

The Three-Legged Stool: Synthesizing and Extending Our Understanding of the Career Advancement Facilitators of Persons With Disabilities in Leadership Positions

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Abstract

I examine the career advancement facilitators of organizational stakeholders who may be identified as simultaneously “core” and “fringe” in this article, via the insights of 21 leaders with disabilities. To navigate barriers and advance their careers, these leaders benefited from three categories of facilitators, including career self-management strategies, social networks, and organizational and societal factors. Facilitators are synthesized with a metaphor, the three-legged stool, which depicts three foundational pillars that underlie the leaders’ success. Focusing on an understudied element of the social networks pillar, I examine how leaders’ external networks (family, friends, acquaintances, and role models) facilitated their career advancement. Findings point to the role of strong and weak ties in developing leaders’ career self-management strategies as well as their access to core stakeholder positions. Last, contributions, implications, and limitations of this article are discussed.

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Persons with disabilities receive lower wages, less job security, and less training at work in comparison to persons without disabilities (Schur et al., 2009). In addition, persons with disabilities advance into leadership positions at a lower rate than persons without disabilities (Bebbington & Özbilgin, 2013; Disability Rights Commission, 2006; Turcotte, 2014). With more than 1 billion persons with disabilities in the world as well as the expectation that this number will increase (World Health Organization [WHO], 2011) understanding the career advancement experiences of leaders with disabilities has become imperative for the field of business and society. However, persons with disabilities—especially leaders with disabilities—are overlooked in business and society research (Boucher, 2017).

The near silence that persists on the career advancement and leadership of persons with disabilities is problematic. In part, this is because leaders with disabilities occupy a unique position in organizations. These stakeholders can be perceived as leaders first, who are “core” stakeholders, with power, legitimacy, and urgency (e.g., Hart & Sharma, 2004; Mitchell et al., 1997). However, as persons with disabilities they may also be described as “fringe” stakeholders, from a marginalized minority group (e.g., Kulkarni & Gopakumar, 2014; McCarthy & Muthuri, 2018; Stone & Colella, 1996). Importantly, to solve pressing organizational and societal issues, researchers have recognized the need to engage fringe stakeholders (Hart & Sharma, 2004; McCarthy & Muthuri, 2018). Though overlooked in stakeholder research, the underrepresentation of persons with disabilities in the workforce and leadership positions is surely one of those problems (Bebbington & Özbilgin, 2013; WHO, 2011).

Thus, in this article I ask, how do persons with disabilities advance into leadership roles? Put differently, I examine the career advancement and leadership facilitators of stakeholders who may be simultaneously core and fringe. Furthermore, I highlight the role of external networks (e.g., family, friends, acquaintances, and role models) as facilitators of career advancement.

Considering the absence of persons with disabilities in business and society research, we can turn to fields such as management, organizational psychology, and disability studies to situate the current investigations (Colella & Bruyère, 2011; Jammaers et al., 2016; Roulstone & Williams, 2014; Stone & Colella, 1996). Research from these fields has primarily focused on barriers (Kulkarni & Gopakumar, 2014). However, researchers have recently begun

to look beyond barriers and examine facilitators of success in the careers of persons with disabilities (Baldrige & Kulkarni, 2017).

Largely emphasizing individual agency, this small literature has explored how persons with disabilities signal competence, access networks, advocate for disability, and construct positive disability identities (Baldrige & Kulkarni, 2017; Kulkarni & Gopakumar, 2014). In addition, social network ties who are internal to the workplace, such as coworkers and supervisors, have been described as drivers of career outcomes (Stone & Colella, 1996). Though not focused directly on career advancement or leadership, researchers have highlighted organizational and societal factors that can benefit the employment and work of persons with disabilities as well (Beatty et al., 2018), such as disability hiring and training policies (Araten-Bergman, 2016) and legislation (Stone & Colella, 1996).

As a nascent literature, there remain many unanswered questions about the facilitators of career advancement and leadership among persons with disabilities. At present we are missing a synthesis of facilitators. The absence of synthesis is problematic because our current understanding of how persons with disabilities advance into leadership positions is fragmented. Without an analysis of facilitators in relation to each other (e.g., What are the types of career advancement facilitators among leaders with disabilities? Is it enough for these stakeholders to have access to one type of facilitator or do they require multiple inputs to advance their careers?), we risk reproducing romanticized disability “hero” narratives when focusing on individual-level factors and repeating disability dependency narratives when attending to social or environmental influences. However, from the broader literature we know that careers do not develop in a vacuum. Rather, they advance through processes that connect various individual, social, organizational, and societal inputs (Tharenou, 1997).

I interviewed 21 leaders with disabilities on the subject of their career advancement and leadership for this article. Participants were from Canada and worked in organizations from for-profit, non-profit, and government sectors. They identified with physical, sensory, speech, learning, and mental impairments, and they held a variety of leadership positions, from junior management to the most senior roles in their workplaces.

Synthesizing our knowledge of facilitators, P8 (manager), described a metaphor that I present herein. This metaphor, the three-legged stool, depicts the importance of three foundational pillars that underlie the career success of leaders with disabilities. Just as a stool requires three legs for stability, successful navigation of disability-related barriers and career advancement requires three points of contact in this metaphor. The three pillars of the stool are career self-management strategies, social networks, and organizational

and societal factors. Because the three-legged stool portrays career advancement as reliant upon three distinct yet equally important factors, participants' advancement is not portrayed as the result of romanticized heroes trouncing barriers or munificent social supports alone. Rather, a combination of factors at multiple levels of analysis are characterized as the requisites of successful career advancement and leadership.

In addition, I take an in-depth look at the influence of external networks in the career advancement of leaders with disabilities. These networks represent a component of the social networks pillar of the three-legged stool. I focus on external networks because we have limited research on social networks in the career advancement of persons with disabilities (Kulkarni, 2012) and virtually no research on external networks in this context (see Shah et al., 2004 for an exception). However, many participants highlighted external networks as facilitators of their career advancement.

This research generates several contributions to stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984). First, considering the normative underpinnings of stakeholder theory (Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Freeman et al., 2020), it is strange that stakeholder researchers have overlooked persons with disabilities. By examining the careers of stakeholders who reside at the fringe of the fringe in stakeholder theory and research, the present article extends our understanding of who stakeholders are.

Second, the three-legged stool is a model of how fringe stakeholders gain access to core, leadership roles. Prior stakeholder research has focused on the organization as central to this process (Hart & Sharma, 2004). However, the organization is only one part of a constellation of facilitators in the three-legged stool metaphor. This article contributes a more complete model of how these stakeholders access leadership positions, which have power, legitimacy, and urgency (Mitchell et al., 1997).

Last, and perhaps most importantly, this article highlights a limitation of characterizing stakeholders as core or fringe (Hart & Sharma, 2004; McCarthy & Muthuri, 2018). Leaders with disabilities contradict the core–fringe dichotomy. This is because leaders are traditionally conceptualized as influential, core stakeholders, whereas persons with disabilities are generally perceived as lower power in society and at the periphery. In other words, leaders with disabilities can reside at both the core and fringe. We run the risk of stereotyping participants as one or the other when we focus on a binary approach to stakeholder identification. This likely contributes to the stigma associated with fringe stakeholder identities as well as the invisibility of leaders with disabilities in business and society research. Thus, my final contribution to stakeholder theory is the understanding that stakeholders can be simultaneously core and fringe.

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows. First, I situate the present research in the literature on stakeholder theory, with a focus on stakeholder identification. Then, I go on to review prior research on disability, career advancement, and leadership. Next, I describe the methods used in this article, followed by findings on the three-legged stool metaphor and external networks. Last, I conclude with a discussion of contributions, implications, and limitations that are relevant to stakeholder research and practice.

Stakeholder Identification and Disability

Stakeholders have been categorized in numerous ways, such as internal or external to the organization (Graham, 2017) and core or fringe (Hart & Sharma, 2004). According to Hart and Sharma (2004), core stakeholders hold privileged positions of power, legitimacy, and urgency in organizations. They represent clearly visible actors who can often sway decision-making, such as suppliers, consumers, employees, and competitors. However, fringe stakeholders are without power, legitimacy, and urgency. These stakeholders have limited capacity to influence decision-making and include marginalized people (Le Ber & Branzei, 2010; McCarthy & Muthuri, 2018). Stakeholder research has primarily focused on core stakeholders, such as organizational leaders (Mitchell et al., 1997), to date. However, interest in the experiences of fringe stakeholders is increasing (McCarthy & Muthuri, 2018).

In part, this may be because fringe stakeholders can be of great benefit to organizations. For instance, Hart and Sharma (2004) noted that stakeholders at the fringe can share knowledge that is essential to predicting future problems and opportunities—but only if organizations engage with them. Although researchers have recognized that fringe stakeholders may play a vital role in the success of organizations, less is known about how fringe stakeholders gain power, legitimacy, and urgency within organizations.

Persons with disabilities can be characterized as fringe stakeholders, being a marginalized minority group (Kulkarni & Gopakumar, 2014; Stone & Colella, 1996). However, persons with disabilities have been largely overlooked in stakeholder research (for exceptions see Guzman et al., 2008; Young et al., 2005; Yue, 2008). Considering the dearth of research on disability from a stakeholder perspective, I refer to persons with disabilities, including leaders with disabilities, as the fringe of the fringe in this literature.

Disability, Career Advancement, and Leadership

We have limited research on the careers of leaders with disabilities (Boucher, 2017), though academics continue to call for investigations on this subject.

Considering the status of leadership diversity in higher education, Bebbington and Özbilgin (2013) cited data from the United Kingdom (Disability Rights Commission, 2006) to report that persons with disabilities are underrepresented in workplace leadership positions. Holding that “leadership theory, in common with organisational theory, has tended to suppress ‘difference’” (Bebbington & Özbilgin, 2013, p. 18), these researchers provide motivation for a more comprehensive understanding of leadership that includes disability. Similarly, Barling and Cloutier (2017) explained that assumptions about the prototypical leader (Epitropaki & Martin, 2005) and the romance of leadership (Meindl et al., 1985) may guide us to perceive leaders as strong and healthy, reducing academic inquiry into the subject of leaders’ mental health.

Career Advancement and Leadership Barriers

Career advancement barriers are a primary concern in research on disability and leadership. For instance, Braddock and Bachelder (1994) noted negative attitudes, environmental barriers, inaccessible assistive technology, as well as several other factors as key barriers to the career advancement of persons with disabilities. Wilson-Kovacs and colleagues (2008) described how positions of leadership are particularly precarious for persons with disabilities, due to attitudinal and organizational constraints. The leaders from their study highlighted how paternalistic work environments, tokenism, and a lack of constructive feedback harmed their career advancement. Roulstone and Williams (2014) extended our understanding of leadership barriers by exploring the combination of cognitive, attitudinal, and organizational factors that impact the careers of senior staff with disabilities in the United Kingdom. These authors described an “inadvertent tying of staff to current support arrangements” (Roulstone & Williams, 2014, p. 24). The perceived risk of disclosure and the potential for negative experience in a new role caused the managers from their study to remain in their current positions.

Metaphor is central to this literature. The glass ceiling (Braddock & Bachelder, 1994) generates the image of an invisible and impenetrable barrier that prevents employees with disabilities from advancing into senior leadership positions; the glass cliff (Wilson-Kovacs et al., 2008) depicts an undetectable and perilous ledge from which leaders with disabilities may fall; and glass partitions (Roulstone & Williams, 2014) portray a suffocating box that forces leaders with disabilities to stay where they are, with glass closing in from all sides.

We have multiple metaphors on barriers to career advancement and leadership for persons with disabilities, yet none on facilitators.

Career Advancement and Leadership Facilitators

Few studies have examined the facilitators of success among persons with disabilities (Baldrige & Kulkarni, 2017) and fewer still focus on leaders with disabilities. However, drawing from the broader literature on disability and work, factors that facilitate the success of persons with disabilities can be grouped into three categories: career self-management strategies (Kulkarni & Gopakumar, 2014), social networks (Kulkarni, 2012), and organizational and societal factors (Stone & Colella, 1996).

Career self-management strategies. Given the numerous workplace barriers that persons with disabilities may encounter, we find research illustrating the importance of career self-management strategies for persons with disabilities (Kulkarni & Gopakumar, 2014). Career self-management strategies are proactive behaviors used by individuals to navigate challenges and, ultimately, benefit their career (King, 2004). In Kulkarni and Gopakumar's (2014) research, employees with disabilities engaged in a range of these strategies with both cognitive and behavioral elements, such as "sensitizing people to ability over disability," "engaging in disability advocacy," and "building, leveraging, and contributing to homophilous networks" (p. 455). Furthermore, their participants demonstrated a positive mind-set and persistence as they contested low expectation stereotypes. Similarly, in their case study on a principal with a visual impairment, Zollers and Yu (1998) highlighted factors such as the principal's professional, interpersonal, and social skills, as well as management style and work ethic, as antecedents of the principal's success in his leadership role.

Studying the experiences of women leaders with physical impairments, Boucher (2017) described how her research participants navigated workplace barriers by surface acting and passing. These behaviors were used to decrease the visibility of the leaders' impairment and disability status. Boucher argued that the need to employ such strategies contributes to the invisibility of disability in both organizations and academic research on leadership, highlighting how career self-management strategies used to navigate barriers can result in detrimental consequences.

Considering the role of a positive disability identity in the careers of persons with disabilities, Baldrige and Kulkarni (2017) found that professionals with adult onset hearing loss redefined their work, who they are, and what success meant to them, to transition into new careers that often leveraged their lived experience with hearing loss. Their research builds from Jammaers and colleagues' (2016) article on positive disability identities in ableist workplaces. Findings from the present article further contribute to this stream of

research by examining how external networks fostered positive disability identities among leaders.

Social networks. An individual's social network influences career outcomes through access to instrumental, informational, and emotional support (Chandler et al., 2011; Granovetter, 1973; Kulkarni, 2012; Lin, 1990). From entry-level to executive positions, network ties play a central role in career advancement (Burt, 1992). Factors such as homophily (Ibarra, 1995) and social influence drive many promotion decisions (Ferris et al., 1992). As a minority group, persons with disabilities are expected to have less access to these desired social resources—largely due to the prevalence of disability stereotypes (Kulkarni, 2012).

Research on disability, career outcomes, and social networks emphasizes the importance of internal networks to success. For example, Stone and Colella (1996) considered how actors at work influence access to challenging job assignments, inclusion in workgroup activities, mentorship, and career advancement opportunities for persons with disabilities. More recently, Baldrige and Kulkarni (2017) described how individuals with adult-onset hearing loss utilized their internal networks to succeed. An example of this is how one of their participants navigated a management decision to restrict the use of captioning telephones by recruiting colleagues to listen to telephone messages for them. Furthermore, a strong internal network of support can result in more positive perceptions of the individual after disclosing their disability for persons with invisible disabilities (Clair et al., 2005).

Although we have begun to understand the influence of internal networks in the career success of persons with disabilities, we know less about external networks. On this topic, Shah and colleagues (2004) reported that having high status and achievement-oriented parents influenced the later career choices of professionals with disabilities in the United Kingdom. Baldrige and Kulkarni (2017) noted that their participants proactively sought out support from external networks, such as hearing loss associations, after experiencing adult-onset hearing loss.

External networks have been found to influence access to employment and career advancement in the broader social networks literature. For instance, acquaintances provided information to individuals about job opportunities that resulted in their subsequent employment in Granovetter's (1973) classic article on "the strength of weak ties." Other studies have confirmed the beneficial influence of external network ties, such as family and friends, on access to high status jobs, such as leadership positions (Lin, 1990, 1999). Given the importance of external networks to career trajectories in this literature, a meaningful next step for research on disability and social networks is

to examine how external networks influence the careers of leaders with disabilities.

Organizational and societal factors. At the organizational level, policy, practices, and culture can support positive work outcomes for persons with disabilities (Stone & Colella, 1996). For instance, Araten-Bergman (2016) found that human resource professionals from organizations with a formal disability hiring policy as well as disability training hired more persons with disabilities than human resources professionals without those policies or training. Schur and colleagues (2009) also found that organizations with more positively rated justice climates had less turnover intention and more job satisfaction, company loyalty, and willingness to work hard among employees with disabilities. Von Schrader et al. (2014) reported that workplace climate relates to an employees' willingness to disclose a disability. This relationship is critical because disclosure can result in access to beneficial social supports, especially for employees with invisible disabilities (Clair et al., 2005).

At the societal level, disability legislation and social movements may benefit the careers of persons with disabilities. Legislation can facilitate success by increasing accessibility and decreasing discrimination on the job (Stone & Colella, 1996), though such positive consequences of legislation are not a guarantee (Acemoglu & Angrist, 2001; DeLeire, 2000; Kruse & Schur, 2003). Further, Noonan and colleagues (2004) found that engagement with social movements such as the civil rights movement, the disability rights movement, and the women's movement were a source of motivation for high achieving women with physical and sensory disabilities. In their research, participants drew inspiration from these social movements as they developed their self-identities and careers.

Method: Participants, Data Collection, and Data Analysis

I used interpretive qualitative methods to study the facilitators of career advancement among leaders with disabilities. This included semi-structured interviews (McCracken, 1988; Spradley, 1979) with leaders with disabilities and an iterative approach to data collection and analysis (Charmaz, 2006). In total, 21 individuals participated in this research. Eight identified as women and 13 as men. Two inclusion criteria were used to determine whether a potential participant was eligible. First, the participant must have self-identified as having a disability. And second, the participant must have occupied a formal and paid leadership position in a workplace at the time of or prior to the interview.

Turning to definitions, career advancement and leadership were characterized as related terms. In the workplace, career advancement is synonymous with promotion (Braddock & Bachelder, 1994; Greenhaus & Parasuraman, 1993) and promotions usually offer employees increased decision-making power and authority. Such changes in responsibility are associated with leadership, because a leader is “a person who exercises authority over other people” at work (Eagly & Carli, 2007, p. 8). This definition of leadership emphasizes role occupancy and it is important to recognize that different characterizations of leadership can also be found in the literature, such as those that focus on leader effectiveness, traits, behaviors, and relationships (Barling et al., 2010).

Participants' leadership positions ranged from junior (e.g., supervisor and advisor) to senior roles (e.g., executive, board member, lieutenant governor, and mayor). Participants worked in a diverse array of organizations, from for-profit, non-profit, and government sectors. All participants were Canadian and some had international work experience.

Importantly, not all participants conceptualized disability in the same manner. Some clearly viewed disability as a health condition or impairment, taking a medical view, whereas others were more closely aligned with the social model of disability, which separates impairment from disability to describe disability as a social phenomenon. For instance, P1 (business owner and manager) described his stammer as “my handicap,” whereas P5 (senior executive) reframed the famous final line from Jean-Paul Sartre's play “No Exit” to state that “disability—is other people.” These varying definitions may be due to participants' age differences and that the social model of disability is a more recent development in Canadian society. However, the WHO's (2011) definition of disability is inclusive of this diversity of perspectives, encompassing both personal and social facets of disability, and it is the definition that I use in the present article. According to the WHO (2011), disability is “an umbrella term for impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions, denoting the negative aspects of the interaction between an individual (with a health condition) and that individual's contextual factors (environmental and personal factors)” (p. 327). Participants self-identified as having physical ($n = 12$; e.g., cerebral palsy and spinal cord injury), sensory ($n = 7$; e.g., hearing and vision impairment), speech ($n = 1$; e.g., stammer), learning ($n = 1$; e.g., dyslexia), and mental impairments ($n = 2$; e.g., depression and obsessive-compulsive disorder [OCD]). Two participants self-identified as having more than one impairment.

Participants were recruited through a variety of channels. I advertised the study through disability-related organizations, listservs, and discussion groups as well as personal and academic connections. Furthermore, I

cold-called publicly known leaders and individuals found through online searches. I had serendipitous encounters with prospective participants at conferences as well. Like Baldridge and Kulkarni's (2017) participants, participants from this article represent a targeted sample of individuals who have achieved leadership positions—they are not a random sample of persons with disabilities.

All participants were provided the option to be named in this article. This was done in agreement with the concept of “nothing about us without us” when conducting disability research (Charlton, 1998). Specifically, I view participants as the primary owners of their own data, and thus, they should have the opportunity self-identify if they so choose. See Table 1 for further information on participants.

Interviews were conducted in-person, via telephone, and online, with the average interview running approximately 60 minutes. All interviews were conducted with the author of this article and transcribed via an online service. During one interview, questions were typed and during another a translator was present. Interviews were semi-structured, beginning with grand tour questions and filtering down to more specific questions (Spradley, 1979). Though I entered each interview with a guide, I did not always rely heavily upon it (Charmaz, 2006).

Example interview questions include, “Can you tell me about your career advancement?” “What role, if any, has disability played in your path to becoming a leader at work?” “Do you feel that leadership work is different for someone experiencing your disability than for someone who is not?” “If at all, how have you managed barriers/challenges?” As data were analyzed more specific interview questions that related to prior participant responses were developed. Generally, these questions followed the format suggested by Charmaz (2006): “Others have mentioned . . . have you had similar experiences?”

I did not begin this research with the intention of examining the three-legged stool metaphor or external social networks as a facilitator of success. Rather, I started with an interest in metaphor and how persons with disabilities advance into leadership positions. I was motivated in part by Eagly and Carli's (2007) work on gender and the labyrinth metaphor at that time. The current focus on the three-legged stool and leaders' external social networks developed part way through data analysis.

Interview data were initially analyzed with line-by-line, followed by incident-by-incident, coding (Charmaz, 2006) on NVivo 10. Higher order categories and themes were developed from initial codes using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Codes, categories, and themes were refined iteratively as interview data were collected. I wrote memos

Table 1. Participant Information.

Participant	Workplaces	Leadership positions	Location	Gender	Impairment
P1 Alvin Marks	Small business	Owner and manager	Canada	Man	Speech
P2 Anonymous	University	Professor	Anonymous	Man	Physical and learning
P3 Wolfgang Zimmermann	University and research institute	President and executive director	Canada	Man	Physical
P4 Steve Mantis	Small business, non-profit, and political party	Owner, manager, executive, board member, electoral candidate	Canada	Man	Physical
P5 Anonymous	Government	Senior executive positions	Canada	Woman	Physical
P6 Max Braut	Government	Manager and executive positions	Canada	Man	Physical
P7 Jeff Willbond	Government and non-profit	Executive and consultant positions	Canada	Man	Physical
P8 Michael MacDonald	Aviation and insurance corporations	Manager	Canada	Man	Sensory
P9 Anonymous	Multinational corporation	Executive	Canada	Woman	Physical and sensory
P10 Anonymous	Disability management and healthcare	Manager and director	Canada	Woman	Mental
P11 Anonymous	Non-profit	Manager	Canada	Woman	Sensory
P12 Linda Niksic	Government	Senior advisor	Canada	Woman	Physical
P13 Anthony Frisina	College	Advisor	Canada	Man	Physical
P14 Marco Pasqua	Small business, non-profit, gaming industry	Owner, manager, executive, board member	Canada	Man	Physical
P15 Luna Bengio	Government	Manager and executive positions	Canada	Woman	Sensory
P16 Mike Cyr	Non-profit	Manager	Canada	Man	Sensory
P17 Diane Bergeron	Government and non-profit	Manager and executive positions	Canada	Woman	Sensory
P18 Steven Estey	International disability rights organizations	Independent consultant	Canada, international	Man	Sensory
P19 Joan Westland Eby	Government, non-profit, international organizations	Mayor, executive, consultant	Canada, international	Woman	Physical
P20 Ian Manion	Healthcare, international network	Executive positions	Canada, international	Man	Mental
P21 David Onley	Government and university	Lieutenant governor, head of independent review, and senior lecturer	Canada	Man	Physical

during and immediately after interviews as well as at other points through the duration of this study that aided analysis.

Participants were given the opportunity to comment on and correct my interpretation of findings. As a form of participant validation (Miles & Huberman, 1994) these exchanges were used to confirm the accuracy of findings as well as develop the article conceptually. For instance, the metaphor of the three-legged stool was not initially discussed during an interview. Rather, P8 (manager) suggested this metaphor—with the legs of the stool labeled as “the self,” “social connections,” and “systems”—in response to an early report of findings. At that time, I had separated facilitators into individual and social/environmental themes. P8 introduced the three-legged stool metaphor to me after being asked if there was a concept that synthesized those results. The three-legged stool metaphor was subsequently endorsed by other participants. In addition, returning to participants gave them further opportunities to withdraw consent or remove identifying information from this article as it developed. This was critical to maintaining confidentiality and respect for participants and the experiences that they shared.

Although this article focuses on facilitators, disability-related challenges (or barriers) were central to many participants’ career advancement narratives. Some of those challenges are considered in relation to facilitators in the findings section of this article. However, a more complete description of the challenges that participants encountered can be found in Table 2. Of note is the diversity of experience that participants shared. No two individuals conveyed the same arrangement or magnitude of challenges, highlighting the heterogeneity of participants’ lived experience. Challenges were confronted daily by some, yet they were virtually nonexistent for others. Many participants’ experiences were found somewhere between those two poles.

Note that I use the term “challenge” rather than the more commonly used term “barrier” because of participants’ own descriptions. Specifically, several participants discussed disability-related career advancement issues as “challenges,” “hurdles,” or “obstacles”—using terms that connote contestability. As P4 (executive and other roles) stated, “It’s about seeing the barrier or the shortcoming and saying, ‘Okay, that’s a challenge.’ To not accept others’ views of me. I’d much rather put out who I think I am.”

Findings: The Three-Legged Stool and External Social Networks

The metaphor of the three-legged stool, first described by P8 (manager), provides a means to synthesize our current knowledge of career advancement and leadership facilitators. The three-legged stool depicts three foundations

Table 2. Disability-Related Challenges.

Theme	Category	Quote
Attitudinal challenges	Assumptions about competence and ability	<p>P2: people use a heuristic that if I'm disabled I'm also not intelligent.</p> <p>P19: you have some people who don't look at skillset, instead assuming that because disability is involved, we'll be limited.</p> <p>P5: He thought that maybe I had only been promoted because of my disability and he wasn't really sure if I was going to be up to the job.</p> <p>P15: Going to see different hiring managers, people look at you and they say "Oh . . ." Sure they're very, very nice, but you don't get any calls.</p> <p>P14: . . . there were times where perhaps I wasn't invited to certain workplace functions or events. Instead of just asking me what accommodations could be made at that time, they would just assume, say that this was not something that was available for me and that I wasn't necessarily going to be included. So, that kind of segregation.</p>
	Obstacles during hiring and application processes	<p>P16: If you look at the Canadian Hearing Society, they did have a Deaf CEO. That person worked for about five years as a CEO, finished their term, and they were let go. That's what happens with CEOs. They were let go and he could not find another equivalent position. Last I heard he'd gone back to front line work.</p> <p>So there is someone who made it up to the level of CEO, lost that position, and was never able to return to it in a different environment. That's something that I think about a lot, as a person who is Deaf. At management levels, you have a lot of turnover and a lot of transition, and I think that's actually healthy. But then, I think that it causes a lot of pressure, especially if you need an accommodation to fill that role. I feel badly, because someone who I looked up to and respected, who did apply to other positions, was never given that opportunity again. That has had a huge impact on my outlook.</p>
	Social segregation	<p>P3: The argument that was used to terminate us was that we were so much better off collecting a disability pension than a person that happens to be able-bodied and temporarily unemployed.</p> <p>P7: Although I was very qualified to do certain jobs over the years, I couldn't take on some of what I wanted to do because I couldn't speak French. So, then I got the opportunity to go back to school and take French as a second language through the government. Here's where systemic policy issue came into play. I needed some accommodation for language training . . . I asked for some flexibility or some different ways of maybe approaching this, and there were no solutions that came to the table.</p>
	Precarity and low representation of persons with disabilities in leadership positions	<p>P15: Fifteen years ago, it was easier for me to do my work than it is today. As a manager and a leader, you're expected to sustain a really fast pace. But technological barriers have increased with standardization and enterprise-wide solutions, making it difficult for me to do my job.</p>
	Inflexible and discriminatory organizational policy	
Systemic challenges	Inaccessible technology	

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

Theme	Category	Quote
Individual-level challenges	Difficulty accessing employment unrelated to disability	P14: If I were talking about something that was a little bit less specific to accessibility or inclusion, the disadvantages would start to pile up.
	Self-limiting perceptions	P2: It's really my perceptions that are more disabling than theirs. I think about the way I have accomplish things in life. . . . people see I've accomplished a lot. And I might have, but I also carry with me the idea that I'll never know if I could have done it the legitimate way. I hate myself for it because it's like I'm delegitimizing my own success. I have my degrees on the wall, but my conundrum is my path. The government would say I got proper adaptation, or at least that's what my supervisor would tell me. But I still had adaptation. And so, did I really earn the degree? Did I really get the leadership position the way someone else would get the leadership position? P4: I just assumed. I didn't go looking for jobs. In fact I'd be scared of that because, "who's going to hire a one-armed carpenter?" I had my own prejudices! P10: Imagine you're sitting in front of a TV and you flick from channel to channel as quickly as you can. That's what it is like in my brain all the time. It can be very, very distracting and frustrating. Whenever I am really tired, overworked, and stressed, I can't control the flashing anymore. P11: Most of the time, I live my life forgetting that I have a disability . . . I don't feel any disadvantage doing what I do, and we're speaking specifically about working and being a team leader. P1: I really cannot think of much of an impact that my stammer had within the workplace. P15: Because I am so often confronted with accessibility barriers, they tend to take a bigger place than I would want them to take. I see myself as a person. The disability is not the most central thing in my life, but in a practical sense, there isn't a day that goes by that I won't face some kind of technology challenge. P5: I do believe that it was easier for me when I was younger and I was less disabled than I am now, physically. I think that people make the correlation that if your body is weak then somehow you don't have what it takes to succeed at the most senior-level. P15: In general, looking for a position when you have a disability, in particular, what is seen as a seriously limiting disability, it's a challenge.
The experience of challenges varied	Impairment-specific obstacles	
	Experienced few disability-related challenges	
	Experienced many disability-related challenges	
	Attributions of disability (course)	
	Attributions of disability (perceived severity)	

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

Theme	Category	Quote
Attributions of disability (visibility)		<p>P12: And it really struck me hard how people are viewed in a wheelchair versus if they're walking. And I remember thinking, "Wow! Why is it so harsh? Why is there this judgement?" And, I think because I have muscular dystrophy, which means for me, I suffer pain and weakness every day, and unless I tell someone, they won't know I have muscular dystrophy so I'm treated differently than when I was in a wheelchair. Having these experiences I know firsthand how some people treat you when you are in a wheelchair versus walking.</p>
		<p>P2: The stuff that's hidden is actually much harder for me to cope with . . . It's a heuristic, but initially when people see me, they think, "Oh, [they have] got physical disability, so [they] must not be all there." But then when they get to know me, they know that I am "all there." Then that doesn't become a problem. But when the hidden stuff comes out, that trips up how I've proven that I'm "all there."</p>
Attributions of disability (acquired and congenital disability)		<p>P14: [The head of human resources] said to me, "Oh, hey, I notice that you use a wheelchair, so when was your accident?" When I explained to her that I wasn't paraplegic or quadriplegic and that I was born with cerebral palsy, I was surprised at what she said next, which was, "Oh, okay. That's different then." And I said, "I'm sorry?" And she responded, "If you were able-bodied before, and then had a physical accident, you would perhaps see the world differently—knowing what it was like to have those abilities and losing them, as opposed to always having a disability. That type of perspective could impact your role as a manager here." And I was really, really shocked that out of nowhere this sort of statement was being made, that I understood challenge or adversity differently simply because of having cerebral palsy versus being paraplegic, which was coming from somebody who was completely able-bodied.</p>
		<p>P7: Acquiring a disability after already being a leader is very different from becoming a leader with a congenital disability. There are more barriers from an early age for someone with a congenital disability.</p>
Intersectionality		<p>P9: I'm a woman from a visibly minority background. I'm an immigrant and I manage episodes of disability. I entered the workforce in a predominately male field. I was the only female. And I'm also small in stature, so I was always the smallest presence. I always had to work super hard. I always made sure that I was one step ahead in preparation. Having a disability has amplified that for me.</p>
		<p>P17: If you're raised in a very wealthy family, you've got top notch technology and access to education, whereas if you're living in or around poverty, you've got to deal with how to get funding and how to get access. You might be able to get funding for your equipment, but how do you get money to pay for your education then? You're less likely to be able to get a scholarship based on your marks because you didn't get all of the accommodations you needed in school.</p>

that facilitate success, including career self-management strategies, organizational and societal factors, and social networks. With all three of these foundations present the individual's career finds steadiness; they have the greatest chance of advancing into leadership positions and succeeding as a leader.

The first foundation, career self-management strategies, underscores the role of agency in participants' career development. Similar to findings from Kulkarni and Gopakumar (2014), participants from this article actively developed skills and attitudes that benefited their careers. Participants did not passively accept barriers as absolute. Instead, they challenged obstacles or sought out alternate paths to achieve their goals. Importantly, the categories within this first foundation of the stool were described by participants as functional behaviors and attitudes for any person aspiring to have a fulfilling career, irrespective of disability status. The second foundation of the stool, social networks, were critical to participants success—both inside and outside of the workplace. Many of these network ties influenced the career self-management strategies of participants, illustrating how the foundations of the stool are distinct yet interconnected. For instance, it was mentors who taught some leaders the communication skills that they later used to build their own teams. The third foundation of the stool, organizational and societal factors, benefited participants' careers during their education and employment. Some of these factors, such as government disability supports, were made available proactively to participants. However, others, such as employer flexibility, were often initiated by the participant and were not easily come by. Thus, these higher level facilitators were frequently accessed because of leaders' self-advocacy.

Of 21 participants, 17 commented on all three legs of the stool during our interview, with the remaining four participants only describing career self-management strategies and social networks. Thus, the three-legged stool may not be universally applicable across participants' careers—yet, it maps nicely onto most of them.

A description of the three-legged stool metaphor in relation to the glass metaphors (the glass ceiling, cliff, and partitions), as well as the butterfly metaphor, which I will describe in the "Discussion" section, can be found in Table 3. The categories of each foundation of the three-legged stool can be found in Table 4. Furthermore, quotes from the three foundations and their categories are detailed in Table 5.

Two themes were constructed on external networks as facilitators of participants' success. The first theme includes the influence of family, friends, and role models upon participants' career self-management strategies ($n = 13$). This theme was abstracted from lower level categories and codes on how these ties outside of the workplace (a) fostered a positive disability identity

Table 3. Metaphors on Disability, Career Advancement, and Leadership.

Metaphors	Glass ceiling	Glass cliff	Glass partitions	Three-legged stool	Leader as butterfly
Description	An unseen glass barrier that bars entry into the most senior level positions. Barriers.	An undetectable cliff that leaders will fall from, having been set up to fail. Barriers.	Invisible walls that close in from everywhere but below, precluding lateral and upward movement. Barriers.	A stool requires three legs to be stable; with only one or two legs the individual leader is unlikely to succeed. Facilitators, agency, and barriers.	The butterfly builds strength in their cocoon and with the support of facilitators will find success. Facilitators, agency, and barriers.
Emphasis	Barriers.	Barriers.	Barriers.	Facilitators, agency, and barriers.	Facilitators, agency, and barriers.
Image of barriers	Glass is impermeable and static. It is impossible to overcome barriers to career advancement because one cannot move through glass. With absolute barriers, there is no way to facilitate success.	The point where glass turns into open air is fixed. With an unseen ledge, the leaders' fall from their position is only a matter of time. With absolute barriers, there is no way to facilitate success.	Glass is impermeable and static. Glass walls prevent lateral movement making upward movement impossible.	Barriers are expected to have greater influence the less stable the stool is.	Barriers are adverse conditions that may feel similar to being constrained inside a cocoon, they are challengeable with strength and support.
Image of facilitators external to the individual	With absolute barriers, there is no way to facilitate success.	With absolute barriers, there is no way to facilitate success.	Potential facilitators, such as accommodation, become a barrier. This is because leaders fear losing these adjustments in new settings.	These factors are represented in two legs of the stool: social networks and organizational and societal factors.	Facilitators support the butterfly through its journey to build strength and self-determination.
Image of individual agency	With absolute barriers, the individual cannot influence their outcome.	With absolute barriers, the individual cannot influence their outcome.	The individual is a part of this metaphor, such that their fears and perceptions help to build the walls that constrain them.	The individual is an agent capable of enabling their own success. However, external factors are also necessary.	The individual is adaptive and inventive, with the capacity to build strength for their self and others.

Table 4. Foundations and Categories of Three-Legged Stool.

Foundation one: career self-management strategies	Foundation two: social networks	Foundation three: organizational and societal factors
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> I. Behaviors <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Learning communication skills; being a self-advocate b. Proving yourself; giving it 150% c. Using education for credibility d. Resume-abling e. Self-employment 2. Attitudes <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Taking a positive attitude b. Perceiving barriers as contestable challenges c. Building confidence and self-determination 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> I. Internal networks <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Inclusive managers, colleagues, and employees b. Mentorship 2. External networks <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Fostering a positive disability identity and motivating success b. Modeling skills c. Recruiting participants into core stakeholder roles for their skillset d. Supporting access to core stakeholder roles in relation to barriers 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Organizational policy and procedure <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Flexible and proactive employers 2. Programs and funding <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. University scholarships b. Career entry and advancement programs 3. Social systems <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Disability-related work b. Leadership status c. Critical mass of leaders with disabilities

and motivated participants’ success ($n = 11$) and (b) modeled skills that participants would later use in their work ($n = 4$). The second theme is on the generation of employment opportunities, or access to core stakeholder positions ($n = 6$). This theme includes how (a) acquaintances sought out participants for jobs that were aligned with participants’ skills ($n = 3$) and (b) family and friends helped participants access employment early in their careers ($n = 3$). Overall, 17 of 21 participants commented on external social networks as an important part of their career development, with two participants having discussed experiences categorized under both external network themes.

External Social Networks Influence Career Self-Management Strategies

Fostering a positive disability identity and motivating success. When discussing their childhood and adolescence, many participants with congenital impairments described the benefits of supportive family members and friends “who didn’t treat me differently” and “didn’t let me make excuses for myself.” These social relations normalized disability for participants, supporting the

Table 5. Participant Quotes on the Three-Legged Stool.

Theme	Higher-level category	Lower-level category	Quotes	
Foundation One: Career self-management strategies	Career self-management behaviors	Learning communication skills; being a self-advocate	P15: You have to explain, you have to speak up . . . you're constantly advocating for yourself. It's fine, I don't mind it, I'm not shy, so I say what I think needs to be said in a constructive manner because the approach I take is, look, I'll explain it to you, I'll work with you so that you can understand and it's easier next time. In many cases, I've gone to people in IT, to people designing applications, and I've said, "You need somebody to test this before you actually make it available to everybody, I'm happy to do that, I'm happy to tell you whether it works or not. I will give you feedback so that maybe you can do something before you actually go live with it."	
		Proving yourself; giving it 150%	P19: There's no question that over the years of my involvement in promoting rights for people with disabilities, that the argument is moving away from a disability focus and to pointing out how, whether it's putting a ramp to a building, or wider doorways in your home, all of this makes sense for everybody. P17: We need to be careful to not let people think that it's due to our disability, if there's something that we can't do. So, we always put in way more effort to show that we're better than. Not equal, but better than, so that they don't blame it all on the disability.	
	Career self-management attitudes	Using education for credibility	P7: I had to give it 150% to demonstrate that I was very capable. P8: I overcompensate with educational credibility. I recognized that when I was a teenager and I recognized that when I was a young adult, in my early 20s, that it was the only way I can get anybody to take me seriously.	
		"Resume-ableing" (less frequently discussed)	P17: As my career went along, I realized that education was key, right? Because even if you think you know everything—which when we're 20, we do think we know everything—your education becomes more and more important. P14: There have been times when I applied for traditional jobs, and if I applied for fifty roles, I maybe got one callback. But the second that I removed the fact that I had cerebral palsy, or any reference to my disability in my resume, I was getting more call backs.	
		Self-employment (less frequently discussed)	P4: I looked around . . . and no one came forward so I started my own little construction company.	
	Career self-management attitudes	Taking a positive attitude	P2: You embrace the negative and the positive, and you see the positive. P3: Everything has its good and bad side, so we make the most of it.	
		Perceiving barriers as contestable challenges	P4: It's about seeing the barrier or the shortcoming and saying, "Okay, that's a challenge." To not accept others' views of me. I'd much rather put out who I think I am. P10: Nothing that you are experiencing should ever be a barrier.	
		Building confidence and self-determination	P12: I really believe in being able to look ahead and I think this attitude is due to my experience battling muscular dystrophy—because I suffer pain and weakness all the time, I have to struggle each day to find a way to build strength. And because of that, I think I just have this self-determination that I have to move forward. So I think that it's just ingrained in me. Multiple participants described themselves with terms such as "confident," "determined," "ambitious," "bold," and "tenacious".	

(continued)

Table 5. (continued)

Theme	Higher-level category	Lower-level category	Quotes	
Foundation Two: Social Networks	Internal networks	Inclusive managers, colleagues, and employees	P1: Other people in my work environment have just understood that the phone is very hard for me, and they don't hesitate in helping out.	
			P7: I was lucky enough that I had some really good supervisors and colleagues early in my career that were just logical and very practical in their thinking. And we would just naturally address barriers as they came up.	
			P11: I don't think in all honesty that disability played a role in my advancement. It was showing that I had the skills, the right competencies, communication style and abilities. But of course, you do need a manager that doesn't look at you from the lens of impairment.	
			Mentorship	P10: The current boss that I have, he's been extremely supportive. He's a mentor for me, the biggest one.
				P6: When I was in my 20's and 30's, I wasn't entitled enough to think that I deserved to be there. I watched what those individuals did. I modeled what I was doing after those individuals. I talked to them about how they got there. I listened to what they were saying, so that I could go and try to repeat what some of those people did myself.
		External networks	The influence of external networks is detailed in the Findings section of this article.	
	Foundation Three: Organizational and Societal Factors	Organizational policy and procedure	Flexible and proactive employers	P9: In most large organizations, in order for you to have a nonstandard issue computer, you've got to go through a ream of bureaucracy and approvals. There's bureaucracy, there's process and procedure, and a long lag time of a lack of productivity. I didn't have to face that with [name of employer]. I immediately told my boss. "I can't see the screen, and I need dictation and read-back functionality." She asked me, "Well, what do you need?" "Well, this is what I need." And within probably two business days, my new laptop, with all the functionality that I need, was available to me.
				P18: A lot of the accommodations that I require would be considered burdensome by a lot of organizations. So, that made me pursue working with organizations that are prepared to foot the cost.
				P8: [A social worker] said, "There's some funding available through the province to pay for students with disabilities who want to go to university." And I said, "Okay, I want to do that. I don't want to go on monthly social assistance," because I saw that as a dead end.
		Programs and funding	University scholarships	P5: This program, it was actually run out of the Public Service Commission at the time, they would pay the salary for six months. They would cover the cost for the first six months of an employee who has self-identified as having a disability, in the hope that the department at the end of that time would keep the person on. And it worked.

(continued)

Table 5. (continued)

Theme	Higher level category	Lower level category	Quotes
Social systems		Disability-related work	<p>P8: Having a disability became an advantage, because I understood the lived experience. The hiccups in life and the turbulence that you experience as a result of your disability, as society's inability to be responsive to your needs or be receptive to your capabilities in the face of those needs.</p>
		Leadership status	<p>P4: You're also seen as more worthy by the organization, so they give you more leeway. They're not looking over your shoulder all the time. For example, flexibility in your workplace if you are a manager is way easier.</p> <p>P6: There's a hierarchy. You realize right off the bat, if this guy's at this table, there's a reason why he's at that table. When you get to a point of my career, people know I sit at a particular table.</p> <p>P20: I think in the later stages of my career, when perhaps I had less to prove to myself or to others, it was easier for me to disclose and not really care whether people reacted poorly or not.</p> <p>P5: You need a critical mass. Otherwise people think, "Oh well, [they are] the exception." As opposed to thinking, "This is just the way it is. We are an inclusive and diverse workplace, and of course, people with all kinds of disabilities are going to move into leadership positions."</p>
Critical mass of leaders with disabilities			

development of self-perceptions that deemphasized medicalized perspectives of disability, instead promoting an understanding of disability as a “neutral” characteristic of the individual.

Emphasizing the “person first,” these external ties helped participants build the confidence required to succeed in their future endeavors. For instance, P13 (advisor) explained that his experiences with family and friends who embraced him “as Anthony the person” gave him “the confidence to be the man that I am.” For P13, his success and the social acceptance of his family and friends “go hand in hand.” After being prompted to further discuss the notion of “embracing Anthony the person,” P13 explained:

It was there from day one. My youth was a little bit challenging before the condition stabilized. But in saying that, I was still Anthony the person. Having the experiences that I had playing sports growing up, learning team skills, leadership skills, it was very important, critical, and vital to the man that I am today. And again, being treated no differently than my siblings or friends in the community. I have my best friend, somebody that I’ve known for over 30 years. So, to me, that’s really vital and critical in saying, “Yeah, they’ll stick with you because you’re a good person. The disability is not a factor.”

Another participant, P19 (mayor and other roles), conveyed the experience of being fired from two jobs early in her career, because her managers thought that she would “scare away” customers. Through these experiences she began to worry that everyone around her felt similarly to those managers. However, with time and the support of her network she overcame those thoughts:

It took a while for me to have confidence, not just in myself, but also to be confident that the world at large did not, in fact, view me the way that these two people did . . . It was partly listening to the people around me and believing in what they said, that this perception of me being some kind of a freak is not the perception that the majority of the world was going to have. And I think it’s like anything, it’s time, it’s not letting this perception rule my world, but to move forward and focus on the things that are positive and the things that reinforce my belief in myself.

For other participants, being “immersed” in networks of persons with disabilities gave them the opportunity to interact with “role models” and develop a more positive view of the self. These networks made participants aware of the array of opportunities available to them, while also disconfirming their “own prejudice” toward disability. P8 (manager) explained that during his childhood he did not know many other individuals who were Deaf or hard of

hearing. However, in high school, he had the chance to “meaningfully entrench” himself in this community, where he “discovered this whole vast experience of persons with disabilities, and the spectrum, the entire spectrum of possibilities.” It was through those experiences that he recognized that he was “just like anybody else” which was “pivotal” to the development of his positive self-perception.

In some cases, these role models were geographically distant from participants, yet they remained influential. Specifically, two participants commented on prominent Canadians with disabilities, including Terry Fox and Rick Hansen, who “made a huge impact” regarding “perceptions of persons with disabilities across the country.” These successful individuals “inspired” P14 (executive and other roles), when he “was looking at newspaper clippings and seeing the changes that they have paved the way for, in terms of changing people’s minds and attitudes.”

In contrast to participants with congenital disabilities, participants with acquired disabilities tended to focus on friends in their external networks, rather than friends and family, when discussing the development of their disability identity and motivation. For instance, P9 (executive) who acquired physical and sensory disabilities part way through her career told the story of how she came to identify with disability. For years, she “would cringe at the notion” of herself “and disability in the same sentence.” Yet, her friends with disabilities became her role models and they facilitated a reframing of her circumstances:

I went through a period where I really did not value myself or what I could contribute, because I was not able to work the way I once worked, which was fast. Very responsive, very reactive. I was very, very high energy. Because I couldn’t do that, I thought, “Oh my God! What am I going to do? What is my contribution going be?” So I went from that to, “Wait. Hold on a second. There’s a lot that I can do.” I’ve come out on the other side of this illness, which could have made me into a very different person, because I was surrounded with people who were doing so many things in spite of mobility challenges, vision impairment, and hearing impairment. I looked at them as my example and my role models.

For another participant, the most influential effect of his friends was not due to their support, but rather, their suffering. P3 (president and executive director) was injured during his first week on the job, after a 50-foot tree split down the middle and broke his back. As an injured worker, he began to witness the destructive power of unaccommodating organizations in the lives of his friends. Through these experiences, he became driven to instigate “structural change” in Canadian society, with the aim of building safer and more accommodating workplaces. As he stated:

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.

Modeling skills. Related to fostering a positive disability identity, family members modeled specific skills that four participants would later benefit from over their careers. In one case, these skills were directly associated with managing the participant's experience of impairment, whereas the remaining three participants learned skills that supported their navigation of social barriers at work.

Focusing on impairment-specific skills, P10 (manager and director) benefited from the experiences of older family members who also had Tourette syndrome and OCD. She explained:

For me, it was family members who were able to relate to what I was saying. Using them as a sounding board, talking about things that worked for them and how I might be able to do the same things.

P10 further explained that her family members had taught her "coping skills for stress and techniques to manage time or thought processes." In addition, those family members provided her with "general support, acknowledgement, and comfort as well, which helped to normalize what I was experiencing."

Turning to skills that facilitated the navigation of social barriers, P8 (manager) described how he learned to use his education to signal credibility at work. In his youth, P8 recognized that a university education was "the only way I can get anybody to take me seriously." Exposure to family members with graduate degrees was an important part of this realization, as he saw them as "the model of success." Another interviewee, P16 (manager), conveyed how different norms of communication in Deaf and hearing cultures can cause conflict in the workplace that harms the career outcomes of Deaf community members. However, because P16 grew up in a hearing family he understood both cultures well. This upbringing taught him how to navigate hearing environments:

I grew up in a hearing family. So, I do have, I think, a better understanding of what the hearing world looks like. 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. You don't want to start banging on tables . . . that affects their performance as well. It's a cross-cultural awareness. I think because of my hearing family, I'm more aware of hearing culture.

External Social Networks Generate Employment Opportunities

Weak ties recruiting participants into core stakeholder roles for their skills. As in the broader networks literature, numerous participants described gaining awareness of, and access to, jobs through network ties. These connections formed both inside and outside the workplace. Internally, job opportunities arose because participants were sought after for their expertise. For instance, P6 (manager and executive) explained that throughout his career he had gained access to new roles, because "somebody's always called me up and said, 'I have a really bad situation, I need your skillset.'" Similarly, P7 (executive and consultant) commented: "I have reached a point in my career where people say, 'There's a particular project or assignment that needs to be done and the person that's got the right skillset or competencies is Jeff.'"

Three participants commented on job opportunities that were accessed through acquaintances in their external networks. Akin to the internal connections described above, participants explained that it was their skillset that led these weak ties to contact them about an opportunity. Participant described these contacts making statements such as, "You'd be really great on my team, why don't you come over here. I think you'd be great at this position," "We need a manager, I think you'd be good at it," and "Look, I am about to post this position. Do you know anybody?" while hinting that the participant would be an ideal candidate. P14 (executive and other roles) told the story of how someone he had met many years earlier asked him to apply for a consulting position. He was working in that consulting role at the time of our interview:

Actually, the person who approached me, the reason she remembered me is that 10 to 15 years ago, when I was training for the BC Summer or Winter games as a competitive athlete, this individual was starting out her career working as a front service desk representative in the city, working at the local community center. And now 10 to 15 year later she was the head of support services and accessibility for the entire city. And it is because of the meaningful connection that I made with her 10 to 15 years ago that she remembered me. She had been following me through social media, and that's how that position came to be.

Strong ties supporting participants' access to core stakeholder roles in relation to barriers. Family and friends in participants' external networks generated

employment opportunities for three participants. All three of these experiences transpired early in participants' careers. Whereas the previously described opportunities came about due to participants' sought-after skills, access to core stakeholder positions from strong ties were primarily discussed in relation to disability. For instance, commenting on how people perceived his stammer and his difficulty using the telephone early in his career, P1 (business owner and manager) said, "the less I had to speak, the better I would be." He decided to work at his father's carpet store, as his position there involved minimal telephone and in-person communication:

Now, my dad had a carpet store. If I wanted to go into something else, I probably could have. But in carpet installation, I'm not having to be on the phone all the time, not having to speak with people the whole time. It's great. Except for the helper and for the customer, I'm not speaking with people. Although I wasn't really aware of it, I'm positive that played a part in why I chose that [career path]. Because if I was to choose other trades that possibly would have involved talking to people, I would have avoided those.

Another participant, P21 (Lieutenant governor and other roles) explained that, "In terms of a job, I, like so many people with disabilities, found it virtually impossible to get a job that had any career path attached to it." Recognizing this, he decided to attend law school, but soon he realized that he was not interested in law. At this juncture, he had the idea that he could write a novel on the American space shuttle program that was then in its infancy. Through his father's contacts it was arranged that he would visit the Kennedy Space Center in Houston to collect data for his novel which later became a bestseller in Canada.

For P4 (executive and other roles) the opportunity to work came from a friend at a critical moment. In the hospital, shortly after a work injury that resulted in an arm amputation, P4 had the following exchange with a prosthetist:

He [the prosthetist] said, "So what kind of work were you doing?" I said, "Construction." Then he said, "Well, you'll never do that now." I didn't know . . . then he says, "What kind of hobbies do you have?" "Gardening. I love gardening." He says, "Well, you won't do that either." By now, tears were running down my face. He said, "My advice to you is find a good woman to look after you for the rest of your life." Then he left. I went, "Here's the expert telling me my life's over."

Subsequently, P4 decided not to seek employment because he believed that no one would hire a one-armed carpenter. However, soon after these

self-limiting perceptions took form a friend came to visit. This visit changed Steve's belief in his own abilities, and ultimately, resulted in Steve's later decision to start his own construction company:

One of my neighbors 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? What have you been smoking man? Look, you want me to build you a house?" And he said, "Yeah. Come on, let's go. Get going, 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."

Discussion

This article generates contributions to several literatures, including research on stakeholder theory, leadership, careers, and disability and work. To begin, I broaden the lens of stakeholder research to include leaders with disabilities who reside at the fringe of the fringe in this literature.

Findings on the three-legged stool contribute to research on leaders as stakeholders. Mitchell and colleagues (1997) first explored how power, legitimacy, and urgency determine stakeholder identification and salience. Organizational leaders are important stakeholders because they often have power and legitimacy, which makes them dominant in their organizations (e.g., Galbreath, 2011; Hillman et al., 2001; Rao & Tilt, 2016). Furthermore, leaders with power and legitimacy can become "definitive stakeholders" when they have urgent claims (Mitchell et al., 1997). This article illuminates how stakeholders can become dominant and definitive stakeholders, or, how stakeholders can attain power, legitimacy, and urgency as organizational leaders.

Specifically, I contribute a model of how fringe stakeholders advance their careers to achieve dominant, or definitive, stakeholder status. Prior stakeholder research has focused primarily on organizational initiatives as the key drivers of fringe stakeholder access to organizations, such as corporate social responsibility (Greenwood, 2007; Hart & Sharma, 2004; McCarthy & Muthuri, 2018). However, the three-legged stool extends this perspective to recognize that facilitators at multiple levels of analysis are critical to accessing and advancing into leadership positions. In addition, findings on the influence of external network facilitators should provoke stakeholder researchers to extend beyond the boundaries of stakeholder–organization relations and include stakeholders' external networks in their research.

Findings highlight the rigidity of the core–fringe stakeholder dichotomy. This is likely the most important contribution of this article. With a combination of career self-management strategies, social networks, and organizational

and societal factors, individuals can be represented by both core and fringe stakeholder roles at once. Reframed as “and/both” rather than “either/or,” I generate a more flexible perspective on core–fringe stakeholder roles that will be critical in future stakeholder research. That is because research that categorizes stakeholders as necessarily core or fringe—rather than including the potential for stakeholders to be core and fringe—contributes to the invisibility of leaders with disabilities. In other words, leaders are only leaders (core) and persons with disabilities are only persons with disabilities (fringe) from a binary perspective. However, that was not the case in this article. All participants held leadership positions and most participants encountered challenges associated with disability during their careers. Thus, this article echoes the only other business and society article on leaders with disabilities that I am aware of, by Boucher (2017). Following Boucher (2017), I emphasize the invisibility of leaders with disabilities as well as the need to increase our awareness of their experiences and unique social location.

This challenge of the core–fringe stakeholder dichotomy relates to the literature on intersectionality. Intersectionality researchers highlight how lived experience is not shaped by grand narratives of identity. Rather, these researchers explain that multiple elements of identity intersect to influence lived experience (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Crenshaw, 1991; Holvino, 2010). Thus, in different terms, the intersection of core and fringe identities is a main focus of this article.

Findings on barriers illuminate how disability intersects with other identities as well. P9 (executive) explained that perceptions of acquired disability intensified the requirement to work hard, which was already a daily reality for her as a woman, visible minority, and immigrant in a male-dominated field. Furthermore, P17 (manager and executive positions) described the intersection of disability and socioeconomic status. She explained that technological and educational barriers are fewer for persons with disabilities in wealthier families.

It is likely that these findings only scratch the surface of the intersectional experiences of leaders with disabilities. Following the work of Boucher (2017), Noonan et al. (2004), and Majiet and Africa (2015), future research should delve deeper into those intersections. Indeed, an intersectional lens will be an important development for the three-legged stool metaphor in the future. The explanatory value of the three-legged stool should be explored and tested at different intersections, with the potential to add nuance to the metaphor as well as boundary conditions.

Findings contribute to research on leadership as well. Leadership is often associated with strength and health (Barling & Cloutier, 2017; Epitropaki & Martin, 2005), yet these attributes are not associated with disability in the

literature (Charlton, 1998; Cuddy et al., 2008; Dwertmann & Boehm, 2016). Considering the ostensible paradox of leaders with disabilities, we require more inclusive models of leadership that embrace individuals from diverse backgrounds, together with disability (Bebbington & Özbilgin, 2013).

One way to include the participants from this article into leadership research is by examining the relationship between resilience and leadership. Resilience is the process of positive adaptation following adversity (Luthar et al., 2000) and resilience is argued to be a critical ingredient of leadership success (Ledesma, 2014). The psychological factors underlying resilience have been described as a positive personality, motivation, focus, perceived social support, and confidence among Olympic gold medalists (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012).

Interestingly, these five factors map onto participants' experiences in this article. One of the most common career self-management strategies discussed by participants was taking a positive attitude, which relates to the notion of positive personality. As P2 (professor) said, "You embrace the negative and the positive, and you see the positive." Participants commented on their drive to give it "150%," highlighting motivation and focus. They further noted the benefits of internal and external networks, relating to perceived social support. And last, participants discussed the value of building confidence and self-determination. Yet, resilience has been discussed as incompatible with impairment in leadership research (e.g., Ledesma, 2014). The present article challenges that assumption by illustrating how impairment, resilience, and leadership are not mutually exclusive. Future research should explore these relationships in greater detail.

Considering the careers literature, the three-legged stool relates to standard models of career advancement. These models highlight social networks (e.g., mentorship and homophily) and individual-level factors (e.g., human capital and performance) as predictor of progression (Burt, 1992; Granovetter, 1973; King, 2004; Tharenou, 1997). At the thematic level, the addition of organizational and societal factors differentiates the three-legged stool from models of career advancement that do not focus on leaders with disabilities. Although career advancement has certainly been conceptualized as a higher level phenomenon in prior research (e.g., career advancement as sponsorship, contests, and tournaments in Ishida et al. (2002); Turner (1960)), the three-legged stool identifies higher level factors as necessary facilitators. Having a flexible and responsive employer was especially important for many of the leaders from this article. Furthermore, disability-specific career entry and advancement programs benefited several participants. Such programs would not have been available to persons without disabilities.

Findings contribute to research on disability and work more generally. For instance, the synthesis and extension of research on facilitators contributes to a nascent body of literature on how persons with disabilities navigate barriers and advance their careers (Baldrige & Kulkarni, 2017; Kulkarni & Gopakumar, 2014). Findings advance research on the construction of disability identity in ableist contexts as well (Jammaers et al., 2016), by examining the beneficial influence of external networks in the development of leaders' positive identities.

Of note, cultivating advantageous networks may be particularly challenging for some persons with disability who occupy suboptimal locations in social networks (Kulkarni, 2012). In this article, participants used a variety of career self-management strategies, such as learning communication skills, proving themselves, and taking a positive attitude to surmount those challenges. Future business and society research should explore what organizations and governments can do to mitigate networking barriers further. For example, organizations could implement training and network audits as well as promote an inclusive climate (Kulkarni, 2012). Governments could provide funding for programs that build the networks of persons with disabilities before they enter the workforce. Such programs could foster the networks that were important career advancement facilitators in this article.

Research and Practice Implications and Limitations

Our current metaphors on disability, career advancement, and leadership emphasize barriers. These metaphors include the glass ceiling (Braddock & Bachelder, 1994), the glass cliff (Wilson-Kovacs et al., 2008), and glass partitions (Roulstone & Williams, 2014). It is important that we continue to research workplace barriers experienced by persons with disabilities, but our exclusive focus on barriers is problematic. That is because metaphors often guide the research questions that we ask (Cornelissen, 2005). Due to the absolute imagery of impermeable glass barriers, it may be all too easy to become cynical about the career advancement of persons with disabilities. Indeed, the dominance of barrier-focused metaphors may contribute to the invisibility of leaders with disabilities in research and organizations, because they depict how persons with disabilities either cannot access leadership positions or are unsuccessful in them. However, the three-legged stool generates a balanced view of barriers and facilitators. It is a reminder that there are factors worth researcher attention that result in the successful career advancement and leadership of persons with disabilities.

Similarly, metaphors prompt action and have implications for practice (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Applied as a guiding metaphor, the three-legged stool

can be used by organizations to develop initiatives related to disability, career advancement, and leadership. Such initiatives would focus on supporting all three foundations of the stool, rather than attending to only one or two foundations. For instance, a leadership development program for persons with disabilities that focuses on career self-management strategies would not be implemented alone. Instead, such a program would be organized in conjunction with other initiatives that cultivate participants' social networks (e.g., a mentorship program) and increase facilitation at the organization-level (e.g., accommodation policy and management training). Likewise, government policy could be developed with all three pillars of the stool in mind. The three-legged stool may be of benefit to individuals as well, as a resource for persons with disabilities who want to learn about how leaders with disabilities have advanced their careers. Furthermore, disability-focused organizations could use the three-legged stool metaphor in educational materials and employment programs.

However, the present article has limitations that should be reflected on before applying the three-legged stool in practice. To begin, few leaders with mental impairments and no leaders with intellectual impairments participated in this research. Mental and intellectual impairments are often perceived more negatively than other impairments (Braddock & Bachelder, 1994; Charlton, 1998; Colella & Stone, 2005; Ren, Paetzold, & Colella, 2008; Scior, 2011) and future research should focus on leaders with those experiences. Next, this research only includes participants from Canada. Future research should consider the career advancement and leadership experiences of persons with disabilities from other countries, because definitions of disability, culture, and the scope of accessibility legislation vary by national context (Baldrige et al., 2015). Last, the broad inclusion criteria of this research are both a strength and a weakness. Including the voices of participants with a range of impairments, in junior to senior leadership roles, and from a variety of sectors generated results that may be applicable to many individuals and organizations. However, what is lost is a more detailed description of specific experience. Disability is certainly not unidimensional (Beatty et al., 2018). A narrower study would have provided more targeted findings and the opportunity to go deeper into some participants' experiences.

Of course, the diverse career advancement and leadership experiences of all participants could not be explored in one article or summarized by one metaphor. Acknowledging this diversity of experience, consider the "leader as butterfly" metaphor that was described by P12 (senior advisor):

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!

The butterfly metaphor promotes an empowering conceptualization of career progression that focuses our attention on barriers, agency, and facilitators of success as well as the positive change that leaders can introduce through the strength that they build. With most of our research and metaphors emphasizing barriers, we would surely benefit from more metaphors like the leader as butterfly. See Table 3 for a description of the leader as butterfly metaphor.

Conclusion

Leaders with disabilities are overlooked in business and society research (Boucher, 2017). With stakeholder theory as my lens, I synthesized and extended the literature on career advancement and leadership facilitators among persons with disabilities. Findings from 21 interviews with leaders with disabilities generate several contributions. First, findings on the three-legged stool and external networks explain how individuals at the fringe of the fringe in stakeholder research advance their careers. The three-legged stool benefits stakeholder theory by introducing leaders with disabilities as important organizational stakeholders who challenge the core–fringe dichotomy as well. Recognizing that stakeholders can be both core and fringe is argued to be essential to reducing the invisibility of leaders with disabilities. In addition, findings generate contributions to the literatures on leadership, careers, and disability and work. Overall, this article provides a framework for future research that looks beyond barriers to examine facilitators of career advancement and leadership among persons with disabilities.

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