

ANTICIPATED CONSEQUENCES AND DECISIONS TO REQUEST ACCOMMODATION: THE REQUESTER'S PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Accommodation benefits employers and helps create equal opportunity for people with disabilities. Yet while there is evidence of reluctance to ask, little is known about requesters' decisions to ask, or not ask, supervisors for needed accommodation. Cognizant of the impact of the ADA-prescribed accommodation characteristics, we propose and test a model that focuses on a requester's assessment of anticipated consequences. By grounding theory with 13 in-depth, open-ended interviews we confirm four salient anticipated consequences. Using logistic regression to analyze survey data from 282 full-time hearing impaired employees in conjunction with data from an expert panel, we found that a requester's assessment of anticipated compliance, situational usefulness and normative appropriateness were significant, while personal cost was not. In addition, we found that accommodation monetary cost and imposition directly effected a requester's decision, while equalization potential did not. Finally, monetary cost and imposition significantly influenced a requester's assessments of consequences, suggesting an important indirect influence.

INTRODUCTION

While passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) was a one-time, landmark event, the impact of this legislation plays out in the everyday interactions of millions of Americans. However, extant research on the effectiveness of the ADA has shown that the ADA may not be having its intended impact (DeLeire, 1997). In fact, it appears that underaccommodation continues to be a major barrier to equal employment opportunities (Braddock & Bachelder, 1994). While there are many potential reasons for underaccommodation, including lack of ADA awareness and employer resistance, both the limited research on accommodation and the more extensive research on help seeking suggest that employees are often unwilling to request assistance. Since the ADA specifically states that it is the employee's responsibility to request accommodation (ADA, 1990), if people with disabilities are unwilling to make such requests, their talents will continue to be underutilized.

THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

The extant literature on help seeking indicates that requests for assistance generally involve complex cognitive assessments (Nadler, Fisher & DePaulo, 1983) suggesting that other factors, beyond an accommodation's characteristics, may be influencing the requester's assessments and decisions. The theory of planned behavior indicates that the likelihood of individuals engaging in a specific behavior is best explained by examining the assessment

process that precedes it (Ajzen, 1991). Specifically, it suggests that situational characteristics not only affect behavior directly, but also through influence on individual's attitudes and beliefs about taking such actions. We conceptualize this process beginning with situational characteristics—in this case accommodation attributes, which influence the requester's formulation of salient beliefs or specifically a requester's assessment of the consequences of asking one's supervisor for a needed accommodation. In turn, these assessments determine the strength of a requester's behavioral intention and the likelihood of a decision to request accommodation. We place primary emphasis on identifying salient beliefs regarding consequences because while specific antecedents to these assessments can be expected to vary by context, the assessments themselves are more widely applicable.

Accommodation Characteristics

Accommodation characteristics serve as known benchmarks to the requester. While accommodations may have a variety of characteristics, three have been argued to play a pivotal role. Given that for a particular disability there is generally a limited set of accommodations that are sought on a daily basis and that requesters are generally well informed about these, they serve not only as an antecedent to the decision itself, but also play a role in shaping the requester's assessment of the anticipated consequences of a request.

Equalization potential. According to the ADA a “reasonable accommodation is any modification or adjustment to a job or the work environment that will enable a qualified applicant or employee with a disability to participate in the application process or to perform essential job functions”. In selecting the particular type of reasonable accommodation to provide, “the principal test is that of effectiveness; i.e., whether the accommodation will provide an opportunity for a person with a disability to achieve the same level of performance and to enjoy benefits equal to those of an average, similarly situated person without a disability”. Therefore, given that the greater the effectiveness of the help under consideration, the more likely an individual is to seek help (Nadler *et al.*, 1983), we expect that accommodation equalization potential will be positively related to the decision to request an accommodation and will play a role in shaping the requester's assessments.

Monetary cost. Provided that an accommodation does not create an undue burden on the employer, the monetary cost is not a relevant consideration under the terms of the ADA. However, the literature on accommodation requesting suggests that monetary cost—the dollar expense of an accommodation to the organization—is of particular importance (Florey & Harrison, 2000). Both the help seeking and the accommodation literature have shown that requesters try to minimize the burden of an accommodation, and the greater the monetary expense, the greater the burden to the organization. Indeed, an accommodation's monetary cost to the organization was among the most frequently noted reasons for not requesting an accommodation by respondents we interviewed. Thus, we expect that monetary cost is negatively related to the decision to request an accommodation.

Imposition. While equalization potential and monetary cost are accommodation attributes specifically mentioned in the framing of the ADA, the help seeking literature and the respondents we interviewed pointed to the importance of imposition—the demand accommodation places on others including supervisors, coworkers and customers. The help seeking literature shows that requests are often withheld even when demands placed on a helper would be minimal and the accommodation literature has shown that an employee may go so far

as to quite rather than burden others. For instance, respondents we interviewed showed a reluctance to ask others to speak up, change seats, or reduce background noise because they did not want to impose on others. Therefore, we expect that imposition is negatively related to the decision to request an accommodation.

The Role of Anticipated Consequences

The help seeking literature indicates that people often withhold requests for help when they believe the consequences of asking are unfavorable enough to outweigh the benefits of assistance (Nadler *et al.*, 1983). That said, the impact of less tangible consequences, such as the personal cost to one's image, remains unclear. We have identified four salient consequences.

Anticipated compliance assessment. At the most fundamental level, a requester's assessment regarding the likelihood of compliance with an accommodation request is pivotal to the decision. If compliance is perceived to be unlikely, requesters may simply choose not to make a request. As noted, accommodation effectiveness is the most important criterion in determining the legal merits of a request. Further, one component of equalization potential is the impact of an accommodation on the requester's performance. Similarly, with respect to monetary cost, Florey and Harrison (2000) found that the resource implication was the most important factor. Indeed, the greater the resource demands, the lower the perceived legitimacy and the greater the perceived imposition, both resulting in less willingness to comply with requests. Thus:

Hypothesis 1a: The relationship between accommodation equalization potential and the decision to request an accommodation is mediated by the requester's compliance assessment.

Hypothesis 1b: The relationship between accommodation monetary cost and the decision to request an accommodation is mediated by the requester's compliance assessment.

Situation usefulness assessment. While the ADA broadly, and perhaps loftily, emphasizes the potential of an accommodation in creating equal opportunity, the requesters we interviewed emphasized the more pragmatic issue of the usefulness of an accommodation in their daily work. For example, some respondents to our interviews indicated that they were only willing to ask for accommodations when they believed they would risk losing their job without the accommodation. Thus, in an ideal world, and as intended by the ADA, people with disabilities would request all accommodations that create equal opportunity for them; however, in the real world of daily requests, situational usefulness—the extent to which an accommodation is helpful to a particular requester his or her daily work—is a chief concern.

Hypothesis 2a: The relationship between accommodation equalization potential and the decision to request an accommodation is mediated by the requester's situational usefulness assessment.

Hypothesis 2b: The relationship between accommodation monetary cost and the decision to request an accommodation is mediated by the requester's situational usefulness assessment.

Personal cost assessment. It has been shown that people in need of assistance also carefully consider the personal costs associated with requesting help (Nadler *et al.*, 1983). Hence, the requester's assessment of personal cost can be expected to influence the request decision. While equalization potential and monetary cost may play a role in personal cost assessments, the help seeking literature and our interviews provide stronger support for the influence of imposition because while monetary cost is absorbed by the organizational, imposition typically falls upon supervisors, coworkers and others with whom the requester interacts on a daily basis.

Hypothesis 3: The relationship between accommodation imposition and the decision to request an accommodation is mediated by the requester's personal cost assessment.

Normative appropriateness assessment. The accommodation literature has also suggested that a requester's assessment of normative appropriateness, or the extent to which others believe an accommodation is suitable to request, may also play an important role in the request decision. The theory of planned behavior, as well as the help seeking literature, underscore the role played by normative assessments in influencing when help should or should not be sought. While equalization potential might be expected to favorably influence the requester's assessment of normative appropriateness because equalization potential impacts the merit of an accommodation request in the eyes of supervisors and coworkers the respondents we interviewed indicated that normative appropriateness was more strongly related to the demand an accommodation placed upon others and the organization as a whole. Further, several of the individuals we interviewed indicated that the greater the imposition and monetary cost of an accommodation, the less approval shown by others. Therefore, it is expected that:

Hypothesis 4a: The relationship between accommodation monetary cost and the decision to request an accommodation is mediated by the requester's normative appropriateness assessment.

Hypothesis 4b: The relationship between accommodation imposition and the decision to request an accommodation is mediated by the requester's normative appropriateness assessment.

METHODS

Initial interviews. Developing and testing our hypotheses required a three prong approach. First, in-depth interviews with 13 people who have hearing impairments were conducted to inform our review of the literature and to ground our theory development. All interviewees were employed full-time, forty-six percent were male, and their ages ranged from 29 to 54 years with a mean age of 38.

Main Survey. Next, survey data was collected on the salient beliefs held by requesters at the time they decided to make, and withhold, requests for needed accommodations. A total of 282 usable surveys returned for a response rate of 40.9 percent. Fifty eight percent of the respondents were women; the mean age was 41 with a range of 22 to 69 years, 58 percent had college degrees, another 12 percent had some college coursework and 36 percent had earned a graduate degree. All respondents indicated familiarity with the ADA and knew that they were

entitled to workplace accommodation. Our 282 respondents described a total of 282 decisions to make a request and 280 decisions to withhold a request for a total of 562 observations.

Expert panel. Finally, an expert panel was used to gain more objective assessments of the accommodation attributes. Specifically, we contacted the director of the Center on Employment at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf—among the largest institutions for the hearing impaired in the world. The director agreed to participate in our study and recommended the inclusion of six highly experienced employment specialists in his department with an average of 18 years of experience working with people who have hearing impairments. These experts work closely with both the employing organization and the hearing impaired employees on a regular basis and are familiar with the *Equalization potential*, *Monetary cost* and *Imposition* of a wide range of accommodations.

RESULTS

With respect to our expectations regarding the impact of accommodation attributes, we note that both *Monetary cost* ($p < .01$) and *Imposition* ($p < .01$) significantly improved the overall model while *Equalization potential* did not. Further, the assessments *Anticipated compliance* ($p < .01$), *Situational usefulness* ($p < .001$) and *Normative appropriateness* ($p < .01$) significantly improved model fit while *Personal cost* did not. Finally, evidence of a significant relationship between *Monetary cost* and *Anticipated compliance* ($p < .01$), *Imposition* and *Personal cost* ($p < .001$), *Monetary cost* and *Normative appropriateness* ($p < .01$), and *Imposition* and *Normative appropriateness* ($p < .001$) was found. Together these findings provide support for: Hypothesis 1b (*Anticipated compliance* mediates the relationship between *Monetary cost* and *Decisions*), Hypothesis 4a (*Normative appropriateness* assessments mediate the relationship between *Monetary cost* and *Decisions*) and Hypothesis 4b (*Normative appropriateness* assessments mediate the relationship between *Imposition* and *Decisions*). Support for Hypotheses 1a, 2a, 2b and 3 was not found. Finally, the mediators were entered as block 1 and the independent variables were entered as block 2. The block χ^2 statistic indicates the improvement in model fit when the independent variables are added. Here we see that inclusion of the independent variables does significantly improve the model fit ($p < .01$) and that *Monetary cost* and *Imposition* remain significant ($p < .01$), thus, the mediational effect is partial rather than full.

DISCUSSION

The current study makes several important contributions to the literature on accommodation requesting and we believe it is the first to try to understand a requester's decision in an everyday context. While the results of our initial interviews were used to help ground our model, it is instructive to reflect on some of the comments we received. In particular, we were struck by the fact that nearly two-thirds of our interviewees indicated that they had withheld requests for needed accommodations at least once each week. As a hearing impaired male, age 37, explained, "I know I have the right [to request accommodation from my employer], but it is not that simple. Sometimes I'm just not comfortable asking, and when I am, I still need to worry about how my boss and coworkers will respond." Thus, we found both anecdotal and empirical evidence that anticipated consequences matter. Indeed, our findings indicate that by adding anticipated consequences to our model, we increased the amount of

variance explained by more than four fold. Finally, while the ADA encourages requesters to ask for all accommodations that help level the playing field—create equal employment opportunity for the requester. Yet, we did not find a significant relationship between an accommodation's equalization potential and requester's decisions. What we did find is a strong relationship between the usefulness of an accommodation in a requester's daily work and the importance of compliance and normative appropriate assessments. Moreover, under the terms of the ADA monetary cost is only relevant to the merit of a request in extreme circumstances—that is, when accommodation would create undue burden in light of an organization's overall resources—we found that both monetary cost and imposition have a significant direct relationship with requesters' decisions and a significant indirect relationship through their relationships with the requesters' assessments of the likelihood of compliance and normative appropriateness of making a request. Moreover, respondents to our interviews and survey were often unwilling to request accommodations that on the surface appeared to involve trivial monetary cost and imposition, yet in the mind of the requester were associated with potentially unacceptable consequences.

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