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Scanning for Inclusion: How Employees Collect Information about their Workplace

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Scanning for Inclusion: How Employees Collect Information about their Workplace

Creating inclusive workplaces has become a grand challenge for organizations. Research into diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) has primarily focused on organizational initiatives that create an environment where employees—and especially those from marginalized backgrounds—feel welcomed and valued (Shore et al., 2011). Reflecting the multiple levels of the organization, these initiatives range from organization-wide policies and practices (Leslie, 2019), to inclusive leadership (Shore & Chung, in press), to ally behaviors from immediate colleagues (Thoroughgood et al., 2021). The influence of such initiatives is highly important to organizations, as empirical research has shown the benefits of inclusion both for employees and the organization—e.g., improved satisfaction (Nishii, 2013; Thoroughgood et al., 2020), reduced turnover (Nishii, 2013), reduced emotional exhaustion (Thoroughgood et al., 2020), and other outcomes (see the review by Shore et al., 2011). Further, inclusive workplaces can create the psychological safety necessary for employees to feel like they can be authentic and express their background (e.g., concealable stigmas; Clair et al., 2005; Jones & King, 2013). Therefore, understanding how employees perceive inclusion is relevant as organizations try to realize these outcomes.

Theoretically, the DEI literature has taken a signaling perspective to understand how initiatives create a workplace of inclusion (see Leslie, 2019). As part of this perspective, employees are assumed to be relatively passive receivers as they perceive and interpret their workplace. Missing from this perspective, though, is a consideration of how employees may actively seek information about their workplace. In this current paper, we challenge this passive assumption about employees by suggesting that they can act as active information gatherers. We introduce the concept of employee scanning, which refers to the process by which a person seeks information about how their background (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation) may be treated in a social context. Drawing from sociometer theory (Leary, 2005) and research around information seeking (Morrison, 2002), we propose that employees vary in the extent to which they scan their environment. We conceptualize scanning in terms of what kind of information employees seek, how they obtain this information, and where they obtain this information. We theorize that scanning may make employees more (or less) attune to positive and negative signals and thus influence how inclusive they perceive their work environment. Through this work, we aim to contribute to DEI research by providing a more complete picture of what influences employee perceptions of inclusion and why initiatives may vary in their effectiveness.

In this working paper, we develop a theoretical model to explain how scanning can directly influence perceptions of inclusion and indirectly employee identity management, engagement, and work attitudes. In five empirical studies, we followed the procedures to Hinkin (1998) to develop and validate survey measures for scanning. Further, we piloted our measures in two studies that provide preliminary support for our hypotheses. We currently are collecting employee data to test our full model.

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