



The Motivated Applicant: A Conceptual Model of Applicant Information Processing in the Internet Age

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Abstract: *This brief report integrates multiple self-regulatory theories to propose a conceptual model that acknowledges the job seeker as an active information-processing agent. In doing so, this paper focuses mostly on internet recruitment (e-recruitment) to develop propositions regarding the constructs and mechanisms engaged in the recruitment process. First, a brief review of pertinent theoretical constructs in the areas of employee recruitment, organizational attraction, and individual differences is offered, with a particular emphasis given to e-recruitment. We then propose that job applicants seek out, attend to, and process information in a manner that is influenced by both employer characteristics (and perceived characteristics) and dispositional features of the applicant. Finally, we provide a testable model that can advance recruitment research and provides human resources practitioners with a framework to organize important phenomena that aid in developing recruitment strategies and executing them in a way that enhances person-environment fit.*

Key Words: Signaling theory; E-recruitment; Person-Organization Fit; Self-Concern; Other Orientation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Humans' inherent social nature and advanced cognitive faculties prompt individuals to engage in complex self-perceptual processes throughout their lives, across contexts and time. The result of these processes is a multifaceted understanding of the self, particularly the social or relational self (Deaux & Perkins, 2001). This understanding of the self and relation of the self to larger systems (e.g., groups, organizations, societies) has led to a rise in consideration of social identity theory, specifically one's identity in relation to an employing organization (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Social identity theory has been applied to the employee recruitment context, where scholars argue that identification with a potential employer has consequences for the applicant pool and who decides to pursue employment (Highhouse et al., 2007; Zhu et al., 2021). From this lens of social identity theory, scientists have explored a variety of antecedents to organizational attraction.

Applicants are drawn to organizations that align with their identity in order to cultivate a match between themselves and the organization, referred to as subjective person-organization fit. Many established and well-known institutions are already judged by potential applicants due to their employer brand equity – beliefs about an organization based on previous knowledge and exposure (Cable & Turban, 2003). Yet, many prospective applicants don't have information beyond the reputation, recruiting material, or the internet (Smith, 2015) and this is often their first exposure to a potential employer. Thus, employer websites have become a standard for organizations with an online presence (Cober & Brown, 2006). When it comes to describing how individuals make important recruitment judgments (e.g., job pursuit intentions, person-organization fit) from employer websites, many recruitment scholars have turned to signaling theory (Breugh, 2008; Ehrhart & Ziegert, 2005).

Signaling theory describes why certain events and social cues in the recruitment process (e.g., recruiter fails to return calls and acts dismissive) produce consequences (e.g., applicant withdraws from consideration). The premise underlying signaling theory is that applicants have incomplete information about an employer, so they use the information they have access to as a signal of the missing information (Rynes et al., 1991). Although authors have attributed the link between recruiting practices/materials and applicant attitudes and behavior to this signaling process, there has been scant empirical justification for this process – particularly the types of inferences. Highhouse et al. (2007) offer one of the few papers connecting signaling theory to inferences made by applicants, distinguishing between instrumental (e.g., pay, location) and symbolic (e.g., prestige or purpose) inferences. Relatedly, De Dreu and Nauta (2009) posit that two orthogonal constructs, self-concern and other-orientation, serve to moderate the relationships between self-relevant information (self-concern) and group-level information (other-orientation). Integrating the findings of Highhouse et al. (2007) with

those of De Dreu and Nauta (2009) may allow for a deeper understanding of the way signals produce inferences and how they relate to recruitment outcomes like person-organization fit, person-job fit, and organizational attractiveness.

First, we review literature pertinent to signaling theory's application in recruitment literature, paying special attention to employer websites. Second, we argue that important recruitment outcomes are the result of social cognitive processes that involve symbolic and instrumental inferences drawn from recruiting materials. Third, we consider how self-concern and other-orientation may motivate the processing of signals, and the subsequent influence of fit perceptions on organizational attraction, differently. Finally, we introduce need strength as another moderator of applicant information processing. Several important propositions are posed throughout this paper and ultimately, we introduce a testable conceptual model of information processing in an e-recruitment context (see Figure 1). In addition to clarifying how individual differences and signaling processes interact to influence applicant attitudes, the propositions outlined in this paper have implications for organizations that engage in targeted recruitment, corporate social responsibility, and web-based recruitment in general.

1.1 E-recruitment

While job seekers continue to use traditional methods such as word-of-mouth, print advertisements, government agencies, and job fairs, a recent survey from the Pew Center found the largest source of searching for a job is the internet (Smith, 2015). Although job seekers can get information from other online sources (e.g., internet forums, news websites, job boards, or blogs), employer websites have proved the most productive in terms of research (Breugh, 2008). Recently the literature has bridged the gap between science and practice in regards to internet use and e-recruitment through various research approaches (Breugh, 2008; Ployhart, 2006). The first set of studies seek to understand how the elements of a website and users' experiences with it influence recruitment outcomes, while the second area of research explores how signals produce inferences from material on the website. Before discussing these research domains, it is important to briefly introduce common recruitment outcomes populating e-recruitment literature.

Given the scope of this paper, the most pertinent variables found in the e-recruitment literature will be highlighted (see Breugh & Starke, 2000 for general recruitment outcomes). Broadly, organizational attractiveness (OA) is one of the most pervasive outcomes studied, defined as perceiving a potential employer as a positive place to work (Ehrhart & Ziegert, 2005). Organizational attractiveness is conceptually related to other applicant perceptions (e.g., prestige, reputation, or person-organization fit) and often precedes job pursuit intentions, particularly when the applicant has many opportunities for employment. Job pursuit intentions (JPI), self-reported intentions to apply or follow up on a job, is

another construct considered important in e-recruitment research.

The last construct considered in this review is person-environment fit, specifically subjective person-job (PJ fit) and subjective person-organization fit (PO fit). There are numerous ways to conceptualize and measure person-environment fit and its subcategories (see Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005 for a review). Here, PJ fit refers to the applicant's perception of compatibility with the job environment specifically (e.g., job demands and characteristics) and PO fit refers to the applicant's perception of compatibility with the organization as a whole (e.g., climate and values). The current paper concerns subjective fit due to the proximity with individual's information processing, as well as the larger observed relationship with other applicant attitudes (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005).

1.2 Signaling Theory

Signaling theory proposes that economic markets, and the constituents that make up these markets (e.g., applicants and employers), deal with constant uncertainty regarding potential employers and employees (Spence, 1973). Spence explains that employers want to know whether an applicant will be a good employee, but they cannot access this information directly (as the applicant is not an employee with performance data) and thus, they use signals from applications (e.g., resume, education, references) to infer future performance. Likewise, potential future employees seek information about the employer in a similar fashion during recruitment (Rynes et al., 1991). In this context, job seekers face incomplete information regarding a prospective employer and resort to making inferences from the information they do have access to, such as reputation, interactions with current or former employees, and even the recruitment materials provided to them by the employer itself.

While it may not be true, recruiters may present a sunny picture of the work environment that is actually toxic and hostile. Indeed, recruitment scholars have long noted the propensity of recruiters and recruitment materials to display overly positive aspects of jobs at the expense of establishing realistic expectations (Breaugh & Starke, 2000). Whether an organization purposefully misleads prospective applicants to increase the applicant pool, or a prospective applicant erroneously infers a characteristic from perceived signals, the exchange expectations between the two parties inform a psychological contract, the beliefs held by an employee about the exchange relationships between herself and the employer (Rousseau, 1989). If there is a breach in this contract, whether it be real or perceived, there will be outcomes (potentially undesirable) for the organization (Bosse et al., 2009).

If job seeking behavior is influenced, at least in part, by one's social identity and concerns for the functional characteristics of the job, then both the process of signaling and the content of inferences merit scrutiny. The increasing role that employer websites share in communicating socially relevant information necessitates that we advance beyond our understanding of the signaling process, which one recruitment scholar asserts as, "... at best a primitive

understanding" (Breaugh, 2008, p. 116). In fact, several recent reviews have criticized the use of signaling theory without explicit considerations of applicant inferences (Celani & Singh, 2011; Connell et al., 2011). Nascent recruiting research has begun addressing these shortcomings by integrating social identity perspectives with signaling theory to understand how employer websites influence job seeker attitudes and behavior.

1.3 Social Identity

Employees websites frequently provide information on instrumental characteristics of employment (e.g., pay, work hours, location) and symbolic characteristics of employment (e.g., friendly atmosphere, prestigious firm). While instrumental and symbolic features can be explicit (company states salary) or implied (company states "competitive salary"), the term inferences will be used here due to the importance of subjective experience. That is, what ultimately matters to prospective applicants in evaluating their fit or attraction to an employer is what they think, not reality (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005; Thomas & Griffin, 1989). The distinction between instrumental and symbolic inferences has spurred a great deal of research that merges social identity theory with signaling theory to advance understanding of job seeker attraction in internet contexts.

Perhaps the most straightforward reason for pursuing employment with a company is due to the instrumental characteristics of the job. It is undeniable that the location and pay offered by a job are important determinants of intentions to pursue employment, as utilitarian motives drive the relationship between perception of instrumental features and organizational attraction (Highhouse et al., 2007). While working in a particular location or performing a certain task may involve elements of one's social identity, it is argued that such elements are more self-serving and functional. The motive behind pursuing employment with a high paying company is more about the function of the high pay (to live comfortably) rather than concern for self-presentation (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). Research has routinely demonstrated the effect of instrumental inferences on recruitment outcomes (Lievens and Highhouse (2003).

Proposition 1a: Instrumental inferences are predictive of organizational attractiveness.

Proposition 1b: Instrumental inferences are predictive of job pursuit intentions.

Although there has not been any empirical research on the link between instrumental inferences and PJ fit, using the instrumental-symbolic framework proposed by Lievens and Highhouse (2003), the conceptual link between positive inferences of job characteristics and higher perceptions of PJ fit should be considered. Since instrumental inferences refer to the functional characteristics of the job, then positive inferences should lead to more favorable evaluations of fit with the job.

Proposition 1c: Instrumental inferences are predictive of person-job fit.

According to social identity theory (Ashforth & Mael, 1989), people identify with organizations to enhance the self, through self-presentation, or because they perceive

congruence between themselves and the organization. Individuals are attracted to organizations that they perceive as caring about the same causes that they care about (Morgeson et al., 2013). Findings support the assertion that symbolic inferences, such as organizational traits (Slaughter & Greguras, 2009; Highhouse et al., 2007) and pride or prestige (Behrend et al., 2009; Jones et al., 2014) are predictive of organizational attractiveness and job pursuit intentions. For instance, if individuals view that an organization has a culture that will support a healthy and friendly work environment (a symbolic inference) they will more likely view the organization as attractive and want to continue on in the application process.

Proposition 2a: Symbolic inferences are predictive of organizational attractiveness.

Proposition 2b: Symbolic inferences are predictive of job pursuit intentions.

Additionally, several e-recruitment studies have found symbolic inferences drawn from employer websites are predictive of PO fit (Behrend et al. 2009; Travis, 2017).

Proposition 2c: Symbolic inferences are predictive of subjective person-organization fit.

1.4 Self-Concern and Other-Orientation

Recently, De Dreu and Nauta (2009) reconcile the many motivational theories that lean heavily on human propensity for self-interests (self-concern; SC) or instead argue the inherent social and relationship-oriented nature of humans (other-orientation; OO) by positing the self-concern and other-orientation as moderators (SCOOM) hypothesis. De Dreu and Nauta (2009) develop the SCOOM hypothesis on the acknowledgment that theoretical underpinnings of dominant perspectives in psychology involve motivations and needs that include selfish and social bases.

While there is no consensus (cf. Meglino & Korsgaard, 2004), De Dreu and Nauta (2009) hypothesize that self-concern moderates relationships between individual-level phenomena (e.g., job characteristics) and work behavior, while other-orientation moderates group-related attributes (e.g., climate) and work behavior relationships. Interestingly, the self-concern and other-orientation motives are strikingly similar to utilitarian motives driving instrumental inferences and the self-presentation motives driving symbolic inferences proposed by Lievens and Highhouse (2003). The current paper suggests that e-recruitment research can benefit from consideration of SCOOM regarding the instrumental-symbolic framework. That is, the same individual differences that motivate information processing in the workplace should also motivate information processing in the job search. Therefore, the relationships between inferences and fit perceptions, and between fit perceptions and organizational attractiveness will be moderated in accordance with the SCOOM hypothesis. Specifically, the relationships between instrumental inferences and PJ fit, and between PJ fit and organizational attractiveness will be stronger when self-concern is high.

Proposition 3a: Self-concern moderates the relationship between instrumental inferences and person-job fit.

Proposition 3b: Self-concern moderates the relationship between person-job fit and organizational attractiveness.

Additionally, the relationships between symbolic inferences and PO fit, and between PO fit and organizational attractiveness will be stronger when other-orientation is high.

Proposition 4a: Other-orientation moderates the relationship between instrumental inferences and person-organization fit.

Proposition 4b: Other-orientation moderates the relationship between person-organization fit and organizational attractiveness.

1.5 Individual Need Strength

Deci and Ryan's (2000) self-determination theory argues that all individuals have the need for competence (desire to feel one can engage in activities and have a positive impact on the environment around them), relatedness (desire to feel close and connected with others), and autonomy (desire to feel that one is in charge of their fate). Uniquely, these needs may differentiate in importance, the level of drive for satisfaction, and impact on different organizational outcomes (Sheldon & Filak, 2008; Van den Broeck et al., 2016). Gagne and Ryan (2005) implicate that when these needs are fulfilled, they are more likely to be motivated and satisfied. Greguras and Diefendorff's (2009) investigation of the different mediating effects of individual needs on the different types of fit (i.e., person-organization, person-group, and person-job) and employee attitudes and job performance demonstrated that different fits predicted different individual needs being met, in turn individual needs being met predicted different employee outcomes (i.e., commitment and job performance), and PO and PJ fit had both direct and indirect effects on employee attitudes (Greguras & Diefendorff, 2009).

We propose that individuals' need strength, the extent to which they need autonomy, relatedness, or competency, will, like self-concern and other-orientation, motivate how potential applicants perceive PO and PJ fit from inferences, as well as influence the extent to which PO and PJ fit affect subsequent organizational attractiveness perceptions. For example, if a job seeker has a high need for relatedness and they infer that an organization possesses an unfriendly environment, they will attend to that inference more strongly and likely develop low PO fit. Subsequently, if the applicant perceives a low PO as their need for relatedness will be unfulfilled, the applicant's low PO fit perceptions will have a stronger (negative) effect on their perception of organizational attractiveness.

Proposition 5a: Need strength will moderate the relationship between instrumental inferences and person-job fit.

Proposition 5b: Need strength will moderate the relationship between person-job fit and organizational attractiveness.

Proposition 6a: Need strength will moderate the relationship between symbolic inferences and person-organization fit.

Proposition 6b: Need strength will moderate the relationship between person-organization fit and organizational attractiveness.

Given the extensive research on fit perceptions as antecedents of OA, and OA as a predictor of JPI (Behrend et al., 2009; Schmidt et al., 2015), the model presented in Figure 1 portrays this causal structure.

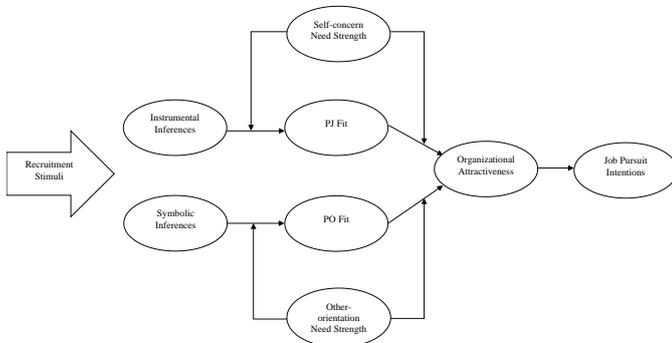


Figure -1: The Motivated Applicant Model of Organizational Attraction.

Note. PJ Fit = person-job fit, PO Fit = person-organization fit. Recruitment stimuli refer to the various inputs that create inferences.

2. CONCLUSION

This brief review addresses several shortcomings of extant e-recruitment literature applying signaling theory to organizational attraction by unifying theoretical links from social identity theory, the symbolic-instrumental framework, the SCOOM hypothesis, and self-determination theory into a simple, albeit not exhaustive, testable model. In addressing the gaps in our understanding of applicant inferences, this paper offers a merging of unique, yet related, research programs. By continuing to further integrate the various models of organizational attraction, researchers will be better equipped to overcome fragmented theorizing and allow for a more complete understanding of e-recruitment, and employee recruitment more broadly.

Furthermore, organizations may better leverage the messages they are sending, intended or otherwise, to potential applicants. The practical applications of information-processing theories are increasingly bolstered by developments in technology and human resources. Additionally, human resources initiatives such as corporate social responsibility and targeted recruitment (Avery & McKay, 2006) are changing how organizations conduct their recruitment activities and subsequently, what qualities they are deciding to emphasize. Thus, organizational professionals will benefit from tightly constructed theoretical bases that inform practice. Given that individual differences exist in motivations to process information, future research could assist practitioners with developing effective recruitment materials and procedures that maximize desired inferences for targeted populations. For example, some nascent research has integrated person perception theory (e.g., stereotype content model) with signaling theory to propose how contemporary organizational practices like messaging around COVID-19

may be processed and considered by potential applicants (Kanwal et al., 2022).

In order to offer a succinct review with clear practical implications, this model was presented with internet job searches as a focus, and employer websites as a particular example through which this theoretical lens can be applied. Nevertheless, the theoretical constructs in the proposed model are applicable to many recruitment stimuli and phenomena that occur in non-internet settings (e.g., college job fairs or interpersonal recruiter contacts). Potential applicants process information from both internet sources (employer websites, news articles, social media) and non-internet sources (friends, personal experience, etc.). While this brief report focuses on e-recruitment, the proposed model can also inform scientists and practitioners interested in recruitment offline as well.

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