

Sociometric Selection and the Employment Interview: An Empirical Examination

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ABSTRACT. In this article, the author reports his empirical test of Adams, Elacqua, and Colarelli's (1994) assertion that the unstructured employment interview is a means of sociometric selection. On the basis of 80 unstructured interviews provided by 13 participants, the author concluded that measures of sociometric fit, job fit, and work world fit were correlated with hiring recommendations. Additionally, he examined the three types of fit comparatively through a regression analysis and concluded that sociometric and job fit were significantly related to hiring recommendations, whereas work world fit was not. The findings support the idea that the interview is used to assess both sociometric fit and job fit.

THE OVERWHELMING MAJORITY OF RESEARCH STUDIES that examined the unstructured employment interview suggest that it is a poor predictor of job performance (e.g., see reviews by Arvey & Campion, 1982; Harris, 1989; Ulrich & Trumbo, 1965). The interview, however, is one of the most commonly used employee selection procedures (Bureau of National Affairs, 1988). Furthermore, interview results are often weighted heavily by those making hiring decisions (Friedman & Williams, 1982). In their 1994 review, Adams, Elacqua, and Colarelli noted that discrepancy and suggested that one explanation for it was that the interview serves functions for organizations that are not clearly addressed in the literature. More specifically, they argued that the unstructured employment interview remains in use because it allows organizations to engage in sociometric selection that they defined as "the selection of individuals into a group based on group members' affective responses toward the applicants" (p. 100). In this article, I report an empirical test of this assertion. In the section that immediately follows, I describe the function of the employment interview as a means to assess applicant fit

and then delineate from the perspective of person–environment fit the various types of fit that may be assessed in the interview. Next, I introduce the notion of sociometric fit and state the hypotheses regarding it and the other forms of fit. Finally, I describe and discuss the results of an empirical study testing the hypotheses.

The interview is a multifaceted assessment device (Schuler & Funke, 1989). It can be used to assess a number of applicant characteristics relative to a wide array of organizational characteristics. Some of the applicant characteristics may include knowledge, skills, and abilities as well as attitudes, values, and goals. Organizational characteristics may include specific job demands (e.g., communication skills for sales jobs) as well as more global organizational characteristics (e.g., organizational culture). Much of the research critical of the employment interview has been conducted, using the traditional selection paradigm. That is, the interview was examined as a selection technique that is used to assess an applicant's knowledge, skills, and abilities relative to the demands of a specific job within a specific organization (Adkins, Russell, & Werbel, 1994). Research conducted from that perspective focuses exclusively on the interview's validity as a predictor of one type of fit, namely, person–job fit. That conceptualization of fit, however, is narrow and limited, given the latitude afforded by the interview and the demands of employing organizations.

Researchers in the area of industrial and organizational psychology have begun to examine the interview's validity relative to the broader concept of person–environment fit (e.g., Bretz, Rynes, & Gerhart, 1993; Rynes & Gerhart, 1990). The underlying premise of that research is that positive outcomes result when individuals fit their work environments. As noted by Bretz and Judge (1994), research in that area has linked person–environment fit to such outcomes as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, intention to quit (Mount & Muchinsky, 1978; Vancouver & Schmitt, 1991), and job performance (Caldwell & O'Reilly, 1990).

Although there is no consensus regarding the definition of person–environment fit within the context of the employment interview (Rynes & Gerhart, 1990), researchers have identified several of its main components. For instance, Kristof (1996) has suggested that one of the components of person–environment fit is person–job fit, or the match between an individual's KSAs and the demands of a particular task environment or job (Caldwell & O'Reilly, 1990; Edwards, 1991). A second component identified in the literature is person–organization fit, which is the fit between an individual's personal characteristics (e.g., personality, values, goals) and the social environment (e.g., culture, values, goals) of the organization (Chatman, 1989; O'Reilly, Chatman & Caldwell, 1991; Schein, 1991). A third component is applicant–interviewer fit, which is the match between the applicant and the

interviewer (Raza & Carpenter, 1987). A fourth component of person–environment fit in the context of selection is person–work world fit. This conception of fit, sometimes referred to as general employability, is more broad and not specifically related to a particular job or organization (Rynes & Gerhart, 1990). It is focused on the match between an applicant’s characteristics and those that are desired of all potential employees (e.g., work ethic).

Of the four types of fit, two are clearly related to the type of sociometric selection described by Adams, Elacqua, and Colarelli (1994). The two types—person–organization fit and applicant–interviewer fit—both focus on social relationships and are therefore most likely to influence the interviewer’s affective response to the applicant. Taken together, these two components of person–environment fit reflect what can be referred to as sociometric fit. *Person–organization* fit clearly encompasses the social and cultural aspects of group functioning described by Moreno (1956) and applicant–interviewer fit encompasses the *tele* or interpersonal attraction between individuals described by Moreno (1953).

Some evidence exists that the various conceptualizations of fit described above are assessed during the employment interview (Raza & Carpenter, 1987; Rynes & Gerhart, 1990). In one of the few studies that examined how interviewers actually arrive at assessments of fit, the content analysis of interviewer comments seemed to support the notion that person–job, sociometric, and person–work world fit are assessed in the interview (Bretz, Rynes, & Gerhart, 1993). Although that study made an important contribution by identifying the content domain related to interviewer assessments of fit, it did not examine the relationship between the person–environment fit constructs and hiring decisions.

With much of the theoretical groundwork laid and the content domain identified by previous research, I obtained for this study interviewer assessments of person–job, sociometric, and person–work world fit and tested three hypotheses regarding their relationship to hiring decisions. The first hypothesis was that interviewer perceptions of person–job fit are positively related to hiring decisions. The second hypothesis was that interviewer perceptions of sociometric fit are positively related to hiring decisions. The third hypothesis was that interviewer perceptions of person–work world fit are positively related to hiring decisions.

Method

Participants

The participants in this study were 13 members of three organizations who, in the course of their duties, were responsible for interviewing and making

hiring decisions to fill job vacancies within their organization. The 13 interviewers provided data on 80 separate interviews, and that is the number of interviews that serves as the basis for this study. Participation was voluntary, and participants could withdraw from the study at any time, without penalty.

Measures

Interviewers completed an applicant rating form that contained items regarding person–job fit, sociometric fit, person–work world fit, and hiring recommendations at the conclusion of each interview they conducted during a 30-day time period. The items used to measure each of the variables were based on the results of Bretz, Rynes, and Gehart’s (1993) content analysis of interviewer descriptions of fit and on past research on the employment interview (e.g., Adkins, Russell, & Werbel, 1994). Additionally, to overcome the unreliability associated with single item measures used in much past research, each of the variables was measured with multiple items. The items were arranged in the following order: (1) person–job fit, (2) sociometric fit, (3) person–work world fit, and (4) hiring decisions. All items were rated on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*) unless otherwise noted.

Person–job fit was assessed by three items. The first item asked, “To what extent has this applicant had work experience related to the job for which he or she is being interviewed?” The second item asked, “To what extent has this applicant completed course work related to the job for which he or she is being interviewed?” The third item asked, “To what extent does this applicant have the knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary to perform the job for which he or she is being interviewed?”

Sociometric fit was assessed by six items. The first item asked, “Given what you know about this applicant and the characteristics of your organization, how well do you think this applicant will ‘fit in’ to your organization?” (Adkins, Russell, & Werbel, 1994). Because there is some debate about the dimensions along which individuals and organizations may be matched (Kristof, 1996), three additional items were used. These items were intentionally worded to provide the interviewers with options regarding the dimensions of sociometric fit they view as important (e.g., attitudes and values). The three items were: “To what extent does this applicant’s attitudes match the attitudes of other members of your organization?” “To what extent do you think this applicant will ‘get along’ with the other people in your organization?” and “To what extent does this applicant’s values appear to match the values of your organization?” In keeping with past findings about assessments of likability in employment interviews (Orphen, 1984; Raza & Carpenter, 1987) and Moreno’s (1953) description of tele, two additional items were included: “To what extent do you personally like this applicant?” and “To what extent would you personally like to work with this applicant?”

Person-work world fit was assessed by three items. The first item, adapted from Rynes and Gerhart (1990), asked, "Overall, how employable do you think this applicant will be in the general job market?" The second item asked, "How well do you think this applicant will perform in some organization other than your own?" The third item asked, "How suitable would this applicant be as an employee for some other organization?"

Hiring decision was assessed by using three items. The first item asked, "Overall, how likely is it that you will recommend that this applicant be hired by your organization?" The second item asked, "How likely do you think it is that this applicant will be a successful employee for your organization?" The third item asked, "How well do you think this employee will perform as a member of your organization?"

Results

Means, standard deviations, correlations, and internal consistency reliability estimates were calculated (see Table 1). As can be seen in the table, each of the measures displayed an acceptable level of internal consistency, and the means and standard deviations are plausible. To provide an initial test of the hypotheses, the correlations between each of the fit variables and hiring decision were examined. In support of the first hypothesis, the correlation between person-job fit and hiring decision was .74 ($p < .01$). In support of the second hypothesis, the correlation between sociometric fit and hiring decision was .84 ($p < .01$). In support of the third hypothesis, the correlation between person-work world fit and hiring decision was .79 ($p < .01$).

For a more informative test of the three hypotheses, hiring decision was

TABLE 1
Means, Standard Deviations, Correlations, and Internal Consistency Reliability¹ Estimates for Study Variables

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4
1. Person-job fit	4.99	1.29	.88			
2. Sociometric fit	5.40	1.14	.66**	.96		
3. Person-work world fit	5.53	1.18	.71**	.85**	.98	
4. Hiring decision	5.12	1.58	.74**	.84**	.79**	.96

¹Elements in the main diagonal are internal consistency reliability estimates (coefficient alpha).

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

regressed on the three fit variables. That analysis allowed the relationships between the fit variables and the hiring decision to be examined comparatively. That is, by examining the joint relationships of all three fit variables on hiring decision simultaneously, the regression analysis allowed the relative relationship of each type of fit to hiring decisions to be estimated. The analysis indicated that taken together, the three fit variables accounted for 75% of the variance in hiring decision, $F(3, 75) = 78.51, p < .01$. The individual regression coefficients for person–job fit, $\beta = .29; t(77) = 3.53, p < .01$, and sociometric fit $\beta = .51; t(77) = 4.75, p < .01$, were significant at the .01 level. However the regression coefficient for person–work world fit was not significant, $\beta = .15; t(77) = 1.31, ns$.

To explore the relative relationships among the fit variables and hiring decisions further, I calculated a series of three additional stepwise regression procedures with hiring decisions serving as the criterion. In the first regression, person–work world fit was entered on the first step, and person–job fit and sociometric fit were entered on the second. The analyses indicated that person–work world fit accounted for 63% of the variance in hiring decisions individually on the first step, $R^2 = .63, p < .01$, but was not a significant predictor when person–job and sociometric fit were entered at the second step, $\beta = .15; t(77) = 1.31, ns$. In the second regression, person–job fit was entered on the first step, and person–work world fit and sociometric fit were entered on the second. The analysis indicated that person–job fit accounted for 54% of the variance in hiring decisions individually on the first step, $R^2 = .54, p < .01$, and remained a significant predictor at the second step, $\beta = .29; t(77) = 3.53, p < .01$. In the third regression, sociometric fit was entered on the first step, and person–job and person–work world fit were entered on the second. The analysis indicated that sociometric fit accounted for 69% of the variance in hiring decisions individually on the first step, $R^2 = .69, p < .01$, and remained a significant predictor at the second step, $\beta = .51; t(77) = 4.75, p < .01$.

Discussion

My study was an empirical test of Adams, Elacqua, and Colarelli's (1994) assertion that the interview serves the function of allowing organizations to engage in sociometric selection. To that end, the study identified three types of fit that can be assessed in an interview (person–job, sociometric, and person–work world fit) and hypothesized that each would be related to hiring decisions. I then tested the hypotheses, using a sample of interviews. In support of the three hypotheses, the results of a correlation analysis indicated that each of the three types of fit was related to hiring decisions in the expected (positive) direction. After a series of regression analyses to examine the relationships of the three types of fit comparatively, I concluded that the results

indicated that each was individually related to hiring decisions. I also concluded that, when taken together, person–job fit and sociometric fit were related to hiring decisions but person–work world fit was not. The results support the idea that the interview does serve a sociometric function for organizations but that it is also functions as a traditional selection method used to match applicant qualifications to job demands.

Because the regression analysis allows for some comparison across the three types of fit, its results are particularly interesting. The finding that, when considered simultaneously, person–job and sociometric fit are both related to hiring decisions but that person–work world fit is not suggests that the interviewers were able to look beyond characteristics generally desired of all applicants (person–work world fit) and base their decisions on the match they perceived between the applicant and the needs (both task and sociometric) of their specific organization. That finding provides additional support for the idea that interviewers attempt to make firm, specific assessments of applicants during the interview (e.g., Raza & Carpenter, 1987; Rynes & Gerhart, 1990).

Taken together, the finding that interviewers attempt to assess sociometric fit in the interview and the fact that structured interviews are typically more reliable (Campion, Porsell, & Brown, 1988) and valid (McDaniel, Whetzel, Schmidt & Maurer, 1994) than unstructured interviews suggests that organizations may be able to improve their current interviewing practices by developing structured interviews that focus on sociometric fit. Those could be developed following Treadwell, Kumar, Stein, and Prosnick's (1998) suggestions for the construction of sociometry questions. Such structured interviews may be more reliable and valid indicators of sociometric fit than unstructured interviews. In attempting to validate interviews designed to measure sociometric fit, interviewers need to specify carefully the criteria the organization is trying to predict. Because the predictor is sociometric fit, it seems logical that the criteria be related to the sociometric functioning of the organization.

As is the case with any study, the present study is not without limitations. One limitation is the fact that the criterion variable was not a true hiring decision but rather something more akin to a hiring intention. Although there is little reason to suspect that those who received higher scores on the hiring decision variable would not be more likely to be hired, an objective hiring decision would have been a better measure. Unfortunately, none of the participating organizations was willing to provide such data.

It should also be noted that the focus of the present study was on interviewer impressions rather than on interviewer accuracy. That is, although the study found support for the idea that interviewers' perceptions of fit are related to their hiring decisions, it did not assess the accuracy of those perceptions relative to some external standard. That would seem an important area for future research. Furthermore, perhaps more than most other selection meth-

ods, the interview relies on interpersonal communication. Because of that, the communication skill of the interviewee takes on a prominent role. It seems likely that those applicants who possess better communication skills are more likely to convey the information needed by interviewers to arrive at assessments of fit. Similarly, the ability of the interviewer to elicit and perceive relevant information from the applicant seems to be important. Therefore, two other areas for future research are the investigation of the applicant's ability to communicate information about fit and the interviewer's ability to process that information (i.e., what is the relationship between an applicant's communication ability and sociometric fit?).

In addition to being an area in need of future research, the issue of accuracy also carries with it some practical implications. For instance, because the data presented here indicate that interviewers may base hiring recommendations on their perceptions of sociometric fit, it may be worthwhile for organizations to train interviewers to be better able to collect and interpret that type of information. Similarly, applicants might benefit from training that enables them to communicate their values and preferences in the interview to facilitate assessments of sociometric fit. Applicants may also benefit from training on how to gather data about the sociometric functioning of the organization that will allow them to make better choices about the jobs they apply for and accept.

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