

# The Career Advancement of Leaders with Disabilities: Synthesizing and Extending Our Understanding of Facilitators

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# A medical leave...

- Persons with disabilities are underrepresented in leadership positions (Sayce, 2010; Turcotte, 2014), even in disability-related organizations (Bebbington & Özbilgin, 2013)

# The state of research on disability, career advancement, and leadership:

**Gender search = 673 articles**

**Disability search = 41 articles, primarily off-topic (e.g. leading persons with disabilities)**

## Research Questions & Definitions

## Literature Review

- Barriers to career advancement and leadership
- Facilitators of career advancement and leadership

## Methods

- Interpretive, qualitative
- 21 leaders interviewed

## Findings

- The three-legged stool metaphor
- External social network (family, friends, role models)

## Conclusion

- Future research, the butterfly metaphor

- 1) What factors facilitate the career advancement of persons with disabilities into leadership positions?
- 2) Do these facilitators relate to each other? If so, how?

# Definitions (1)



## Disability

- The negative interaction between impairment and contextual factors (environmental or personal)
- A mixed individual-level/social model (e.g. WHO, 2011)
- Main focus on social or environmental factors in this research

### **Career Advancement**

- Promotion (Braddock & Bachelder, 1994)

### **Leadership**

- Formal leadership positions
- At work, a leader is “a person who exercises authority over other people” (Eagly & Carli, 2007, p. 8)
- Role occupancy (e.g. supervisors, managers, directors)

**There is a lot of research on barriers, yet very little on barriers to career advancement specifically (Kulkarni & Gopakumar, 2014)**

## **Attitudinal**

- Employer fears regarding performance, cost, negative reactions from co-workers and customers (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2008)
- High performance ratings and low performance expectations (Ren et al., 2008)

## **Systemic**

- Segregation into low skill jobs (e.g. Hernandez et al., 2008) with high insecurity (Mitra & Kruse, 2016)

## **Individual**

- Self-limiting behaviors (Jones, 1997)



**Barriers experienced by workplace leaders with disabilities. There is an emphasis on barriers to career advancement and metaphor.**

- The glass ceiling (Braddock and Bachelder, 1994)
- The glass cliff (Wilson-Kovacs et al., 2008)
- Glass partitions (Roulstone & Williams, 2014)
  - Fear of losing accommodation and opening up to negative treatment in new environments reduce lateral and upward movement

**Less research on facilitators of career advancement in comparison to barriers. Prior studies on facilitators more generally fit into three broad categories:**

1. Career Self-Management Strategies
2. Organizational and Societal Factors
3. Social Network

### 1. Career Self-Management Strategies

- proactive behaviors used by individuals to navigate challenges and, ultimately, benefit their career (King, 2004)
- Cognitive and behavioural elements (Kulkarni & Gopakumar, 2014)
  - Positive mindset, persistence
  - Sensitizing observers to ability
  - Disability advocacy
  - Leveraging homophilous networks

### 2. Organizational and Societal Factors

- Organizational policy, practices, and culture
  - Disability hiring policy and training (Araten-Bergman, 2016)
  - Justice climate and disclosure (von Schrader et al. 2013)
- Disability legislation
  - Increase accessibility; decrease discrimination (Stone & Colella, 1996)
  - Mixed findings (Kruse & Schur, 2003)
- Social movements
  - Motivation to achieve (Noonan et al., 2004)

### 3. Social Network

- Internal social network
  - Access to mentorship, challenging tasks, workgroup inclusion, and career advancement opportunities (Stone & Colella, 1996)
- External social network
  - How do these networks influence the career advancement of leaders with disabilities?
  - Network literature, the “strength of weak ties” (Grannoveter, 1973)
  - High status roles and the influence of family and friend ties (Lin, 1999)
  - Socialization during childhood (Shah, 2004; Thomas, 1998)

## General Approach

- Interpretive, qualitative methods (Charmaz, 2006)
- Semi-structured interviews
- Iterative approach to data collection and analysis

### Participants

- 21 leaders with disabilities
- 8 identified as female, 13 as male
- Self-identified impairments
  - Physical n=12; sensory n=7; mental n=2; speech n=1; learning n=1
- Leadership roles
  - Titles such as advisor, supervisor, consultant, manager, executive, board member, political candidate, mayor
  - Across sectors (government, for-profit, non-profit)

### **The Three-Legged Stool Metaphor**

(described by Michael MacDonald, manager)

Just as a stool requires 3 legs for stability, a successful career requires 3 categories of facilitators:

1. “the self” – career self-management strategies
2. “social connections” – social network
3. “systems” – organizational and societal factors

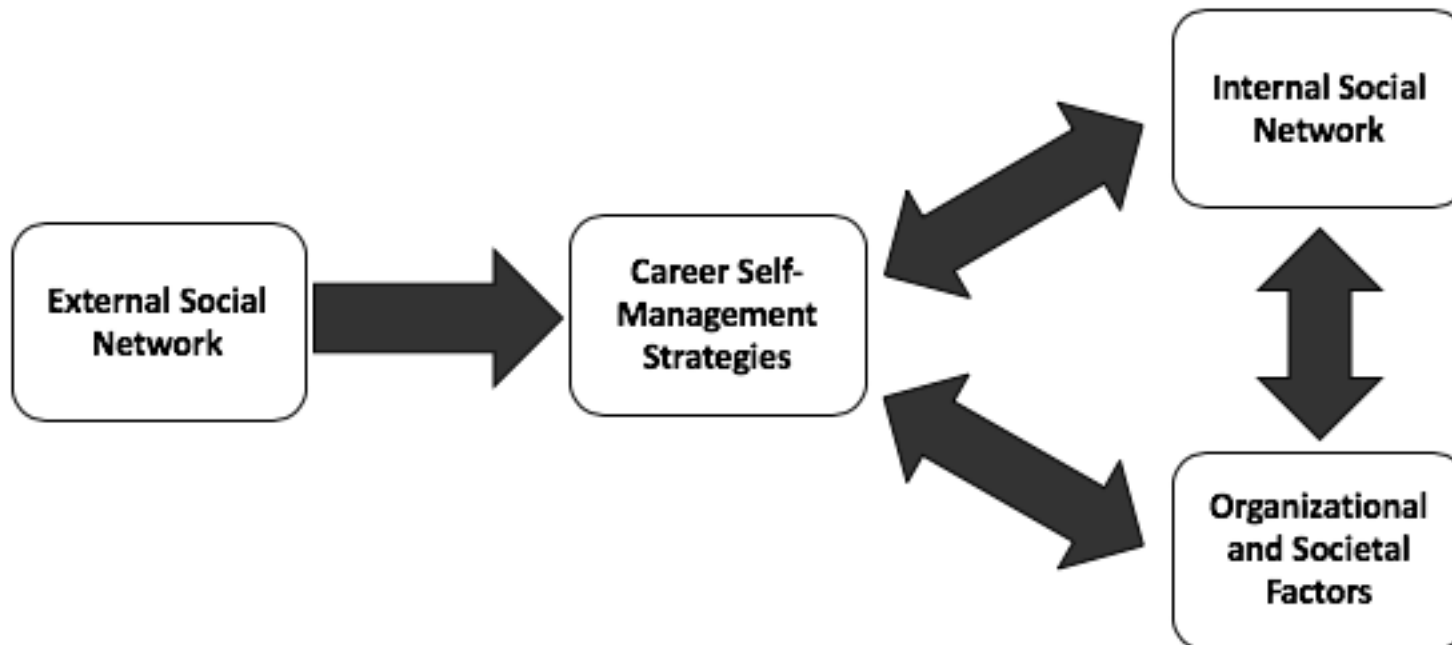
**How generalizable is the three-legged stool across participants' (n=21) experiences?**

- All three pillars considered, n=17
- Only discussed the first two pillars, n=4



## Findings (2)

A model on the interrelation between the three pillars of the stool. Today, we will focus on the first relationship, between the **external social network and career self-management**.



### **External Social Network → Career Self-Management Strategies (n=15)**

1. Fostering a positive disability identity and success (n=10)
2. Modeling and promoting skills development (n=3)
3. Generating employment opportunities (n=3)

### 1. Fostering a positive disability identity and success (n=10)

- Disability as neutral; not a limitation
  - Family and friends “who didn't treat me differently”, “didn't let me make excuses for myself”
  - Entrenchment in disability communities illustrates a spectrum of experience and the realization that participants are “just like anybody else”
  - Role models (e.g. Rick Hansen) break down barriers

### 1. Fostering a positive disability identity and success (n=10)

- General difference between congenital and acquired experience
- Motivating success, also from negative experience
  - “Part of what has motivated me, is that several of my buddies committed suicide. Because in the late '80s they were not accommodated, they didn't go back to work, and you have the classic combination of chronic pain, depression, despair, and no hope for the future.” (Wolfgang Zimmermann, president and executive director)

### 2. Modeling and promoting skills development (n=3)

- Family teaches cultural skills
  - “I grew up in a hearing family. So, I do have, I think, a better understanding of what the hearing world looks like. But when you look at people who are called strong culturally Deaf, there's potential for cross-cultural conflict. The Deaf approach is quite straight forward, some may even call it blunt. They're very direct. And I think I've seen this with other cultures as well. But in the workplace, that is not always the best approach. For example, to get your attention, culturally Deaf people will bang on a table or bang on the floor, and it's noisy. That wouldn't really work in a hearing workplace... I think because of my hearing family, I'm more aware of hearing cultural.” (Mike Cyr, manager)

## 2. Modeling and promoting skills development (n=3)

- Family with similar experiences modeling skills
  - “For me, it was family members who were able to relate to what I was saying. And using them as a sounding board and then talking about things that worked for them and how I might be able to do the same thing.” (Anonymous participant, manager)

### 3. Generating employment opportunities (n=3)

- Internal networks connected many participants to “weak” ties that developed access to new job opportunities
- When encountering disability-related employment barriers, three participants’ external network (family and friends) generated employment opportunities
  - “One of my neighbours comes in and says, ‘So let's get up and get going here Steve.’ This was September. ‘Next spring, I want you to build my house.’ I said, ‘What? You can't see?... Look, you want me to build you a house?’ And he said, ‘Yeah. Come on, let's go. Get goin', I want you to build my house.’ And so, he created a vision for me that I didn't have, and he gave it to me. And I went, ‘Oh, well maybe I could. If he thinks I could, maybe I could.’” (Steve Mantis, executive and other roles)

## The “three-legged stool” from Michael Macdonald as a positive metaphor on facilitators

### External Social Network → Career Self-Management Strategies

- 1) Fostering a positive disability identity and success (n=10)
- 2) Modeling and promoting skills development (n=3)
- 3) Generating employment opportunities (n=3)



## Future Research: The Butterfly Metaphor



“I would like to share the metaphor of how the butterfly starts its journey of self-determination first in a cocoon where freedom to freely fly is not possible. Struggling to build strength in their wings inside the cocoon, they keep trying to move and they eventually build enough strength to be able to open the cocoon with their wings of strength and fly and soar into a world of possibilities. Facilitators provide endless possibilities for success. And, Leaders with Disabilities may find themselves up against adverse conditions that feel like being restricted in a cocoon. But at the same time, these highly adaptable and inventive leaders are building strength and in time will be able to build strength in others with the aid of facilitators that believe in them and wish for them to soar without limits!” (Linda Niksic, senior advisor)

## Thank you!

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