INDIVIDUAL DETERMINANTS OF MEDIA CHOICE FOR DECEPTION

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ABSTRACT

Deception plays a role in most communication events, including those set in a business context. Deception is of particular concern in hiring situations, as a successful lie on the part of a job applicant can lead to a poor fit between the requirements of the job and the skills of the person filling the job. This in turn can lead to poor organizational performance, low job satisfaction and in positions that are sensitive with regard to national security, can put people in peril. The ability of managers to detect deception on the part of job applicants and subordinates is critical, and the current study seeks to assist managers in detecting deception in the two ways: by providing managers with warnings as to which media will carry the most deception, and by providing managers with a method for making individually targeted media selections that should make deception more difficult.

We identify two personality characteristics, political skill and impression management as influences on media choice. Using a scenario based survey set in an organizational context, we identify relationships between political skill and impression management and media choice. Specifically, we found that individuals who score high on political skill and impression management prefer to lie via the telephone, and are least comfortable lying via e-mail.

Keywords: Media Selection, Deception, Computer Mediated Communication, Individual Differences

INTRODUCTION

Recent research has highlighted the importance of deception in new work settings. Deception, where an individual knowingly transmits a message in order to foster a false belief or conclusion in others [2], is an omnipresent component of communication [23]. In a business setting, deception has been found to occur in both job interviews [7] and reporting [1] and it is likely present in many other situations. Because it can have a negative impact on individuals, organizations, customers and other stakeholders, particularly when employees have goals that differ from those of their coworkers and organizations; limiting the impact of deception in the organization is in the interest of the employer [4]. One trend that has a large influence on deception in work settings is the increased use of computer-mediated communication. Computer-mediated communication (such as e-mail) filters many cues to deception, potentially making it easier for individuals to deceive successfully [5], therefore putting organizations more at risk when the deceiver’s goals differ from those of the organization. Also, preliminary studies
have found that up to 12% of deception is communicated using computer-based communication [23]. However, it is unclear which individual-level factors, including those that could influence an individual’s ability to successfully deceive, lead individuals to choose different types of media for deception.

According to Furner & George [16], failure to detect deception perpetrated by job applicants could lead to a poor fit between the requirements of the job and the abilities of the employee, which could potentially have a negative impact on organizational performance. Further, if the job has implications for national security, successful deception by the applicant could have dire consequences [24]. From the perspective of a manager, understanding which media job applicants and subordinates prefer to use to deceive is of vital importance. The aim of this study is to further our understanding of how individuals prefer to deceive based on several individual factors. Armed with this understanding and information about the employee or job applicant in question, this study will enable managers to force job applicants or employees to use a media with which they are least comfortable lying, which should hinder their success.

LITERATURE AND HYPOTHESES

The popularization of computer-based communication media in the 1980s and 1990s brought about many new questions that researchers have attempted to answer [3, 19]. One of these questions is which media best facilitate different types of communication. Daft, Lengel & Treviño [9] argue that characteristics of a communication medium should fit the requirements of the message being sent. Daft et al. [9] conceptualize media as existing on a continuum from rich to lean, based on their ability to facilitate understanding, and rich media facilitate understanding better than lean media. The ability of a medium to facilitate understanding is based on four factors: multiplicity of cues, immediacy of feedback, degree of personal focus and language variety. One might be tempted to conclude that the richest medium, face-to-face, is the best in all situations, because it has the ability to transfer the most information. However, richness has a cost associated with it [10, 29], and there are times when senders prefer less richness, such as when they are trying to deceive someone [5]. In addition, it has been shown that too much richness sometimes leads to confusion and misunderstandings in certain situations by overwhelming the receiver with extraneous information [9]. More recently, authors have suggested that media choice is not simply a function of fit between media characteristics and the requirements of the communication task; in addition, individual differences between senders have been suggested as influences that impact media choice [6, 15]. This could mean that different individuals might choose different media for specific types of communication tasks, such as deception.

Researchers have investigated deception in face-to-face settings for many years [11, 33]. One well studied area of deception research is aimed at understanding how well individuals can detect deception. Studies found that, on average, individuals are able to detect about 35% of the lies with which they are confronted [27]. However, more and more communication in modern business settings is happening using information systems, and electronic communication affects deception. This is because many cues to deception are visual and audio based, such as gestures and vocal pitch [11], and media such as e-mail do not allow for the transmission of these cues [8]. As other researchers have recognized, most deception studies have been conducted in a media rich context [33]; however, as more lean communication media are used in everyday business processes, interest in deception detection in leaner media has grown [34, 35].

Recent research has investigated deception in computer-mediated settings such as interviews, decision-making groups, and negotiations. These studies found that individuals were only able to detect between 3% and 8% percent of the lies with which they were confronted [19, 20, 21]. Although these studies revealed that, if present, deception is a major problem in computer-mediated settings, they did not investigate the role of individual differences in media choice for deception. As previously mentioned, different types of individuals might choose different types of media for specific tasks. For example, individuals with skills that allow them to deceive effectively may not use computer systems for deception, since those media do not allow these individuals to fully utilize their skills.

Researchers have begun to investigate these unanswered questions about media choice for deception, and an initial study on the topic was recently conducted [5]. This study looked at individuals’ media choice in two different business scenarios, a high-risk deception scenario, and a low-risk deception scenario. The high risk scenario was particularly interesting, because it involved lying to a friend and being deceptive in a way that would likely negatively effect an organization. For the scenario, 30% of respondents chose telephone, 11% chose memo, 15% chose e-mail, 39% chose face-to-face, 2.5% chose letter, and 2.5% chose voice mail as the media that they would use to communicate the deception. When memo is integrated with e-mail (which is appropriate as today most
memos are now delivered using e-mail), it becomes clear that a similar number of individuals chose e-mail, phone, and face-to-face methods for deception. This study showed that while most deceivers may not choose computer-based communication methods for deception, a significant number of deceivers (about 33%) will choose this method. While this was an interesting finding, the study did not look at individual differences between the participants.

While empirical studies on media choice for deception have been limited, Furner & George [16] investigated the impact of an individual’s espoused national culture on their media choice in a deceptive context. Their study demonstrated that an individual difference variable, espoused national culture, did have an impact on media choice for deception. Subjects were put in the position of a hypothetical employee in an organization, asked by their boss to lie to another person in the organization. Furner & George [16] found that individuals who scored highly on espoused collectivism preferred to use text-based media to lie, those who scored high on espoused power distance preferred to use the telephone to lie, and those who scored high on espoused masculinity preferred to lie face to face.

One individual difference that is closely related to deception is political skill. Political skill is defined as: “The ability to effectively understand others at work, and to use such knowledge to influence others to act in ways that enhance one’s personal and/or organizational objectives” [12]. Political skill consists of four sub-skills: social astuteness, interpersonal influence, networking ability, and apparent sincerity [12]. Social astuteness is used to describe the ability to identify with others in order to obtain things by presenting one’s behavior in the best possible light. Socially astute individuals can read situations and people, and use that information to attempt to influence others. Interpersonal influence refers to the ability to adapt and calibrate one’s behavior to situations to get particular responses from others in order to achieve personal goals. Networking is the ability to develop and use diverse networks of people. Individuals who score high in networking ability are often highly skilled negotiators. Apparent sincerity describes the ability to appear as though one possesses high levels of integrity, authenticity, sincerity, and genuineness.

Politically skilled individuals are able to change their behavior to different situational demands and consistently appear genuine and sincere. This leads to feelings of trust and support from those around them. It also allows them to use influence over others effectively. Also, politically skilled individuals can adjust their behavior toward others in ways that elicit favorable reactions [12]. These skills likely allow deceptive individuals to appear honest, even if they are leaking cues to deception. Deceptive individuals with these skills would want to communicate in more intimate and real-time communication settings since they could appear honest, and so that they could use their influence tactics.

**H1A:** Political skill will be related to media choice for deception.

**H1B:** Face-to-face and telephone will be the dominant media choices for individuals with high political skill.

Another important individual difference related to deception is social skill. Social skill has both emotional and social dimensions [30]. The emotional dimensions include emotional expressivity, emotional sensitivity, and emotional control. The social dimensions include social expressivity, social sensitivity, and social control. Individuals that are high in emotional expressivity, emotional sensitivity, and emotional control are able to inspire others by their ability to transmit feelings, attend to and accurately interpret the subtle emotional cues of others, as well as accurately show emotions. Individuals with social expressivity, social sensitivity, and social control skills are usually tactful, and they can be adept in guiding the direction and content of communication [30].

Individuals with social skills are confident in their ability to communicate effectively, but they may not have the ability to influence others as do politically skilled individuals. However, both skill areas imply that individuals will these skills can interpret cues from others better than individuals than others, signaling that there could be some overlap in these constructs. We feel that socially skilled individuals will also likely want to carry on a real-time conversation when they are deceptive, so that they can better direct the flow and direction of the conversation.

**H2A:** Social skill will be related to media choice for deception.

**H2B:** Face-to-Face and telephone will be the dominant media choice for individuals with high social skill

Yet another important individual characteristic related to media choice for deception is the use of impression management. Impression management is a process in which individuals try to influence the image that others hold of them [31]. Individuals use impression management to try to maintain their own identities while projecting a different identity to others [32]. Researchers have developed a taxonomy for understanding impression management [26]. The techniques in this taxonomy include...
self-promotion, ingratiation, exemplification, intimidation, and supplication. Individuals that use these techniques tend to point out their abilities and accomplishments, attempt to increase their likeability, self sacrifice to increase others’ perceptions of their dedication, make others aware of power and punishment capabilities and express weakness or failures with the goal of being perceived as needy.

Individuals that use impression management are trying to control others’ opinions of them. Since individuals that regularly use impression management are comfortable with behavior that is similar to deception, which is communication designed to foster a false belief in others, they will likely choose a communication method for deception that is similar to what they use for their impression management. Much of this behavior may happen in face-to-face settings, since there is a high level of personal focus in these settings, but it may also predominantly happen over e-mail since supervisors and managers may be more accessible via this channel. This behavior may also happen on the phone since the phone offers a mix of accessibility and a moderate level of personal focus. While it is unclear how most of this behavior usually happens, it is likely that individuals will pick the media for deception that is often used for impression management.

H3: Regular use of impression management will be related to media choice for deception.

METHOD

Data were collected to test the hypotheses by distributing surveys to upper-level business students at a large university in the US. The students were given the option to take the survey for extra credit in their classes. The surveys contained established scales that measured the participants’ social skill [30], political skill [12], tendency to use impression management [25], and experience with electronic messaging, for control purposes [6].

The surveys contained a high-risk deception scenario that was previously used in another study [5]. High risk (or high stakes) deception is deception where individuals have a lot to gain or lose from the deception and where they have fear of being caught in the act of deceiving [13]. High risk deception causes deceivers to experience strong emotions, which leads to cue leakage, which makes it easier for receivers to detect deceptive behavior [14]. Our high-risk scenario involved a situation where the organization’s and the individual’s reputations as well as the organization’s financial performance could be affected by the deception, and were the deception was communicated to an individual that the deceiver already knew. While the situation was simulated, the participants were business students that understood the potential impact of this kind of deception on an organization, so they were likely able to evaluate the risk and stakes involved with the activity. However, it should be noted that this was only a simulated situation, and a different level of emotion would be involved with a similar real situation [14], which could influence media selection.

In the scenario that we used, the participants were asked to pretend that they worked in the contracting department of an automotive manufacturer. They were asked by their supervisor to be deceptive about a defective component in an automotive product. The supervisor asked them to communicate to a friend in another department that there was no problem with the part, and that the problem was probably the result of improper maintenance. They were also told that they knew that the part was incorrectly specified in a previous order, but that the problem was fixed, and the parts currently being delivered were fine. The scenario also hinted that there is a chance that the defective part could cause injury to users. The scenario ended by describing that the supervisor did not want to make the department look bad, and that the subject was in no position to argue with their supervisor or to refuse to carry out this task. Lastly, they were instructed that it was up to them to decide how they would communicate this message, and that it was clearly important that they were believed.

At the end of the scenario, the participants were asked to choose with which communication media they would choose to carry out their task: face-to-face, e-mail, or phone. The study in which the scenario was developed also allowed participants to choose memo, letter, voice mail, or video conferencing [5]. However, very few participants chose letter, voice mail, and video conferencing, so those choices were eliminated in this study. Also, since memos are primarily distributed using e-mail in modern business settings, that category was also eliminated.

Although it was not part of our formal hypotheses, we also created collected data on individuals’ likelihood of deceiving. Even though participants were told that the deception in the scenario was important to them, it was not clear how likely they would be to carry out the deceptive task. We developed a three-item scale to capture their perception of how likely they would be to carry out the deception. We asked them to rate on a 7-point Likert scale how important it would be to them to perform the task, how motivated they would be to do the task, and if they would definitely perform the task.
Individual hypotheses were tested using discriminant analysis and ANOVA. Discriminant analysis is the appropriate technique to use when the dependent variable (in this case, media choice) is categorical and independent variables are interval. Discriminant analysis derives a variate to represent the linear combination of multiple independent variables that will discriminate between pre-defined groups. Weights are set for the variate weights for each variable, such that the between-group variance relative to the within-group variance is maximized. These variates allow for classification. The discriminant function used in the current study is: \[ Z_{\text{media}} = a + W1(\text{IM}) + W2(\text{PS}) \]. One-way ANOVAs (and Scheffe comparisons across media) were also conducted to compare characteristics of the groups based on the group means of the independent variables.

The results of the discriminant analysis are presented in Table 2. The Wilks’ lambda of 0.940 (\( \chi^2 = 10.49, p < 0.05 \)) indicates that the discriminate function does predict media choice at a rate significantly better than chance [22]. Significance values of less than 0.05 indicate that the variable is a significant predictor of media choice. The Standardized Discriminant Coefficient represents the increase in the z-score for media choice for each one unit increase in the variate. The Fisher’s linear classification coefficients for each IV are listed in Table 3. The coefficients give an indication as to how each IV impacts media choice.

Hypothesis 1A predicted that political skill would be related to media choice for deception, and this was supported (\( p < 0.05 \)). Hypothesis 1B predicted that those with high political skill would primarily choose face-to-face and telephone for deception, and this was supported by the means and Scheffe comparisons (\( F = 2.50, p < 0.05 \)). Politically skilled individuals chose telephone and face-to-face over e-mail for deception (averages: face-to-face, 97.32; telephone, 98.95; e-mail, 94.93). Hypothesis 2A and 2B were not tested since the scale was not adequate (as previously mentioned). Hypothesis 3 predicted that impression management would be related to media choice for deception, and this was not supported (\( p = 0.12 \)). While the analysis did not provide conclusive results for impression management, the means provided some indication that telephone was the preferred media for individuals that scored high on impression management (averages: face-to-face, 77.87; phone, 78.37; e-mail, 74.93). Political skill had the strongest impact on media choice, followed by impression management. While the coefficients were slightly different, the order of magnitude of impact for each IV was the same across all three media types.
Table 1: Pearson’s Correlations Between Variables

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Media (DV)</th>
<th>IM</th>
<th>PS</th>
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<tr>
<td>Media (DV)</td>
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<tr>
<td>IM</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>PS</td>
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* Significant at the 0.05 level

Table 2: Discriminant Analysis Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>F-value</th>
<th>Significance</th>
<th>Standardized Discriminant Coefficient (W)</th>
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<tr>
<td>IM</td>
<td>2.111</td>
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<td>.976</td>
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<tr>
<td>PS</td>
<td>3.689</td>
<td>0.027</td>
<td>.958</td>
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Table 3: Fisher’s Linear Classification Coefficients

<table>
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<th>Media</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td>0.320</td>
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<td>PS</td>
<td>.716</td>
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DISCUSSION

This study looked at how different individuals chose to deceive in a business setting. Specifically, we looked at how several individual differences in 172 upper-level business students were related to their media choice for deception. The study participants were given a scenario and were asked how they would choose to communicate a deceptive message that was ordered by a superior and that would likely have a negative impact on the organization.

Overall, we found that most individuals preferred face-to-face and e-mail to the phone for deception (69 respondents choose face-to-face, 29 chose telephone, and 74 chose e-mail). This finding is different from another recent study that looked at how individuals communicated all the deception that occurred in their daily lives, Hancock et al. [23]. Hancock et al. [23] found that 66% of respondents chose to deceive face-to-face, 22% over the phone, and 12% using e-mail and instant-messaging. However, they also found that, in general, the lies used in the study were considered by the participants to be of little importance. Because of this, most individuals likely choose the easiest communication method available, which was face-to-face. As previously mentioned, when communicating lies that could have a large impact, individuals would be likely to be more emotional and leak more cues to their deception [14]. When communicating these types of lies, individuals that are effective communicators would be more likely to choose media that would limit the transmission of some of these deceptive cues.

The findings are also different from a previous study that used the same scenario [5]; however, the participants in this study were different from those used in the previous study. The participants in this study were undergraduate business students, with an average age of 21. The participants in the other study were faculty and staff at a university. In the previous study, similar numbers of individuals chose e-mail (when combined with memo, as previously explained), phone, and face-to-face. In this study, more individuals chose e-mail and face-to-face communication methods than the phone. The shift towards an e-mail preference in the current study likely reflects the younger generation’s high level of comfort with this media. This finding could signal that more deception will be present in electronic communications in future years, as this generation of workers enters the workplace. However, this finding could also mean that the population looked at in this study had lower political and impression management skills than did the older, more experienced workers in the other study, and it could signal that indi-
Individuals’ tendencies might change as they refine their workplace communication skills over time.

When testing the hypotheses, we found that individuals with high political skill and individuals that regularly used impression management (although the finding was only partially supported) predominantly chose telephone and face-to-face communication media. This was expected since these are synchronous communication methods that have a relatively high level of personal focus, and they allow these individuals to use their conversational skills, influence tactics, and impression management techniques. However, it was somewhat surprising that, overall, phone was the overall dominant media choice for these same individuals.

Implications

The results of this study are insightful for managers seeking to hinder deception by subordinates and job applicants. George et al. [18] found that prior warning that a lie may be taking place has a substantial impact on the effectiveness of the receiver in detecting that deception. This study provides managers with guidance as to when to be extra vigilant against deception. Our results imply that most deception in an organizational context will likely happen via e-mail or face-to-face. However, when deception does happen in phone conversations, it will come from the individuals that are the most skilled at deceiving and comfortable with deception. Managers should be aware that while deception will occur in computer-mediated communication (which is something that they definitely need to be aware of), they also need to pay close attention to phone communication, where the deception that is the hardest to detect may be occurring. This deception will be hard to detect because it will be coming from skilled deceivers, and because many cues (such as facial cues to deception) will still be filtered. To identify deception in these contexts, managers will need to seek out cues other than physical or linguistic.

One clear application of these findings is in the organizational hiring process, where deception is a widely recognized problem. While Medlin et al. [28] were able to demonstrate that job applicants in Information Technology industries often have a poor idea of which job skills their potential employers seek, George et al. [18] note that job applicants frequently lie on their resumes and during job interviews, in an attempt to portray their skills and abilities in the most positive light possible. Armed with this information, managers need to be vigilant about detecting deception from job applicants, to ensure a proper fit between the applicant’s skills and the demands of the job. Our results indicate that individuals differ in their preference for media for deception. We were able to identify a most preferred and a least preferred media for deception based on an individual’s impression management abilities and political skill. Table 4 identifies the best medium for hindering deception (that is, the least preferable media for the sender) based on the sender’s scores on impression management and political skill.

In order for a manager to apply this table, they will need to measure the subject’s scores on impression management and political skill. This is discussed further, along with other limitations in the following section.

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Limitations

There are several limitations to the findings of this study. First, the subjects were upper-level undergraduate business students. These students would likely have some tendencies that are different than many organizational employees, and the average age and average experience of the student subjects were likely different than those of the average organizational employee. These differences could affect individuals’ motivations and perceptions of media. Even though we accounted for several individual differences closely related to deception, others may exist, and they should be investigated in future studies. Also this was only an initial study that looked at one
type of deception in one setting. Different external and situational variables could have an influence on this process, and should be investigated in future studies.

Applying the findings of this study requires that managers assess the impression management abilities and political skill of job applicants or subordinates. Doing so carries a cost and may not be practical for many managers. However, as Furner & George [16] point out, in hiring situations where the job carries national security implications, and in several other high importance situations, the costs of assessing individual characteristics may be justified.

Future Research

As previously mentioned, we also collected data on individuals' perceived likelihood of deceiving. We found that, overall, individuals felt that they were likely to carry out the deceptive task (4.65, on a 7-point scale, where 7 was most likely to carry out the deception). There were no differences in this variable between media choices. The overall number shows that most individuals would likely be deceptive; however, since most individuals were not absolutely sure, there are some individuals that would probably back out of the deceptive task, even if they had initially planned to be deceptive. Determining the factors that could cause an individual to actually go through with a deceptive task would be an important subject for future research.

The findings of this study represent an important step in the investigation of individual differences in determinants of media choice for deception. While this study evaluated several individual differences that have the potential to impact media choice for deception, there are other individual differences that might have an impact. The most visible individual difference that needs further research is age. Since another study found slightly different results with a sample that consisted of older participants [5], this variable warrants further investigation. Further, as the world becomes more globalized and organizations more multicultural [17], cultural determinants of media choice for deception are a relevant avenue for further exploration. There are also situational variables that could impact individuals' choices. Future studies also need to look at deception in other settings to understand how outside influences impact individuals' media choices regarding deception.

CONCLUSION

Previous research found that deception in computer-mediated settings is extremely difficult to detect, but it was still unclear what types of individuals might choose to deceive this way. This study found that two different individual difference variables, political skill and tendency to use impression management, were related to media choice for deception. Overall, we found that the participants in this study preferred e-mail (43%) and face-to-face (40%) media to telephone (17%) for deception. These numbers show that that deception is likely to occur in e-mail, which is problematic since deception is difficult to detect in computer-mediated settings [18]; however, the findings also show that individuals with political skill and individuals with a tendency to use impression management predominantly chose telephone and face-to-face methods for deception, and that telephone was their dominant media choice. Skilled deceivers likely did not choose e-mail for deception because it does not allow them to fully utilize their deception-related skills. These results imply that while individuals need to be aware of deception in computer-mediated communication, they also need to be aware of deception in settings where communication is happening over the phone, where skilled deceivers are most likely to deceive.

These results are important to organizations because individuals already work together in many settings where their communication is supported by computer systems and because they continue to integrate computer-based communication tools into more and more work processes. As organizations expand their use of computer-mediated communication, they need to be aware of how individuals interact with these tools. If individuals have personal goals that differ from those of the organization, they will likely be deceptive, and they will often take advantage of lean media to transmit deceptive messages. If organizations feel that deception could be present in particular areas, they need to realize that it will likely be present and very difficult to detect in phone communication, where many cues to deception will be filtered, and where skilled deceivers are likely to carry out deception, and computer-based communication, where unskilled deceivers are likely to deceive, but also where most cues to deception will be filtered. They will therefore have to investigate the usefulness of deception training programs, automated detection systems (as they become available), and policies that encourage individuals to use multiple communication methods to minimize the impact of harmful deception in new work settings.
REFERENCES


**AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES**

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