Avatar: The New Employee? Creating Online Employment Personas May Benefit Stigmatized Employees

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COMMENTARY

Avatar: The new employee? Creating online employment personas may benefit stigmatized employees

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Although we appreciate and agree with the conclusions that (Wilcox et al., 2022) come to in their review of the literature related to cybervetting, our intention in this response is to discuss the potential utility of cybervetting in a post-COVID world in which fully remote employment is much more prevalent. Specifically, we draw parallels to other contexts in which individuals interact completely remotely successfully and highlight how such arrangements can actually be beneficial—rather than detrimental—to employees with stigmatized identities or characteristics.

The post-COVID working world

The COVID-19 pandemic has forever changed the way that many organizations do business. At the onset of the pandemic 2 years ago, organizations had to adapt quickly to operating in ways that allowed employees to either completely quarantine themselves from one another or continue functioning with physical distancing and physical protective equipment to prevent transmission of the virus. According to a recent study, 56% of companies in the United States went completely remote during the COVID-19 pandemic. This same report indicated that 70% full-time employees in the US worked remotely, with 90% of those working remotely reporting that they were more productive when they worked from home (Owl Labs, 2021).

Currently, high vaccination rates and lowered transmission rates have prompted the federal guidelines in the US to include returning to work without protective equipment or physical distancing in place, and most states in the US have followed suit or will do so soon. Despite the ability to return to "business as usual," many organizations have emerged from the pandemic with a greater appreciation of the benefits of remote work for their employees, including better work/nonwork balance, the ability to live in cheaper places than where their office is located, and saved commuting resources by approximately 40 minutes and $500 per month, among other benefits (Apollo Technical, 2022). Many organizations have also realized the benefits of remote work to their overall bottom lines, with many of them choosing to sell physical properties and/or not renew contracts for rented or leased office spaces (for pre-COVID data related to this phenomenon, see Garg & Rijist, 2015). These savings are noteworthy given the benefits associated with retaining talented employees who enjoy flexibility in their jobs and the saved costs associated with mortgage/rent, maintenance, and utility costs of buildings.

Many organizations have also realized that remote work may prompt some people to seek employment in organizations that they previously may not have considered due to geographic considerations. This is a particularly intriguing lever for organizations that wish to increase the diversity of their workforce. Taking race as an example, racial minority employees may not be drawn to organizations that conduct their operations in predominantly White regions due to fears of ostracism or lack of community support for cultural activities (Tulshyan,

2021). However, fully remote employees can now reside in regions in which they feel more comfortable while being employed by organizations in places they would not want to live. Similarly, remote work is now getting generally more accessible for employees with physical disabilities or employees who are neurodivergent, immunocompromised, or otherwise unable to interact in person easily (Holland, 2021). In summary, the post-COVID working environment will be very different from "business as usual" and affords opportunities for both employees and organizations that were not present to the same extent before.

Cybervetting post COVID-19

We argue that cybervetting may not be as negative in a post-COVID-19 world as it was before. Specifically, we assert that working remotely can allow employees to establish and maintain work personas that they deploy for employment purposes that are psychologically separate from the way they typically present themselves and that this practice is especially useful for those with stigmatized identities or characteristics. The specific ways these identities will be forged will vary greatly. However, we posit certain circumstances need to be in place for this to be viable.

First, potential employees should be aware that cybervetting is likely to occur and have knowledge of how to best present oneself online for employment purposes. The research discussed by Synowiec (2021) suggests that many people are keenly aware of this, though many may not know exactly how to present themselves favorably. However, individuals possess the ability to decide what will be shared and can edit, post, or conceal information at any given moment to adjust their online personas.

Second, potential employees must be comfortable with navigating a potential duality of identities. Specifically, there may be costs associated with adopting false identities for employment purposes. Prior research conducted before the pandemic with employees who (presumably) worked in physical proximity to one another highlighted the benefits of being authentic with coworkers and the negative implications of pretending to be someone one is not (Griffith & Hebl, 2002; Martinez et al., 2017). Furthermore, employees with potentially stigmatized identities that have disclosed their identities outside of work but not at work can experience events that can cause stress related to fears of their secret identity being revealed at work without their consent (Ragins, 2008). However, this possibility is less likely for online personas that are well maintained because coworkers are less likely to encounter one another in unexpected places or at unexpected times when they interact completely remotely. We completely agree that authenticity at work is ideal. However, the negative implications of being inauthentic are likely to be less harmful in the context of completely remote work given the physical and psychological distance that can be maintained. Thus, this may be a viable option for some employees in some situations.

Examples of other work contexts that require inauthenticity

The notion that employees must sometimes engage in behaviors that are inauthentic is not new. The extensive literature related to emotional labor at work highlights how employees must sometimes engage in behaviors that are not in sync with the underlying emotions they are experiencing when those emotions do not align with the behavioral expectations of the job, particularly in customer service industries that require "service with a smile" (Grandey & Sayre, 2019).

Similarly, employees who do work that is stigmatized as being relatively less desirable (e.g., sanitation work, exotic dancing) report that they psychologically distance themselves from the work. Specifically, these employees tend to focus on the situational influences that led them to this work rather than suggesting that innate interests or abilities motivated them to engage in this type of work (Bergman & Chalkley, 2007). Thus, these workers engage in work that they feel does not reflect who they are as people inherently. Finally, it is common practice for entertainers of all

kinds to adopt stage names that are designed to be widely appealing to general audiences (e.g., John Wayne, Madonna). All of these situations represent work that is being completed by people who are engaging in inauthentic behaviors to some extent.

Examples of other social contexts in which people are inauthentic

There are several examples of people adopting false personas outside of work for extended periods and in the context of meaningful relationships. First, one example of people fabricating online personas includes online dating. The MTV documentary show *Catfish* is in its eighth season and has documented 194 examples of people having intense emotional relationships with people that they have never seen. The phenomenon is so common that there are now replicated versions in Mexico, Brazil, Colombia, the United Kingdom, and Chile. If the experiences depicted in the show are to be believed, it is clear that people can form meaningful long-term relationships with people who may be falsifying their identities. The morality of such behaviors is beyond the scope of this paper, but there are clearly some positive implications of these relationships for those involved in them.

Second, it is expected for people to adopt false personas in the context of online gaming. Many games allow players to create completely different identities (avatars), which they use to coordinate with others (who have their own avatars) to accomplish complicated missions, sometimes over extended periods. Some gamers gain notoriety as their online personas among other gamers who only know them as their avatars. The interdependence and long-term investment associated with the tasks mimic coordinated team tasks that employees must accomplish at work. These are just two examples of people adopting and maintaining false personas in ways that yield benefits for themselves and those with whom they interact.

In conclusion, we maintain that cybervetting is, in general, not a good practice for employees or for organizations. However, given the reality that it is very common and unlikely to go away, we also suggest that there are ways that employees can leverage this practice to their advantage, so long as they are willing and able to navigate their employee personas effectively without compromising their true identities. Indeed, some employees may find the ability to truly be themselves outside of work without fear of reprisal from coworkers to be freeing.

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