

Fostering an Equitable Workplace by Addressing Systemic Issues

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Abstract

Inflexible and exclusionary policies, discrimination biases, the inability to adapt to the modern workplace, and mental health stigmas detrimentally impact an organization's work culture, and consequently, the experience of the organization's employees. Systemic workplace issues are currently addressed by placing a metaphorical band-aid on the outcomes, but there is little emphasis on the systems, attitudes, and perceptions that cause these outcomes to become so apparent and detrimental. The intent of this paper is to identify and respond to systemic issues in the workplace in hopes of fostering a more equitable environment for employees. The literature was assessed through humanistic, sociological, and modern management perspectives. The emerging themes of this analysis include workplace flexibility, inclusion and anti-discrimination efforts, management impact and behavior, and mental health perceptions. The themes were further examined through the theoretical frameworks of institutional logic theory, social norms theory, systems theory, and the social model of disability theory. Ethical implications were highlighted for organizations who choose to ignore and not implement the findings of this research, and proposed policy recommendations in both the private and public sectors were included.

Keywords: inclusion, discrimination, equity, system, workplace, mental health.

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Introduction

One may believe that a modern-day workplace would come with its own unique set of modern-day problems. While this proves to be true, historically challenging problems manifest throughout workplaces in a more modern presentation. Between being overworked, undervalued, underpaid, discriminated against, and subjected to unethical and unwelcoming environments, employees worldwide face challenges within the confines of any industry or organization. W. Edwards Deming wrote that 94% of issues in the workplace are systemic, with only 6% being attributable to individual-level, idiosyncratic factors. Consequently, programs, resources, and strategic initiatives should be investing in organizations at the systems level as opposed to the individual level (Praslova, 2023). On an individual level, most adults spend much of their lives at work. Therefore, the workplace serves as a primary venue for making friends and simply socializing with others. Recognizing these benefits of social relations at work exposes the inherent risks in regulating or attempting to regulate those relations (Green, 2005). Additionally, one in five Americans has a mental disorder that impairs their social, interpersonal, and occupational functioning, with similar rates observed across developed countries (Page et al., 2014).

Apart from the individual factors of employee satisfaction and engagement, the cruciality of management impact cannot be underscored enough. Gallup research of workers have found that the primary reasons employees quit their respective jobs is a bad boss, rather than a problem with their job or organization (Han et al., 2017). At the same rate, 65% to 75% of workers report that the worst aspect of their job is their immediate supervisor (Han et al., 2017). Current workplaces are unfortunately not meeting the needs of today's workforce, and the lack of

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workplace flexibility is having huge human capital costs that are affecting every sector in society (Christensen & Schneider, 2011). As this paper will reveal, poor management often exceeds beyond solely being an ineffective leader to being detrimental to the wellbeing, productivity, and overall experience of followers. Therefore, management culture may be contributing to a less safe, satisfying, and healthy workplace. The intent of this paper is to dig deeper into systemic issues embedded into elements of the collective employee experience and provide recommendations to assist in the contesting of these systemic issues. Notably, the elements include workplace flexibility, perceived senses of inclusion and discrimination, organizational attitudes on employee mental health and wellbeing, and leadership behavior, actions, and culture. These elements combine to make an amalgamation of unsupportive, and at times unhealthy, work environments for employees.

To further detail the systemic issues of the elements, the researcher shares some insights, beginning with workplace flexibility. The modern-day workforce is much more diverse now than it would have been when older generations first started out their careers. Dual-income households, single parents, and older workers have become more normalized now than ever before. While efforts to re-align the demands of the workplace to match the needs of the workers resonated with academic and business communities, their efforts to address them lacked coherence, momentum, and institutional infrastructure (Christensen & Schneider, 2011). As a result, today's cookie cutter, one-size-fits-all workplace, with its rigid work structure and career paths are outdated, as any successful workplace flexibility program must be a "win-win" proposition for both employees and employers (Kavanagh et al., 2017). Nearly a third of U.S. workers consider work-life balance and flexibility to be the most important factor in considering job offers (Christensen & Schneider, 2011). Consequently, taking a closer look at the struggles

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the modern family face is a great place to start when assessing the systemic issues with workplace inflexibility. Firstly, the modernity of women in the workplace has its own struggles. With a surge in the proportion of women in the workforce, there has been an increase in the focus on work and family harmony (Taylor et al., 2009). Notably, experts on higher education policy and the law have been investigating when and why scientists leave the profession and what can be done to resolve this leaky pipeline. For female scientists, marriage and childbirth account for the largest leaks in the pipeline between PhD and tenure (Christensen & Schneider, 2011).

While many parents are leaving the workforce, many parents are juggling both work and family life. Most children live in households with either two employed parents or an employed single parent. The inflexibility of work and school schedules and feeling guilt at the root of competing priorities is a pressure that working parents feel daily. This then, of course, affects their work-related productivity, health, and family life (Schneider, 2011). Specifically, emotions that arise from these pressures create resentment among adolescents when their parents miss and are not involved in sport and school activities, as well as stress and strain on a marriage. Schneider (2011) also declares that work-family conflict leads to an overall decreased psychological well-being. Parents must work to meet the needs of their families; however, their lives show signs that achieving a healthy balance in the current state is not ideal. Currently, the Family and Medical Leave Act provides only basic protections for workers seeking to balance family responsibilities with those at work (Root & Young, 2011). Therefore, a more effective balance must be achieved between work and home for working families. Parents are going to continue to work, and the stress of pressures of work-family conflict will only increase unless

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more flexibility options are designed and implemented to meet the needs of modern working parents (Schneider, 2011).

Accompanied with the issues at the root of workplace inflexibility are the issues of workplaces that are not as inclusive or equitable as they should be. Throughout this paper, readers will understand that the connection between social interaction and discrimination is fundamental to social norms within work culture. While the broader definition of culture represents an entire mindset that explains and controls behaviors and beliefs, work culture, specifically, tells us what to wear, how to walk, what to talk about, and how to interact within different social settings (Green, 2005). However, there are always outsiders and outliers to any general population or community, and the workplace is no exception as social interaction is likely to be polluted with discrimination bias. According to Green (2005), social science research reveals that outsiders do have to work harder than their counterparts to fit into a work culture that is defined along a white, male, able-bodied norm. Furthermore, insider discriminatory bias is likely to result in a presumption against fit. Unfortunately, traditional employment antidiscrimination efforts have largely ignored the role that work culture plays in perpetuating workplace discrimination and segregation. Where social relations are increasingly crucial to employee success, understanding the ways in which work culture can be a source of discrimination is paramount (Green, 2005).

Last but certainly not least is the ongoing concern of decline in mental health throughout collective society. In this context, the increasing costs of common mental disorders has created a major public health problem as policymakers and health professionals demand a better understanding of the correlation between modern work and mental health (Harvey et al., 2017). Poor mental health is a predictor of unemployment and reduced career goals, which ultimately

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result in a decreased quality of life and diminished community participation rates (Malachowski et al., 2016). Even though the American Psychological Association is offering awards to psychologically healthy workplaces (Grant et al., 2007), companies are not under legal obligation to address mental health and wellbeing in the same way that they do for addressing working conditions, physical health, and safety. This may be an indicator as to why research is more invested in physical health and less invested in mental health (Ivandic et al., 2017).

Unhealthy and unsupportive workplaces typically develop slowly overtime, and typically to the surprise of leadership who become unaware until it is too late. Indicators of these types of workplaces include but are not limited to lack of employee satisfaction, increased sick days, high turnover, decreased cooperation, increased conflicts, low productivity, and social isolation. By assessing what contributes to these outcomes, we can begin to identify ways of avoiding toxicity in the workplace while promoting healthy and inclusive environments (Healy & Dowell, 2017). As a response to these issues that employees face in the modern workplace, this paper is going to dive into these systemic issues by better understanding how they arise, how they are being perpetuated and kept alive, and how management and organizations can make systemic improvements. Addressing the issues at their most foundational level will render more successful than applying quick fixes that do not address the root of the problem.

Literature Review

Extant literature on systemic issues within the workplace reveals that several industries, disciplines, and countries have explored the employee work experience to different extents throughout history. Upon conclusion of the literature exploration, the researcher finds the emerging themes of employee flexibility, mental health, equity and inclusion, and management culture, paired with their respective issues: either systemic or developed. The research can be categorized and understood through the lenses of political and social science, legal perspectives, executive and managerial issues, business ethics, occupational and environmental medicine, and international perspectives.

Publication-Specific Literature

Four out of the thirty-one total articles were published in *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science Journal*. All four studies are similar in that they were published in 2011 and address the modern issues of hindered workplace flexibility. The focus of the research includes reviews on working families and the importance of why workplace flexibility needs to become a standard in the U.S. workplace (Schneider, 2011) as well as the result of increased job demands and new pressures on the modern workplace (such as dual-earner families, single parents, older workers, etc.) (Christensen and Schneider, 2011). The impact of the workplace is first underscored in “Introduction: Making a Case for Workplace Flexibility.” In this article, Christensen and Schneider (2011) explore demographic changes across generations and highlight the consequences of the structural mismatch between workplaces and workers for families and children, ultimately declaring that U.S. workers’ lives are becoming increasingly more complicated. Additionally, Root and Young (2011) find that a supportive work environment is identified by workers as a critical factor that promotes loyalty and motivation for the good of

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the broader organization. The impact of family is also reviewed. In their article entitled “The Cost of Workplace Flexibility for High-Powered Professionals,” Goldin and Katz (2011) conclude that women face penalties for greater job interruptions and their need for more flexibility. At the same time, in “The Human Face of Workplace Flexibility,” Schneider (2011) states that a new balance needs to be achieved between work and home for working families.

Another lens that this literature is reviewed through is the legal perspective. Specifically, *The California Law Review* and the *GPSolo Magazine* of the American Bar Association each highlight issues of inclusion and discrimination and toxic management culture in their respective publications. *The California Law Review*’s “Work Culture and Discrimination” article is part of a larger disciplinary movement towards conceptualizing discrimination as a problem with both human and organizational dimensions. In this article, Green (2005) posits that recognizing work culture as a source of employment discrimination may help address some harms that scholars have identified. On the other hand, Healy and Dowell (2017) discuss different contributing factors of toxic workplaces and suggestions for how to address concerning issues in workplace culture in their article entitled “Cleaning up Toxic Workplaces.”

Still focused on the concept of management culture, Pittsburg State University’s *Journal of Managerial Issues* examine the relationship between followers’ self-perceptions of their own follower and leader abilities (Baker et al., 2016) as well as relationships among three Path-Goal leadership styles, diversity, work group effectiveness, and turnover intention (Dixon & Hart, 2010) in the two articles assessed in this context. Baker et al. (2016) found that followers who build trust and communicate with the leader are more likely to see themselves with the abilities to inspire a shared vision, whereas Dixon and Hart (2010) found that both work group effectiveness and employee retention positively contributed to bottom line performance. Two

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articles in *The Academy of Management Executive Journal* also explore the issues within management culture. In an earlier article where remote and hybrid workplaces were relatively newer, “Managing a Virtual Workplace” identifies the business reasons both for and against virtual workplaces while providing tools and information for managers of virtual workplaces (Cascio, 2000). In a different article published few years later in 2007, the authors call attention to the importance of managerial practices on employee well-being and offer guidelines for managing and mitigating well-being tradeoffs (Grant et al., 2007).

Also published throughout the 2000s, four different articles published within the *Journal of Business Ethics* further contribute to the management culture theme as it relates to this research. Han et al. (2017) explores the impact of abusive supervision on an unexamined employee outcome, creative performance, and tests two mediators of sleep deprivation and emotional exhaustion. Similarly, Thoroughgood et al. (2011) sought to determine the effects of an organization’s climate and financial performance on subordinate perceptions of and reactions to aversive leadership. Lloyd et al. (2015) examined whether perceptions of supervisor listening are associated with proximal and distal work outcomes and mediating mechanisms that may explain listening effects, whereas White and Lean (2008) examine the impact of a team leader’s perceived integrity on their subordinates’ behavior. The authors found that abusive supervision had an indirect negative relationship with employee creativity via its impact on employee sleep deprivation and emotional exhaustion (Han et al., 2017) while discovering an interaction between leader integrity and team member ethical intentions (White and Lean, 2008).

The last individual publication that offers great insight into the mental health theme is the *Occupational and Environmental Medicine Journal*. Two research articles were reviews presented as analyses while one was a quantitative study. In the first of the two analyses articles,

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“Can Work Make You Mentally Ill?”, the authors conduct the first comprehensive systematic review of the evidence linking work to the development of common mental health problems. Notably, depression, anxiety, and/or work-related stress while considering how the risk factors identified may relate to each other (Harvey et al., 2017). In the second analysis article entitled “Stakeholder Perceptions of Job Stress in an Industrialized Country: Implications for Policy and Practice,” the authors used a secondary qualitative analysis of stakeholder perceptions of work stress in Australia to characterize the context for policy and practice intervention (Page et al., 2013). The purpose of the qualitative research article, “Workplace Stress: What is the Role of Positive Mental Health?” was to determine if positive mental health can protect an employee from the ill-effects of stress on mental health (Page et al., 2014). Harvey and colleagues (2017) found that a greater risk of developing common mental health problems is associated with high job demands, low job control, high effort-reward imbalance, low relational justice, low procedural justice, role stress, bullying, and low social support in the workplace. On the other hand, Page and colleagues (2013) discovered that individuals perceive stress as an individual problem as opposed to an organizational problem, in addition to viewing work stress as a stereotypically feminine weakness that affects a subset of people. Lastly, the results of Page’s quantitative study reveal that age was negatively associated with psychological distress, and having a long-term health condition was positively associated with distress (Page et al., 2014).

Society and Political Climate in the United States

The next literature grouping was written within the context of the American society and political climate within the United States, published throughout different journals and institutions. Of these publications, two articles addressed flexibility, three addressed inclusion, one addressed management culture, and two addressed mental health. Beginning with flexibility,

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the two articles used within this literature review consisted of one review/analysis as well as one quantitative study. Published in the *Monthly Labor Review* authored by the U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics, the authors conduct a review of a book of essays. Entitled "The Future of Flex: Recommendations for Improving Workplace Flexibility," Kavanagh et al. (2017) detail that the essays make the case that greater workplace flexibility will benefit today's diverse workforce. Moreover, several essays describe how working parents balance their time between family and work demands, and how family demands impact their respective careers (Kavanagh et al., 2017). Published within the *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, Taylor et al. (2019) conduct a quantitative study entitled "Work-Family Conflict/Facilitation and the Role of Workplace Supports for U.S. Hispanic Professionals." This study investigated the relationship between work-family conflict/facilitation (WFC/F) and the perception of psychological contract fairness by Hispanic business professionals. It also examined the effects of WFC/F as a mediator of the relationship between workplace supports and psychological contract fairness (Taylor et al., 2009). Kavanagh and colleagues (2017) discovered that men who work long hours are hesitant to reduce their hours in fear of their earnings and future career opportunities being compromised, and working mothers multitask most of their day while getting less sleep than stay-at-home mothers. Additionally, a couple's personal time suffers when both spouses are working outside the home (Kavanagh et al., 2017). On the other hand, Taylor and colleagues (2009) discovered that work-family conflict and facilitation mediated the relationship between workplace supports and psychological contract fairness for supervisor support, work climate for family, and job characteristics. Ultimately, there was a direct relationship between the availability of formal workplace supports and psychological contract fairness (Taylor et al., 2009).

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The next theme of inclusion was supported by three articles, each published within the *Risk Management Journal*, *Science & Society Journal*, and *The Sociological Quarterly Journal*, respectively. “Comparing Safety Culture and Learning Culture” examined the alignment of learning and safety culture in organizations and tests the hypothesis that factors that indicate a good learning culture may also signify good safety (Littlejohn et al., 2014). Out of the 48 papers analyzed, Littlejohn and colleagues (2014) employed the summaries of each to pinpoint factors that were indicators of learning culture or of safety culture. On the other hand, “Disability Oppression in the Contemporary U.S. Capitalist Workplace” explored personal interviews with disabled employees in large, public-sector organizations. These interviews uncovered various instances of alienation and harassment experienced by these disabled employees in the implementation phase of the ADA (Robert, 2003). Lastly, Robert and Harlan (2006) continue their project of exploring discrimination against people with disabilities within the framework of sociological theories in their article entitled “Mechanisms of Disability Discrimination in Large Bureaucratic Organizations: Ascriptive Inequalities in the Workplace.”

Moving to the theme of management, in 2023, Ludmila Praslova wrote an article in the *Harvard Business Review* entitled “Today’s Most Critical Workplace Challenges Are About Systems.” She ultimately concluded that critical workplace issues — e.g., the problematic quality of leadership within organizations, the threats to employee mental health and well-being, and the lack of belonging and inclusion — are primarily attributable to systemic factors embedded in organizational cultures and processes. And yet, many of these and other issues are still mainly addressed on the individual level. She details how a bias in how we perceive and explain the world is to blame, and furthermore, what leaders can do to begin to fight that within their respective organizations (Praslova, 2023).

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Finally, two articles within this context support the theme of mental health, published in the *Society and Mental Health Journal* and the *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, respectively. With the goal of exploring the social relations and institutional practices that provide context for employees dealing with mental illness attempting to stay employed, Malachowski and peers (2016) employ an institutional ethnography to clarify the institutional organization of the everyday work experience of the employee living with self-reported depression. On the other hand, Oksanen and peers (2010) examined the vertical component and horizontal component of workplace social capital as risk factors for subsequent depression. In this context, vertical components include respectful and trusting relationships across power differentials at work, and horizontal components of workplace social capital include trust and reciprocity between employees at the same hierarchical level (Oksanen et al., 2010). Therefore, their results underscore the criticality of both vertical and horizontal components of workplace social capital as predictors of employee mental health.

International Research Publications

The final grouping of literature consists of six international articles and publications throughout Germany, England, and Finland. Specifically, German research was conducted within the scope of flexibility and management culture themes, English research was conducted within the scope of flexibility, and mental health was conducted within the context of Scandinavian publishers in Finland. Beginning with workplace flexibility in the *Historical Social Research Journal (Historische Sozialforschung)*, the authors of “Flexible Work Practices: Analysis from a Pragmatist Perspective” build on the economics of convention (EC) to “elaborate on the current challenges HRM scholarship is confronted with and provide a theoretical lens that goes beyond the tension between market and bureaucracy principles in actual employment settings (Brand et

al., 2019).” Moreover, they show that different modes of coordination in employment are applied in a fluctuating manner that depends on the specific situations. Published in the Oxford University Press, “*Flexible Work, Flexible Penalties: The Effect of Gender, Childcare, and Type of Request on the Flexibility Bias*” analyzes flexible work practices and the effect of gender, childcare, and type of request based on flexibility bias. According to Christin Munsch (2016), participants evaluated employees who requested flexible work more negatively than employees who did not request flexible work and evaluated workers who requested flexible arrangements more negatively than workers who requested flextime arrangements (Munsch, 2016).

The theme of management culture was explored within the *German Journal of Human Resource Management (Zeitschrift für Personalforschung)*. In their research, Mathias Diebig and colleagues (2017) conducted a quantitative research study that linked leader strain with followers’ level of burnout while considering leaders’ transformational leadership behavior. Overall, Diebig et al. (2017) found that strained leaders display less transformational leader behaviors, leaders’ transformational behaviors reduce follower burnout, and the relationship between leader strain and follower burnout is mediated by transformational leadership behaviors. The study provides further understanding into the field of leadership theory by shedding light on the nature of leadership under stress (Diebig et al., 2017).

Mental health that was last theme examined within an international context. Specifically, three research studies were published within the *Scandinavian Journal of Work, Environment & Health*. In Ivandic and peers’ (2017) “A Systematic Review of Brief Mental Health and Well-Being Interventions in Organizational Settings,” the goal was to provide an overview of the evidence on the effectiveness of brief interventions targeting mental health and wellbeing in organizational settings and compare their effects with corresponding interventions of common

duration. The second analysis was conducted by Milner and peers (2017) entitled “Psychosocial Job Quality and Mental Health Among Young Workers: A Fixed-Effects Regression Analysis Using 13 Waves of Annual Data.” The authors examined the difference in mental health when a young person was not in the labor force compared to being in a job with varying levels of psychosocial quality (Milner et al., 2017). Lastly, Stansfeld and Candy (2006) clarified associations between psychosocial work stressors and ill mental health by conducting a meta-analysis of psychosocial work stressors and common mental disorders. The results of this research reveal that brief interventions can be implemented as a strategy for stress relief when tasked with enhancing employee mental health and reducing their stress levels. Moreover, their duration and simplicity may have a positive influence in overcoming common structural challenges and barriers of implementing mental health interventions in the workplace (Ivandic et al., 2017). Milner et al. (2017) found a statistically significant decline in mental health when young people were employed in jobs with poor psychosocial working conditions, but an improvement in mental health when they were employed in jobs with optimal psychosocial working conditions. And finally, it was proven that predictors of common mental disorders include job strain, low decision attitude, low social support, high psychological demands, effort-reward imbalance, and high job insecurity (Stansfeld & Candy, 2006).

Literature Gaps & Proposed Future Research

Management Culture

After synthesizing the various pieces of literature within this context, a few observations on management culture emerge. First, it appears that relatively little is known about the health of leaders, despite industry scholars’ investigatory efforts of follower as the result of certain leader behaviors (Diebig et al., 2017). According to Dixon and Hart (2010), an appropriate leader can

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enhance a work group's performance, increase group members' job satisfaction, and reduce turnover intentions. However, even if studies spent more time on measuring leader and management health, there is limited research on assessing the impact of specific leadership styles on diverse work group effectiveness and turnover intention (Dixon & Hart, 2010). With that, and on the note of leadership styles, insights into the stress-related precursors of transformational leadership behavior are deficient, as there is a limited amount of research on antecedents of transformational leadership (Diebig et al., 2017). With leader ethics and behavior under the microscope, little is known about the processes by which perceptions of abusive supervision influence behavioral and emotional outcomes (Han et al., 2017). Additionally, there is a deficiency in understanding of the role of leaders' listening and the emotional conditions that listening facilitates in employees (Lloyd et al., 2015), as well as limited research with goals of examining the developmental aspects of employee ethical decision-making in a team environment (White & Lean, 2008).

Mental Health

Research gaps in the mental health sphere were also identified throughout the literature. While specific work factors were examined throughout this literature, a general agreement regarding which work factors influence mental health has yet to be reached. Despite the existing reviews that address specific work-related factors independently, the influence of all relevant factors on mental health has not yet been further investigated (Harvey et al., 2017). With that, there also exists a need for more interventions studies to assess whether modifying work-related stressors lead to improved mental health throughout working populations (Stansfeld and Candy, 2006). Additionally, despite the concept and analyses of vertical (across management levels) and horizontal (within management levels/peers) components of workplace social capital have been

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welcomed by researchers, it has prompted limited amounts of empirical research (Oksanen et al., 2010). On a related note of workplace social capital, researchers have yet to investigate the extent to which gender has influenced perceptions of workplace psychosocial risk (Page et al., 2013). Ultimately, while it would be crucial for organizations to provide an overview of mental health interventions for their respective settings, no comprehensive collection and analysis of the evidence is readily available (Ivandic et al., 2017).

Flexibility

The next theme of workplace flexibility also has its own share of research gaps and limitations. While there has been a significant amount of discourse and conversation on flexible work arrangements throughout various industries, the existing research has not fully caught up with how flexible work is being operationalized in modern workplaces. Specifically, while Human Resource Management resource acknowledges alternatives to bureaucracy to organize work and employment, the findings has had an insignificant impact on the analysis of work practices and their dynamics in real organizations (Brandl et al., 2019). Systemic disadvantages of formal or informal flexible work arrangements are a valid concern for employees, but concurrently, little is known about the ways that flexibility bias or stigma varies by the type of arrangement requested, and by the gender and parental status of requesters (Munsch, 2016). Similarly, research on how to reduce the conflict between work-family facilitation and to what degree individuals, employers, communities, and policies can be effective is still limited (Taylor et al., 2009). Lastly, as it relates to the argument against flexible work arrangements, previous research have examined the consequences of flexible work with a limited focus on workload reductions and leaves of absence, specifically within the context of the Family and Medical Leave Act (Munsch, 2016).

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Inclusion

And finally, while the concept of equity and inclusion in the workplace is expansive, several research gaps are particularly related to the disabled community. As a whole, studies of workplace discrimination have typically focused on unobservable motives to explain ascriptive inequalities among class, gender, and race, but at the same time have overlooked disability. From an organizational perspective, more effort needs to be invested to further recognize and understand patterns of disability discrimination in the workplace, as well as the role that organizations themselves have in creating and propelling these patterns (Robert & Harlan, 2006). (Robert & Harlan, 2006). Aligned with disability discrimination, disability oppression remains a constant battle for the community. Recent analyses of disability oppression have focused on the historical exclusion of people with disabilities from employment in capitalist society, however, there is limited systematic research on recent efforts to remove barriers to employment for people with disabilities (Robert, 2003).

Analysis

The emerging themes from this analysis can be further examined through the humanistic, sociological, and modern management perspectives. Humanistic psychology is particularly relevant as the humanist focuses on the fullest growth of individuals in areas of love, fulfillment, self-worth, and autonomy (Humanistic psychology, 2024), viewing individuals as a person first before they are an employee. The second perspective directly relates to how employees function and interact with each other throughout society, entitled the sociological perspective. The foundation of the sociological perspective is the social science of sociology that examines the dynamics of constituent parts of societies, which include institutions, communities, populations, and gender, racial, or age groups (Form & Faris, 2024). In this context, a sociologist would be

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able to examine the employee experience while further analyzing the demographic and cultural components of their individual lives. The last perspective that will be used to interpret these findings is the modern management perspective. When addressing systemic issues in the workplace, the idea is to shift the current workplace environment to a more inclusive and progressive environment. This aligns well with modern management perspective that adopts an approach to management that balances scientific methodology with humanistic psychology. It employs emerging technologies and statistical analysis to make decisions and quantify performance while valuing individual job satisfaction and a healthy corporate culture. This type of management perspective allows organizations to adapt to complex, fluid situations with local solutions instead of positing a single, overriding principle (Overview of Management Theories, 2022). Next, we focus on each perspective in detail as they relate to our guiding purpose of fostering an equitable workplace by addressing systemic issues.

Perspectives

Humanistic Perspective

When assessing the employee experience from the perspective of ensuring their jobs are aligned with reaching their greatest potential as individuals, several characteristics comprise this view that are also supported throughout this literature. Characteristics of the humanistic perspective include the importance of employee freedom, the concept of trust, stress factors, and metrics on increased outcomes such as productivity, commitment, creativity, and retention. A sense of freedom in the workplace is not only beneficial to employees at the individual, human level but also at the organizational level as it produces more positive outcomes. In the context of employees in the workplace, this sense of freedom is defined as flexible work arrangements: whether that be flexible hours or locations. Both employees and employers will benefit from a

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more flexible workplace, as employees who have flexible work options can respond more positively to the demands of work, education, and family (Kavanagh et al., 2017). The concept of flexible work conflicts with traditional worker norms by allowing workers a certain degree of freedom in choosing when and where to work (Munsch, 2016). Employees with access to flexible workplace arrangements exhibit improved mental health than other employees, and low-income workers specially experience this effect more strongly than higher earners (Schneider, 2011). Family demands, in addition to time demands experienced on the jobs, have created pressures for working parents as they feel that they do not have enough time to get their work done at their jobs. Consequently, the heightened sense of time pressure is significantly associated with an increase in the report of work-family conflict (Schneider, 2011). This is an effective example of how stress is correlated with flexible work arrangements, which is the next characteristic of freedom that the humanist would explore.

The role of mental health, and more specifically, stress, is a factor that without a doubt will hinder an individual from achieving their goals and desires, both professionally and personally. One of the major risk factors leading to a decline in mental health and wellbeing is work-related stress (Ivandic et al., 2017). Mental disorders have now replaced musculoskeletal problems as the leading cause of sickness absence and long-term work incapacity in most developed countries (Harvey et al., 2017), and at the same time, studies have revealed that job stress can impair mental health, regardless of being measured as overall perceived stress or reported exposure to psychosocial stressors (Page et al., 2014). To that end, as part of an attempt to discover how stress at home correlates with stress at work, Page and colleagues (2014) reveal that stress at home amplified stress at work. Participants of their study stated that workplace stress could spill into workers' private lives, where some even said that stress at home was the

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primary cause of work stress. There is a noticeable difference when comparing the results of worker with high flexibility with workers with low flexibility. Specifically, those with low flexibility were more likely to report having more arguments, work tensions, and physical health symptoms (Christensen & Schneider, 2011).

For working adults with families, a humanist would make the argument that the concern of stress becomes even more complex at not only the individual level but also at the parent level. Firstly, parents need to be available to provide care for unpredictable times of sickness or injury. Parent stress related to these types of events has been shown to distract parents at both their home and work environments (Schneider, 2011). With that, Schneider (2011) shares that most working parents have the daily worry of arranging their schedules to accommodate the demands of time for both professional and personal activities. According to Christensen and Schneider (2011), work appears to have the strongest influence on the social interactions mothers and fathers have with each other and with their children. Moreover, the relationships can be particularly negative if the parents spend long hours at jobs that do not have flexible work arrangements.

Another characteristic of the humanist perspective, as it relates to this paper, is the concept of trust, both at the lateral level among employees as well as the hierarchical level with leaders. Specifically, an increased sense of mutual trust can benefit employees with respect to their professional development. Employees' may be more willing to engage in reciprocal acts of trust and communication when an organization's culture fosters leaders' ability to create a climate of trust and open communication with their teams. As a result, employees may feel more confident about their own potential and become more inclined to step up to the challenges of a formal position in leadership (Baker et al., 2016). It is also critical to assess trust interact at the

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more lateral among colleagues. In the context of a virtual workplace, much of the success of virtual work arrangements is based on the amount of trust that one's coworkers will fulfill their obligations. Lack of trust can destabilize existing precautions taken to ensure successful virtual arrangements (Cascio, 2000). Where the vertical component refers to employee interaction with their upline leadership, and the horizontal component refers to employee interaction with coworkers, both low vertical and horizontal trust were associated with lower self-reported psychological health (Oksanen et al., 2010). A humanist would conclude that a sense of trust is a core pillar that needs to be present among employees, their management chains, and their coworkers to produce a more ideal work environment.

The last characteristics that a humanist would take interest in are the metrics around increased productivity, commitment, creativity, and retention, as they are reciprocally beneficial for both the employee and the organization. Unsurprisingly, work-related stress and related mental health problems lead to several socioeconomic consequences such as absenteeism, increased turnover, and loss of productivity (Ivandic et al., 2007). On the other hand, flexible work arrangements were strongly related to positive work outcomes. Employees who have a supportive work-life culture are more satisfied with their jobs, more committed to their employer, and are more likely to stay with their employer (Taylor et al., 2009). In a similar study, workplace flexibility was associated with reduced work-family conflict, improved physical and mental health, fewer unplanned absences, reduced employee turnover, and increased engagement and job satisfaction (Munsch, 2016). Apart from workplace flexibility, management has additional impacts on employee experience metrics. Studies reveal that safe yet engaging environments greatly benefit employees. Leader efforts of enriching tasks to create feelings of meaningfulness lead to higher levels of job satisfaction (Grant et al., 2007), and similarly, leaders

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providing a safe environment for employees to explore or fail is a key factor in promoting creative performance (Han et al., 2017). Leadership efforts to truly listen to their employees and make them feel heard also influence turnover intentions. Happier employees are likely to be committed to their job regardless of competing opportunities, whereas less happy employees may be motivated to quit their job and/or leave the company. Alternatively, supervisors who are perceived as poor listeners may increase the risk of emotional exhaustion while causing employees to develop a negative attitude towards their leadership and organization (Lloyd et al., 2015).

Sociological Perspective

The next perspective that is particularly relevant to the purpose of this paper is the sociological perspective. The social study of sociology would enable organizations to view the employee experience within the context of their individual demographic characteristics. It appears that organizational Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) efforts are closely aligned with these characteristics, and therefore, a sociologist would take great interest in how these demographics shape the overall employee experience. Within this context, major demographics and characteristics emerge from the literature, including populations of women and people with disabilities, as well as employer involvement with regards to organizational management of discrimination and an inclusive culture.

Women in the workplace, regardless of age or family status, fight unique battles with regards to sexism, flexibility, emotions, and vulnerability. Beginning with the issue of sexism for women in general, organizational leaders may instruct women to develop confidence, stick up for themselves, speak up more in meetings, and not be afraid to report harassment or discrimination. However, the solution should not be focused on women's actions or behaviors, and instead

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should be on the environments that create systemic discrimination (Praslova, 2023).

Furthermore, it would behoove organizations everywhere to question the current state of their respective corporate cultures to ensure that women are not subjected to sexism, discrimination, or harassment so that they can succeed authentically. With regards to flexibility, women in general are taking more control of their careers by choosing professions and specialties that are consistent with their greater desire for workplace flexibility. While some professions have changed due to the scale of operations, others have changed because of the increased entry of women (Goldin & Katz, 2011). The last universal issue that women appear to grapple with is the perception of negative terms being aligned with femininity. In a study that assessed stakeholder perceptions of job stress, the authors reported that participants often used terms that aligned with stereotypical notions of femininity, such as poor coping, over-sensitivity, complaining, while masculinity was associated with physical and aggressive means (Page et al., 2013). Likewise, work stress as a whole was perceived as a feminine vulnerability. To detail, Page and colleagues (2013) reveal that one woman manager even stated that the male ego problem is portrayed by the rhetoric of “real men don’t get problems,” and that men are reluctant to even admit that they have any problems.

For women with families, all aforementioned factors are still relevant but concerns of balancing their families with their careers just add on to their struggles. While both mothers and fathers engage in housework-related activities, mothers are more likely than fathers to be engaged in multiple housework-related activities (Schneider, 2011). And with that, on the note of multitasking, it is associated with higher levels of frustration, irritation, and stress, as mothers are more likely to report greater work-family conflict than fathers when multitasking (Schneider, 2011). As a consequence, mothers are choosing to forego their leisure time to make room for the

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amount of multitasking that is required to keep up with work and family demands. It is especially unhelpful that women do not have as much public support for combining paid work with family caregiving as opposed to women in other countries (Christensen & Schneider, 2011). And finally, in the context of women in science disciplines and professions, female scientists leave their respective professions due to family formation, specifically marriage and childbirth (Christensen & Schneider, 2011). Unsurprisingly, this appears to be aligned with Goldin and Katz's (2011) findings that women have flocked to various industries and careers where penalties to having a family have decreased.

A second population that is particularly impacted by systemic issues in the workplace is the population of people with disabilities. Sociologists would take a keen interest in diving further into the discrimination and inequities that people of disabilities face, especially in the workplace. People with disabilities currently comprise 19.2 percent of the U.S. population, and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) acknowledges systemic employment barriers for people with disabilities (Robert & Harlan, 2006). The studies examined in the context of this paper demonstrate that employees with disabilities were typically alienated at work by means of physical segregation, social isolation, or separation from any labor process, resulting in them becoming outsiders at their own place of work (Robert, 2003). From an economic perspective, the roots of capitalism are inherently exclusionary to people with disabilities, which is particularly inconvenient as capitalism currently serves as the backbone of corporate culture in modern society. One can argue that capitalism created factory production, which therefore segregated people with disabilities from family members who entered the waged work force in these factories. Consequently, the worth of individuals became tethered to this capitalist mindset and ideology (Robert, 2003).

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It appears that the exclusion of people with disabilities has a snowball effect, especially as inadvertent physical exclusion quickly snowballs into senses of social isolation and exclusion. In a study conducted by Robert and Harlan (2006), nearly all participants reported experiencing or knowing of other workers with disabilities who had been marginalized at work. Marginalization typically manifests as various forms of social isolation, which may include being ignored by coworkers and supervisors, being excluded from daily routines, and being stared at. Sometimes, workplace isolation is the result of environmental constraints and planning, as some employees with disabilities were excluded because their coworkers would congregate at inaccessible places. And furthermore, perhaps because of the physical segregation, those same employees were alienated from others through social isolation (Robert, 2003). Unfortunately, Robert (2003) also admits that dumping grounds were set up to keep people with disabilities hidden from other workers or the public. Robert and Harlan (2006) build on to this sentiment by revealing that workers with disabilities acknowledge that they could have been included if leadership and decision makers prioritized making public spaces accessible and if coworkers prioritized findings ways to include them. Unfortunately, these reflections were not communicated back up to senior leaders and decision makers, thus illustrating the discouragement and perhaps dejection that people with disabilities may feel. This directly leads to the next question of: how does management contribute to this problem? The interpersonal constructs and notions that manifest as discriminatory acts of marginalization, fictionalization, and harassment are made possible and sustained by the organizational context in which they operate. Robert and Harlan (2006) reveal that disabled employees are perceived as liability workers who cannot compete with their nondisabled peers. The sole act of defining disabled workers as “liability workers” enables organizations and leaders within these organizations to

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indirectly authorize the differential treatment of workers with disabilities and the resulting negative outcomes. As part of the solution, leaders need to acknowledge and celebrate diversity so it is viewed as a generator of innovation and creativity as well as communicate positively about differences within social groups. When this happens, leaders emphasize the organization's shared goals, which leads members to take introspective views about their beliefs about diversity. This then enhances organizational effectiveness and positively impacts organizational competitiveness (Dixon & Hart, 2010). Specifically, Dixon and Hart (2010) claim that organizations that emphasize common values and conduct appropriate diversity training may be able to improve employee satisfaction for all employees and diverse group performance.

Finally, a third component of the sociological perspective is organizational management, oversight, and involvement of anti-discrimination efforts. Sociologists, industrial psychologists, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) practitioners, human resource departments, and similar professionals are identifying and evaluating anti-discrimination efforts in hopes to produce more inclusive environments, especially for marginalized and underserved communities. While work culture discrimination at its core is a human problem, organizations are the entities who influence and shape work culture through structural and other institutional choices. In other words, employers create the context in which work cultures develop (Green, 2005). Once organizations define their own work culture, individuals look to the values, norms, behaviors, and expectations that they observe to guide their behavior. When doing so, they then learn which behaviors are acceptable and which are not within the respective organizational context (Thoroughgood et al., 2011). If leadership of a certain organization stigmatizes mental health conditions, for example, it would be easy for employees within that organization to develop harmful biases against any coworkers who may have depression, anxiety, etc. On that note, stigma towards mental illness is

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also directly related to employment inequity and further contributes to underemployment as well as underemployment (Malachowski et al., 2016). Diversity rhetoric has shifted attention from systemic problems of discrimination and intergroup conflict and toward individualized solutions to individualized conduct because diversity rhetoric distances diversity concerns from civil rights issues by broadly defining diversity (Green, 2005). Green (2005) also declares that discriminatory work cultures are not solely the product of an organic social process subject to human bias, and instead are shaped and influenced by the larger organizational policies and structures.

Modern Management Perspective

The final perspective that was utilized to analyze the research and literature findings is the modern management perspective. Modern management enables organizations to adapt to complex situations with unique, custom solutions as opposed to stricter, inflexible solutions (Overview of Management Theories, 2022). This type of management renders particularly effective for comparing current, more rigid organizational culture and ways of working to a more progressive, adaptive work environment with an overall improved culture and employee experience. Notable characteristics of this perspective include examining how existing systems of bureaucracy can hinder progress, comparing new to old management and work culture, analyzing the modern virtual workplace, and laying the foundation for a more optimistic and welcoming culture for mental health concerns.

Beginning with the organizational system of bureaucracy, this particular system is currently what human resource management practices are built off. Social arrangements where human resource management practices apply are large companies, schools, and public administrations, which are all characterized by the bureaucratic way of coordination (Brandl et

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al., 2019). Strict adherence to bureaucratic ideologies, methodologies, and work cultures may ultimately end up creating an inflexible and exclusive work environment, leading to a less desirable or fulfilling employee experience. An effective solution to combat this is flexible work, and prioritizing employee outcomes and results as opposed to demanding that employees follow strict work schedules, locations, or other characteristics that remain unadaptable to employee lives. According to Schneider (2011), the main two types of flexibility that can assist with meeting the needs of today's working parents include flexible work arrangements, which allow employees more control over when and where they work, and formal/informal time-off policies that allow for short-term time off. Within the context of this research, work practices such as remote work or voluntary work time challenge the strict, more hierarchical nature of the traditional organization with foundations in bureaucracy. By employing more uncontrolled spaces in more traditional work practices, the nature of employment changes in terms of work practices reconfiguring how they hybridize different forms of coordination (Brandl et al., 2019).

One way to begin to challenge bureaucratic foundations within the workplace is to take a closer look at how current, rigid management practices can become more fluid and adaptive. As a result of supervisors setting goals and expectations about demands and providing emotional, social, or material support, they are likely to be a strong source of influence on the work environment (Lloyd et al., 2015). Current management that is built on bureaucratic work culture consists of negative, unhelpful actions and behaviors. Firstly, workforce reduction is being used as a solution to business crises, resulting in the declining possibility of job security or lifelong employment, while other traditional safety nets such as pensions are disappearing. These types of organizational changes have dramatic impacts on individuals (Taylor et al., 2009). In addition to workforce reduction, the accidental enablement of harassment in the workplace is another issue,

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as various forms of harassment create a hostile work environment that work organizations both encourage and tolerate in different ways. To further detail these ways, leaders often disproportionately encourage competition between employees, overlook or downplay workplace tensions and harassment and ultimately do not take these claims seriously, continue to enforce anti-harassment policies that are not well disseminated and implemented, and fail to send strong messages indicating no tolerance policies of harassment within the workplace. This ultimately leads to the perpetuating of the status quo of an unwelcoming work environment (Robert & Harlan, 2006). Addressing the root of this inadvertent enablement would behoove not only the employees but the organizational work culture in its entirety. Next, leaders are not aware of the impact of their own personal fears and anxieties. Instead of an understanding of effective management becoming the driving force behind management decisions, leadership's fears of mistakes, liabilities, lack of discipline, inadequate revenue, or a bad reputation can become the driving force instead (Healy & Dowell, 2017). Micromanagement is a typical outcome of how these fears may manifest, and has unfortunately become normalized within a traditional, bureaucratic workplace. With that, Healy and Dowell (2017) conclude that a manager who micromanages does so because they fear that tasks will not be completed adequately without their direct intervention. When this happens, employees are subliminally made aware that they are not trusted or perceived as competent.

Similarly, the second strategy that can be employed to challenge bureaucratic foundations within the workplace is to assess the need for a flexible and more adaptable organizational work culture. Work culture is constantly shifting and changing as internal conflicts and negotiations determine which expectations will succeed (Green, 2005). To illustrate, employees have become increasingly more subjected to organizational change that can range from technology and

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management changes to downsizing or restructuring (Harvey et al., 2017). In many instances, there has even been a shift from a product-based economy structure to a service economy structure, that produce outcomes of downsizing, merging, outsourcing, and temporary workers. This then further impacts the relationship between employees and their organizations (Taylor et al., 2009). However, a shift from the current controlling mindset to a future influential mindset can produce more positive outcomes of change. The more that managers and employees view their workplace as an environment that they can influence, as opposed to an environment they must tolerate, the more significant the change that can occur (Healy & Dowell, 2017). This can be aligned with alternative work arrangements, as they challenge the current fixed and rigid nature of organizations. New ways of working offer a fluid nature of organizing work as opposed to having rigid boundaries (Brandl et al., 2019). Progressing beyond the inflexible way of working, employees must help their employees manage their daily lives and promoting alternative work arrangements and other characteristics of work flexibility serve as an effective mechanism of doing so (Christensen & Schneider, 2011). Finally, work redesign is another opportunity that organizations should explore. As an example, a more progressive work culture should include assigning employees to work on clusters of tasks that are not only manageable but meaningful to ensure that work is challenging but not detrimental or demanding. With work redesign practices that may include re-defining concepts of work, tasks, or projects, complexity and specialization can be balanced, which promote job satisfaction as well as physical health (Grant et al., 2007).

The next element that a modern management practitioner would value is the importance of revising an existing workplace that is often hindered by old ways of thinking regarding hybrid and virtual teams. Moreover, they would ideally seek to develop more effective management and

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support of a virtual workplace. Despite being published almost 25 years ago, Cascio's (2000) article in the *Academy of Management Executive Journal* is particularly relevant, as it identifies the business reasons for, as well as some potential arguments against, virtual workplaces. It also examines alternative forms of virtual workplaces, along with the advantages and disadvantages of each; and provides tools and information to managers of virtual workplaces. In this article, Cascio identifies the first managerial challenge of the virtual workplace as making the transition from managing time to managing projects, or in other words, move away from activity-based mindsets to results-based mindsets. With that, the second challenge is to overcome uncertainty about whether managers will still be valued by their respective organizations if they are managing employees who are not physically present (Cascio, 2000). Solutions to these issues have been identified as shifting from a focus on time to a focus on results, recognizing that virtual workplaces require better supervisory skills as opposed to needing fewer managers, and giving the people what they need. Adequate capital, material, and human resources are paramount if hybrid or fully remote workers are expected to reach organizational goals they have set. Cascio (2000) further details that employees acknowledge and appreciate these efforts, and unsurprisingly, perform well under these circumstances when they are prioritized.

Finally, the last element that a modern management specialist would value is the new path forward that organizations pave for mental health promotion. Within the confines of traditional and more bureaucratic foundations that organizational cultures are built upon, there are a range of work-related factors that appear to be important risk factors of employees, such as low distributive justice, low informational justice, organizational change, job insecurity, and atypical working hours (Harvey et al., 2017). In another study, it was found that well-known psychosocial job stressors such as low decision latitude, low social support, high psychological

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demands, high demand and low control job strain, effort-reward imbalance, and job insecurity were predictive of common mental problems (Page et al., 2014). To further support this, long-term exposure to these poor working conditions has been shown to lead to deterioration of personality or capacity to cope with stressors (Page et al., 2013). Unfortunately, Page and colleagues (2013) also reveal that organizations also have the tendency to downplay and overlook risks, which increase worker reluctance to report stressors and result in the creation of barriers to job stress intervention. Given the current state of psychosocial job stressors not being addressed or mitigated, organizations and by proxy, work cultures, can become more proactive in a modern work environment. Especially when dealing with absenteeism on account of mental health conditions, it is critical for employers to proactively address psychosocial risks while promoting health and well-being in the workplace (Malachowski et al., 2016). Paired with promoting high-quality psychosocial work that will protect and promote employees' wellbeing (Milner et al., 2017), brief mental health interventions could be part of the solution as a strategy for stress relief, either implemented on their own or as part of a more comprehensive organizational strategy (Ivancic et al., 2017).

Theoretical Frameworks

Institutional Logic Theory

The first theory that this analysis is based on is the institutional logic theory. According to Wu and colleagues (2023), the institutional logic theory is a theory for analyzing how institutions, through their underlying logics of action, shape heterogeneity, stability, and change in individuals and organizations. Moreover, they are a set of social principles involving practices, assumptions, values and beliefs that enable actors to interpret social reality and make sense of their situations, identities, and activities. Within the context of this paper, there were two distinct

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concepts that are the result of the institutional logic theory, which include ideal worker norms and white, male norms that are built into organizational attitudes and further perpetuated by leadership. Firstly, ideal worker norms, otherwise known as normative workplace expectations, call for absolute dedication to work and few commitments outside of work. That said, Munsch (2016) argues that flexwork conflicts with these norms by allowing workers a certain degree of freedom in deciding when and where to work. However, the issue remains that flexible work arrangements or accommodations fail to challenge ideal worker norms. Flexwork requesters are likely to be devalued, but it is also likely that participants will evaluate flexwork requesters differently depending on the type of accommodation they request. As a result, some arrangements will allow workers to more closely align with ideal worker norms (Munsch, 2016).

The second concept that is the result of institutional logic is the white male norm. As research has proved (Green, 2005), work cultures dominated by white males are likely to develop around a white, male norm, and outsiders (by either race, sex, or both) struggle as a result. Specifically, by demanding that women and minorities conform to these behaviors, a discriminatory work culture inflicts costs on those who end up fitting in (Green, 2005). Defining relational behavior along a white, male norm may ultimately compromise the identities of nonmembers as they enter the group. Green further provides illustrations of this norm being materialized in engineering workplaces. Specifically, “Particularly in workplaces in which engineers as a group were powerful, there was enormous pressure to conform to the image of the ‘good’ engineer, an image characterized by displays of bravado and frequent demonstrations of technical, hands-on competence. To be accepted in the lab, in other words, one had to conform to the image of the ‘technical jock’ (Green, 2005).” Unfortunately, contemporary work organizations commonly operate with a notion of an ideal employee. More often implicitly than explicitly, the ideal is a

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white, able-bodied male, which is the ideal in which people of color, women, and people with disabilities are compared against (Robert, 2003).

Social Norms Theory

The next theory employed is the social norms theory. This theory explains that behavior is influenced by perceptions of behavioral norms, as social norm interventions attempt to modify perceptions of what behavior is as a means of influencing actual behavior (Johnson, 2012). Kavanagh et al. (2017) reveals that work-family policies in the United States are so different from other countries because American political culture valorizes hard work but devalues leisure at the same time. This further contributes to unwritten rules that serve as the foundation of the work-life culture of organizations. These rules include the statements that individuals cannot attend to family needs on company time, family needs should not be placed ahead of business needs, work-life balance is entirely the employee's responsibility, and that a choice is required between advancement and attention to one's family life (Taylor et al., 2009). Unwritten rules can also be utilized for mutual benefit between employee and employer. To further illustrate, Tandem Computers, identified as a company with a strong culture, has no formal organizational chart, minimal formal rules, limited meeting meetings and memos, and flexible duties and hours. However, thanks to unwritten rules and shared understandings, employees operate successfully, independently, and all work towards the same vision and goals (Green, 2005). The construct of gender and ideas of masculinity and femininity are also significant aspects of social norms, as Page and colleagues (2013) indicate that perceptions of work-related stress are heavily influenced by gender stereotypes surrounding stress and coping. Specifically, perceived stress and associated short-term responses were often viewed as a stereotypical feminine weakness, whereas masculinity can be seen to dictate that "real" men should ignore stress while portraying

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men who seek professional help as “weak” (Page et al., 2013). To further support this, Green (2005) discovered that women are presumed to lack hands-on competence in high-tech engineering firms with work cultures that require frequent displays of competency, and as a mitigating solution, will most likely have to overcompensate by engaging in more of this behavior than their male colleagues.

Systems Theory

The third theory employed for this purpose is systems theory. This theory is the study of society as a complex arrangement of elements, including individuals and their beliefs, as they relate to a whole (Gibson, 2024). Within the context of organizational mechanisms of encouragement and tolerance, and as expressed in policies, procedures, decisions and system of resource and reward allocation, individual acts of discrimination become embedded patterns of discrimination that lead to job segregation, low rates of promotion and reasonable accommodation, and a hostile work environment (Robert & Harlan, 2006). Leader behavior can be assessed and improved when looking at the systems that their skills are built upon. Learning techniques of active listening and/or non-defensive communication can be trained successfully via leadership education, training, and development (Lloyd et al., 2015). Similarly, Thoroughgood and colleagues (2011) find that follower perceptions and reactions to aversive leadership are a function of complex interactions among the leader and the broader climate and financial performance of the organization, and furthermore, cannot be explained by simple main effects. At an even higher level, developing a more balanced way of thinking that considers both individual and systemic factors can help leaders be more objective and compassionate, which would earn employee trust while making even more accurate decisions. With that, appreciating

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systemic interdependencies between businesses and communities can help create a healthier and systemically sustainable way of working (Praslova, 2023).

Social Model of Disability

The final theory leveraged for this analysis is the social model of disability. This theory rejects organic impairment as the most burdensome issue faced by people with disabilities and raises a convincing case for the disabling and oppressive effects of social discrimination based on the ascriptive status of disability (Robert & Harlan, 2006). The two constructs of capitalism and “The Incompetent” fictional identity serve as the starting points of the social model of disability analysis. The first construct of capitalism is inherently exclusionary to disabled communities, as this economic model created factory production, which ultimately segregated people with disabilities from their working family members (Robert, 2003). Additionally, the capitalist ideology of individual responsibility abstracts the qualities of individuals from the social, political, and economic context in which they emerge (Robert, 2003), thus resulting in a robust system of beliefs, work practices, work attitudes, and other relevant job characteristics. Under this belief, members of historically oppressed groups are responsible for their own oppression and are accused of seeking special treatment when they seek equal treatment. Unfortunately, this applies to people with disabilities as well, as accommodations are still perceived as “special treatment.” The second construct of “The Incompetent” may be one of the most damaging fictional identities encountered by people with disabilities. Under this identity, it was assumed that because of a disability, a person was incapable of performing at the same level expected of coworkers without disabilities. Workers with more rare or less well-understood disabilities were also frequently considered incompetent. This would include those with cerebral palsy, mental illness, learning disabilities, etc.) (Robert & Harlan, 2006). People with disabilities

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who were assigned the label of “incompetent” are usually denied a chance to prove that they can effectively work a job, in addition to being denied opportunities for promotion, reasonable accommodations, or career growth (Robert & Harlan, 2006). To prove that this harmful identity is culturally and geographically agnostic, in Medieval Europe, disability was often equated with demonic possession, which enabled individuals to conclude that people with disabilities were unfit for work (Robert, 2023).

All four of these theories can be summarized by the findings of Pamela Robert in her article entitled “Disability Oppression in the Contemporary U.S. Capitalist Workplace.” Her quote reads: “Contemporary work organizations commonly operate with a notion of an ideal employee. Sometimes explicitly but more often implicitly, this ideal is a white, able-bodied male, against which non-whites, women, and people with disabilities are invidiously compared. Individuals who do not fit the ideal get hired, but disproportionately in lower-level jobs and often as tokens. The concentration of employees with disabilities at the bottom of the occupational structure is consistently revealed by employment data, and tokenism seems to account in many cases for their hiring and retention (Robert, 2003).”

Ethical Implications

One of the primary common denominators between workplace flexibility, perceptions and feelings of inclusion and discrimination, and employee mental health and wellbeing, and overall work culture is the impact of organizational leadership and management. If management demonstrates unfavorable attitudes and behaviors towards these critical pillars of the employee experience, then management itself will contribute to an unsupportive work environment. As a result, negative consequences arise for all employees. Examples of what may contribute to these negative consequences include emotional contagion, destructive leadership, and negative

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workplace flexibility perceptions. Firstly, if leaders are not able to regulate their own stress levels, an unfortunate downstream ripple occurs where it becomes more than the leader's problem. This brings us to emotional contagion, which explains how strain on leaders not only impacts leaders but their followers as well. Emotional contagion is an automatic and unconscious transmission of emotions between individuals, meaning that followers take on the emotions displayed by their leaders (Diebig et al., 2017). While leader strain has a negative impact on the leader's followers, it also has a negative impact on the quality of behavior that the leader displays, as leader strain was proven to be negatively related to transformational leader behaviors (Diebig et al., 2017). Diebig (2017) also found that stressed transformational leaders become less inspirational, which implies that followers may experience higher levels of burnout when they realize that leader focus is solely on themselves while having limited energy for others. If leaders do not address the factors or circumstances that are negatively impacting their professional actions, mindset, or attitudes, their peers and followers will be negatively impacted.

The concept similar to emotional contagion is the broader topic of destructive leadership. Destructive leadership appears to be a complex process that is the result of a confluence of leader, follower, and environmental characteristics that are consistent with the toxic triangle theory (Thoroughgood et al., 2011). Abusive leadership, specifically, has been associated with negative outcomes such as increased employee stress, and workplace deviance, as well as decreased job satisfaction, performance, and organizational commitment (Han et al., 2017). Unsurprisingly, Han (2017) discovered significant positive relationships between abusive supervision and emotional exhaustion.

In addition to negative leadership outcomes such as emotional contagion and destructive leadership, the risk of unsupportive management behavior becoming the standard is also a risk

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within the workplace. Despite what managers say or write in their organizational policies, the most significant influence on employees is what the manager does. Employees see the standard a manager sets and uses it as their own personal guide (Healy and Dowell, 2017). As an example, if during June, which is “Pride Month,” if an organization officially celebrates the queer community with emails or internal news articles, but a manager has a negative personal bias towards a member of the LGBTQIA+ community within the workplace, followers and other employees will take note of their behavior more than they would take note of the organizational efforts to be inclusive. Furthermore, that manager’s discrimination may become apparent in direct ways such as side comments or messages but can also be revealed through more indirect ways such as the micro-aggression of misgendering a trans or nonbinary employee on purpose. Moreover, “When negative leader behavior becomes an accepted pattern of behavior in an organization, victims may perceive them as an unpleasant yet normal part of the organization's climate that they must cope with through fear and resignation (Thoroughgood et al., 2011).”

The next factor is the negative mental health outcome. While management cannot solve their local mental health crisis in its totality, they can offer support in small yet meaningful ways. Specifically, if managers do not ensure that there is healthy balance between demand, control, and social support, employees will become more susceptible to decreased mental health and emotional stability (Harvey et al., 2017). The job demand-control-support model proposes that jobs where high demands, such as increased workload and time pressure, are combined with low control (minimal decision-making) create a “high-strain” situation and bears the greatest risk of illness and reduced well-being. Harvey and colleagues (2017) further established solid evidence for an association between high job demand, low job control, and low social support with poorer employee mental health. As a preemptive attempt to decrease the risk of this outcome, managers

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should ensure that all three factors are optimized as much as possible. This could look like a lighter workload with less time pressure, more empowerment among their employees, and increased managerial support.

And lastly, inflexible work arrangements may sound best on paper if it is the most cost-effective option, but ultimately may end up doing more harm than good if management does not carefully consider its negative outcomes. Root and Young (2011) found that workers in an inflexible environment will seek to create their own flexibility when pressured by competing obligations. For example, an inflexible manager may require that employee to be at their desk in the office until 5:00 PM and not a minute sooner. But it's an important day, as executive leaders are in for a visit, so employees can't even leave for an emergency. However, if at 3:30 PM an employee receives a call that their child was hurt leaving school and needs to go to the hospital, chances are slim that that employee is going to adhere to the strict mandate of not leaving until 5:00 PM. If the employee stays until 5:00 PM, they will certainly develop feelings of resentment towards their manager and maybe even the broader organization. This could then be one of many reasons that this employee ends up leaving or is even the final straw that drives them into leaving the company. However, since it is more likely that the employee would leave anyway, this may upset and perhaps anger the inflexible manager. Alternatively, if that same employee told their manager the situation, and the manager encouraged them to leave the office to attend to their child, both the employee and manager are aligned, as empathy is prioritized over bureaucratic policies and norms. The employee may even develop more respect for the manager, especially if this circumstance serves as a core interaction that determines the relationship and dynamic between the employee and manager. Ultimately, the employee is going to do what is best for them; it just comes down to whether management is aligned in terms of priorities.

Policy Recommendations

Both the public and private sectors can make more efforts to invest in policies, programs, and initiatives to more effectively address and mitigate systemic organizational issues via the utilization of a top-down approach. Three dimensions of this paper, including workplace flexibility, discrimination and inclusion, and mental health management, contain areas of opportunities for the development of existing, or creation of new, organizational policies and programs.

Areas of opportunity that were identified related to workplace flexibility include updating and optimizing flexwork programs in the private sector, supporting virtual and hybrid work arrangements, and making more attempts to write and pass relevant federal legislation. A new balance between work and home needs to be achieved for working families. Bringing these two dimensions into better alignment requires a new configuration of work that meets the needs of businesses and families (Schneider, 2011). Beginning with organizations, flexwork policies need to be updated and optimized. The first step is to start with a mindset shift. First and foremost, worker agency should be a critical factor in considering policies and practices concerning workplace flexibility and work-family balance more generally (Root & Young, 2011). Organizations should create policies or programs that train their managers about the importance of their role in providing direct support for employees who use formal supports provided to balance their work and family responsibilities. Organizations should train their leadership to assist in providing a favorable work climate for working parents and families, in addition to assisting their managers with the understanding and valuing of the facilitation role that families play in their workers' job performance (Taylor et al., 2009). Munsch (2016) reveals that just as race and sex bias promotion and salary decisions, working flexibly may also operate as a lens

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through which evaluators assess employee performance. That said, organizations should define parameters of flexible work in advance so that decisions to be made about flexible work arrangements are made without regard to the employee's gender, parental status, or rationale for the request.

The next component of workplace flexibility that should be addressed at organizational level policies and programs is the capability of a virtual workplace, whether that be a hybrid or fully virtual work arrangement. Such policies, frameworks, and other corresponding organizational statements for virtual and hybrid work arrangements raise some considerations for leadership. With virtual or hybrid work, managers should carefully consider the kinds of behaviors that are more likely to enhance a virtual or hybrid team's ability to function effectively, including collaborative, socialization, and communication skills (Cascio, 2000). Since virtual and hybrid teams are not completely on-site, they cannot be physically checked up on or supervised, which ultimately drives the need for management to re-frame how they supervise. The shift, then, becomes managing projects and initiatives as opposed to managing employees' time, and learning to make this transition will determine the success of an organization's hybrid or telework program (Cascio, 2000). Policies, standard operating procedures, guidelines, etc. should reflect enhancements to support what hybrid or fully virtual workers need to be successful in their roles, as well as the culture shift from time management to project management. Ideally, quarterly and/or annual performance reviews will be aligned with these documents so that hybrid or virtual workers are fairly and effectively assessed.

The last focus on the topic of workplace flexibility is the examination of federal laws and the federal government. Currently, the federal government is behind the private sector in terms of offering more permanent part-time work and other forms of flexibility, such as phased

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retirement. As an example, the United States is the only industrialized nation without a federal law that provides for universal paid sick days, parental leave, or paid vacations in the private sector (Kavanagh et al., 2017). As another example, the scope of the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) is typically limited to medical care and time off related to birth or adoption, and for the most part, short-term flexibility is largely a function of the internal policies of an organization (Root & Young, 2011). Root and Young (2011) also posit that government policies and top-down mandates regarding employee behavior and production outcomes will be most effective if the agency of these managers is recognized as a pivotal factor. With that, managers must be informed, encouraged, and trained to recognize the need for worksite flexibility. In sum, scholars, policymakers, and business leaders all need to come together to begin solving the ever-growing issue of balancing work and family responsibilities for employees in any sector or industry (Kavanagh et al., 2017).

There are areas of opportunity in the second dimension of discrimination and inclusion. Diversity discrimination and disability oppression are two major concerns at the highest level throughout organizations. Just because work culture appears to be an organic process of human interrelation does not mean that employers do not play a role in defining the context of those relations, or in determining their significance for success. Employer efforts to manage diversity may provide a footing for incorporating concern about the impact of organizational choices on worker relations and group-based inequity. It may be possible to strengthen existing diversity management efforts by tying them to civil rights and organizational choices through a legal incentive to undertake structural measures to combat discriminatory work cultures (Green, 2005). In the absence of organizational mechanisms of encouragement or tolerance, interpersonal mechanisms of discrimination including marginalization, fictionalization, and harassment may

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never develop beyond isolated incidents. However, this solution becomes increasingly less viable once interpersonal mechanisms of discrimination become more normalized in work culture (Robert & Harlan, 2006). But what would it take for disability oppression, specifically, to be decreased? According to Pamela Robert (2003), overcoming disability oppression in our capitalist workplace in the United States would require a continuous national movement of disability advocates and activists. An effective starting point to this is the Americans with Disabilities Act, or the ADA. Public policy legislation such as the ADA is important as it creates a protectable status while recognizing that workplace organizations are not neutral in their treatment of people with disabilities. However, securing the civil rights of people with disabilities will require legislation that extends the ADA by holding work organizations accountable for their practices. This legislation will then need to specify the nature and extent of work organizations' responsibility for creating a nonhostile work environment and explicitly highlight the consequences of not doing so (Robert & Harlan, 2006).

The last dimension of mental health management contains the actions of investing in leadership development and training programs, implementing mental health support programs, and encouraging government involvement. Beginning with leader development and training, an essential pillar of organizational leadership should be the promotion of high-quality behaviors for leaders. As recent studies have revealed that leadership training is an effective intervention for occupational health, organizations should offer opportunities for their leaders to engage in transformational leadership behavior. Additionally, as strained leaders display fewer of these high-quality leadership behaviors, organizations should also offer opportunities for their leaders to become sensitized and informed about ways in which to cope with stressful situations or preventing them if possible (Diebig et al., 2017). On the topic of mental health, mental health

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promotion must be implemented alongside proactive stress prevention strategies to improve workplace mental health (Page et al., 2014). Even though strategies to improve individual levels of resiliency have received much attention as of late, any mental health intervention program should include efforts to reduce known risk factors (Harvey et al., 2017). If risk factors are successfully identified and better understood, we would be able to get to the root of the issue before it became the cause of all subsequent problems. Additionally, development programs need to teach managers how to provide support for their employees with mental illnesses to further empower their leadership capabilities. Finally, in terms of federal government involvement, governments can promote upstream approaches through national- or state-based systems that reward employers for developing psychologically healthy workplaces by providing incentives for organizations to move beyond the avoidance of liability and towards positive mental health organizations with increased psychological safety (Page et al., 2013). To supplement this, Page et al. (2013) recommends that national health promotion campaigns should educate employers about the importance of identifying, assessing, and controlling psychosocial hazards to promote systems approaches which further integrate worker-directed strategies while emphasizing primary prevention.

All in all, the culture of the workplace needs to change from one that requires a commitment to work at the cost of a family's wellbeing to one that determines the highest standard of living for all employees, despite their parental status, disability status, race, gender, or other demographic or cultural dimensions of their personal lives (Schneider, 2011). Investing in initiatives, programs, and resources that address workplace issues of flexibility, discrimination and disability oppression, and mental health management would be a great start for any organization or government at any level. As Green (2005) references Deal and Kennedy's quote:

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“We need to remember that people make businesses work, and we need to relearn old lessons about how culture ties people together and gives meaning and purpose to their day-to-day lives.”

Summary

The intent of this paper was to further identify the systemic issues embedded into elements of the collective employee experience and provide recommendations to assist in the contesting of these systemic issues. Upon completion of reviewing and synthesizing the relevant literature, the elements of this experience included workplace flexibility, perceived senses of inclusion and discrimination; organizational attitudes on employee mental health and wellbeing; and leadership behavior, actions, and culture, paired with their respective issues: either systemic or developed. These elements exist within the same space and can create an unsupportive, and at times unhealthy, work environments for employees, especially if employees do not feel valued, prioritized, or supported. This research was categorized and understood through the lenses of political and social science, legal perspectives, executive and managerial issues, business ethics, occupational and environmental medicine, and international perspectives. The focus of research published in *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science Journal* was on why workplace flexibility must become a standard in the U.S. workplace (Schneider, 2011) as well as an analysis of the result of increased job demands and new pressures on the modern workplace (Christensen and Schneider, 2011). From a legal perspective, the authors explored why the idea of work culture should be recognized as a source of employment discrimination (Green, 2005) as well as researched different contributing factors of toxic workplaces, along with suggestions for how to address them (Healy & Dowell, 2017). Several publications spoke on management culture, which examined different constructs. These include but are not limited to the relationship between followers' self-perceptions of their own follower and leader abilities;

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relationships among leadership styles; the importance of managerial practices on well-being; the impact of abusive supervision; the effects of an organization's climate and financial performance; and the correlation between supervisor listening and work outcomes. And lastly, the occupational space revealed statistical findings between the relationship between mental health problems and job characteristics, in addition to discoveries on perceptions of stress from a gender and age perspective.

Publications focused on society and political climate tapped into all four of this paper's emerging themes of flexibility, inclusion, management, and mental health. When examining work/life flexibility, Kavanagh and colleagues (2017) found a gender variance between men and women as well as differing actions and mindsets among both genders, while Taylor et al. (2009) found a relationship between the availability of formal workplace supports and psychological safety. Inclusion was assessed with an emphasis on disabilities and discrimination. The findings included factors that were indicators of learning or safety culture (Littlejohn et al., 2014) as well as the outcomes of personal interviews with disabled employees (Robert, 2003). From a management perspective, issues such as problematic quality of leadership and threats to employee well-being and belonging were identified (Praslova, 2023). From a mental health perspective, the institutional organization of everyday work experience of depressed employees was employed (Malachowski et al., 2016) and the components of workplace social capital as risk factors for depression were examined (Oksanen et al., 2010).

Relevant research was also conducted outside of the United States. With respect to workplace flexibility, research in Great Britain found variance in evaluations among employees who requested flexible work versus those who did not (Munsch, 2016). With respect to management culture, In Germany, strained leaders were found to display less transformational

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leader behaviors, and with that, transformational leadership behaviors mediated the relationship between leader strain and follower burnout (Diebig et al., 2017). And lastly, mental health was a significant focal point for Scandinavia, as the researchers explored mental health interventions as a strategy for stress relief (Ivandic et al., 2017), the relationship between mental health decline and poor psychosocial working conditions (Milner et al., 2017) and proved predictors of common mental disorders (Stansfeld & Candy, 2006).

The emerging themes from this analysis were further examined through humanistic, sociological, and modern management perspectives. The focus of the humanistic perspective were the characteristics of employee freedom, trust, stress factors, and metrics on increased outcomes of productivity, commitment, creativity, and retention. In the context of employees at work, freedom was defined as flexible work arrangements, whether that be flexible hours or locations. A humanist would argue that stress becomes even more complex at the parent level and not just at the individual level, and how stress will hinder an individual from achieving their personal or professional ambitions. Regarding trust, a humanist would conclude that trust is a core factor that should be apparent in the workplace to contribute to a positive work environment. The sociological perspective became relevant as major demographics and characteristics emerged, such as gender and ability variations and employer involvement with regards to management of anti-discrimination and inclusion efforts. It was identified that for all women in the workplace, they each fight unique battles as they relate to sexism, flexibility, emotions, and vulnerability, whereas women with families have the added complexity of balancing their work and family lives. People with disabilities were also identified as an underserved population within the workplace. Sociologists would be invested in the analysis of workplace discrimination and inequities that people with disabilities face, especially as

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discriminatory acts of marginalization, fictionalization, and harassment are perpetuated by their organizational contexts. On a broader level, regarding the organizational management and oversight of anti-discrimination efforts, sociologists are identifying and evaluating anti-discrimination efforts to hopefully produce more inclusive environments. The last perspective that was employed for this research was the modern management perspective which was effective for comparing rigid organizational culture to a more adaptive work environment. The analysis was framed by examining how existing systems of bureaucracy can hinder progress, comparing new to old management and work culture, analyzing the modern virtual workplace, and laying the foundation for a more optimistic and welcoming culture for mental health concerns. Challenging bureaucratic foundations, revising a workplace that is hindered by old ways of thinking with regards to flexible work arrangements, and a more proactive response to improved mental health promotion were all explored as means to become a more modern workplace or organization.

Three theoretical frameworks were employed to synthesize this research that include institutional logic, social norms theory, systems theory, and the social model of disability. The institutional logic theory analyzes how institutions, through their logics of action, shape stability and change in individuals and organizations (Wu et al., 2023). Within the context of this paper, the two distinct illustrations of the institutional logic theory were ideal worker norms and white male norms created by leader organizational attitudes. Social norms theory was also prevalent as social norms dictated the ways in which employees felt about themselves, each other, and the complex relationships and associations between the two. This included variances in gender, family status, and ability status. Systems theory, the study of society as a complex arrangement of elements as they relate to a whole (Gibson, 2024) was employed throughout all four themes

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since the intent of the paper is to view the workplace as one complex system. And lastly, the social model of disability was utilized to highlight the theme of perceived senses of inclusion and belonging, especially for employees with disabilities. The constructs of capitalism and “The Incompetent” fictional identity was the starting point of the social model of disability analysis; both of which were prominent in the researcher’s findings.

If work culture does not become more inviting, inclusive, or promote a psychologically safe environment, several ethical implications emerge. Negative consequences may include but are not limited to emotional contagion, destructive leadership, and negative workplace flexibility perceptions. Unsupportive management behavior will become a standard, and organizational policies would mean virtually nothing if leader behavior does not match what is formally on paper. Covert and overt manager discrimination may also become apparent via micro-aggressions or unchecked biases. If management continues to downplay or dismiss the need for a healthy balance between demand, control, and social support, employees will become more susceptible to the risk of decreased mental health and wellbeing. Similarly, choosing to adhere to inflexible work arrangements solely because they look the best on paper and from a cost-cutting perspective will result in negative outcomes such as employee engagement, satisfaction, and turnover concerns.

Lastly, policy recommendations in both the private and public environments were proposed. Updating and optimizing flexwork programs in the private sector, supporting virtual and hybrid work arrangements, and making more attempts to write and pass relevant federal legislation were all identified as areas of opportunities for workplace flexibility promotion. Currently, the federal government is behind the private sector in terms of offering more permanent part-time work and other forms of flexibility, such as phased retirement. Areas of

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opportunity in the dimensions of discrimination and inclusion as well as investing in mental health support programs and development and training programs were also identified.

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