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Working from everywhere:

The future of work and inclusive organizational behavior (IOB)

1. Introduction

The rapid digitalization of work, accelerated by the global COVID-19 pandemic, has fundamentally transformed the landscape of organizational behavior. As millions of employees transitioned to remote and hybrid work arrangements, particularly in industries well-positioned for such work (i.e., white-collar), organizations grappled with reimagining inclusion in virtual spaces (Magrizos et al., 2023) as working from everywhere (WFE) became a possibly and option for employees. This seismic and sudden shift has brought to the fore the critical importance of inclusive organizational behavior (IOB) in fostering employee well-being, engagement, and productivity in increasingly distributed and digitally-mediated work environments (Caligiuri et al., 2020).

While the concept of organizational inclusion is not new (Shore et al., 2011), the rapid transition to "working from everywhere" demands a reconceptualization of IOB that accounts for the unique challenges and opportunities presented by digital work and hybrid contexts in the aftermath of pandemic-related work changes. What appears sorely lacking is a global awareness and consideration of the need for inclusive behaviours in the regulation of digitalization. For example, the UN conventions for eliminating gender, race and disability-based discrimination and violence do not yet engage with digital inequalities and need for inclusion in digitally enabled settings. This special issue brings together six groundbreaking studies that push the boundaries of our understanding of IOB in the digital age. Drawing on these contributions, we propose a novel, multi-level framework for digital IOB that integrates individual, group, and organizational factors shaping inclusive experiences in virtual and hybrid work arrangements (Syed & Özbilgin, 2009).

In this editorial, we first provide a brief overview of the evolution of IOB research, highlighting the need for a digital turn and its setbacks in inclusion scholarship and practice. We then synthesize the key findings and theoretical contributions of the six papers in this special issue, demonstrating how they advance our understanding of IOB in digital workplaces. Building on these insights, we introduce our multi-level framework for digital IOB, which serves as an organizing structure for the special issue and a roadmap for future research. We conclude by discussing this framework's theoretical and practical implications and outlining avenues for future research.

2. Inclusive Organizational Behavior: Toward a digital paradigm

The concept of organizational inclusion has its roots in diversity management literature, evolving from a focus on demographic representation to a more rounded emphasis on creating work environments where all individuals feel respected, valued, and able to fully participate (Roberson, 2006; Georgiadou & Antonacopoulou, 2021). Late British sociologist Margaret Archer (2021) has elaborated that individuals are divided regarding their love and hate of digitalization. While some hope for friendship with robots as technophiles, others remain technophobic, distancing themselves from technology-enabled work and life. İn such a polarised digitalised world, there is an urgent need to explore emergent dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in workplaces. There are reports of many workplaces requesting workers to return to work, with rigid arrangements as a backlash against digitalization and remote work.

This return to tradition proves costly for workplaces as it reportedly reduces engagement and productivity and encourages turnover (Gleb, 2024). Shore et al.'s (2011) influential work conceptualized inclusion as the degree to which individuals experience both belongingness and uniqueness in their work group. This dual emphasis on belonging and uniqueness has shaped our approach to IOB as the study and application of inclusively oriented human resource capacities that can be developed, measured, and effectively managed to improve the workplace of today and the future. In a digitally enabled world, how will belonging manifest, how will disagreements be settled, how will individuals display or hide their uniqueness, what will happen to solidarity and trust among workers, and who will organise and socially operate in the new digitalized workplace? These are some of the many questions that remain open today as we see the emergence of some answers. digitalization has polarised our work environments, with some individuals having greater access to resources due to digitalization, its platform economy, algorithm-driven AI enhanced work. Ozbilgin (2024) explains that a gap is emerging between owners of digitalised work whose income has reached unprecedented levels and workers and other stakeholders who suffer job losses and low pay and conditions. Inequalities induced by digitalization emanate from the old and now obsolete assumption that humans have full control and autonomy over digitalization that they experience. digitalization at work has brought about complex challenges to the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. However, as Nishii and Leroy (2022) note, inclusion is a complex, multi-level phenomenon that operates at individual, interpersonal, group, organizational, and societal levels. Recent scholarship has increasingly recognized the need for more nuanced, context-specific understandings of inclusion that account for the interplay between these levels (Fitzsimmons et al., 2023; Ozturk, 2021). The papers in this special issue build on this multi-level perspective, extending it to the unique context of digital work environments.

The move towards a paperless office, the precursor to the digital workplace, has been a long time in the making as information technology has enabled work to take shape without relying on the office space's traditional in-person norms. At the same time, the growth of social media platforms has enabled work to take place continuously beyond the confines of a physical space as technologically distributed work projects can now span the globe. To this end, White (2012) provides the following definition, “A digital workplace enables any employee to complete a task, share information and work as a member of a team with other employees in the organization and in any partner organization on a totally location-independent basis for all the parties concerned” (209). These ongoing technological shifts in the nature and place of work were brought into hypervisibility in recent years as the world grappled with the challenges of working during the pandemic. Some of the current definitions of digitalised workplaces need critical appreciation of how digitalization has not served everyone at work in the same way.

Consequently, the rapid shift to remote and hybrid work during the COVID-19 pandemic brought new urgency to understanding IOB in digital contexts. As Özkazanç -Pan and Pullen (2020) argue, the transition to virtual work has the potential to both exacerbate existing inequalities and create new forms of exclusion. At the same time, digital technologies offer novel opportunities for fostering inclusion across geographical and temporal boundaries (Branicki, 2020; Özkazanç-Pan, 2021). Radical technological innovation also brings about uneven outcomes for different stakeholders and communities, exacerbating the gap between haves and have nots (Ozbilgin and Erbil 2024).

This tension between the inclusionary and exclusionary potentials of digital work underlies much of the research in this special issue. The six papers indicate how the digitalization of work is reshaping the antecedents, processes, and outcomes of IOB at multiple levels of analysis. In doing so, they lay the groundwork for a more comprehensive understanding of inclusion in the digital age.

Drawing on Özbilgin and Erbil's (2024) concept of "inclusion hysteresis", we can frame the evolution of IOB in digital contexts as a dynamic interplay between progress towards inclusion and resistance rooted in tradition and, more recently, emerging from a right-wing political backlash against DEI (diversity, equity and inclusion) practices and policies (Prasad and Śliwa, 2024). As organizations implement new digital tools and practices, they inevitably encounter resistance anchored in traditional in-person ways of working and interacting. This resistance can create a lag in the realization of more inclusive digital workplaces, particularly for individuals whose needs and experiences may not have been fully considered in traditional work environments.

Looking into how individuals navigate inclusion and exclusion in digital spaces, the concepts of "frontstage" and "backstage" performances could be particularly relevant in understanding how employees manage their identities and interactions in virtual work environments, where the boundaries between professional and personal spaces are increasingly blurred (Özbilgin & Erbil, 2024). This framework provides a rich lens through which to examine the complexities of digital inclusion, highlighting the performative aspects of workplace interactions and the potential for digital technologies to both constrain and enable authentic self-expression.

Moreover, the evolution of IOB towards a digital paradigm involves not only adapting existing inclusion concepts to virtual environments but also expanding our understanding of inclusion to encompass a broader range of experiences and challenges unique to digital work (Lazazzara et al., 2023). In this sense, digital inclusion, particularly in the context of work, can provide a foundation for fostering inclusion within the social and societal arena (Reisdorf and Rhinesmith, 2020).

3. Advancing IOB in digital contexts: Key contributions of the Special Issue

The six papers in this special issue offer diverse methodological and theoretical approaches to understanding IOB in digital work environments. Here, we synthesize their key findings and contributions, organized around three broad themes: (1) reconceptualizing inclusion for digital contexts, (2) multi-level dynamics of digital inclusion, and (3) technology as both enabler and barrier to inclusion.

3.1 Reconceptualizing inclusion for digital contexts

The first theme emerging from these studies challenges us to radically rethink our understanding of inclusion for virtual work environments. Ressi et al. (2024) argue compellingly that traditional conceptualizations of inclusion, primarily centered on demographic diversity, fail to capture the nuanced experiences of belonging and exclusion in digital spaces. Their qualitative study unveils how employees construct meanings of workplace inclusion that transcend visible identity markers, emphasizing the critical importance of being accepted, integrated into decision-making processes, and able to express oneself in virtual settings authentically. This expanded notion of inclusion resonates with Shore et al.'s (2011)

dual emphasis on belongingness and uniqueness, while also acknowledging the unique affordances and constraints of digital work environments.

Dhanani et al. (2024) further complicate this picture, offering a granular examination of how employees from diverse backgrounds conceptualize and experience inclusion in remote work settings. Their findings reveal a striking paradox - while definitions of inclusion were relatively consistent across social identities, the specific organizational practices that fostered feelings of inclusion varied significantly between groups. This nuanced understanding challenges the efficacy of one-size-fits-all approaches to digital inclusion, underlining the need for more context-sensitive and intersectional strategies that recognize the multiplicity of experiences within seemingly homogeneous groups.

Zahoor et al. (2024) add another layer of complexity to our understanding of digital inclusion by examining the intricate interplay between organizational digitalization efforts and inclusive climates in shaping employee resilience. Their study illuminates the critical importance of considering both technological infrastructure and social-psychological factors in fostering inclusive digital work environments. This multi-faceted approach aligns with recent calls for more systemic perspectives on organizational inclusion (e.g., Nishii & Leroy, 2022; Nishii, 2013), while also highlighting the unique role of technology in shaping experiences of inclusion in virtual spaces.

In all, these studies compel us to move beyond simplistic notions of digital inclusion as merely the absence of discrimination or the presence of diverse representation. Instead, they point towards a more nuanced conceptualization that encompasses psychological safety, authentic self-expression, meaningful participation, and the ability to navigate and leverage digital technologies to foster connections and contribute to organizational goals. This reconceptualization has profound implications for both research and practice, challenging us to develop more sophisticated conceptualizations and measures of inclusion in digital contexts and to design interventions that address the multifaceted nature of virtual work experiences.

3.2 Multi-Level dynamics of digital inclusion

The second theme emerging from these studies illuminates the complex, multi-level nature of inclusion in digital work contexts. The papers in this special issue reveal how individual, group, and organizational factors interact in intricate ways to shape experiences of inclusion in virtual and hybrid work arrangements.

At the individual level, Zahoor et al. (2024) demonstrate the critical role of employees' digital literacy and core self-evaluations in moderating the relationship between organizational digitalization efforts and employee resilience. These findings challenge techno-deterministic assumptions about the impact of digital technologies on inclusion, highlighting instead the importance of individual differences and capabilities in shaping how employees experience and navigate digital work environments. It suggests that organizations must consider not only the technological infrastructure they provide, but also the varying levels of digital competence and psychological resources their employees bring to virtual work settings.

Lacerenza et al. (2024) further illuminate individual-level dynamics of digital inclusion, revealing how perceptions of diversity climate interact with gender to influence experiences of stereotype threat, anxiety, and turnover intentions in remote work settings. Their study offers a sobering perspective on the potential downsides of digital work for inclusion, showing how

the sudden shift to remote work during the pandemic exacerbated anxiety and turnover intentions among women, particularly in organizations lacking positive diversity climates. This finding highlights the importance of intersectional approaches to digital inclusion that consider how multiple identities and organizational factors interact to shape experiences of belonging and exclusion in virtual spaces.

At the group level, Ressi et al. (2024) uncover four distinct approaches to inclusion in remote work - blighting, silencing, balancing, and harmonizing - which vary in their degree of participation and engagement with diverse employee interests. This typology offers a valuable framework for understanding how inclusive practices manifest in virtual teams, while also highlighting the potential for exclusionary practices to be reproduced or even amplified in digital spaces. Their findings underline the critical role of team-level dynamics and leadership practices in shaping experiences of inclusion in digital contexts, suggesting that interventions aimed at fostering inclusion must consider the unique challenges and opportunities presented by virtual team environments.

Beijer et al. (2024) further illuminate group-level dynamics of digital inclusion, demonstrating how inclusive leadership behaviors like fostering uniqueness, strengthening belongingness, and empowering employees to contribute ideas are crucial for enhancing employee resilience in remote settings. Their study stresses the need for leaders to adapt inclusive practices for digital contexts while navigating new challenges in building trust and fostering belonging across physical and virtual spaces. This work points towards the emergence of new leadership competencies specifically tailored to fostering inclusion in hybrid work environments, challenging traditional notions of leadership effectiveness.

At the organizational level, several studies highlight the critical importance of organizational climate and culture in fostering digital inclusion – in other words, digital inclusion add another layer of complexity to existing climate and culture within the organization and should be intentionally and meaningfully designed. Zahoor et al. (2024) demonstrate how inclusive organizational climates interact with digitalization efforts to enhance employee resilience, while Lacerenza et al. (2024) reveal the protective role of positive diversity climates in mitigating anxiety and turnover intentions among women during the pandemic-induced shift to remote work. These findings accentuate the need for organizations to cultivate inclusive climates that extend beyond physical workspaces into virtual realms, challenging traditional notions of organizational culture as bound to specific physical locations.

These multi-level insights reveal the complex, interdependent nature of digital inclusion processes. They suggest that effective strategies for fostering IOB in digital contexts must address individual, group, and organizational factors simultaneously, recognizing the dynamic interplay between these levels of analysis. They also emphasise the potential for both positive and negative spillover effects across levels, stressing the need for holistic approaches to digital inclusion.

3.3 Technology as both enabler and barrier to inclusion

The third crucial theme emerging from these studies is the paradoxical role of technology as both an enabler and potential barrier to inclusion in digital work environments. This duality represents perhaps the most novel and consequential insight to emerge from this collection of

papers, challenging simplistic notions of digital transformation as inherently inclusionary or exclusionary.

Zahoor et al. (2024) illuminate this paradox, showing how organizational digitalization can enhance employee resilience, but only when combined with an inclusive organizational climate and high levels of digital literacy among employees. Their findings highlight the importance of complementary social and technological approaches to fostering inclusion, challenging the techno-deterministic assumption that digital transformation alone will lead to more inclusive workplaces. This nuanced perspective suggests that the inclusionary potential of digital technologies is contingent upon the social and organizational contexts in which they are deployed, as well as the capabilities of individuals to leverage these technologies effectively.

Ressi et al. (2024) further complicate this picture, revealing how digital communication tools can enable more participatory decision-making processes, but may also be used to silence or marginalize certain voices if not implemented thoughtfully. Their study underscores the need for a critical approach to digital inclusion that considers the power dynamics and potential exclusionary effects embedded in technological systems. It suggests that the very features of digital technologies that can facilitate inclusion - such as asynchronous communication and virtual collaboration tools - may also be leveraged to reinforce existing hierarchies and exclusionary practices if not carefully managed.

Beijer et al. (2024) explore this tension in the context of leadership, examining how leaders must adapt inclusive practices for digital contexts while navigating new challenges in building trust and fostering belonging across physical and virtual spaces. Their study underscores the need for new leadership competencies and adapted practices to enact inclusion in hybrid work environments, highlighting the limitations of simply transplanting existing inclusion initiatives into digital spaces. This work points towards the emergence of a new form of "digital inclusive leadership" that combines technological savvy with a deep understanding of the unique psychological and social dynamics of virtual work environments.

Lacerenza et al. (2024) offer a unique perspective on the potential downsides of digital work for inclusion, revealing how the sudden shift to remote work during the pandemic exacerbated anxiety and turnover intentions among women, particularly in organizations lacking positive diversity climates. This finding highlights the potential for digital work arrangements to amplify existing inequalities and exclusionary dynamics, particularly for marginalized groups. It suggests that organizations must proactively address these potential negative consequences of digitalization, developing targeted interventions to support vulnerable employees in navigating the challenges of virtual work.

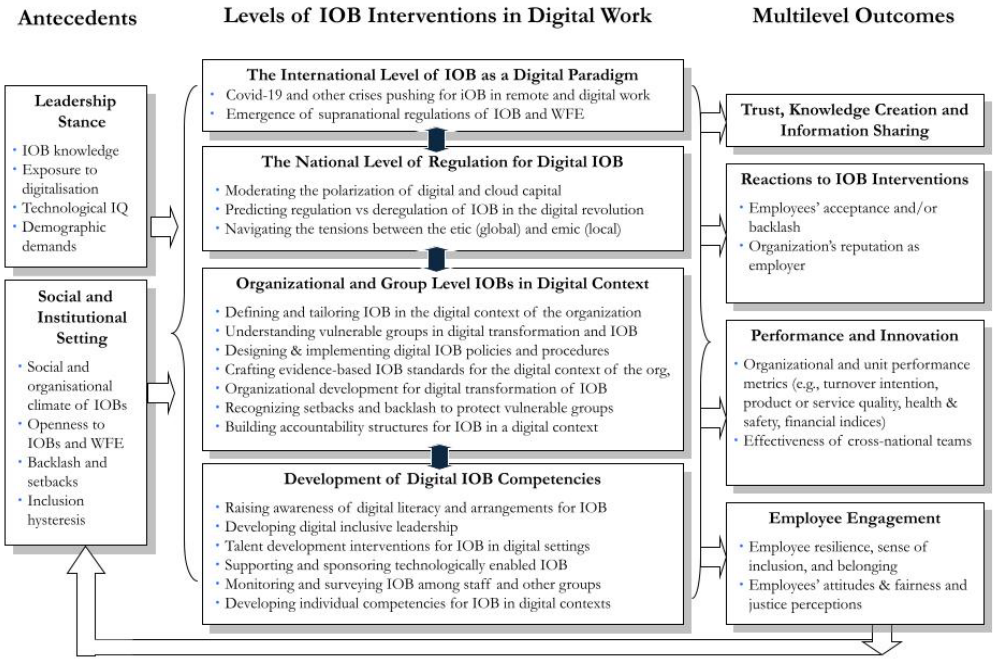
Collectively, these insights reveal the complex, often contradictory role of technology in shaping experiences of inclusion in digital work environments. They challenge us to move beyond simplistic narratives of technological determinism, instead adopting a more nuanced, socio-technical perspective that recognizes the mutual shaping of technological systems and social practices in digital work contexts. This perspective has profound implications for both research and practice, suggesting the need for more sophisticated theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches that can capture the dynamic, contingent nature of digital inclusion processes.

4. A process-based relational multilevel framework for digital IOB

Synthesizing these insights, we propose an integrated framework for conceptualizing IOB in digital contexts. The figure presents antecedents that foreground IOB at work, a range of multilevel IOB interventions in digitalised context and predicted outcomes of these interventions. The feedback loop suggests how the success or failure of IOB interventions would entrench or alter the antecedents that support or resist future interventions for IOB in digitalized work.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

Figure 1: A process -based relational multilevel framework of IOB in digital work



At its core, our framework conceptualizes digital IOB as an emergent property arising from the complex interactions between individual, group, and organizational factors, mediated and moderated by technological infrastructures and practices. At the individual level, the framework incorporates factors such as digital literacy, core self-evaluations, and perceptions of diversity climate as key antecedents to experiences of inclusion in digital spaces. These individual-level factors interact with group-level dynamics, including inclusive leadership behaviors, participatory decision-making processes, and team psychological safety, to shape the micro-contexts of digital inclusion. At the organizational level, the framework emphasizes the role of inclusive climates and culture, diversity-valuing policies and practices, and technological infrastructure in creating the broader ecosystem within which digital inclusion unfolds.

Crucially, our framework conceptualizes technology as both a mediating and moderating force at all levels. Digital tools and platforms mediate interactions between individuals, groups, and the broader organization, shaping how inclusion is enacted and experienced. Simultaneously, the affordances and constraints of specific technologies moderate the effectiveness of inclusive practices at each level. This dual role of technology in our framework reflects the paradoxical

nature of digital inclusion revealed by the studies in this special issue, acknowledging both its potential to enhance participation and its capacity to reinforce existing power structures and inequalities.

5. Implications and future research

The implications of this integrated framework for research and practice are profound. For scholars, it offers a roadmap for future investigations into digital inclusion, highlighting the need for multi-level, longitudinal studies that can capture the dynamic, evolving nature of IOB in digital contexts. It calls for more sophisticated methodological approaches that can illuminate the complex interactions between individual, group, and organizational factors in shaping experiences of inclusion in virtual spaces.

For practitioners, our framework underscores the need for holistic, systemic approaches to fostering digital inclusion. It suggests that effective interventions must address multiple levels simultaneously, considering how individual capabilities, team dynamics, organizational cultures, and technological infrastructures interact to create inclusive or exclusionary digital work environments. The framework also highlights the importance of ongoing monitoring and adaptation of inclusion initiatives, recognizing that the rapidly evolving nature of digital technologies and work practices necessitates continuous learning and adjustment.

Moreover, our framework has implications for organizational design and technology implementation. It suggests that decisions about technological infrastructure and digital work practices should be made with careful consideration of their potential impacts on inclusion at multiple levels. This may involve more participatory approaches (Özbilgin et al., 2024) to technology selection and implementation, as well as ongoing assessments of the inclusionary and exclusionary effects of digital work practices.

6. Conclusion

The papers in this special issue, along with our proposed integrated framework, mark a significant advancement in our understanding of IOB in digital work contexts. By reconceptualizing inclusion for virtual spaces, illuminating multi-level dynamics, and grappling with the paradoxical role of technology, this body of work lays a strong foundation for future research and practice in this critical area.

As we navigate the complexities of increasingly digital and distributed work environments, the insights offered by these studies take on heightened importance. They challenge us to move beyond simplistic notions of inclusion as mere representation or the absence of discrimination, instead pointing towards a more nuanced understanding that considers the multifaceted nature of belonging, participation, and authentic self-expression in virtual spaces.

As we write this editorial, many large firms are already instituting RTOs or return-to-work mandates. Recently, Andy Jassy the CEO of Amazon shared the following letter with all employes[1], "to address…being better set up to invent, collaborate, and be connected enough to each other and our culture to deliver the absolute best for customers and the business, we've decided that we're going to return to being in the office the way we were before the onset of

[1]https://www.aboutamazon.com/news/company-news/ceo-andy-jassy-latest-update-on-amazon-return-to-office-manager-team-ratio

COVID. When we look back over the last five years, we continue to believe that the advantages of being together in the office are significant. I've previously explained these benefits (February 2023 post), but in summary, we've observed that it's easier for our teammates to learn, model, practice, and strengthen our culture; collaborating, brainstorming, and inventing are simpler and more effective; teaching and learning from one another are more seamless; and, teams tend to be better connected to one another. If anything, the last 15 months we've been back in the office at least three days a week has strengthened our conviction about the benefits."

It is possible that such mandates are done with the proposed aims of better collaboration, invention and team performance but it is also likely that such efforts are intended to get employees to quit. A 2024 survey[2] of 1,500 individuals including over 500 HR managers by an HR firm found that a "close to a third (32%) of managers admit the desire to track employees was a main goal for their company's RTO [return to work] mandate." Thus more than ever, understanding whether and how inclusion can take shape across all spaces where work gets done will be crucial to the well-being of firms as well as employees.

Looking ahead, several promising avenues for future research emerge. Longitudinal studies examining how experiences of inclusion evolve over time as organizations transition between remote, hybrid, and in-person work arrangements are crucial for understanding the dynamic nature of digital inclusion processes. Cross-cultural comparative studies could illuminate how societal and institutional factors shape the enactment and experience of IOB in digital work environments across different contexts. Design-oriented research focused on developing and testing specific interventions and technologies to enhance inclusion in virtual and hybrid work settings could bridge the gap between theory and practice, offering concrete solutions for organizations striving to create more inclusive digital workplaces.

In an increasingly digitalized world, the quest for inclusive organizational behavior takes on new urgency, touching on fundamental questions of equity, justice, and human dignity in the digital age. By advancing our understanding of IOB in digital contexts, we contribute not only to organizational effectiveness but also to the broader project of creating more equitable and inclusive societies. The challenge before us is to harness the inclusionary potential of digital technologies while mitigating their exclusionary effects, working towards a future where individuals can fully and meaningfully participate and thrive in the digital workplace.

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