Shortcut or Sellout? Perceptions of AI Use and Disability in the Workplace

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Abstract

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is reshaping the workplace, but its use may carry risks. In an experiment, we tested reactions to an email in which an employee requested a raise, varied by disability, gender, and how the message was created (using AI, a job coach, or self-written). Emails written personally were viewed as most trustworthy and persuasive, while AI use drew the harshest criticism, over and above the use of a job coach. Mental health disability led to greater stigma than a physical disability, particularly for women. The negative reactions to AI use were so strong that they overshadowed even the disability bias. As AI becomes routine, it's important to consider when and how it should be used, especially for tasks where a personal touch may carry more weight.

Introduction

In today's business world, Artificial Intelligence (AI) is becoming a regular part of how people get things done. Some see it as a productivity game-changer. It brainstorms, writes, computes, polishes, and even seems to "think" for us. However, there's still no clear agreement on when and how AI should be used—is it working smarter or just cutting corners? The picture gets even murkier for those who may be judged more harshly for using it. For example, people with disabilities have long faced stereotypes,[1] like being seen as lazy, and that bias could carry over in leveraging AI. The jury's still out on whether using AI at work is seen as disingenuous, even unethical, especially in tasks where effort and originality may be

valued. Some work may need a stronger human touch. If so, is there an added risk for people with disabilities?

Scenario Findings

In an experiment, we asked over 2,000 people to imagine that they were a manager in a company. This manager received an email from a direct report, Alex, who was described as a reliable employee of several years. The email expressed appreciation for the job opportunity and gave specific thanks for "*all the mentorship you've given me*," and went on to describe the personal connection that Alex felt with the manager: "*Your support during that difficult time in my life meant more to me than I can express, and I truly appreciated having you in my corner. With this support, I've been able to thrive on the job.*" Alex then went on to request a raise: *"I'm proud of what I've accomplished as well as the additional responsibilities I've taken on beyond my core role…I believe that my compensation should reflect the impact of my work."*

Different participants saw different descriptions of Alex. The three groups all knew that Alex occasionally asked for a few extra flex days, but the reason varied: (1) to reduce commute time and cost, (2) due to a condition that resulted in chronic pain and for which Alex wore an assistive device at work (a picture of Alex wearing an exosuit designed to alleviate joint pain was provided for context), or (3) related to a mental health disability (Alex, in this case, was described as living with depression).

Afterward, the manager overheard Alex speaking in the breakroom about the email. There were also three different versions of this overheard conversation: Alex was heard stating (1) the use of AI in generating the entire email, (2) the use of a job coach to write the whole email, or (3) their commitment to writing all text personally (even though others use AI for tasks like this).

Finally, participants were asked to evaluate Alex on dimensions of trustworthiness and ethicality, as well as to evaluate the email itself on whether it was well-written, persuasive, and (in their opinion) likely to result in Alex getting a raise. We also ran different versions of Alex as a male or female and found that, overall, female Alex was trusted more than male Alex!

In terms of disability (and consistent with prior research showing that mental health disabilities are more stigmatized than other types of disabilities),[2] our results showed that the condition in which Alex was described as having depression led to lower ratings of trustworthiness and ethicality than when Alex was described as having a physical disability. Furthermore, when we separate the results by Alex's gender, we see that when Alex was a woman, the version with depression was also rated as more arrogant and less warm. It seems that women with a mental health disability are judged even more harshly than their male counterparts.

Meanwhile, the self-written email was more positively rated on all dimensions, including the potential for getting Alex the raise, as compared to the AI and job coach variants. In fact, the use of AI was of significantly greater concern than the use of a job coach on all dimensions.

Participants were fairly positive about the content of the email overall, with 76% offering praise for the message. Of the 18% who expressed negative views, however,

there was a definite trend. Those who knew that Alex had used either AI or a job coach were far more likely to hold these negative opinions (53% and 39% of the negative comments, respectively). Those who had heard Alex comment on the self-written nature of the email were more positive (offering only 8% of the negative comments).

- AI use: "*using AI should disqualify him from getting a raise,*" and "*it lacks a personal, genuine touch,*" and noting that it's "*less authentic.*"
- Job coach: "*I don't appreciate the fact that it didn't come from him personally,*" and "*I feel somewhat deceived by this.*"
- Self-written: "*I like that he is willing to put more time in to make sure it is personalized,*" and expressing respect for the "*dedication to authenticity*."

It is interesting to note that even though the email was identical in all conditions, those who were told that the email was self-written were convinced that it was much more "*personal and persuasive*" than those who thought it was written with assistance!

These results offer two main takeaways.

The first is with respect to disability: Regardless of behavior, we still see stigma associated with mental health disability. Since the physical disability condition came with photos of an assistive device, it may have prompted the idea that there was a clear solution to the problem. The ability to see an actual physical piece of technology might have been reassuring in a way that no discussion of handling depression could emulate, even as the mental health disability was also described as "not a problem."[3] The archetype of the "strong man in a wheelchair" is another example of an assistive device potentially changing the impression of a disability.[4] However, mechanical devices can and do fall prey to failure (parts break, batteries die), and there is no reason outside of bias to explain why there would be a general assumption that a person living with a mental health disability would be less trustworthy. And indeed, research has shown that other invisible disabilities, such as dyslexia, are better received than depression.[5] The entire topic of mental health disabilities seems to make people uncomfortable.

The other issue is the extreme reaction to the use of AI as "*dishonest*" and a form of "*cheating*," over and above having another human being (the job coach) write the whole email instead—a reaction that was even more negative than the disability bias. Objectively, both AI and a job coach are versions of external assistance, but the reactions were not equivalent. Perhaps it was the lack of a human touch that made the difference. Or perhaps it was the ease with which AI text can be created, as opposed to the effort it would take to consult with a job coach. Those participants who described the use of AI as "*lazy*" seem to be supporting this idea. (Per the gender issue above, more than twice as many participants called out female-Alex with a pejorative term than the male version, saying things like "*she's a dope.*")

AI is a brave new world in terms of what kinds of applications are, and should be, acceptable. People are uncertain about its use across contexts. By way of example, look at the struggles of teachers in trying to tamp down their students' use of AI for generating their assignments, while simultaneously capitalizing on the tool for themselves through content creation and grading/feedback assistance.[6]

Conclusion

Are people with disabilities held to a different standard when using AI? Not necessarily. While disclosing a mental health disability does seem to worsen impressions (especially for women), it didn't seem to accelerate concerns over AI use. Our findings show instead that AI use was sharply frowned upon, no matter who was using it. People who relied entirely on AI, especially for such a personal request, were seen as less trustworthy, less warm, and more arrogant.

As AI tools become a mainstay, we need to understand that they can raise questions about effort and authenticity. User beware.

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Endnotes

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