Inclusive workplace practices: understanding disability-assistance animal stereotype-bias signals

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to fill a distinct gap in the literature on disability-assistance animals (disability-AAs) and inclusive employment by investigating human resource (HR) practitioners' perceptions of disability-AAs in the staffing process and workplace. HR practitioners play a critical role in accommodation and inclusion, yet their experiences and insights have been largely ignored in prior research.

Design/methodology/approach – This study used a phenomenological approach, drawing on signaling theory and employability constructs, to explore insights from 17 HR practitioners' experiences with assistance animals in the workplace.

Findings – The potential for unconscious bias in employment practices was found, as well as a significant percentage of practitioners who were unprepared to handle animal accommodations. First, the potential development of a positive stereotype bias suggests all genuine assistance animals are high functioning. Second, the assumption that employees' assistance animal requests for invisible disabilities without previous disclosure are presumed fraudulent until proven valid.

Research limitations/implications – As a qualitative study, findings from this study are not generalizable to a larger population but may be transferable to similar employment contexts.

Originality/value – This study extends knowledge from previous studies, which focused predominately on insights from disabled individuals, animal trainers and therapists, to the HR practitioner domain in creating a more inclusive work environment. Findings from this study suggest the need to improve education about disability-AAs and the potential for unconscious bias for HR practitioners and hiring managers when accommodating requests, particularly when those assistance animals are not described as high functioning.

Keywords Service dog, Emotional support animal, Human resources, Inclusive practice, Bias

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The use of a dog to mitigate an individual's disability in the workplace is increasingly common, as the post-COVID-19 focus on mental health has caused a dramatic rise in the demand for service dogs (SDs) as a reasonable accommodation under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) (Decious, 2021). An SD performs tasks "for the benefit of an

individual with a disability, including a physical, sensory, psychiatric, intellectual or other mental disability" (Nondiscrimination on the Basis of Disability in State & Local Government Services, 2016), such as physical assistance, medical alert or psychiatric response. Also, when considering ADA-based accommodations in the workplace, a reasonable accommodation can include an emotional support animal (ESA), one whose mere presence provides comfort but who is not trained to do a task (Gibeault, 2021). Therefore, the term disability-assistance animal (disability-AA), as described by Hunter, Verreynne, Pachana, and Harpur (2019), will be used to discuss the experience of human resource (HR) practitioners with disability-AA requests in the workplace, encompassing both SDs and ESAs.

Multiple factors have been identified as concerns related to the legitimacy of an SD for individuals with invisible disabilities, including the rise in fraudulent SDs, the increased presence of ESAs and the perception that small animals are not legitimate SDs (Buhai, 2016; Foreman, Glenn, Meade, & Wirth, 2017; Glenn & Thorne, 2015; Mills, 2017). It is no surprise that when considering an individual's employability, the potential negative perceptions of disability-AAs have become a pressing concern for applicants and employees. Glenn and Thorne (2015) suggested that individuals with invisible disabilities had more concerns with privacy, whereas those with visible disabilities had more concerns with coworker preparation and legal knowledge in the employment environment. Social stigma for mental health conditions may explain why this group's concern for privacy in the workplace was much greater. Mills (2017) noted that individuals with invisible disabilities reported "significantly more discrimination than those with visible disabilities" in the use of their SD and were more likely to be questioned about the legitimacy of their SD. Recent scholars have suggested that a focus on diverse and inclusive workplace practices has resulted in greater acceptance overall but still excludes those who are described as differently able (Gould, Harris, Mullin, & Jones, 2020). Inspired by the potential change toward inclusive workplace practices, this study seeks to explore this emerging dichotomy.

Previous literature on this topic drew on the perspectives of individuals, animal trainers and therapists (Hunter *et al.*, 2019). Because the employer's perspective is largely absent from the literature, an exploratory phenomenological approach was used (Creswell, 2007). Similar to Strindlund, Abrandt-Dahlgren, and Stahl (2019), which used phenomenology to understand disability and employability in the workplace, the intention of this study was to solicit employer representative's values, biases and experiences to obtain narrative accounts of the phenomenon representing their shared and unique perspectives (Giorgi, 2009). Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study is to investigate the valuable perspectives of HR practitioners who encountered disability-AAs in the staffing process and workplace, which is missing from the field of business-focused research as noted by Hunter *et al.* (2019).

This is a dynamic topic that is growing in importance. Public animosity toward SDs and emotional support dogs has increased as has their usage (Dorfman, 2019). Findings from this study can assist HR practitioners in developing inclusive workplace policies and practices by elucidating the potential for discrimination against individuals with disability-AAs.

Theoretical foundations
Previous research suggested that employers may view the lack of transparency as implying unethical behavior when information is later found to be inconsistent, undisclosed or inaccurately presented, and individuals were viewed as questionable or less employable (Cooley & Parks-Yancy, 2016). Therefore, the use of signaling theory helps to provide a relevant conceptual framework to better understand employability perceptions and the

communication process from the HR practitioner's perspective. It has been used in prior HR management studies to examine employer–labor market interactions to understand signals of applicant quality (Maurath, Wright, Wittorp, & Hardtke, 2015). Connelly, Certo, Ireland, and Reutzel (2011) described signaling theory as a phenomenon of information exchange, where the sender and receiver have shared information as well as undisclosed information. They noted that positive information is purposefully exchanged, whereas negative information is withheld but typically ends up being an accidental disclosure as an "unintended consequence" of the information exchange process (p. 45).

An employer's perception of an applicant's employability is a result of the employer's interpretation of one or more signals evaluated in the context of seeking employment opportunities or being employed. Employability is described as a collective subjective or implicit judgment. Implicit judgments are a cognitive process of unconscious retrieval of information and experience, resulting in implicit attitudes and implicit stereotypes (Greenwald & Krieger, 2006). An implicit attitude represents favorable or unfavorable perceptions and actions, whereas implicit stereotypes represent associations of groups as a category with a specific favorable or unfavorable trait (Greenwald & Krieger, 2006). Employability can then be viewed as a trait-based category potentially laden with implicit bias. Greenwald & Krieger (2006) cautioned that implicit bias was more likely in the employment domain for those in marginalized subgroups, such as the disabled. Lindsay and Thiyagarajah (2021) and Mills (2017) suggested future research should consider the potential for discrimination related to the visibility of the disability and disability-AAs in the workplace.

Signaling theory and employability bias include symmetry and asymmetry of information and expectations about the potential employment relationship. First, employer representatives' perceptions of an individual's subjective employability are related to the observability of a signal's strength and clarity, value and quality of organizational or job fit and the signal's observable consistency and stability. Second, as the signaler, symmetry or asymmetry is impacted by the individual's potential honesty, dishonesty and reliability. Third, for the receiver, information symmetry or asymmetry is also impacted by the employer representatives' attention to or focus on the signal and interpretation of the signal, which is then mitigated by potential environmental interference or internal biases.

Method
Phenomenological guidelines followed Creswell's suggestion of 5–25 participant interviews and Giorgi's procedures for phenomenological data collection and analysis.

Participants
Participant inclusion criteria were defined as HR practitioners with disability-AA encounters in the staffing or employment process. Individuals were excluded if their experience occurred outside the USA or was more than five years. Participant solicitation included social media requests and posting on job platforms, which resulted in 17 qualifying participants who were paid a $50.00 incentive.

Eleven industries were represented in the study, and ten organizations allowed public access. When considering pet-friendly environments, three were not clearly articulated, six were not pet-friendly, one was pet friendly in some but not all locations, one was pet-friendly outside and six were clearly pet-friendly. Types of disability-AA accommodation requests included SD-medical alert, SD-psychiatric alert, SD-mobility, ESA and SD-in training. Fifteen participants were female, and two were male. Participant-selected pseudonyms

included Jamie, Kerry, Rebecca, Tamara, Pamela, Donna, Ashley, Angle, Beth, Samantha, Chandy, Halli, Carrie, Randy, Simone, Jack and Lindsey.

Interviewing
After obtaining informed consent, 60–75-min video-recorded interviews were conducted and transcribed by the principal investigator. A semistructured interview protocol was used to guide the discussion, which was informed by previous research with disability-AA handlers, service animal trainers and counselors, but it was adapted according to the organizational perspective (Ju, Pacha, Moore, & Zhang, 2014; Foreman *et al.*, 2017; Glenn & Thorne, 2015; Mills, 2017). Interviews began with introductions and requests for demographic information about the organization. Participants were asked how their organization was prepared for encountering a disability-AA in the staffing process. Subsequent questions sought to clarify HR practitioners' responses, experiences and thoughts about the encounter, including what went well and how they handled challenges. Next, participants were asked about their evaluation of the job-related need for a newly hired or existing employee requesting a disability-AA accommodation under the ADA and the placement experience related to approved requests. Questions about placement experiences included what went well and challenges related to integration, productivity, culture, interpersonal dynamics and other organizational stakeholders. Notes were taken during the interview. Interviewees were asked to clarify or expand on responses as needed. During data analysis, emergent themes were identified and final salient themes were selected.

Data representation and analysis
This study used Giorgi's (2009) phenomenological method to analyze the narratives. Data analysis began with the initial transformation and reduction of narratives where each transcript was read for a holistic sense and then carefully reread to understand the multiple parts of the narrative and how each part may fit into the phenomenon. The interviewer's presence was reduced from transcripts, implied responses were made explicit with additions (inserted) and grammar was corrected to ensure the intent and accuracy of the written data were aligned with the original audio recording. Notes taken during the interviews were organized and incorporated as memos into the data. Participants were contacted by email for additional information or clarification as needed.

Initial coding
Initial content codes were created based on the structured interview questions. Responses to interview questions were reread by both researchers and further broken into smaller meaning units where meaning units were separated as the meaning or intent of the data changed. Next, meaning units were rewritten in the third person and HR management disciplinary language was applied. Each meaning unit was then coded with descriptive labels that emerged from the data and were reviewed by both researchers and revised or recoded as agreed throughout the systematic process. Drawing on signaling theory, additional descriptive labels were added to the meaning units delineating a typology of actions, behaviors, perceptions and outcomes with a focus on signals, interpretations and responses.

Identification of emerging themes
The codes were grouped together into categories or themes that emerged from the coding process. The resulting categories included staffing preparedness, job-related need, additional requests and perceptions of the disability-AA as genuine. Relationships in the data between codes and categories emerged as the network view was developed in Atlas.ti software. Atlas.ti allows importing of codes into a network view where relationships can be identified. The multiple, overlapping networks in Atlas.ti can be linked such that a holistic view of the phenomenon can emerge as a framework without losing the interviewees' narrative accounts of the experience and unique elements experienced by a subset of interviewees. The resulting themes of the phenomenon included experiences with disability-AA within the staffing process and the employment relationship, which are presented in the next section.

Results
HR practitioners' experiences with disability-AAs included applicants with accompanying dogs in the staffing process and employees seeking to have a dog present in the employment environment after employment began.

Disability-assistance animals and the staffing process
In total, 14 of the 17 HR practitioners encountered a disability-AA in the staffing process where two subthemes emerged:

(1) disability-AAs were described as highly trained or well trained; and
(2) no negative impact on employability from the presence of a disability-AA.

HR practitioners described their responses as efforts toward providing a nondiscriminatory interview process. Responses included verbal solicitations of applicants' needs and coaching of supervisors; nonverbal actions included actively searching for information about employer responsibilities when a dog arrived at an interview. In each of these situations, the presence of a dog provided a nonverbal cue to HR practitioners that the applicant was disabled. The observable signal's strength and clarity were derived from the individual's control of, and teamwork with, the disability-AA, which provided consistently stable and dependable signals leading to the perception of symmetry. The symmetry of applicants' signals and HR practitioners' judgments has the potential for positive spillover to employability, including perceptions of ethical behavior, respect for others and personal responsibility. Therefore, HR practitioners' response to the dog as a nonverbal cue of applicant disability did not negatively impact disabled applicants' employability.

Chandy, Donna, Samantha, Rebeca, Jamie and Tamara all had applicants arrive for the first interview with a disability-AA. Randy, Pamela, Lindsey, Angel, Halli and Kerry all had applicants arrive with a disability-AA for a second, third or final interview, but not the first interview. When considering those who were prepared or unprepared for a disability-AA in the staffing process, eight HR practitioners were prepared and six were not prepared, with the majority of those who were unprepared having applicants in the first interview. Prepared HR practitioners used the ADA as a framework to eliminate explicit bias through preexisting policies, whereas unprepared HR practitioners scrambled to ensure legal compliance through internet research.

Rebecca had an applicant with an invisible disability arrive at the interview without prior notice of the disability-AAs arrival. Rebecca indicated that the first point of contact for the applicant was the receptionist. "The receptionist alerted me ... She was like, "Hey,

there's a dog." Then I Googled a couple of things, and I pulled up the EEOC guidelines."
Whereas Rebecca was able to have the applicant wait while she conducted some quick
internet research, Donna had no time to prepare. Donna described the experience: "Not
knowing that he had an SD, he just, he came in for the interview ... We walked in [no
warning], there's the dog, so no prep, no nothing. I had no idea."

Overall, HR practitioners described positive experiences with disability-AAs in the
interview process regardless of prior notice. In total, 13 of the 14 HR practitioners described
the disability-AA in the staffing process as highly trained or well trained. During the
interview process, disability-AAs were perceived positively based on the disability-AAs'
behaviors, the individuals' behaviors and control of the disability-AAs. HR practitioners'
perceptions of employability in the staffing process were positively impacted by individuals'
nonverbal signals and the disability-AAs' immediate compliance and becoming invisible.
Jamie described the individual's and disability-AA's behavior as high-functioning and the
dog as individual-focused: "Even though her dog did not have a vest or anything, it was
very clear just in how they functioned as a team, between her and the dog, that you could tell
that it was a trained SD. I do not think anyone will ever have a doubt, because that dog did
not care what anybody else was doing. It was completely focused on her, as it should be."
Donna described the behavior from a training perspective, indicating, "Yeah, it's
unbelievable. I've never met a more well-behaved dog. It's better behaved than half our
employees; it's unbelievable." The high-functioning teamwork between the individual and
disability-AA resulted in no negative impacts on employment offers.

Disability-assistance animals and the employment relationship
The experiences described by HR practitioners during employment were substantially more
complex than experiences in the staffing process. Most HR participants, 16 of the 17,
encountered a disability-AA request in the workplace where two subthemes emerged:

(1) requests for a disability-AA from an existing employee were initially perceived as
    not a valid AA unless prior conversations occurred; and

(2) proximity to an approved disability-AA resulted in additional requests for
    accommodations.

HR practitioners described employees requesting a disability-AA with an invisible
disability as having insider information for which they need to discern the validity of the
request. Employees with a known disability (prior signal) were perceived to be honest.
When encountering an invisible disability, HR practitioners were increasingly attentive to
the asymmetry of information from observable signals' strength and clarity, as well as
consistently signaling a genuine disability-AA and a valid disability.

Ten of the HR practitioners were concerned with the job-related need, whereas five of the
HR practitioners assumed the job-related need was authentic if the disability-AA was
genuine. When assessing the job-related need, Angel said, "Basically, a review of the
employee's or future employee's job description to see what work they would be needing to
do and how the service animal would support them." Similarly, Beth described their
approach as "It was about that full process looking at the full job description, assessing the
knowledge, skills, and abilities needed for that role, and how that SD would support that
individual with their tasks." The need for open communication in requesting a disability-
AA accommodation was closely related to perceptions of the job-related need, which was
mentioned by Angel, Beth, Chandy, Kerry, Rebecca, Pamela, Jamie and Ashley. For
example, Kerry believed the employee was having increasing difficulty, based on their
conversations. The employee discussed the problem with her medical provider, and they

agreed that a disability-AA would be beneficial. The employee got a dog, began training it at home while she was employed with the organization and contacted HR requesting a disability-AA as an accommodation once it was trained. In Kerry's situation, the employee was open about his/her mental health condition and the need for a disability-AA.

During the accommodation request process, HR practitioners relied on employee narratives and nonverbal signals of the individual to assess the disability-AA as genuine or fraudulent. In total, 13 of the 16 HR practitioners were concerned that the AA was a genuine AA and not a pet being fraudulently misrepresented. Samantha asked, "Is this truly a needed accommodation, or is this someone that just wants to put a vest on their dog and bring them into work; so they wanted to check in the validity of that." Ashley's response was similar in sentiment, but really underscored the skepticism: "That's kind of twofold. The big thing was the actual need. So, when going through the interactive process, is there an actual need, or is it more of a want and like? This employee was a longer-term employee and had their medical condition the entire time that they were here. So, it was very much if you worked this long without one, is it really required for your success here? Or is it more of a preference, because throughout COVID, you worked from home and then had the preference for the animal to be near you?"

Six HR practitioners described concerns about proximity to an approved disability-AA in the workplace as causing additional and somewhat questionable requests from employees. Jack related, "Yes, after this, it kind of opened the floodgates a little bit. We had lots of people requesting they bring in their pets." Finally, once the process was followed, only three requests for ESAs were approved. Jamie encountered additional requests and suggested they may not be valid because employees may have gotten the idea from the employee hired with an SD. "The proximity to the first individual could have influenced the decisions of the other ones to get an SD because they sometimes work on shift together." Jamie related that mental health conditions are more difficult to ensure they are actual disabilities. "But the ones that are more for probably anxiety-related conditions are so much more challenging to figure out if it is legit or not, and there is so little you can ask that you just do not really know." Complicating the situation, Jamie explained that in practice, the ADA forms and the two allowable questions are not sufficient to ensure the SD is needed by the individual for their disability, not specifically related to the job, and that it is a real SD. "If they come in with an ADA form that says this person needs an SD, and this is what the SD is going to do for them, and then they answer those couple questions that you can ask in a way that seems appropriate, that is all you can do, say, 'Okay, well it is what it is.' Even though, on the surface, it really does not seem that it is truly an SD." Frustrations with clarifications of the disability and the genuine nature of the disability-AA were a shared experience by Beth, Kerry, Jack, Lindsay, Simone, Jamie, Kerry, Rebecca and Tamara.

Discussion of implications
The purpose of this study was to investigate the shared perception of HR professionals from workplace experiences with disability-AAs. The research's theoretical implications contribute to the literature by being the first to investigate employer-representative signal interpretations of work-related interactions with individuals using or requesting disability-AAs as an accommodation.

Theoretical and practical implications for staffing
HR practitioners commented on the highly trained nature of disability-AAs and their behavior resulting in a lack of visibility during the interview process. HR practitioners expressed that disability-AAs were not only highly trained, but there was "no doubt" about

their status as "real SDs." Signals provided by the disability-AA that aided in the interpretation of a "real" SD included being noticeably responsive to verbal and nonverbal commands, not noticeably present, nonreactive to people and the environment, and completely focused on the individual. In contrast to current literature, the mere presence of a disability-AA did not diminish the employability of individuals (Ju *et al.*, 2014; Mills, 2017).

Findings suggest the presence of a well-trained disability-AA resulted in no negative impacts on the perceptions of employability in the staffing process despite 45% of HR practitioners being unprepared. In contrast to existing literature related to the staffing process from the applicant's perspective, the status of the dog as a disability-AA and the applicant's potential disability-based need for the disability-AA were perceived to be honest based on the highly trained disability-AA signals and the high-functioning nature of the team (Mills, 2017). Extending current literature, this positive stereotype – all disability-AAs are highly trained – may have the potential to become an implicit bias, an unfair application of a positive stereotype to another subgroup (Blair & Banaji, 1996; Greenwald & Krieger, 2006). This novel insight provides opportunities for further work in the application of signaling theory to employability constructs for this disadvantaged subgroup, as well as inform gaps in stereotype bias models. For example, one concern is that implicit bias may result in the perception of inconsistent information during the staffing process and may result in elimination from the applicant pool (Cooley & Parks-Yancy, 2016). This implicit trait-based stereotype bias then may have the potential to be applied to low-functioning teams – a disability-AA not highly trained – resulting in negative pre-employment judgments such as described by Strindlund *et al.* (2019) in diminishing trust, which is significant in perceptions of disabled individuals' employability.

In the workplace, negative employment actions based on the explicit or implicit bias of a group create the potential for discrimination – a disparate impact in treating one group differently based on their shared trait (Greenwald & Krieger, 2006). Therefore, future research should consider employment impacts when distinguishing *trained* from *in-training* where the applicant or employee's disability-AA is not described as highly trained, and the individual and disability-AA has not yet reached the description of a high-functioning team. Further research in applications of signaling theory should also consider which signals from the applicant as a disability-AA handler would diminish HR practitioners' and hiring managers' perceptions of an individual's employability to identify counter-stereotypical trait associations, as suggested by Rice & Barth (2015) and Blair & Banaji (1996).

Theoretical and practical implications for employment
When previous conversations were held between the employee with a disability-AA and the HR practitioner about mental health conditions, the condition was assumed to be valid. This experience may have created a positive trait-based stereotype (Blair & Banaji, 1996) – that is, those with a legitimate disability are proactive and open in communicating about their disability. However, previous research suggested individuals with invisible disabilities may be more concerned about privacy and, therefore, less likely to disclose their disability (Glenn & Thorne, 2015). Contributing to signaling theory, evidence shows that most HR practitioners in this study indicated skepticism that a previously undisclosed mental health condition was severe enough to be a disability or that the individual needed the disability-AA (Buhai, 2016; Mills, 2017). In addition, they were frustrated by the limitation of two allowable questions on the ADA forms assessing the job-related need of the disability-AA. Future research should investigate if cascading requests for a disability-AA as an accommodation are related to proximity to an employee with a disability-AA and applying signaling theory, if the disability-AA request is subsequently interpreted as fraudulent in

conjunction with an undisclosed invisible disability. In addition, some of the HR practitioners were concerned that the spillover effect – exposure to another employee's psychiatric SD – was the catalyst for the decision to obtain a disability-AA rather than a disability-based need discussed with a doctor. Future research should investigate if the presumption of spillover effect is a broader phenomenon as this signal may help inform bias and discrimination models. Finally, investigating this study's identified limitations of the ADA guidance on allowable questions may identify solutions to reduce practitioner frustration and improve worker accommodations.

Conclusion

The most notable outcomes of this study, contributing unique insights to the field of HR management, were the potential for implicit stereotype bias, presuming that all disability-AAs are high functioning and that individuals with a legitimate disability are forthcoming in the disclosure to HR. The application of a positive stereotype bias, an implicit bias, may be unknown to the HR practitioner or manager and has the potential to lead to discrimination in the workplace. Findings from this study indicate that almost half of the HR practitioners were unprepared for a disability-AA encounter and suggest the need to improve inclusive policies and practices to mitigate the potential risk of implicit bias-based discrimination from positive stereotype bias when the individual with a disability-AA is not a high-functioning team.

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