionals recommended direct disclosure regardless of the disability (visible or invisible) or size of organization (small or large). Further, results revealed that managers prefer candidates who directly reveal their disabilities at or after the interview. The costs associated with not disclosing can be high. For instance, disclosing can provide employers with the time and attention to make necessary accommodations (e.g., the allowance of certain leave times). In the absence of such disclosures, jobs can be lost because of employers' misunderstandings about and denial of sick leave requests (Roberts & Macan, 2006). Research shows that there is a large amount of flexibility possible regarding interpretation of policy (Kopnina & Haafkens, 2010). Employers report preferring disclosure upfront for many reasons, including: (a) invoking rights provided by the ADA of 1990, (b) discovering if a required accommodation would be considered "reasonable" rather than going through the entire hiring process only to find that (e.g.) the employer financially cannot accommodate the request, and (c) eliminating the possibility that a person's employer feels deceived when (inevitably) the disability is disclosed later (Roberts & Macan,

2006). However, from an employee perspective, it seems prudent to disclose once it is necessary for the employer to provide the necessary accommodation.

### **Disclosing Makes Organizations Adept at Creating Inclusive Work Environments**

A fourth reason we encourage disclosure is that it facilitates policies that protect and promote employees with disabilities, such as providing inclusive work environments. There are many negative pitfalls that result when organizations do not promote inclusion. A lack of early organizational intervention (for example, providing accommodations) leads to more severe insurance claims and higher costs (Gardner & Johnson, 2004).

Although diversity management (i.e., strategies organizations engage in to recruit and retain diverse employees) traditionally is concerned with acceptance of a multicultural workforce that consists of individuals who offer demographic diversity, disability (particularly invisible disability) is often overlooked (Kopnina & Haafkens, 2010). Best practices in diversity management include organizations that successfully employ, support, and reintegrate individuals with invisible disabilities in their workforce (Kopnina & Haafkens, 2010). Research suggests that HR professionals tend to be the ones who receive notification of employees' invisible disabilities, which happens when employees try to avoid disclosure with their direct supervisors but perceive their invisible disability as interfering with their work tasks (Kopnina & Haafkens, 2010). HR representatives acknowledge that sometimes policies determining the level of support individuals experience at the grassroots level can be dictated by how/whether the employee chooses to disclose.

FedEx<sup>®</sup>, Starbucks<sup>®</sup>, and Walgreens<sup>®</sup> are companies heralded for their proactive and inclusive, prodisability policies. For example, a senior Walgreens distribution executive who has an adult son with

a disability used his influence to hire diverse individuals with various disabilities (Kaletta, Binks, & Robinson, 2012). Their goal in this approach to hiring was to create an integrated work environment in which employees with and without disabilities would work side by side. In its currently 6 years of operation, there has been an average of 550–600 employees at the distribution center and an average of 35–40% who choose to disclose they have a disability(ies). This is striking when compared to the 21% of individuals over 16 with a disability who are in the labor force as a whole (Kaletta et al., 2012).

Regarding the Walgreens inclusion program, the company looked to peer companies for advice on how best to accomplish its inclusion goals. However, Walgreens found no other peer companies that employed individuals with disabilities in large numbers, so it created its own process (see Kaletta et al., 2012). There were three stated main strategies utilized to maximize the program's likelihood of success: (a) forge partnerships with state and local social services agencies early in the process to assist with the initial screening and training of candidates with disabilities on an ongoing basis, (b) build a physical workplace conducive to accommodating employees with different abilities (building design, equipment selection, and management practices), and (c) create a welcoming and accepting culture in the building from the first day of operations—an expected benefit was that safety was a top priority among all employees (Kaletta et al., 2012). After the systematic and detailed implementation of this program, 31 locations in three distribution centers were evaluated. In 18 locations, the difference in productivity rates between individuals with and without disclosed disabilities was statistically insignificant, in three locations employees without a disclosed disability were more productive, and in 10 locations employees with a disclosed disability were more productive. In the words of the program's founder, "in comparing the worker population with disabilities to the one without... the workers

with disabilities have amassed records that show greater retention, equal productivity and equal safety" (Kaletta et al., 2012, p. 70). Thus, as shown in the business case of Walgreens, disclosure of disabilities made the organization more adept at handling a diverse workforce.

We also suggest that individuals disclose to encourage organizations to implement universal design in the workplace. Universal design was originally developed by an architect, Ronald Mace, to design buildings and products that are beneficial to and usable to all (Mace, 1997). This concept was picked up by educators and dubbed "universal design for learning" (UDL). Workplace universal design uses both traditional and UDL principles to develop a workplace that is universally accessible (Ward & Baker, 2005). One example of universal design that is often cited is the curb-cut phenomenon (Breckenridge & Vogler, 2001). Curb cuts were mandated, so that people using wheelchairs could access the sidewalk, but it was soon discovered that many other people benefitted from this accommodation: workers pushing carts and parents pushing strollers, in addition to individuals using wheelchairs. Similarly, improvements made to the workplace design that act as accommodations for some can have beneficial consequences for others who do not specifically need the accommodations. For instance, older individuals in the workforce benefit from many of the universal design implementations (e.g., curb cuts, walk-in showers, large print), not to mention the additional benefits of universal design to others such as culturally diverse workers who experience language barriers (e.g., pictograms; Rousek & Hallbeck, 2011). By having an accessible workplace, the desire to disclose need not be predicated on requesting accommodation: disclosing would not be the same as asking for accommodation. One way to increase the frequency of companies implementing universal design in the workplace is to have a realistic perception of the number of people with disabilities in the workforce. Thus, disclosing is necessary to

justify universal design improvements that stand to benefit all.

### Universal Reduction of Stigma

The fifth and final reason we suggest that individuals with invisible disabilities disclose is that it promotes a universal reduction of stigma. As we noted earlier, some individuals will undoubtedly experience fallout from disclosing. We sympathize and emphasize that these individuals should seek whatever retribution that they can. In the absence of this, however, it is even more important for individuals to unite, stand up, and be counted so that society can move beyond discrimination and stigmatization. The disclosure of invisible disabilities can be an important form of advocacy. Individuals with and without disabilities can all be agents of change, particularly when there is a strong business case for inclusion (see Kaletta et al., 2012). However, until individuals make the decision to disclose, their disability(ies) truly are “invisible.” We cannot educate others about the experience, prominence, or strength of invisible disabilities if we do not make these disabilities visible through disclosure.

Industrial–organizational (I–O) psychologists have the opportunity to play a vital role in reducing the stigma around invisible disabilities. SIOP discusses the importance of workplace diversity as a “strategic imperative in many companies across the country, from production floors to the boardroom” (SIOP, 2013) and that inclusion matters to organizational effectiveness (Davidson & Ferdman, 2002). Other fields including vocational rehabilitation, disability studies, and special education, among others, discuss the reduction of stigma from a person-centered perspective, but I–O psychologists have a unique opportunity to bring together research and practice to make the workplace more accessible for all workers. It is a field that can influence the organization and individuals to be a strong instrument of change.

When we avoid an uncomfortable subject, we may be implicitly saying that it

is something to be ashamed of, something that should be hidden, or something that deserves differential treatment. There was a time that cancer was a taboo topic that people did not broach. Now it is a topic people can address. Attitudes toward people with cancer are becoming less negative, and individual cancer survivors and victims are becoming heroes (e.g., Liv Wise; DeJohn, 2013). Such increased awareness makes other people with similar conditions more likely to disclose themselves, and in the long run, a disability moves from something that is hidden into something that may be favorably endured and even celebrated. Thus, we emphatically suggest that individuals disclose, stand up, and be counted.

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