How effective are disability sensitization workshops?

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Abstract

Purpose – Organizations are increasingly investing in disability-specific sensitization workshops. Yet, there is limited understanding about their hoped outcomes, that is, increased knowledge about disability-related issues and behavioral changes with respect to those with a disability. The purpose of this paper is to examine the effectiveness and boundaries of disability-specific sensitization training in organizations.

Design/methodology/approach – This is an interview-based study where 33 employees from five industries across India were interviewed over the span of a year.

Findings – The findings suggest that sensitization workshops are successful with regard to awareness generation. Paradoxically, the same awareness also reinforced group boundaries through “othering.” Further, workshops resonated more so with individuals who already had some prior experience with disability, implying that voluntary sensitization is likely attracting those who have the least need of such sensitization. The findings also suggest that non-mandated interventions may not necessarily influence organizational level outcomes, especially if workshops are conducted in isolation from a broader organizational culture of inclusion.

Originality/value – The present study helps outline effects of sensitization training initiatives and enhances our understanding about how negative attitudes toward persons with a disability can be overcome. The study also indicates how such training initiatives may inadvertently lead to “othering.” Finally, this study offers suggestions to human resource managers for designing impactful disability sensitization workshops.

Keywords India, Disability, Training workshop

Diversity training is a key component of organizational diversity initiatives and comprises programs aimed at enabling constructive intergroup interactions and reducing discrimination. The most common forms of diversity training are sensitization or awareness training (e.g. being sensitive to how we see ourselves and others) combined with skill-building or behavior-based training (e.g. learning how to communicate, which actions are appropriate) (Bezrukova et al., 2012; Phillips et al., 2016). Despite increasing investments in such programs, we do not know if and under which conditions such sensitization training is most beneficial, who benefits, and if benefits persist over a long term (Dwertmann, 2016); critical knowledge for human resource managers who wish to better design and implement diversity training within their organizations (Rynes and Rosen, 1994; Kearns, 1997; Bezrukova et al., 2012; Kalinoski et al., 2013; SHRM, 2014).

Further, while the broader diversity training research indicates that focus on a specific demographic group may pose problems as it highlights differences between participants (Bezrukova et al., 2012; Ellis and Sonnenfeld, 1994), specific groups such as persons with a disability are being increasingly focused upon in organizational diversity and inclusion initiatives (SHRM, 2014). The disability-specific research also suggests the criticality of focused sensitization training (Stone and Colella, 1996; Phillips et al., 2016). However, empirical
evidence for such is equivocal, outlining positive effects (e.g. Wilson et al., 2009) as well as cautionary notes (e.g. French, 1992). We are thus faced with a situation wherein the focus on disability-specific training is increasing across workplaces, but we do not know if and under which conditions such training is effective.

In the present study, we outline effectiveness and boundaries of disability sensitization training in organizations. More specifically, through interviews with 33 respondents across five industries in India, the present study makes the following contributions. First, the broader diversity training literature suggests that training has a positive short-term impact on attitude of participants, but long-term assessments are less positive (Rynes and Rosen, 1994) and actual behavioral change after awareness training is not firmly established (Kulik and Roberson, 2008). With an explicitly long-term focus, the present study can help outline lasting effects of sensitization training initiatives. Second, as Barney (2011) explained with regard to the disability-specific literature, understanding how negative attitudes toward persons with a disability can be overcome is important as such attitudes mean society overlooks contributions of this talent pool, and members of this group are not able to support themselves through productive wage-earning. Finally, as the disability-specific training focus (and spend) increases (SHRM, 2014; Kulkarni, 2016; Kulkarni et al., 2016), studies such as the present one can serve as guides to human resource managers with regard to designing effective sensitization training programs.

Importance of disability sensitization training in the workplace

Organizations may choose to engage with diversity training because of strategic objectives and external forces. For example, training may be used to impart information, obtain employee buy-in for diversity programs, change employee behavior, achieve diversity goals toward competitive advantage, and for compliance with legal standards (Kulik and Roberson, 2008; Cocchiara et al., 2010). Said alternately, diversity training can be framed around the why (legal mandates, moral imperatives, and business success), what (e.g. types of change desired or the goals), and how (e.g. type and duration of learning, Ferdman and Brody, 1996). The most common form of diversity training is awareness training, wherein the immediate goal is to increase awareness of cognitive processes which may lead to differential treatment of certain groups of employees (Rynes and Rosen, 1994; Kulik and Roberson, 2008).

While diversity training is noted as benefiting those least in the need of it (Kulik et al., 2007), reinforcing group boundaries when it is meant to obliterate such (Bezrukova et al., 2012), and as imposing costs when the benefits are unclear (Rynes and Rosen, 1994), it is also shown to contribute in the aggregate to organizational economic performance beyond the effects of a traditional high-performance work system (i.e. bundles of work practices and policies) (Armstrong et al., 2010). Furthermore, diversity training remains indispensable as legislation alone may not always have the intended effect on organizational inclusion of certain groups such as persons with disabilities (Cocchiara et al., 2010).

Disability-specific sensitization training in the workplace is especially important for the following reasons. As Baldridge et al. (2017) explain, despite being the world’s largest minority whose rights are protected through legislations, persons with a disability continue to face overt and subtle workplace discrimination. Persons with a disability may be inadvertently overlooked as job profiles may depart from essential requirements and include ideal profiles, or managers may recruit in mainstream spaces that do not have a pool of diverse candidates such as those with a disability (Stone and Colella, 1996; Stone and Williams, 1997). As Lengnick-Hall et al. (2008) found, employers may also harbor fears and misconceptions about the productivity of persons with disabilities.

Once hired, the inadvertent or intentional sidelining of persons with disabilities may continue. For example, accommodations, a critical component of workplace adjustment and
success may not always be within reach. Coworkers may form judgments about distributive (Colella, 2001) and procedural (Colella et al., 2004) fairness with respect to requested or granted accommodation, and to the extent workplace norms discourage accommodation seeking, persons with a disability may suffer a disadvantage. Social inclusion, another key facet of workplace adjustment and informal workplace learning, may also be suboptimal as coworkers may not interact enough with persons with disabilities, and managers may offer undemanding projects based on kindness or low expectations (Colella, 1994). Finally, careers of persons with a disability may be derailed given aforementioned barriers (e.g. employer misconceptions, inadequate accommodations, or suboptimal social inclusion).

However, as Schur et al. (2009) demonstrate, disability is not and need not be disabling in all workplaces. More specifically, organizational cultures which are responsive to the needs of all employees particularly benefit those with a disability. Such workplaces are characterized by fairness and responsiveness, and are perceived as inclusive by all employees. This sense of inclusion can be brought about through sensitization training wherein both those with a disability and other organizational members understand each other’s needs, expectations, and styles of working (Kulkarni, 2016; Phillips et al., 2016). Training programs can also help challenge stereotypes and impart information about how to communicate with and better integrate persons with disabilities (Stone and Colella, 1996). Despite the stated importance of such training, very minimal research – described below – has focused on it.

Past research on disability-specific sensitization training in the workplace

Past research has focused on targeted interventions for specific disabilities in specific contexts. For example, Bailey et al. (2001) focused on professionals who can help with successful inclusion of persons with intellectual disability in communities. Their study involved trainee police officers from the Royal Ulster Constabulary (Northern Ireland). Through their quasi-experimental design (role-play), Bailey et al. found that awareness training was associated with a more favorable attitude toward persons with intellectual disability.

In two other studies focused on learning disabilities, Murray et al. also found that disability training was positively associated with favorable attitudes and actions. For example, in one study, faculty members who had undergone disability sensitization scored higher on willingness to provide exam accommodations, knowledge about learning disabilities, willingness to personally invest in students with learning disabilities, and personal actions (e.g. inviting disclosure and providing accommodations) as compared with those who did not receive training (Murray et al., 2009). In the other study, university staff members who underwent training reported greater scores on general knowledge and sensitivity toward university students with learning disabilities as compared with those who did not (Murray et al., 2011).

Other studies focused on specific disabilities have included training interventions aimed at supportive communication, job-site analysis, and accident investigation for work injuries (McLellan et al., 2001), simulation exercises for healthcare professionals working within a regional neuro-rehabilitation service (Wilson et al., 2009), and interventions for disability attitudes and knowledge, empathic communication, and strategies for return to work to reduce workers’ compensation claims (for work injuries) (Shaw et al., 2006).

Alternatively, studies have focused on disability in general, and not on specific types of disability as noted above. For example, Hunt and Hunt (2004) examined if a brief educational intervention could impact individual attitudes and knowledge. Their quasi-experiment included undergraduate business students. The results indicated that even after controlling for gender and prior experience with persons with disabilities (e.g. knowing friends and family who have a disability), there is significant effect of a one-hour presentation. Although there were decrements in scores one week after the presentation, both knowledge and attitudes remained higher than they were before the intervention.
In another study, Barney (2011) examined if type of sensitization workshop plays a role in decreasing negative attitudes about disability among future healthcare professionals. In this study, students either attended an experiential (playing wheelchair basketball) or a didactic (classroom lecture and discussion) workshop. The results indicated that neither workshop decreased negative attitudes compared to the baseline (control group) results for students. However, stigmatizing attitudes were found to be lower among participants in the experiential workshop than among participants of the didactic workshop. Barney concluded that attitudes about disability are pliable only under certain conditions. This scarce disability literature is thus not developed enough to classify in the aforesaid framework of the why, what, and how of diversity training (Ferdman and Brody, 1996).

With regard to studies focused on the Indian organizational context, we found that while sensitization training has been noted as being critical for social inclusion and other career outcomes (Kulkarni, 2016; Kulkarni et al., 2016) no study has examined the effectiveness of such training programs. Further, while persons with a disability are seen as a talent pool by employers (NASSCOM, 2016), theorizations of disability are anchored in a medical view of the body (Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner, 2013), and there is yet stigma associated with disability (Chishti, 2016; Petcosky-Kulkarni, 2017), implying the need for awareness building or sensitization programs.

Overall, despite the stated importance of disability-specific training to bring about attitudinal and behavioral change, there is very sparse literature focused on the topic. Most research has focused on targeted interventions for specific disabilities in specific contexts. By examining effectiveness of sensitization workshops across different types of workplaces, we hope to contribute to this important body of work.

Method

The number of persons with a disability in India is said to range from the census number of 26.8 million (Dhar, 2013) to as high as 100 million (Cherian, 2012). The Department of Disability Affairs of the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India, is the principal actor in the Indian institutional environment which oversees disability-specific awareness and sensitization plans. From The Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act of 1995 through the most recent The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, the government has stressed the importance of awareness and sensitization programs. For example, the Act of 2016 stresses the importance of general awareness about disability as well as employment-specific sensitization programs to fully include persons with a disability in all spheres. As another example, a current focus is on training and sensitization of key functionaries of central as well as state governments, and local bodies. The XII Five Year Plan has made an outlay of 20 crore rupees to create awareness about disability-related legislation, development programs, and rehabilitation and referral services amongst the various governmental stakeholders (Rehabilitation Council of India, 2015). The government’s Sugamya Bharat Abhiyan, that is, the Accessible India Campaign involves conducting zonal awareness workshops for sensitizing all stakeholders such as government officials, professionals (e.g. engineers, architects), students, and so forth (Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, 2015).

There are also other actors within the country that support and work toward awareness and sensitization specific to workplaces. For example, certain non-governmental organizations or disability training agencies (Kulkarni and Scullion, 2015) and a few employers (Kulkarni and Rodrigues, 2014; Kulkarni, 2016; Kulkarni et al., 2016) have made efforts at disability-specific sensitization. However, according to a study by the American India Foundation (2014), while there is an increasing trend toward inclusive workplaces in India, only a “handful” of organizations have disability in their employment focus and lack
of employer awareness or sensitization is a factor in unemployment of persons with a
disability. The same study notes that sensitization is important for improving employment
as well as workplace integration of persons with a disability.

Data sources and analysis
We gained access to employees, our sample, who had attended disability-specific
sensitization workshops in two ways. First, we approached two disability-specific
organizations which are known throughout India for engaging in activities that sensitize
various societal segments to the realities of persons with a disability. We asked them for
contacts within organizations in which they had conducted disability-specific sensitization
workshops. These contacts were typically someone in the organization’s human resources
department. Next, we also approached our own professional contacts within organizations.
Notably, despite the impressive country-wide client list of the organizations and our efforts,
we did not have expected success in access to organizations, a point we discuss later.

We asked to be connected with employees who had participated in the disability
sensitization workshop at least six months before the interview date. This is because
while attitudinal change persists over six months, it may deteriorate afterwards (Bezrukova
et al., 2012) and we were interested in relatively long-term effects of attending a sensitization
workshop. Further, a recent study across five states in India shows that employers invest in
two forms of sensitization programs, e-learning and face-to-face modules (Kulkarni, 2016). For
standardization, we requested contacts only with those who had participated in face-to-face
sensitization workshops. Finally, again, to maintain a degree of standardization in comparing
respondent experiences, we only focused on similar workshops – specifically, half-day
workshops[1] conducted with an explicit focus on awareness generation and behavioral
changes. Thus, the workshops were not focused on the aforesaid dominant “medical” view of
disability. The first and second author independently attended two such sensitization
workshops in 2015 to ensure that present respondents were exposed to very similar materials
and so that we could follow their descriptions and experiences of the workshop.

The workshops covered what disability is (degree/type of ability), examples and videos of
different (dis)abilities, and the different workplace solutions and accommodations. Sympathy,
charity, and aid for the collective was discouraged, and ability and the daily differences in how
diverse persons navigate their personal and work lives was stressed. Workshop participants
could ask questions and make comments both during and after the workshop.

We conducted interviews with 33 respondents from five industries. Interviews took place
over a span of about a year starting from May 2015 to March 2016. Of the 33 respondents,
11 were female and 22 were male. Respondents had attended the non-mandatory
sensitization workshops in the year 2013 (13 respondents), 2014 (9 respondents), and 2015
(11 respondents). Seven interviews were conducted over telephone and 26 interviews were
conducted in person. Most of our respondents worked in the banking and finance industry (12)
followed by retail (8), aviation (6), consulting (5), and precision engineering (2).

Following past research (Bezrukova et al., 2012), we relied on participants’ self-reports to
capture their learning from the workshops. The interview method was also well suited to the
present case given paucity of research on this topic (Phillips et al., 2016), implying an
inability to construct specific predictions (Grote and Raeder, 2009). Our interview guide
covered the following broad areas: respondent recall of the workshop, if their thinking
changed as a result of the workshop, any changes they or their work unit/organization
undertook as a result of the workshop, organizational policies and practices, if any, with
regard to inclusion of persons with a disability, and their background (e.g. their work
designation in the organization, and when they had attended the workshop).

While it was a straightforward task to, for example, capture if respondents’ thinking
changed as a result of the workshop, we noted that certain respondents seemed to be more
sensitized than others. We noted such points. Coding was driven by past research, and we
were open to new themes. For example, what types of changes (Ferdman and Brody, 1996),
who benefits (Kulik et al., 2007), and boundary conditions of training (Bezrukova et al.,
2012) were noted. The first and second author independently coded each interview,
noting similarities and dissimilarities across participants. Later, the two of us examined
all data and discussed each finding as well as appropriate illustrative quotes. There were
some disagreements which we resolved in person. For example, one of us had coded
only actual individual behavior as a result of the workshop (e.g. learning some sign
language), while the other had coded intent (e.g. wanting to learn some sign language) in
our theme titled “workshops lead to behavioral outcomes.” In this case, to avoid any
double counting and to separate awareness from behavior, we decided to count only
instances of actual behavior (not intent) in the aforesaid theme. In this manner, we counted
each instance and discussed each transcript, such that all numbers below are agreed upon
by both coders.

Findings
Data indicate the following about effectiveness of disability sensitization workshops:
workshops seemed to be effective in raising awareness about disability-specific issues for all
participants. However, they seemed to sensitize some participants more so than others and
led to behavioral changes (e.g. actual hiring of persons with a disability) only in certain
organizations. Workshops also seemed to evoke certain unintended consequences
(e.g. seeing someone with a disability as a hero). We describe each finding below.

Workshops lead to general awareness about disability-specific matters
Each of our respondents could recall parts or the general summary of the sensitization
workshops and what they learned about disability-specific issues. More specifically,
21 percent of respondents explained that they were more aware about the types of jobs
persons with disabilities can effectively perform, 21 percent knew of the diverse types of
disabilities which require different accommodations, and 94 percent claimed that they
learned of appropriate attitudes and behaviors to assume when working with persons with
disabilities. Referring to the diverse jobs which persons with disabilities can undertake, a
respondent explained:

The kind of activities which people with disabilities can do was really an eye opener for me.
Specifically, I was looking at the way people were actually working in petrol pumps or […]
supermarket […] it was a very good insight for me also to understand where all people can
contribute, notwithstanding their disabilities […] some of the jobs what these people are able to do
are really astonishing. I personally wouldn’t have thought of that from the beginning […] my own
perception and my own views of what kind of people, what kind of job they can do, are certainly
changed (Male, Technology lead, Precision engineering, attended workshop in 2013).

Respondents also noted how they became aware of the different types of disabilities as a
result of the workshop. For example, a male respondent who works in a bank in the
operations department explained that earlier he had not thought about invisible disabilities,
but was more aware of such as a result of the workshop. He explained how he now
understood that a certain blood condition, an invisible disability would require specific
accommodations. Another respondent spoke of her realization that “disability has a very
wide definition and has multiple sides”:

One of the main things which kind of helped me from the sensitization program is that you know
like for example there is hearing disability but there are multiple types of disabilities in hearing as
well […] For example, in hearing disability some people do lip reading, some people do hand signs
and all those things. I got to know that there are various kinds under one big disability umbrella.
So, if I know that this particular candidate has a hearing impairment but he is very good with lip reading, we can make sure that we speak to him face to face so that he can read whatever we are speaking and respond accordingly (Female, Analyst, Banking and Finance, attended workshop in 2014).

Finally, awareness meant the understanding of appropriate attitudes and behaviors to assume when working with persons with disabilities. Respondents explained how “we should never be sympathetic” and be “equal” in approach toward persons with a disability. A female respondent explained her change in attitude:

I mean, it will help to remove all the barriers in the mind [...] treating them differently, feeling sorry [...] I think those things can be just removed from the thought process itself [...] you know, feeling sorry and feeling sad about their situation is the biggest barrier. It stops anybody from their growth whether it’s an organization or an individual. I think the training helps to cut that away from the whole thought process (Female, Compliance Manager, Banking and Finance, attended workshop in 2015).

In referring to understanding of appropriate behaviors, a respondent stated the following:

Before that we didn’t have any specific opinions about people with disabilities. After the workshop we learnt how to behave with them, how to interact with them and how to treat them also [...] Before what we used to do is, if a person who has visual impairment is crossing the road we will pull their hands and ask them to come with us. After this workshop, we were told that we should request their permission for what to do [...] when you are speaking with deaf people, we need to look at them and speak. We should not have our back to them (Male, Manager, Banking and Finance, attended workshop in 2014).

Overall, workshops seemed to have been successful in increasing general awareness about disability-specific matters as evidenced by respondent recall, even when the workshop had occurred two years prior to our interview.

**Workshops resonate more so with certain individuals**
While each respondent seemed to become aware of disability issues as a result of attending the workshop, the workshop seemed to have made a particular impression on people who were already familiar with disability issues. We say that because 36 percent of respondents explicitly noted that they identified with the workshop content because they already knew someone with a disability or had some prior experience with disability. For example, a respondent narrated the story of a cousin, who is a person with a disability:

Because I too have a cousin who is physically handicapped and he’s working for [technology organization name]. And from my childhood, we used to encourage him whenever he was with us. Like even if we played cricket with him, just encourage him by bowling slowly, like with a bit of difference [...] I felt happy that [my organization] encourages such people (Male, Data Development, Consulting, attended workshop in 2014).

Another respondent who volunteers his time at a disability-specific non-governmental organization noted that he was already sensitized to disability-specific issues prior to the workshop conducted in his bank. He explained that the workshop was useful in adding specific knowledge over and above his awareness such as “If somebody is visually impaired we have tools like JAWS, which basically does text to speech conversion.” It is noting that “I was already very sensitive” prior to the workshop, another of our male respondents who works in the aviation industry explained that he had volunteered at a school where he taught music to children with a disability. He explained that though he “had not attended any sensitization workshops for people with disabilities” his teaching made him “very conscious of the challenges these people face.” We also heard stories about someone’s daughter having an attention deficit syndrome, someone’s neighbor being a person with a
disability, and how that had influenced respondents’ thinking prior to any formal workplace sensitization training they underwent. A respondent captured this point:

For me, it’s not really just particular to this workshop, I have been engaged with the disability forum for quite a few years now […] I think [the workshop] is more impactful when somebody that you know of personally has had a disability; permanent or temporary doesn’t really matter as much I would say. But then having that personal connect definitely is more impactful rather than you know just attending a workshop (Female, Associate, Banking and Finance, attended in 2015).

Overall, workshops thus seemed to resonate with people who had already had some prior experience with disability.

Workshops lead to behavioral changes for some employees but not across the organization

We had asked respondents to tell us about specific and voluntary behavioral outcomes which resulted from the workshop. Respondents referred to three individual level behavioral changes – learning very basic sign language to converse with those with a hearing loss (27 percent), facing those with a hearing loss in conversation so as to facilitate lip reading (27 percent), and volunteering for organizational activities aimed at inclusion (30 percent). A respondent explained that he had learned the sign language after the workshop to better integrate those with a hearing loss into his team:

I have learnt sign language. Not in depth. But like how to explain […] If I need any information, I can get it from them. If I have to explain anything to them, they are able to understand what I’m trying to say […] Like if I hadn’t for that training, it would have been difficult to understand what they need. For example, in sign language […] it’s easy for me to get information on what I want and what they are required to do or what they want me to do (Male, Customer representative, Banking and Finance, attended workshop in 2015).

Another respondent who works in the retail sector demonstrated to us the basic greetings (sign language) he had learned after the workshop, so he could make small conversations with those with hearing loss. We were also told of changes in behaviors such as facing the person with a hearing loss so they could lip read during in-person conversations, and not helping the visually impaired unless help was asked for. With regard to volunteering for organizational activities, respondents said they volunteered for their organization’s “disability forum” or asked for more training and involvement from their human resources department. For example, a respondent explained that to work more with his deaf and hard of hearing subordinates and help them succeed, more engagement would be beneficial, and he brainstormed with his human resources team:

I think that a specific kind of an orientation or seminar can definitely work. I think quarterly, once in 6 months, or once in a year makes a lot of difference if you have started working with this kind of an atmosphere with persons with a disability and when you are managing them. And also I have also suggested to the Human Resources team that you should have a skill based or a sign language based training. [Also] […] what about their growth? That becomes a challenge for HR. I think HR has not thought about it. But yes I suggest that they should engage with […] a lot of training institutes are out there […] who can train better than us for this kind of staff. So probably we can give them a career opportunity and how they can grow within the group for the next level. So we can think on those lines (Male, Senior Area Manager, Retail, attended workshop in 2013).

In no case, however, did such individual efforts lead to systemic organization-wide changes. In fact, one of our respondents specifically narrated a story wherein the three deaf people she had hired were fully integrated in her workgroup in a span of a year and a half, and her team of 15 members had voluntarily learned basic sign language and had informally started a referral program for her group (referring persons with a disability for employment).
Nonetheless, despite her attempt, her consulting organization did not go beyond the sensitization workshop to creating any formal policies.

Instead, we found that workshops led to systemic behavioral outcomes only in organizations that are already “disability friendly.” Such outcomes included increased hiring of persons with a disability across departments, providing accommodations hitherto not provided, sponsoring educational scholarships as part of extended CSR activities, and having more targeted awareness workshops (e.g. recurring peer sensitization workshops in departments as new persons were hired). In total, 79 percent of respondents specifically noted that the workshop helped (or would help) only because it was (or if it were) part of a larger inclusion initiative within the organization. One of our respondents clarified his organization’s “combination” approach:

[Workshop] does sensitize them. The appreciation and understanding of disability comes from that fact that they will probably be a lot more aware of what disability means […] But if you were to ask me if it is impactful enough for them to make a difference in the way they approach disability […]? Not […] That’s why we’ve got to be a little more targeted in what we want to do […] We do hire people with disability […] What is it that we can do both from a technology perspective such that when they are on board as an employee of the firm they can face any challenges. I think we’ve done quite a bit in the technology aspect already (Male, Vice President, Banking and Finance, attended workshop in 2013).

Such a “combination” approach, the same respondent noted, was critical because otherwise attending workshops only leads to basic awareness and increases one’s “diversity credits” as one attends sessions. Another male respondent from a bank noted that “all these factors have come together in the company” such that you should not only be aware and learn to interview “a hard of hearing or a visually impaired person,” but also know “what workplace accommodation you have to do, how you sensitize the peers of his or her group so they feel comfortable.” This respondent went on to explain his organization’s “diversity month […] a grand month with a lot of diversity focus events” within which the disability-specific workshop was scheduled. The same respondent explained that the workshop may help “map the right person for the right role” as it helps understand the various types of disabilities and required accommodations in his “disability friendly” organization.

A similar view was noted by a male respondent in the precision engineering industry. He explained that workshops make a behavioral impact as his organization is also “known for hiring people with disability from very long back” and that inclusion has been in “the DNA of [the organization] from very long back.” In fact, 18 percent of our respondents thought that workshops on their own did not make a difference at the level of the organization. For example, while acknowledging that the workshop increased his awareness, a respondent complained that he did not quite see how that would translate into hiring:

We generally receive some emails regarding the referrals for hiring of people with disabilities but we are not sure about the exact policies (Male, Data Development, Consulting, attended workshop in 2014).

Overall, while workshops led to behavioral changes for some individual employees, there were no organizational level changes unless the organization was already “disability friendly,” that is, had a culture of inclusion.

**Workshops lead to inadvertent othering**

We noticed two points which we thought were misaligned with the thrust of the workshops. First, 36 percent of our respondents seemed to view persons with a disability as heroes. For example, we heard phrases such as, “seek a chance to learn from them,” those with a disability are “brilliant,” “heroes,” and that they are “motivators.” This was surprising as throughout the workshop, the notions of equality and degrees of ability were stressed. It is
likely this “hero” interpretation stemmed from depicting of success stories within the workshops, as respondents often referred to specific stories when making this point. For example, a female respondent who works in a consulting organization explained, “This session has changed my outlook towards life […] instead of looking down upon impaired persons, we should give them more and more opportunities. And I am confident they will do better than us.”

Such assumptions of heroism were also noted by respondents whose organizations seemed to engage in the aforementioned “combination” approach. For example, as one of our respondents stated:

It was more of an awareness week that we had […] It’s a weeklong program showcasing some of the achievements of people with disabilities […] The performance levels are in fact even a little higher and they are much more brilliant. So, it was only showcasing […] They also have certain folks who have done excellence in research in the area of maybe aviation or locomotives […] things that normal people wouldn’t have even thought of […] So, a new kind of appreciation that comes in and people will start treating them with respect (Male, Analytics lead, Aviation, attended workshop in 2015).

Next, despite the stress on terminology of equality and person-first language in the workshops, there was a degree of inadvertent “othering.” A surprising 42 percent spoke of “them,” “the disabled,” “the handicapped,” and so on; words and phrases which seemed to allude to persons with a disability as some out-group. Even when seemingly positive, we heard responses such as “A disabled person, after getting trained, became like any normal staff and in fact they are doing better than what a normal staff does.” Yet, another respondent explained that “we should do something for society” and that his organization hires other than the “normal” people:

Today I have a ratio of 10:2. Ten will be normal employees and 2 will be persons with disability staff. Ok, so 10 people should have a positive approach to accept these people […] for that approach I think we should conduct [sensitization] activities (Female, Senior Executive, Retail, attended workshop in 2014).

One respondent thought that workshops may, in fact, backfire and may not help the organization, even if they sensitize individuals attending the workshop:

I have to give it a thought. When you organize such kind of activities it also means that you are making people aware that there is a difference between these two which is a kind of pointing out with a finger. But I don’t agree on not conducting such activities because my being there I found some difference […] I don’t think as a company it helps [organization name] but I guess it helps people in developing positivity towards life and self-motivation (Female, Scientist, Aviation, attended workshop in 2015).

Overall, by priming differences, workshops led to inadvertent othering of the very groups which were to be assimilated.

Certain workshop formats may be more useful than others
In total, 33 percent of our respondents noted that workshops may be more effective if they were either conducted by someone with a disability or were more experiential, and these changes be combined with or added to the traditional format they had experienced. Noting the first point, a respondent narrated how a blind person had helped her in the organization by showing how she handled interviews and how that had helped the respondent gain “practical knowledge”:

So I think practical knowledge is much better than just presentation […] presentation you will go back with the notion that I need to be accommodative of such people, that’s all. Maybe that’s just the frame that you get […] but if people really spend time with such people you will kind of get to
know that each and every task of theirs [...] so it might not just be a plain vanilla presentation that’s going to help you [...]. A workshop will definitely be effective if you get to interact with such individuals and you form your opinion on your own (Female, Lead Data Analyst, Banking and Finance, attended workshop in 2013).

Referring to more experiential formats being useful, another respondent who also works in the banking and finance industry recalled his incredulity when he discovered that the person leading the “dialogue in the dark[2]” was blind. Another respondent explained that “even if get these eminent personalities to talk, we have a panel discussion, people come, people listen, people love it, people clap and they go away. But once they go away, the hangover is not there for a long term.” He explained that “the impact is tenfold” when an “employee with disability” shows how he handles all tasks on a daily basis.

None of the respondents, however, dismissed workshops they had attended. Alternative formats were noted as extensions and supplements to what they had undergone. As one elaborated:

See it’s a mix of both [...] so it’s theoretical versus the practical, right? So before you get into the practical you need to understand the theory [...] it’s as simple as that. So yes you have to go through workshops with the theory as well as with the practical. First I prefer theory, because first time when I met a person with low vision I don’t know how to deal with the person. So if I understand the theory of it then I can deal with the person practically. Yes, theory is the first and practical is the second (Male, Analytics Leader, Banking and Finance, attended workshop in 2015).

Overall, respondents did not dismiss the importance of the workshops they had experienced. They did note that alternative formats wherein workshops were facilitated by someone with a disability or were more experiential would be more impactful.

Discussion
We examined if disability-specific sensitization workshops are effective in organizations, that is, if such workshops bring about increased knowledge about disability-related issues and behavioral changes such as increased employment and workplace integration of those with a disability. Considering the increased focus and spend on such activities, we believe that unless we engage with conditions under which such workshops are beneficial, efforts of human resource managers may be futile. Below we discuss each finding and how it contributes to the workplace disability literature.

Contributions to the workplace disability literature
We found that sensitization workshops led to general awareness such as understanding the diversity of disabling conditions (e.g. differences in severity of hearing loss, invisible disabilities) and knowledge of how to interact with someone with a disability (e.g. facing someone who is hard of hearing in face-to-face conversations). This finding is in line with past research (e.g. Bailey *et al.*, 2001; Murray *et al.*, 2009, 2011) but also extends it by showing that even when the workshop is not targeted to a specific disability group (as was the case in aforementioned studies), overall awareness is achieved. We especially find it heartening that respondents’ awareness was sustained two years after they had attended workshops. The findings, thus, indicate that awareness persists over a long term and is not a short-term gain with diminishing utility over time (cf. Hunt and Hunt, 2004).

We do wonder, however, if these non-mandated workshops as well as our interview requests attracted only the believers. We say this because, as noted in the method section, despite the impressive country-wide client list of the disability organizations we approached for contact leads, their attempts to connect us with their client organizations, and our own efforts, we did not achieve expected success in access to organizations. Further, our findings show that workshops resonated more so with individuals who already had some prior
experience with a disability (e.g. they had a child with a disability, or they had volunteered for disability work prior to attending the workshop). The possibility that workshops advocate to people who already share convictions aligned with the thrust of the workshop implies that voluntary sensitization is likely attracting those who have the least need of such sensitization. This finding is in line with the work of Kulik et al. (2007) who found that employees with greater knowledge of equal opportunities express more interest in voluntary equal opportunity training than employees with less of such knowledge.

Relatedly, we found that workshops lead to behavioral outcomes at the level of the individual, but unless the organization already had a culture of inclusion, there was no further behavioral gain – at the level of the organization. For example, recall the finding that while persons in one group seemed to voluntarily learn basic sign language to integrate their deaf colleagues, there was no change at the level of their organization for inclusion or integration of persons with a disability. Taken together, these findings imply that there are boundaries to the effectiveness of such sensitization workshops. The potential argument then is not so much if such workshops help or not in the aggregate (e.g. Murray et al., 2009, 2011; Wilson et al., 2009) but to understand boundary conditions under which workshops are effective. In no instance did any respondent dismiss the importance of the workshop.

The most troubling finding is that workshops led to the “othering” of persons with a disability. We were taken by surprise to hear of this collective as being referred to as “heroes” or as those different from “normal.” While workshops may increase awareness, we wonder, as do Bezrukova et al. (2012), if awareness comes at the cost of inadvertently reinforcing group boundaries. This finding about othering of certain groups through language implicitly highlights who is “normal” or accepted more so as an employee in organizations (cf. Galvin, 2003). The discourse of othering can comprise contradictory discourses of ableism (that produce difference) and tolerance and inclusiveness (which render it problematic to talk about difference). Well-meaning organizational stakeholders, through such contradictions, can end up reinforcing the very discursive representations they wish to de-emphasize (Mik-Meyer, 2016). Present finding again points to the boundary conditions under which workshops are effective, and not just the binary of if-or-not such workshops are effective.

Overall, present findings move forward the conversation in the disability workplace literature by pointing out that sustained awareness can result from short duration training interventions. Paradoxically, though, the very same awareness can reinforce group boundaries, and collectives meant to be integrated are inadvertently seen as different. The findings also suggest that non-mandated interventions may preach to the choir and not necessarily influence organizational level outcomes – if the workshops are conducted in isolation and there is no broader organizational culture of inclusion supporting such workshops. We hasten to add though that we are not dismissive of such workshops. Based on the present findings, we offer some suggestions for making such workshops more impactful.

**Implications for employers**

First, human resource managers should not stop at the mere administration of the workshop, but ensure that they have follow-up events to capture if and how much intended outcomes are achieved. We say that because, in the present study, the stated objectives were both attitudinal and behavioral – at the level of both the individual and the organization. While awareness seemed to have increased, actual outcomes at the level of the organization (as a result of the workshop) were missing. One way of doing so would be to create personal action plans for integration of and full utilization of available talent (e.g. De Meuse et al., 2007). It is also important that employers elicit employee feedback about such workshops, or better yet, design such with stakeholder inputs. This is because stakeholder commitment may be higher for those practices that are perceived as effective by those involved (Khoreva et al., 2017; Maxwell et al., 2001).
Second, the finding that the voluntary sensitization workshops are likely to attract those already open to engaging with disability is an important point of leverage for human resource managers. If such individuals can be identified pre or post the workshop, they can serve as formal or informal ambassadors for inclusion efforts. Here, we also echo an idea suggested by Kulik et al. (2007) that human resource managers can conduct pre-training needs assessment to specify minimal skills required for compliance with local legislation, and ensure that employees who do not meet this criterion attend sensitization workshops.

Third that workshops did not alter behaviors at the level of the organization is a noteworthy point for human resource managers. The broader diversity research shows that to increase diversity, structures which help establish responsibility (e.g. affirmative action plans, diversity committees, and diversity staff positions) are critical (Kalev et al., 2006). Stand-alone activities may not be as impactful, and employers will benefit most from their diversity efforts if several initiatives (e.g. recruitment, training, mentoring programs) work in tandem (Kulik and Roberson, 2008; Cocchiara et al., 2010). In fact, if not understood, fashioned, and realized within the socio-historical and organizational context, diversity management efforts can hinder more than help individual and collective efforts (Knights and Omanović, 2016).

Fourth, the present finding about “othering” is significant. Human resource managers may wish to engage employees in a reflection exercise wherein linguistic choices are examined. If employees claim awareness about appropriate attitudes and they yet engage in referring to persons with a disability as “the other,” a deeper engagement with one’s biases and diversity-related blind spots may help toward true inclusion. Identities are indeed ascribed through the “othering” of certain groups through use of language and such ascribed differences need examination (Galvin, 2003). Employees can also be sensitized to the fact that disability is a human condition given functional limitations and job demands, and not something that is specific to some “other” groups of humans (cf. Kearns, 1997).

Finally, we think respondents’ views about format of the workshop (e.g. workshops conducted by someone with a disability, experiential workshops) are practicable. Disability studies scholars have also proposed that workshops be conducted by highly trained persons with a disability where participants learn through facilitated discovery. Such a facilitated discovery can be achieved through formats such as group discussions, cases, and examination of how disability is portrayed in media, and so on. Combining such formats with actions’ plans per participant can not only produce impact but also reduce the possibility of viewing persons with a disability from just a medical angle where impairment is the focus (French, 1992).

**Limitations and directions for future research**

No study is without limitations, and ours is no exception. Our limited sample size, the one country focus, and type of workshop present restrictions to the generalizability of findings. While we can cast as a finding in itself the difficulty in inducing employers to invite researchers into their premises to talk about the present topic, we cannot but acknowledge this limitation. We also agree with Baldridge et al. (2017) that there are national variations in the cultural and legal definitions of who is defined as a person with a disability, and in employment experiences and discrimination encountered by different disability groups. Furthermore, there may also be within-nation differences. For example, as we noted in an earlier section, the Indian context primes people to think of disability as a medical condition (Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner, 2013) but also sees persons with a disability as a talent pool (NASSCOM, 2016). We do not know which view respondents espoused before attending the workshop, a key matter for future research.

Next, diversity training is a complex endeavor with regard to why and how organizations are engaging with it (e.g. reason, type, and duration of learning, Ferdman and Brody, 1996). For example, with respect to type of disability-specific workshops, there are
electronic formats (Kulkarni, 2016), which we did not consider in the present case. We also agree with Kulik and Roberson (2008) that future research could examine effectiveness of diversity training using designs that make use of random assignment to training conditions and non-trained control groups, and how much training translates to changed behaviors toward diversity issues – to the extent such assignment is not unlawful. Said limitations also present opportunities to conduct more research as well as offer further implications for human resource management, possibly through large-scale quantitative studies.

Finally, the most important stakeholder is the person with a disability. While coworkers may claim awareness and employers may claim engagement with diversity inclusion efforts, it will be useful to gain the perspective of the persons with disabilities who may not experience said culture of inclusion. How those with a disability organize and negotiate workplaces is of importance when we examine, in any form, the possibilities of production of social categories of difference (Foster and Fosh, 2010; Williams and Mavin, 2012). This is especially important as, in many workplaces, employees with a disability occupy a contradictory discursive and material position and have to navigate an ableist assumption of lower productivity (Jammaers et al., 2016; Mik-Meyer, 2016).

Conclusion
This study contributes to our knowledge regarding the effectiveness of disability sensitization workshops in organizations. We attempted to examine if disability-specific sensitization workshops bring about hoped outcomes, that is, increased knowledge about disability-related issues and behavioral changes such as increased employment and workplace integration of those with a disability. Our findings point to both positives and boundary conditions of such workshops and we hope that researchers and practitioners engage with present findings for making such workshops more impactful.

Notes
1. While the actual workshop content did not exceed two hours, often the question-and-answer session was extended. We were told that organizations had referred to them as “half-day workshops.”
2. The respondent explained that this is an experiential practicum wherein people are blindfolded or are in pitch dark environments and learn to navigate it.

References


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