THE INFLUENCE OF OBSERVABLE INTERVIEW BEHAVIORS ON THE WILLINGNESS TO ACCEPT A JOB OFFER

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ABSTRACT

Hiring is a complex optimization problem under substantial uncertainty. In addition to uncertainty regarding how well candidates' skills meet job requirements, recruiters must assess and seek to improve candidates' willingness to accept an offer. This proposed study evaluates the influence of pre-interview stress and impostorism on post interview trust in the employer and hesitancy to accept an offer. Implications for recruiters as well as employment counselors and candidates are discussed.

Keywords: Selection, Imposter Phenomenon, Stress, Job Interview

INTRODUCTION

For more than 40 years, the cost of hiring new employees has been a prominent consideration among recruiters (e.g., Barron & Bishop, 1985; Muehlemann & Leiser, 2018). The average costs of hiring new employees range from 10 to 17 weeks of wage payments (Blatter et al., 2012). This highlights the importance of recruiter impression management, with the goal of persuading qualified candidates to accept offers.

Indeed, quality candidates that have been interviewed may not always be the ones who are hired. Reasons for the poor hiring decision may include competition among candidates (Bennis & O'Toole, 2000), miscommunication across generations during the interview (Jennings, 2000), mismatched wage expectations, and schools not equipping graduates with the relevant skills (Cappelli, 2012). What is certain, is that companies need to have the best tools on-hand to recognize talent. In doing so, recruiters are better prepared to reduce their uncertainty about the ability of a candidate to meet an organizational need.

This article focuses on one small, but substantially important portion of the interview: Understanding what role imposterism and stress play in the interview process. A model is developed which proposes that this construct can lead to not only a lack of trust in the employer, but as a result, hesitancy to accept a job offer. While researchers have studied employment interviews extensively, the influence of observable interview behaviors suggesting stress and imposterism are not well understood in this context. The implications of this model suggest that employers should not only be aware of the effects of these constructs, but also actively seek out imposterism behaviors during interviews, and engage in activities that foster trust in the organization and hopefully increase the likelihood that the candidate will accept an offer.

In order to build a model to guide recruiters in this effort, we review relevant literature in the context of employment interviews in the following section. Next, the model is developed and propositions are elaborated. Implications for practitioners are discussed, and summarizing remarks conclude the paper.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to build a model of candidate trust in an employer and willingness to accept an offer, relevant literature related to employment interviews, uncertainty reduction, stress, impostorism, job search intensity and interview self-efficacy are discussed.

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Employment Interviews

The Bureau of National Affairs (2000) conducted a survey of HR professionals and found that over the preceding 15 years, the top 3 priorities of HR professions were the recruiting, selection and placement of new employees. Further, according to the 2019 Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) skills gap report: The Global Skills Shortage, the most common reason organizations report for struggling to hire suitable candidates is competition from other employers. Bateson et al. (2014) note that organizations devote substantial effort and resources for evaluating, negotiating with and selecting job candidates, since the consequences of a poor hire are considerable. The selection of job candidates is a complex optimization problem in which the recruiter must match the skillset of job candidates with the requirements of the organization, under substantial uncertainty, and constrained by the organization's ability to attract the candidate (Drake & Furner, 2020). Since job candidates often embellish and sometimes outright misrepresent their abilities on resumes (Furner & George, 2012), and others misrepresent their interest in accepting an offer on their cover letter (McKillip & Lockhart, 1984), recruiters are operating under substantial uncertainty. Uncertainty about the abilities of a candidate to perform job tasks is problematic itself, however, uncertainty regarding the willingness of a candidate to accept an offer is problematic for recruiters as well, since there are risks to making multiple simultaneous offers for the same position, and since strong candidates often receive many offers in quick succession, if a recruiter makes an offer to a candidate who does not accept, then they will waste time, during which other desirable candidates may accept offers from competing firms.

Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT) (Berger, 1979) posits that when a decision-maker is faced with choices in which all of the information necessary to make a decision is not available (e.g., such as when recruiters are selecting job candidates for employment), passive (observation) and/or active (information seeking) uncertainty reduction strategies are used to reduce that uncertainty (Downen et al., 2018). Pre-employment interviews serve as a method for recruiters to reduce some of the uncertainty associated with the extent to which a candidate is prepared to carry out relevant job tasks since the recruiter can ask open-ended questions, observe outward signs of deception (Giordano et al., 2011), as well observe tacit qualities, such as professionalism and communication ability (Young & Beier, 1977).

Indeed Kristof-Brown (2000) points out that candidate screening seeks to maximize both person-job fit (P-J fit) and person-organization fit (P-O fit). Determining P-J fit requires matching the qualifications of candidates (their knowledge, skill and attitudes or KSA) with the requirements of the job. Job requirements are determined by hiring managers, while KSA qualifications are provided by candidates, largely from information taken from their resumes (Lauver & Kristof-Brown, 2001). While assessing KSA requires acting under some degree of uncertainty because research indicates that job candidates often embellish or lie about their qualifications and KSA on their resumes and cover letters (Barrick et al., 2009; Levashina & Campion, 2009), assessing P-O fit is even more wrought with uncertainty. Assessing P-O fit requires recruiters to make judgments regarding the candidates' personality, social habits and workplace behaviors (Zinko, Furner, et al., 2017). Pre-employment interviews provide recruiters the opportunity to reduce uncertainty related to not only assess P-J fit (by asking questions which may indicate the candidates' grasp on the KSAs that they claim in their resumes) but also P-O fit (by providing the opportunity to assess the candidates' social ability, professionalism, espoused attitudes and behaviors) (Turos & Strange, 2018).

Trust in the Recruiter

Like recruiters, qualified job candidates are also faced with an optimization problem under uncertainty, as they seek to elicit

multiple offers from competing employers without full knowledge about the work environment, comfort level, the potential for career growth and organizational culture. As such, the job interview represents an important uncertainty reduction opportunity for the job candidate, as their interactions with the recruiter not only provide the opportunity to ask questions about workload and other relevant factors, but also gives the candidate the ability to assess the trustworthiness of the recruiter (Kirkwood & Ralston, 1999).

The influence of applicant trust of recruiters on interview outcomes has been well documented by researchers. For example, Saks (1989) investigated the influence of recruiter characteristics on job offer acceptance and found that candidates are more likely to accept an offer when recruiters provide realistic portrayals of the work environment during the interview, even when the portrayal is less desirable. Expectation-confirmation theory would suggest that subsequent job satisfaction may be influenced by accurate portrayals, particularly when the portrayal is negative. This finding is consistent with Fisher et al. (1979), who attributes the improvement in likelihood to accept an offer to the candidates' perception of the recruiter's trustworthiness, knowledge and credibility (Fisher et al. found that recruiters who provide unfavorable written information about the job positively influence perceptions of trustworthiness).

A job candidate's trust in a recruiter has been directly tied to offer selection (Celani et al., 2008). Further, research suggests facilitating candidate trust during the interview process may have a positive impact on work outcomes after employees are hired. Employee trust in an employer has been tied to multiple positive factors, including motivation (Eskildsen & Dahlgaard, 2000), commitment and satisfaction (Dirks & Ferrin, 2001), knowledge sharing (Mooradian et al., 2006), and performance (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002).

Willingness to Accept an Offer
Since this study seeks to reflect the challenges that recruiters face in reducing the uncertainty regarding whether a candidate will accept an offer, the outcome of interest in this study is the willingness of a candidate to accept an employment offer. A number of factors have been studied which influence candidates' willingness to accept a job offer, including offer characteristics such as benefits (Jennings et al., 2003), as well as recruiter characteristics such as how much information the recruiter shared with the candidate (Jennings et al., 2003) and candidates' perceptions of the invasiveness of the recruiter (Drake et al., 2016), as well as candidate characteristics including current employment status (Abraham et al., 2013) and trust in the employer (Celani et al., 2008).

Further, Drake and Furner (2020) demonstrate lack of trust is a primary driver of hesitancy to accept a job offer. They conducted an experiment in which candidates were told that recruiters screen the social media accounts of their candidates in one of three ways: 1) By viewing public profile information, 2) by asking candidates to befriend the company's profile, so that the company can see the information shared by the candidates and 3) by requesting the social media passwords of candidates, so that the company can see all social media content. They found that viewing public profile information did not affect hesitancy to accept an offer, friend requests had a negligible impact, and requests for social media passwords had a substantial effect on hesitancy to accept an offer.
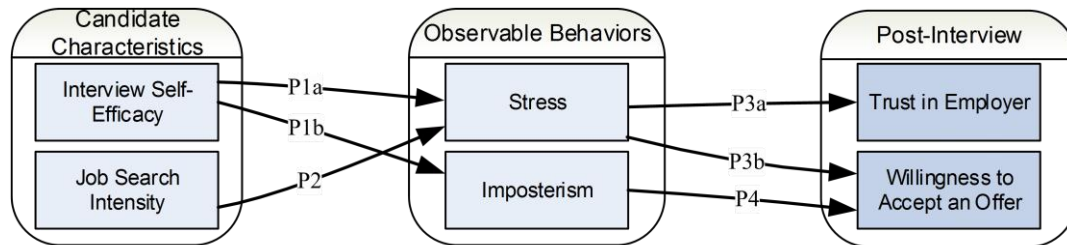
To assess the likelihood that a candidate may accept an offer, there are several clues that a recruiter can look for. We discuss two of these in the following section: Stress and Impostorism. In addition, we identify two candidate characteristics that influence Stress and Impostorism.

PROPOSED MODEL
Figure 1 shows the relationships between two observable behaviors (Imposterism and Stress) and post-interview attitudes. We

further identify relationships between candidate characteristics and interview behaviors. These relationships are discussed further in the following subsections.

Figure 1: Proposed Model

Interview self-efficacy (I-SE)
Researchers like Bandura have long shown that self-efficacy (i.e., one's belief in one's ability to succeed in specific situations or accomplish a task) is an empirically validated predictor of individual behavior (e.g., Bandura, 1983; O'Leary, 1985). Furthermore, efficacy beliefs regarding a specific task are most relevant for predicting and comprehending one's performance in a given situation (Gist et al., 1989). Essentially, if an individual holds a belief that they are good at something, they are likely to succeed at tasks involving that activity (Keith et al., 2015).

The social cognitive view of self-efficacy proposes that it is not a static trait, but rather it's dynamic, directly changeable, and is directly associated with specific performance domains (Nauta et al., 2009). As such it can be associated with such aspects as one's ability to interview.

I-SE measures a candidate's views regarding their job-interviewing abilities---reflecting cognitions about task-specific self-competence when it comes to enacting appropriate behaviors during the interviews (Tay et al., 2006). In a sample of working and unemployed adults, Wanberg et al. (1999) showed that job search competencies (i.e., such as I-SE) were positively related to one's ability to find employment when being out of work.

Self-efficacy beliefs are usually determined by four sources: performance attainment (personal accomplishments), vicarious experience (modeling), verbal persuasion,

and physiological states and reactions (Day & Allen, 2004). We expect that high I-SE should result in less pre-interview stress because candidates who have a higher degree of confidence in their ability to successfully interview are less likely to fear making a mistake that could result in not getting an offer, and experience less fear of embarrassment or other social anxieties.

P1a: Candidates who report higher levels of Interview self-efficacy will experience less pre-interview stress.

Further, we predict that interview self-efficacy will reduce feelings of imposterism in two ways. First, since feelings of imposterism stem from perceptions of inadequacy related to one's ability to complete the task (Furner et al., 2013), and self-efficacy refers to ones perceptions of their ability to complete a task, we predict that candidates who have faith in their ability to interview will also have more faith in their ability to present themselves as competent. Second, some individuals may score highly on I-SE because they have confidence in their ability to persuade others that they are competent, even if they are actually imposters (i.e. even if they are not particularly competent). In these situations, we expect that candidates who enjoy higher I-SE will exhibit fewer observable imposterism behaviors, even if they are imposters. One could say that they are more effective imposters.

P1b: Candidates who report higher levels of Interview self-efficacy will be less likely to exhibit imposterism behaviors.

Job Search intensity
Job candidates differ in the extent to which they are motivated by and emotionally tied to their job search (Gault et al., 2018). Candidates who already have stable jobs, or who do not have financial stress, or who are

engaged in other activities that bring them satisfaction experience lower levels of job search intensity. Conversely those with financial stress, the unemployed and those with low levels of job satisfaction experience higher levels of job search intensity. In this sense, job search intensity is a measure of the motivation of individuals to secure a job. The construct has been used in a variety of studies as both an antecedent and as an outcome.

For example, Werbel (2000) surveyed 219 job seekers and treated job search intensity as a mediator of the relationship between environmental exploration and initial compensation. Abraham et al. (2013) conducted an analysis of data from the Panel Study *Labor Market and Social Security* and found that among 4,000 respondents, those who were unemployed were not only more willing to accept new offers than those who were employed but were more willing to accept less appealing working conditions, including fixed-term offers.

Many of the antecedents of job search intensity have been tied to stress and other emotional outcomes. For example, Van Hooft and Crossley (2008) find that stress mediates the relationship between perceived locus of control, financial needs and job search intensity. Indeed, demonstrated relationships between stress and job search intensity, particularly when their goal orientation was high. Consistent with these findings, we predict that:

P2: Candidates will experience higher levels of stress when they report higher levels of job search intensity.

Pre-Interview Stress
Psychological stress refers to a feeling of tension and apprehension associated with perceptions of change or demand (Finklea & Osborn, 2019), and is widely studied across many disciplines. In management, stress has been studied in several contexts including task pressure (Matteson & Ivancevich, 1987), social issues related to work and performance (Quick et al., 1997) and the influence of gossip on work reputation (Zinko, Tuchtan, et al., 2017).

Indeed several studies have investigated job candidate stress reactions during employment interviews. McCarthy and Goffin (2004, p. 607) point out that stress is particularly salient "…for prospective employees, as the evaluative and competitive nature of the job application process often evokes feelings of anxiety, frustration and distress." Indeed espoused stress states can influence recruiter perceptions of candidates, resulting in lower scores for candidates who exhibit stress cues (Ayres & Crosby, 1995). In addition, Schmit and Ryan (1992) found that anxiety influenced both a cognitive ability test and a personality test.

Trust is a heavily studied decision factor in a variety of contexts (Serino et al., 2005). The relationship between stress and trust has been widely explored, generally finding that trust in an individual reduces social stress (Takahashi et al., 2005) and that in the absence of trust, stress tends to be higher (Troman, 2000). Guinot et al. (2014) found that when employees trust their coworkers, they report lower levels of job stress. We propose that when candidates are feeling higher levels of stress, they are less likely to form trusting beliefs toward the recruiting firm. Since trust is the willingness of an individual to cede control to another party with the expectation that the other party will not harm the individual (Schoorman et al., 2007), we predict that when job candidates perceive stronger feelings of anxiety regarding jobs that they apply to (i.e. experience stress), they will be less comfortable ceding control to the employer (i.e. experience lower levels of trust).

P3a: Job candidates who report higher levels of interview stress will report lower levels of trust in the employer.

The relationship between trust and willingness to transact has been studied extensively in marketing and more recently in e-commerce and virtual communities (Furner et al., 2012). Indeed Drake and Furner (2020) found that job applicants report higher levels of hesitancy to accept an offer when they report lower levels of

trust in the recruiter. We argue that the same mechanisms by which stress influences trust will also influence the willingness of candidates to accept an offer. When candidates experience more stress, they will not only form weaker trusting beliefs but also experience anxiety and concerns about the ability of a job to meet their personal needs and thus be less likely to accept the offer.

P3b: Candidates who report higher levels of stress will be less willing to accept an offer

Imposterism

Defined as "an internal experience of intellectual phoniness in high achievers who are unable to internalize their successful experiences" (Bernard et al., 2002, p. 321), imposterism was originally described by Clance and Imes (1978). They were examining highly educated and well-credentialed females and found that many of them felt themselves to be frauds, viewing themselves as impostors with low competence levels even though they were very successful.

A study by The Hub (2019) suggests that imposterism affects up to 85% of the population at times. As such, it is a significant issue impacting a variety of workplace dynamics. Indeed, these feelings of inadequacy have been shown to manifest in generalized anxiety, a lack of self-confidence, depression or frustration (Chrisman et al., 1995). Gediman (2005) stated that this syndrome is comprised of fear, doubt, worry and a defective cycle of post-success anxiety which doesn't allow individuals to develop and benefit from all of their latent abilities. Individuals suffering from imposterism feel they are not adequately suited for their job and engage in behaviors to prevent others from noticing their perceived inadequacies.

Such self-perceptions issues have been known to affect all aspects of one's workplace actions, for fear that some significant person within the organization will 'discover' that the employee is an impostor (Clance & Imes, 1978). As such, when a capable person is suffering from imposterism, they may experience self-doubt about their ability to secure a competing offer from another company, increasing their risk aversion, and compelling them to accept the offer in hand. Following this reasoning, we predict that:

P4: Individuals who score high on imposterism will report a higher willingness to accept an offer.

DISCUSSION

Interest in imposterism has grown in the past few years, with the construct gaining attention in mainstream media (e.g., Leviton, 2020). In addition, labor markets are tightening, making it more difficult to recruit and retain capable employees. As such, recruiters are faced with even more uncertainty regarding which candidates to make offers to. Understanding how imposterism and stress (behaviors which are observable by astute interviewers) may serve to increase the success of recruiters in making the right offers to the right candidates. Specific implications are discussed below.

Practical Implications

Recruiters should know if a candidate has the KSAs necessary for the job before the interview, based on information contained in the resume. During the interview, the recruiter is assessing the extent to which the candidate possesses the KSAs that they claim to, as well as other soft skills and characteristics. Our proposition that willingness to accept an offer depends on the level of stress and imposterism expressed by the candidate suggests that recruiters should be looking for signs of these indicators. In addition, if a recruiter feels that KSA and soft skills are acceptable, and perceives stress or imposterism, the recruiter should be prepared to make an offer immediately after interviews are concluded, to reduce the time during which the candidate can develop feelings of stress, loss of trust and potentially hesitancy to accept an offer, and the probability that the candidate receives a competing offer.

In addition, research suggests that cognitive dissonance can be affected by reducing the

importance of the dissonant beliefs, adding more consonant beliefs that were seen by the individual as more significant that the dissonant beliefs, or alter the dissonant beliefs so that they are no longer seen as inconsistent by the individual (Brehm & Cohen, 1962). As the recency effects shows, (see Baddeley & Hitch, 1993 for an overview of the recency effect), an individual who has recently come off a success is likely to carry those positive emotions forward for a period. As such, an offer should be made to the candidate as soon as possible (i.e., before the imposter effects can counter the positive outcome of the interview). Candidates may experience cognitive dissonance during a delay between the interview and the offer if they may feel that they did well during the interview, but also feel that they are not good enough for the job (i.e. the imposter phenomenon). The strength of the dissonance is based upon the number of beliefs, and the importance attached to each belief (Freedman, 1965). Feelings of lack of trust in the employer may exacerbate feelings of dissonance as time passes.

Secondly, recruiters should endeavor to foster strong feelings of trust during the interview. Other studies have identified the importance of trust in decisions (i.e. Furner et al., 2014), and our findings highlight this importance. Some trust-inducing behaviors that recruiters can adopt include providing a realistic preview of job responsibilities rather than an overly positive preview (Saks, 1989), espousing empathy and an interest in the candidate, and communicating in manor which projects personal focus (George et al., 2004).

For career counselors, this suggests that I-SE should be taught along with other interview skills. Self-efficacy can be increased with practice, meditation and mental activities which foster a positive attitude. Adding these to existing training may reduce stress and imposterism, potentially leading to better interview outcomes.

Theoretical Implications

In addition to extending research on willingness to accept employment offers, this study also extends research on imposterism. P1 and P2 are purely theoretical, while P3 and P4 are largely practical. Imposterism has been treated as a static individual characteristic (Bernard et al., 2002), however, this study treats imposterism as an antecedent as well as an outcome in the employment interview context. Our model suggests that interview self-efficacy can be effective in not only more impressive interview performance, but also better in modeling behaviors which would lead a recruiter to believe that a candidate might accept an offer, which could potentially result in more offers. Our study also serves for a call for more research on observable interview behaviors which may serve as clues to recruiters about the suitability of job candidates as well as their impression of the recruiting organization and their intentions regarding accepting offers.

CONCLUSION
We described how pre-employment interviews serve as an important uncertainty reduction mechanism for recruiters who seek to assess the P-J and P-O fit of job candidates and to foster trust which can both increase the propensity of the candidate to accept an offer, and may lead to better employee outcomes after the candidate is hired. These interviews are conducted before a candidate is selected, and are seen by many candidates as a stressful step in the process (McCarthy & Goffin, 2004). Our model suggests that I-SE can influence observable interview behaviors (stress and imposterism) which in turn influence trust in an employer and willingness to accept an offer. Implications for recruiters including reducing the time between the interview and the offer, while implications for counselors and candidates include teaching I-SE.

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