Categorizing Supervisor Reflections on Risks of Hiring Persons with Disabilities

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Although legislation prohibits employment discrimination related to disability such discrimination is regularly perpetuated and contributes to underemployment of persons with disabilities. I make the assertion that decision-maker's perceptions of risk shape their intention to hire, and actual hiring of, persons with disabilities. There is minimal qualitative research published regarding supervisors' views on hiring persons with disabilities. This shortcoming is addressed though my solicitation and of supervisor reflections on hiring and declining to hire persons with disabilities. I also map these reflections to categories of risk perception to generate insight on the nature of and form of supervisor risk perceptions.

INTRODUCTION

In-group perpetuation and out-group discrimination is common and frequently a mechanism of reducing potential harms and hazards of unknown social entities (Acker, 1990). In the context of human resource management and a 'performance-through-people' view of the organization, this discrimination occurs frequently in employment staffing decisions (Riley II, 2006; Stone & Williams, 1997). It is through staffing actions (attraction and selection) that organizational boundaries and corporate in-group identities are maintained (Wright & McMahan, 1992). Historically, we see that the 'decision to employ' goes against certain labour groups, such as aboriginal, female, elderly, and disabled, and thus these groups are labeled as 'underrepresented'. 'Disability' is one of the most common candidate characteristics used unfairly, and usually illegally, to refuse entry to an organization (Jackson, 2000). The result is systemic under-employment of persons with disabilities, which has negative impacts on the person, economy, and society (Social Development Canada, 2004).

There are legal provisions to allow for deliberate decisions to not hire persons with disabilities or otherwise accommodate the employment of persons with disabilities. There are also legal provisions to guard against unfair and/or discriminatory selection and accommodation decisions against disabled persons. However, in practical terms, many such decisions reflect the decision maker's ethical and social preferences, and business operation considerations.

Multiple factors are identified as possible, situation-sensitive explanations for discrimination (Stone, Stone & Dipboye, 1992). Research that crosses silos of such work on social (Bruyere, Erickson & Van Looy, 2004), legal (Williams, 2004), and financial explanations (Salkever, Shinogle & Purushothaman, 2000) is warranted to produce a better-fitting and better discrimination-mitigating model for employment practices related to disability.

Risk Perception (Lupton, 1999) is a theoretical lens that can lead to a more rich and nuanced understanding of staffing decisions. Research following both the Cognitive Calculation (counting-up risks) and Socio-cultural (risk constructions) perspectives have shown that organizational actor attitudes, decisions, and behaviours are influenced by the harms and hazards they perceive (Lupton, 1999).

It is reasonable to expect that staffing decisions are influenced by the potential for pain perceived by the decision-maker. Anecdotally speaking, pain can be felt in terms of business performance, leader approval/sanction, employee morale, and personal engagement and cognitive dissonance. The distributed and situational sources of perceived pain in this context helps explain why laws, financial impact, and social influence do not individually explain or mitigate discrimination behaviours. Risk Perception is also unlikely to be a one-shot solution. However, is likely to prove a more encompassing framework for explaining individual decision-maker choices to engage in unfair or illegal discrimination based on applicant disability.

Working in the exploring phase of the Human Resource Risk Management field development, as described by Becker and Smidt (2016), I investigate supervisor responses to an active presentation of hiring disabled persons as a potential risk condition and capture their expressions of perception and sense-making.

Literature Review

Unpacking and understanding barriers for the employment of persons with disabilities (PWD) involves a number interrelated constructs, including risk, human resource risk management, and supervisor perceptions and practices for hiring persons with disabilities.

The broadest construct informing my study of PWD employment is Risk. This construct represents the range of dangers, harms, and inconveniences that may be perceived and mitigated or tolerated by an agent. Deborah Lupton (1999) describes in her book *Risk* three general lenses for describing risk. The first is Cognitive Calculation, which involves objective enumeration of hazards and calculation of consequences. Typically, higher magnitude consequences receive more attention and mitigation action. The second lens is Socio-Cultural, which involves recognizing that risks ebb and flow with time and context. For example, what was safe before is now dangerous, or dangerous there is safe here. The third lens is Governmentality, which means that state or authoritative actors may influence public awareness and perceptions of risk. For example, jurisdictional messaging regarding healthy living and dietary practices. Regarding the employment of PWD, all three lenses are appropriate considerations as employers may calculate the costs or consequences of a PWD hire, social influences and public sentiment may influence perceptions of supervisors towards PWD, and local governments may enact laws or fund public advocacy messaging regarding employment of PWD.

A related and more refined understanding of risk in the employment context comes from the emerging field of Human Resource Risk Management (HrRM). The development of this domain is recorded by Becker & Smidt (2016) and organized into loose, overlapping perspectives of "Organizational / HRM Practices & Risk", "Human Resource Risks", and "HRM & Risk Management" (p153). My reading of their reviewed articles suggests a simplified and more succinct categorization of HrRM as 'people' - risk associated with employees existing / acting within the workplace, and considered from a Supervisor / Co-worker perspective; 'practices' - risk associated with methods of managing employees, and considered from an HR System Design perspective; and 'resource' - risk associated with engaging people as a productive asset compared to other resources, and considered from an Organizational Systems perspective. Regarding the employment of PWD, all three constructs are appropriate considerations, but in this study I focus on risk from the People perspective.

Positive and negative perceptions and practices for hiring persons with disabilities are well-expressed in the literature. Two of the most prominent writers are Mukta Kulkarni (e.g., Kulkarni, 2012a; 2012b; Kulkarni & Kote, 2013, and Kulkarni & Lengnick-Hall, 2014) and Dianna L. Stone (e.g., Stone, 1997; Stone & Collela, 1996; Stone & Stone, 2015; Stone, Stone & Dipboye, 1992, and Stone-Romero, Stone & Lukaszewski, 2006). These authors, plus a number of others make plain the presence of negative attitudes and concerns of hiring managers towards the employment of PWD.

Legnick-Hall, Gaunt, and Kulkarni (2008) provide a strong description of the organizational barriers and plausible remedies for hiring persons with disabilities. My reading of their work suggests an emphasis on supervisor awareness and education as focal points for improving the workforce participation of persons with disabilities. Carvalho-Freitas, et al (2015) offer an important consideration – that 'willingness' is a requisite element. That is, while supervisors may become more aware of laws prohibiting discrimination on the basis of disability or learn of potential benefits of hiring persons with disabilities, they will only take action if they are willing to do so.

To contribute to the literature, my study integrates the above-noted work and offers a synthesis view of supervisor risk perceptions.

Conceptual Framework

Baker, Ponniah & Smith (1998) outline a process of System Risk Management that includes a path progression of Risk Analysis -> Risk Evaluation -> Risk Consequences -> Risk Monitoring. In short, an actor becomes aware of a potential harm, assesses the magnitude of the harm and implements mitigations if feasible / desirable, experiences the consequences of the hazard manifesting (or not), and reflects on the result for the next time a risk is perceived.

An important role of my study is to solicit and surface supervisor perceptions of PWD hiring risk such that their perceptions and subsequent decisions and actions may be better understood from a risk perspective. To do this, I expand the 'Risk Evaluation' and Risk Consequences' portion of the above path progression to better illustrate and capture perceptions. That is, Risk Evaluation grows to reflect risk lenses of a) Cognitive Calculation, b) Socio-cultural, and c) Governmentality. These lenses were introduced earlier in the literature review. Risk Consequence grows to reflect to risk categories of:

- **Performance**: Possibility for the output or productivity to decline when a PWD is hired / included in the work.
- **Team Dynamics**: Possibility for the work group to experience internal conflict or morale issues when a PWD is included.
- **Supervisor Duties**: Possibility for the supervisor to experience increased workload directly related to the accommodation and management of a PWD.
- **Supervisor-PWD Relationship**: Possibility for the supervisor to feel and/or enact a relationship obligation to the PWD not normally extended to other subordinates.

METHOD

A semi-structured interview research method was utilized as it is the most appropriate way to capture broad descriptions of perceptions and responses. This is in alignment with suggestions of Bachiochi & Weiner, 2002 for the following reasons. First, the research is exploratory. My objective was to discover how supervisors perceive hiring PWD, the risks they consider, and the responses they action (if any). To my awareness, there is not presently a well-articulated guiding framework to test and in-fill. Second, open-ended questions allow research participants the opportunity to explain their feelings more fully. Participants are more able to share experiences and provide interpretations not anticipated by the researchers. Third, an interview research method provides an opportunity to obtain greater depth and richness of data than typically gained from questionnaire surveys.

I interviewed six supervisors from small and medium sized enterprises in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. The supervisors were selected to participate as they were all involved in a business networking group that received regular advocacy from a disability service organization. Thus, they were in a position to reflect on recent opportunities to hire a PWD. The enterprises were diverse and included: cabinet making, construction, direct mailing, home security, housing, and registries.

The question protocol was based upon an extensive review of the literature on the employment of persons with disabilities. Questions covered the following issues: a) organizational profile including characteristics (industry, size, history), and actions (competitiveness, corporate social responsibility,

innovation), b) involvement in selection processes, c) personal and organizational influences on selection decisions, d) perceptions of PWD hiring promotion messages, and e) experiences hiring PWD. Interviews took place in participants' offices. Each participant was provided an advance copy of the interview themes and questions, and were encouraged to respond in an open-ended fashion.

My previous experience in interviewing supervisors and human resource professionals regarding disability discrimination led me to believe that participants would only speak candidly about their perceptions and actions when there was a mutual perception of trust and non-judgement. Conditions of anonymity were strictly maintained, and in most cases two or three relationship building conversations took place prior to the formal research interview. Interviews took place in participants' offices with no other people present.

Interviews ranged in length from 25 minutes to 60 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis. My research team individually listened and read the interviews, and generated the results on a consensus / shared perception basis.

RESULTS

An immediate finding is that of the six supervisors, only one had hired a PWD, three were considering making a hire, and two were not willing to consider making a hire. Thus, there is evidence that the 'risks' of hiring were perceived differently by the supervisors.

Preliminary analysis of the interviews reveals that supervisor perceptions of risks associated with PWD hiring relate mostly to the immediate operations and experiences of the supervisors. A tally of supervisor characterizations / dominant expressions according to several themes and categories are presented in Table 1. (Note: tallies may exceed '6' as some supervisors addressed multiple topics.

TABLE 1
CATEGORIZATION OF SUPERVISOR RISK PERCEPTIONS

PWD Hiring Experience			
'Will Not Hire' PWD		**'Considering Hire' PWD**	**'Hired' PWD**
2		3	1
Risk Lens			
Cognitive Calculations		**Socio-Cultural**	**Governmentality**
6		0	0
Risk Categories			
Team Performance	**Team Dynamics**	**Supervisor Duties**	**Supervisor-PWD Relationship**
1	1	4	2
Risk Magnitude			
Low		**Medium**	**High**
1		3	1
Expected Rewards			
Social / Societal		**PWD Benefit**	**Company Benefit**
0		5	2

All supervisors expressed risks perceptions in terms of quantifiable magnitude similar to a Cognitive Calculation guided by expressions of severity, probability, and consequence. Representative comments are:

- "I have to consider how often they will be working and the tasks they could do, and I really wonder if it will be worth it for anyone involved." (Supervisor 1)

- "It is just too much. I am already busy with my regular staff, and taking that on would be more than I can handle right now" (Supervisor 3)
- "I have to be really concerned about whether they would be hurt at the worksite" (Supervisor 4)

When explaining the potential consequences of hiring a PWD, supervisors framed their concerns largely as increase workload for themselves in managing the PWD. While impacts to team performance and team dynamics were also anticipated, supervisors generally felt that those effects would be minimized or kept within acceptable tolerances in part because of extra efforts they would make as supervisors.

Interestingly, some supervisors expressed concerns with the potential relationship between themselves and the PWD anticipating an increase in 'requirement to be a friend or caretaker' above what normal supervisor-employee relations involve. A representative comment is "I don't know what they're going to need, and I have a business to run. It's easier for me to hire normal people where I don't have to worry about special needs." (Supervisor 5)

The general risk perception level in terms of magnitude is 'Medium', characterized by one supervisor as "big enough to duly consider but not so big as to generate an automatic no' (Supervisor 6). One supervisor expressed that "for current job expectations (entering client homes and installing cabinets) it's not feasible but a coming company expansion and transition to some internal manufacturing process may change things". (Supervisor 1)

Lastly, when examining the potential 'rewards' for taking on the perceived risks, few supervisors expressed that a PWD hire would involve a win for the organizations. For one supervisor that did hold that positive view (Supervisor 2), the win was related to helping the company and team 'grow' and 'demonstrate compassion' more than improved access to a purchasing demographic, community reputation, or operational advantage. Rather, in most cases the beneficiary of the hiring decision was seen to be the PWD because of access to work experiences and compensation. No supervisor mentioned that the hiring decision would have impact or extension to a broader societal good or social value. A representative comment is "It will be good for the person to get an opportunity to work" (Supervisor 1).

DISCUSSION

Supervisors identified a PWD hire as a risky activity. Aligning to my broad HrRM categories, the supervisors felt the risk was associated primarily with the person (People), but also that the Practice of hiring 'non-typical' employees was a matter of general concern. As supervisors generally adopted a Cognitive Calculation view of the risk they consistently described the concerns or problems that they perceived with the hire, and that there were minimal positive rewards to them or the enterprise for taking on that risk.

I also discovered a clear supervisor preference for the involvement of an advocate in the employment relationship. This was expressed as the supervisors having access to a 3rd party influence and communication mechanism with the PWD in the event that a) work performance is a problem, b) termination is likely, or c) unexpected or unwanted PWD relational / caretaking needs emerge. The presence of the advocate was an important concern mitigation consideration.

I also discerned a generalizable pattern that supervisor proximity to persons with disabilities in social and personal life tempered their perceptions of risk and increased their willingness to accommodate. That is, through personal experience and exposure they had a greater appreciation for the potential benefit to the person with disability and tolerance of the potential complications.

Future Research

Extension and elaborations of this research in several ways would be productive. First, the present study offers a limited number supervisor interviews. A more expanded study capturing risk perceptions of dozens of supervisors would lead to stronger findings and better generalizability. Further, as risks may be different in certain industries and according to nature of the disability, an expanded study focusing on one industry and disability condition pairing would be beneficial and help to articulate the 'general case'.

Second, the supervisors used a variety of cliché's, rationales, and conjectures to legitimize their views and decisions for not hiring a PWD. A discourse analysis of these utterances would be helpful and determine if supervisors rely predominantly one form or another of legitimization (e.g. economic rationale vs. anecdote experience). This analysis could then inform strategies reshape the decision narrative.

Last, I noticed that most supervisors were positively inclined to hire a PWD if not for the perceived risks. This implies a disconnect between 'intention' and 'action' that is similar to many other management situations where a person would do X if not for Y. Further exploration of the mediating variables between intention and action (e.g. individual, social, or policy) would help target initiatives aim at mitigating risks and bridging that divide.

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