

The Disability-Authenticity Dilemma

A Randomized Trial of Responses to Disability Disclosure

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2026 AEA Conference

Purpose of Paper

Organizations increasingly promote authenticity at work

- Employees with disabilities face disclosure tradeoffs
 - We examine when authenticity is rewarded vs. penalized

Authenticity at Work

Linked to well-being, trust, and performance

(Lenton et al. 2013; Cha et al. 2019; Rossignac-Milon et al. 2024; Cable et al. 2013)

- But authenticity has professional boundaries
- Strategic authenticity highlights selective disclosure

(Pillemer 2024)

Disability Disclosure at Work

Disclosure shaped by stigma and bias

(Ameri 2024)

- **Employees may avoid disclosure to protect reputation**
(Ameri & Kurtzberg, 2022)
- **Mental health viewed as particularly risky**
(Kurtzberg & Ameri, 2024; Ameri & Kurtzberg, 2025)

Literature Gap

Little experimental evidence on reactions to disability-based authenticity

- Unclear differences across disability types
- Limited guidance for managers

Research Questions:

- *Study 1:* How do coworkers respond to disability authenticity?
- *Study 2:* How should managers respond?

Study 1: Overview

Built a fictitious company and a team of three whose members all varied in what they disclosed in a getting-to-know-you conversation

- Different participants (n=2636) saw different versions of the third teammate introducing themselves
 - **Teammate 1:** Avid dog trainer with championships under his belt
 - **Teammate 2:** Parent of three and spoke of some of the struggles of parenting
 - **Teammate 3:** Always contained a description of a disability, but the specifics and their gender varied by conditions...

Study 1: 3x3x2 Design

IVs:

- *Disability*: Prosthetic arm, Dyslexia, or Depression
- *Explanation type*: Commitment to getting the job done (reliability), effective skills for the job (hard skills), or both
- *Gender*: Male or Female

DVs:

- Ratings of teammates
- Future Work Comfort ($\alpha=0.79$)
- Value of Authenticity at Work ($\alpha=0.85$)

Study 1: Differences Between Conditions

DV	Condition: Type of Story	N	Mean	SD	95% LLCI	95% ULCI
Future Work Comfort	Dog Training	2636	5.79	1.02	5.75	5.83
	Parenting	2636	5.59	1.13	5.55	5.64
	Depression	666	4.91	1.55	4.80	5.03
	Depression w. hard skills	215	4.90	1.59	4.69	5.12
	Depression w. reliability	216	4.91	1.58	4.70	5.12
	Depression w. hard skills+reliability	212	4.90	1.55	4.69	5.11
	Prosthesis	661	5.75	1.04	5.67	5.83
	Dyslexia	666	5.63	1.21	5.54	5.72
Value of Authenticity at Work	Depression (All versions)	1309	4.76	1.08	4.70	4.81
	Prosthesis	661	5.27	0.94	5.20	5.34
	Dyslexia	666	5.20	1.00	5.12	5.27

DV: Future Work Comfort

Disability disclosures reduced comfort vs. controls ($F=111.5, p<0.001, df=2,7905, \eta^2=0.03$)

- Hierarchy across disability types ($F[2,2633]=107.96, p<0.001, \eta^2=0.08$)
- Participants less comfortable w/ teammate who spoke about their depression than
 - Prosthetic arm ($t[1968]=-12.20; p<0.001; 95\% CI=[-0.70, -0.51]; \text{Cohen's } d=-.58$)
 - Challenges with dyslexia ($t[1973]=-10.98; p<0.001; 95\% CI=[-0.66, -0.46]; \text{Cohen's } d=-0.52$)

Reassurance about competence or reliability did not help

DV: Value of Authenticity at Work

Significant differences between disability stories ($F[2,2633]=72.28; p<0.001; \eta^2=0.057$)

Authentic disclosures were significantly less valuable overall after reading any of the depression disclosures as compared to

- prosthetic arm ($t[1968]=-10.41; p<0.001; 95\% \text{ CI}=[-0.61, -0.42]; \text{Cohen's } d=0.50$)
- dyslexia ($t[1973]=-8.82; p<0.001; 95\% \text{ CI}=[-0.54, -0.34]; \text{Cohen's } d=0.50$)

Boundaries Around What Gets Discussed

94% reported feeling comfortable sharing personal information about themselves at work

84% agreed that authenticity can help improve team dynamics

~75% noted that it is possible to be “too authentic”

- Some information may create tensions...

Study 2: Overview

Examined how managers can mitigate this dilemma for employees with disabilities

- Should managers focus on their interpersonal relationship with the employee directly *or* normalize and reframe disability disclosures to create an open climate more broadly?

Study 2: Design

Survey of managers (n=251)

- 8 response strategies evaluated; placed in two clusters →
- **Rated:** Past use, intent, and effectiveness

Presented 3 examples; rated if they would use each strategy

- **Example 1:** Study 1 depression discussion
- **Example 2:** “Bad flare-up” of an unnamed medical condition
- **Example 3:** Overwhelmed by lighting and noise at a bar for an office happy hour

Cluster 1: Supportive Behaviors

1. Acknowledge concerns
2. Continue privately
3. Provide support
4. Research resources
5. Follow up after disclosure

Cluster 2: Sharing Behaviors

6. Share personal example
7. Reframe narrative
8. Encourage team members to share

Study 2: Findings on Mental Health Overall

Managers rated discussing mental health at work ($M=3.91, SD=1.34$) as significantly less appropriate than discussing physical health ($M=4.45, SD=0.95$)
 $t[500]=-5.17, p<.001, 95\% CI=[-0.737, -0.331]$

These conversations came up less often and reported that mental health ($M=2.41, SD=1.08$) was discussed less than physical health ($M=3.12, SD=0.93$)
 $t[500]=-7.87, p<.001, 95\% CI=[-0.886, -0.532]$

Study 2: Between and Within Condition Differences

Cluster	Strategy	Used Before Mean (SD)	Use in Future Mean (SD)	Mean Diff	t	p	LL 95% CI	UL 95% CI	Find Effective Mean (SD)	t	p
Supportive Employee-Centered Behaviors	Acknowledge	4.34 (0.89)	4.11 (1.01)	-0.22	-4.15	0.00	-0.33	-0.12	4.09 (0.95)	--	--
	Continue Privately	3.89 (1.20)	4.15 (0.98)	0.26	3.89	0.00	0.13	0.38	4.15 (0.93)	1.79	0.07
	Support	4.15 (1.00)	4.32 (0.86)	0.17	3.38	0.00	0.07	0.27	4.34 (0.78)	5.00	0.00
	Research	3.46 (1.39)	3.97 (1.14)	0.51	7.38	0.00	0.38	0.65	4.01 (1.06)	-0.49	0.63
	Follow Up	4.25 (1.03)	4.43 (0.76)	0.19	3.42	0.00	0.08	0.30	4.45 (0.76)	6.87	0.00
Social Sharing Behaviors	Personal Example	3.63 (1.37)	3.67 (1.30)	0.04	0.70	0.49	-0.07	0.15	3.87 (1.12)	-2.96	0.00
	Reframe	3.61 (1.30)	3.73 (1.28)	0.12	2.05	0.04	0.01	0.23	3.81 (1.18)	-3.83	0.00
	Team Members	3.28 (1.40)	3.48 (1.29)	0.21	3.73	0.00	0.10	0.32	3.61 (1.20)	-7.17	0.00

Study 2: Past/Future Use of Strategies

Managers unsure how to handle disability disclosures; default to acknowledge them

- Once presented with the other options for handling disability disclosures, managers reported being willing to use them

Study 2: Perceived Strategy Effectiveness

Cluster 1-Supportive Behaviors
reported as more effective ($M=4.21$, $SD=0.91$)
than Cluster 2-Sharing ($M=3.76$, $SD=1.17$)
($t[12.99]=8.90$, $p<.001$, *Cohen's d*=0.44)

Participants more likely to use
Cluster 1-Supportive behaviors than
Cluster 2-Sharing behaviors across 3
examples presented

- Example 1, $\chi^2=210.12$, $p < 0.001$, $\Phi=-0.32$
- Example 2, $\chi^2=180.58$, $p < 0.001$, $\Phi=-.03$
- Example 3, $\chi^2=42.67$, $p < 0.001$; $\Phi=-.15$)

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Insights

Authenticity is conditionally valued

- Mental health disclosure remains risky
- Authenticity requires managerial support
 - Leadership shapes disclosure climates