

ABILITY TO DIFFERENTIATE AND ITS IMPACT ON EMPLOYMENT INTERVIEW DECISION MAKING

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ABSTRACT

Both management and cognitive psychology literature indicate that an underlying cognitive model influences the way information is processed into a single evaluative judgment. This paper explores one element of an individual's cognitive process, their degree of differentiation, and the impact it has on the accuracy of the interview decision. Results indicate that individuals who have a higher degree of differentiation make more accurate interview decisions.

INTRODUCTION

The employment interview is the most widely used employment technique (e.g. Judge, Higgins & Cable, 2000; Segrest-Purkiss, S. L., Perrewé, P. L., Gillespie, T. L., Mayes, & B. T., Ferris, G. R., 2006). Industrial and organizational psychologists have been studying the employment interview for over sixty years in an effort not only to determine the reliability and validity of judgments based on the interview, but also to discover the various psychological variables which influence these judgments.

A substantial amount of research has examined various impression management behaviors that interviewees use in the interview process as is summarized in the 2008 review by Bolino, Kacmar, Turnley, and Gilstrap. Likewise, interviewer behavior has been extensively examined. It has long been recognized that two interviewers, asking the same questions, often obtain different results. From Rice's 1929 classic study of interviews to Chapman and Zweig's 2005 development of a nomological network for interview structure and how interviewers react to specific elements of interview structure, it has been documented that when different employment interviewers separately assess the same applicant, they often come to different conclusions (Judge, et al., 2000; Segrest-Purkiss et al., 2006).

Researchers have sought to identify the factors inherent in the interviewer that contribute to the differences in interview ratings. Literature reviews by Harris (1989), Judge et al., (2000), Macan (2009), and Posthuma, Morgeson, & Campion (2002) identified numerous studies that have examined a variety of individual factors. Included in these factors were stereotypes of good applicants, unfavorable information, pre-interview information, minority bias, nonverbal behavior, and different decision styles.

Harris (1989) offered two explanations for differences in interviewer ratings. One was that different questions or probes were asked by more accurate interviewers. The second was that more accurate interviewers were better at processing and integrating information. For decades research has focused on structured interview formats and much of the research has focused on the first explanation (Chapman & Zweig, 2005; Janz, Hellervik, & Gilmore, 1986; Latham, Saari, Pursell, & Campion, 1980; Motowidlo,

Carter, Dunnette, Tippins, Werner, Burnett, Vaughan, 1992; Tsai, Chen, & Chiu, 2005; Van Iddekinge, McFarland, & Raymark, 2007). While use of the structured interview has appeared to increase the validity of the interview, the impact of the information processing of the interviewer in the interview process remains unclear (Chapman & Zweig, 2005; Motowidlo et al., 1992). In Macan's (2009) employment interview research review and directions for future research, it was pointed out that note-taking during the interview process "was important for memory and legal reasons, but not necessarily for improving the accuracy of interview judgments" (p. 4). However, it does make sense that note-taking aids in the gathering and processing of information and allows interviewers to more finely differentiate between the various interviewees.

Interview Information Processing

A four-phase information processing model is described by Motowidlo (1986) and can be utilized to elucidate the employment interview process. Obtaining a sample of information from the domain of information is the first phase. The domain of information is conceptualized as the total population of both positive and negative information available about the employment interview target stimulus-- the interviewee. The second phase involves the attendance to and evaluation of this sample of domain information in order to develop an input sample. The third phase of the model is the development of the retrieved sample of information. In this phase, evaluative impressions are recalled when the interviewer forms a judgment. The final phase in the information processing model is the actual evaluative judgment of the interviewee. The accuracy of the evaluative judgment depends on how closely the retrieved sample of information represents the true domain of information available.

Differentiation Among Others

Differentiation is the tendency to make distinctions among people or objects, which results in perceiving them as different from one another (Shrauger & Altrocchi, 1964; Svenson, 1992). Individuals having a more differentiated conceptual system are better able to predict how others will respond in a series of social situations (Bieri, 1961; Hale, 1980). Similarly, Kelly (1955) describes differentiation as cognitive complexity or the number of independent dimensions which people use in describing others and suggests a more differentiated conceptual system would lead to a more precise, unique description of other people. The greater the differentiation, the lower the risk of post-decision ambiguity, decision reversal, or regret (Svenson, 1992).

Based on Motowidlo's (1986) model, differentiation has the potential to impact several elements of information processing in the interview. Specifically, it could create a more complex categorization schema, which would in turn impact the attentional mechanism and recall processes. Then these processes could influence the accuracy of the interview ratings. As discussed, categorization is the process in which applicants are assigned to clusters on the basis of the degree that the features of the individual overlap those of a category prototype summarizing resemblances among category members. Once a person is categorized as a member of a group, features of the group's prototype characterize that individual. Essentially, the unique characteristics of the applicant are lost and the interview decision is based on inferences made from the category prototypes. It would follow that the less differentiated the categories the greater the chance of stereotyping and losing the ability to accurately evaluate the specific strengths and weaknesses of individual interviewees.

Also, it has been theorized that once behavioral information about an individual is assigned to a long-term memory category, any unique information about the individual is lost and only categorical

information remains. Recall of the individual applicant becomes recall of the category prototype. Likewise, according to Differentiation and Consolidation models of decision making, attractiveness restructuring and consolidation processes often occur which work in favor of the desired outcome or alternative (Svenson, 1992). This in turn would influence the accuracy of hiring decisions made regarding these individuals.

The influence of differentiation on the attentional mechanism is in the invocation of the automatic or controlled process. When applicant information is inconsistent with an individual's categorization schema, conscious attention must be used and the controlled process is initiated. Having more detailed differentiation and finer degrees of categorization schema should invoke the controlled process more frequently. This in turn should result in more accurate interview decisions.

Based on the information processing theory discussed and the potential role of individual differentiation in the accuracy of interview decisions, the following two hypotheses are presented:

H 1: Individuals with higher levels of differentiation would be more accurate in judgments of applicant favorability.

H2: Individuals with higher levels of differentiation would be more accurate in hiring decisions.

METHOD

Subjects

The sample for the study was comprised of 212 students enrolled in a basic management course at a College of Business at a large Southeastern university. The students participated voluntarily for extra credit. The sample was composed of approximately 56% men and 44% women. The mean age of the subjects was 22 with a range from 18 to 47 years of age. The total work experience average for the subjects, including full- and part-time work experience, ranged from no work experience to 31 years, and the average total work experience was 2.7 years. The ethnicity composition of the sample was as follows: 66% Caucasian/ White (not of Hispanic origin); 18% African American/ Black; 11% Hispanic/ Latino/ Latina; 0% Native American; 4% Asian/ Pacific Islander; and 1% Other. Business majors accounted for 83% of the sample, while the remaining 17% were non-business majors. The grade point averages ranged from 2.0 to 4.0 with an average of 3.0. As expected, due to the fact that the data were collected from students, only 10% of the sample had any experience with formal interviewer training. Although generalizability when using students has been considered a problem by some researchers (Gordon, Slade, & Schmitt, 1986), Bar and Hitt (1986) concluded that results are similar when using students as subjects, as opposed to employees, on issues related to interview decisions.

Procedure

An application with an overview of the procedure and an informed consent form was completed for the Human Subjects Committee and data were collected during controlled laboratory conditions. Doctoral students were selected and trained to administer the surveys using specific written administrator instructions.

Subjects were instructed to imagine that they were hiring for a human resources manager position and to visualize themselves actually interviewing the video applicant. They were given a job description and resume and given time to read the materials. The job description for the Human Resource Manager was adapted from the *Dictionary of Occupational Titles* (U. S. Department of Labor, 1991). The subjects were instructed that they could take notes during the interview. At the end of the videotaped interview,

subjects responded to a set of survey questions. Survey items included the applicant's perceived characteristics, the interviewer's attitude toward hiring the applicant, intentions to hire, hire decision, and demographics.

The application and resume contained information designed to present a strong candidate for the position of a HR manager. The candidate, a white male, was well qualified for the position. The applicant had a B. S. in Business Administration (GPA 3.5) and a MBA with a concentration in human resource management (GPA 3.7). The applicant also displayed good vocabulary usage and, through the use of interview script, a working knowledge of human resource management. Thus, an accurate view of favorability would be strong favorability and an accurate interview decision would be a strong decision to hire.

Interviewer's perceptions of applicant characteristics. Subjects' perceptions regarding the interviewee's disposition were assessed by having the subjects' rate applicants on 26 bipolar pairs of adjectives that were rated using a 7-point scale, with 1 indicating positive traits and 7 indicating negative traits. The adjective pairs were adapted from previous research focusing on characteristics of the ideal employee, effective top managers, and motivated workers (Larkin & Pines, 1979). The following are examples of the adjective pairs used: successful - unsuccessful, conscientious - unconscientious, competent - incompetent, industrious - lazy, organized - disorganized, attractive - unattractive, decisive - indecisive, stable - unstable, prompt - tardy, and trustworthy - untrustworthy.

Interviewers' rating of applicant favorability. The interviewer's attitude toward the applicant was measured using a 7-point Likert type scale (1 = strongly agree and 7 = strongly disagree). The following questions were included: "Would you feel satisfied if you hired this individual?"; "Would you like to work with this individual?"; "Do you feel favorable toward this individual?"; "Do you like this individual?"; and "Do you believe that this individual would be an asset to the company?". Responses were averaged into an overall favorability score and higher scores indicated a stronger level of favorability toward the applicant.

Interviewer's intentions to hire. The following questions (coded 1-7, with 1 = strongly agree, 7 = strongly disagree) measured the interviewer's intentions to hire the candidate: "I will probably NOT hire the video applicant for the Human Resource Manager position" (reverse-coded); "It is likely that I WILL hire the video applicant for the Human Resource Manager position"; and "I plan to hire the video applicant for the Human Resource Manager position." Responses were averaged into an overall score for intention to hire and higher scores indicated a stronger decision to hire the applicant.

Demographic features. The demographic section included questions on work experience (part-time and full-time), race/ ethnicity, GPA, major, gender, and age. Work experience was entered in number of years and was computed as an average of part-time and full-time work experience. The race/ethnicity categories were: Caucasian/ White; African American/ Black; Hispanic/ Latino/ Latina; Native American; Asian/ Pacific Islander; and Other.

RESULTS

The 26 items used to measure perceptions of applicant characteristics were adapted from research by Larkin and Pines (1979), so a factor analysis was performed in order to ascertain whether sub-scales were evident or if the items should be combined to form one scale measuring the characteristics of the ideal employee. According to the factor analysis results, many of the items had

mixed loadings. There did not appear to be any conceptual rationale for dividing the scale, so the composite scale was used to measure perceptions of applicant characteristics. The Cronbach alpha reliability estimate was .87.

The ability to differentiate among others was measured by calculating the total variance for each subject's responses to the 29 items pertaining to subject's perceptions of the job candidate's character. Subjects' variance scores for the 29 items ranged from a low of 0.75 to a high of 6.19. A low variance would suggest a low ability to differentiate among individuals while a higher variance would indicate a stronger differentiation ability.

To assess the relationship between the subject's differentiation ability, i.e. their variance in character assessment of the applicant and their accuracy in viewing the applicant favorably, a correlation was performed using SPSS 16.0. Results revealed that a positive relationship existed between variability of respondent's answers and overall positive assessment of the job candidate (.455, $p < .001$). Further, among applicants who regarded the candidate favorably (rating him an average of 5 or better), the average variability in character ratings was 2.97. On the other hand, those subjects who regarded the applicant unfavorably (rating him an average of 3 or lower) the mean variability in character ratings was significantly lower (2.27). This supports hypothesis 1.

The degree of differentiation and the intent to hire were also compared using a correlation analysis. Results revealed a positive correlation between the two constructs (.355, $p < .001$). Further, of the 42 subjects who were not inclined to hire the candidate (rating an average of 3 or less on the seven point "intent to hire" scale), the mean variance of their "perception of character" scores was 2.15, which was significantly lower than the average variance of the 142 individuals who chose to hire the candidate (those subjects who responded with average 'intent to hire' scores of 5 or more). These results support Hypothesis 2.

DISCUSSION

Our study appeared to support the hypothesis presented. Results demonstrated that subjects with a higher degree of differentiation as measured by the variance they reported in individual characteristic measures of the candidate's character were in fact more likely to make more accurate assessments of the job candidate's favorability, as well as a more accurate hiring decision. This would suggest that interviewer training to provide for a more detailed differentiation schema or even selecting interviewers on their ability to differentiate among others would increase the accuracy of interview decisions.

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