What We Know About Applicant Reactions to Selection: Research Summary and Best Practices

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this white paper is to bridge the gap between research on job candidate attitudes and behavior and applied practice. We accomplish this objective by highlighting why candidate reactions matter, outlining the key research findings, and sharing a list of best practices for human resource managers directly involved in employee selection.

What We Know About Applicant Reactions to Selection: Research Summary and Best Practices

The process of recruiting and selecting top candidates is central to organizational success. From a recruitment perspective, a key goal of selection systems is to increase candidates' interest in the employer as a place to work. From a selection perspective, the key goal is to predict which employees will be successful on the job. As a result, it is critical to consider selection systems from the perspective of both the employer and the job candidate. Organizational decision makers may, however, be unfamiliar with how to predict, understand and influence job candidates' reactions to the selection system. Fortunately, researchers have developed and tested models of this process. In the current paper, we outline why candidate reactions matter, discuss the key findings of the research about job candidates' attitudes and behavior, and provide a list of best practices for employer organizations.

Why Should Employers Care About the Attitudes and Behaviors of Job Candidates?

Imagine the following scenario, which we've all seen happen in a variety of contexts...

> *Bob applied for a job that he really wanted, but he never heard back from the company. In the meantime, he has become upset and angry and is now telling his friends about the bad experience with the company. This could have been prevented if only the company had treated Bob with respect and sent him an e-mail telling him whether he got the job.*

As this scenario illustrates, there are a number of convincing practical, economic, legal, and psychological reasons for organizations to pay attention to how candidates react to selection systems. We outline five of these below:

1) *Disgruntled candidates may develop a negative view of the organization* and may communicate this perception to individuals in their professional and social networks. This may discourage potentially strong candidates from applying, and has direct implications for organizational image. It is even possible that consumer behavior may be affected if organizational image is tarnished.

2) *Candidates who view the selection procedure as invasive may withdraw from the selection pool*. This is more likely to occur when candidates are highly qualified and have competing offers. As a result, organizations may lose top employees to their competition.

3) ***Negative reactions influence the attitudes and work behaviors of candidates once they are hired on the job.*** To compound matters, negative reactions may have an immediate effect on work outcomes because many organizations use standardized selection procedures for employee promotion. This has direct implications for organizational productivity, morale, staff turnover/retention, counterproductive behaviors at work, and culture.

4) ***Inappropriate selection procedures may cause candidates to file complaints or take legal action.*** Not only can this be extremely costly, it can also severely harm an organization's reputation, which is particularly damaging in the Internet age.

5) ***Negative experiences during the selection process may have detrimental effects on candidate well-being.*** Not only is this a concern for the long-term health of applicants, but it is also at odds with the goals of socially responsible organizations.

What Are Key Aspects of the Selection Process from the Applicant Viewpoint?

In recent years, considerable research has emerged on candidate perceptions and reactions to selection systems. These applied studies have tended to center on how candidate reactions impact organizations, focusing on outcomes such as organizational attractiveness, intentions to recommend the organization to others and propensity for litigation. The framework for this has primarily revolved around procedural and distributive justice rules. Procedural justice rules focus on the fairness of how decisions

get made (i.e., are the steps taken to make the decision fair?), while distributive justice focuses on the perceived fairness of the outcomes which are received (i.e., is the decision itself fair?).

Much of this work has been driven by Professor Stephen Gilliland's summary model of candidate reactions. This model predicts that the fairness of the selection system can influence candidate attitudes (e.g., organizational attractiveness), intentions (e.g., to recommend the selection process to others) and behaviors (e.g., interview performance). He further proposed a total of 10 rules that enhance the experience of fairness from the candidate's perspective. These rules provide employers with a way of thinking about the selection process from a candidate's perspective and include the following:

(1) Ensure the system is **job-related**

(2) Give candidates the **opportunity to perform**

(3) Give candidates the **opportunity to challenge** their results

(4) Ensure that procedures are **consistent** across all candidates

(5) Provide candidates with informative and **timely feedback**

(6) Provide **explanations** and justification for procedures or decisions

(7) Ensure that administrators are **honest** when communicating with candidates

(8) Ensure that administrators **treat candidates with warmth and respect**

(9) Support a **two-way communication process**

(10) **Ensure that questions are legal** and not discriminatory in nature.

Bauer and colleagues (2001) developed a comprehensive measure to assess Gilliland's rules that may be used to assess the relative fairness of selection practices in actual organizations. A number of studies have tested Gilliland's (1993) propositions, and meta-analytic findings indicate the perceptions of procedural fairness are, indeed, related to organizational attractiveness, intentions to recommend the selection process to others, and job acceptance intentions (Chapman, Uggerslev, Caroll, Piasentin, & Jones, 2005; Hausknecht, Day & Thomas, 2004). In terms of specific rules, the most consistently proven strategies for improving applicant reactions are ensuring that the procedure is job related, providing candidates with the opportunity to show what they know, ensuring the procedure is consistent across candidates, providing explanations to candidates, and ensuring that administrators treat candidates with warmth and respect (Hausknecht et al., 2004; Truxillo, Bodner, Bertolino, Bauer, & Yonce, 2009).

In contrast to the North American perspective on candidate reactions, European research has adopted a broader framework that places more emphasis on how the *individual candidate* is personally affected by the selection process (e.g., Anderson, Salgado, & Hülsheger, 2010). This line of research suggests surprisingly small differences in applicant reactions across countries – a boon for multinational organizations recruiting outside of the United States. It also highlights the fact that selection systems can have far-reaching implications for candidates that extend beyond acquiring a job – they may influence candidate levels of self-esteem, stress and perceived self-worth (Truxillo & Fraccaroli, 2011). Some European work has been driven by Schuler's (1993) *Social Validity Theory*, which focuses on the extent to which

candidates are treated with dignity and respect. Specifically, *Social Validity Theory* contains four components:

(1) **Informativeness** (the degree to which candidates perceive the information is useful)
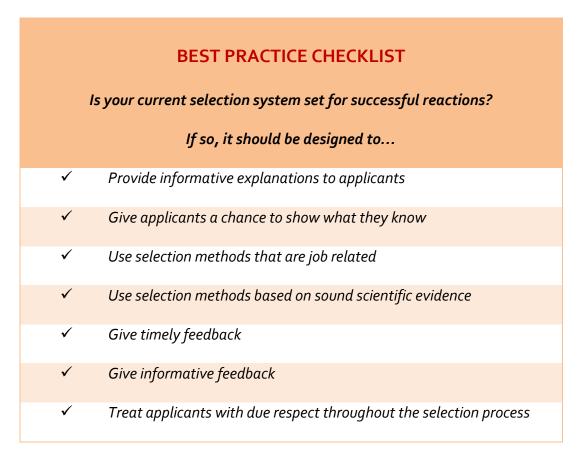
(2) **Participation** (the extent to which candidates feel that they can be involved)

(3) **Transparency** (the extent to which candidates feel that the selection methods are unambiguous)

(4) **Feedback** (the amount of information provided to candidates regardless of whether or not they secured the job)

BEST PRACTICE CHECKLIST

Is your current selection system set for successful reactions?

If so, it should be designed to…

- ✓ *Provide informative explanations to applicants*

- ✓ *Give applicants a chance to show what they know*

- ✓ *Use selection methods that are job related*

- ✓ *Use selection methods based on sound scientific evidence*

- ✓ *Give timely feedback*

- ✓ *Give informative feedback*

- ✓ *Treat applicants with due respect throughout the selection process*

Best Practices for Positive Applicant Reactions

In summary, relatively recent developments in theory and research have provided us with valuable insight into the selection process from the perspective of job candidates. We know that applicants' perceptions are largely a function of how well they did in the selection procedure (e.g., passed or failed). The question now is what organizations can *actually do* in order to maximize features and benefits of their selection methods for producing favorable applicant reactions.

The goal of this section is to bridge the gap between empirical knowledge and applied practice by outlining how organizations can ensure that their selection system is well received by candidates. We accomplish this objective by outlining specific recommendations that are connected to empirical research findings. These recommendations are presented in Table 1. The first column of Table 1 presents Gilliland's procedural justice rules, along with Schuler's corresponding components. In the second column we offer our corresponding recommendations for practice. We detail each rule in the following table along with corresponding recommendations.

Procedural Justice Rules, Descriptions and Recommendations for Selection

Procedural Justice Rule	Rule Description	Recommendation
1. Job relatedness	Extent to which a test appears to measure the content of the job or appears to be a valid predictor of job performance.	• Develop the selection system based on a job analysis to identify the knowledge, skills, abilities and other characteristics (KSAOs) that are relevant for the job. Use the KSAOs in the design of tests and/or interviews. • Base the selection system on scientific evidence. • If the selection method is not obviously job-related to candidates, explain it to them.
2. Opportunity to perform	Having adequate opportunity to demonstrate one's KSAOs in the testing situation.	• Ensure the selection system is comprised of multiple components – interview, standardized test and work sample. • Ensure that tests are long enough to enable a comprehensive assessment of candidate KSAOs. • Ensure that the selection process is modified over time to keep it relevant.
3. Consistency	Uniformity of test content and test scoring and test administration.	• Develop and use standardized tests and interviews based on extensive job analysis. • Ask the exact same questions of each candidate. • Provide extensive training to test/interview administrators to ensure that standard procedures are followed for all candidates. • Ensure all materials (online and elsewhere) send consistent messages regarding your organization.

4. Feedback	Providing candidates with informative and timely feedback on the decision making process.	• Use a computerized application system whereby candidates can track their progress and view results of the decision-making process. • Make timely feedback a priority and track time-to-feedback for each selection hurdle.
5. Explanations and justification	The provision of justification for a selection decision and/or procedure.	• Give candidates as much information as possible. • Put the information in context such as the number of applicants. • Provide candidates with information regarding future job applications.
6. Honesty	The importance of honesty when communicating with candidates.	• Ensure that the process is transparent. • Train and reward administrators for being honest with candidates. • If providing negative results, focus on the facts and not personal characteristics. • Ensure all materials (online and elsewhere) are accurate messages regarding your organization.
7. Treat candidates with respect	The degree to which candidates feel they are treated with warmth and respect by test administrators.	• Treat candidates with respect. • Provide interpersonal training for all administrators. • Highlight the importance of ensuring that the organization is perceived in a positive light.

8. Two-way communication	The interpersonal interaction between the candidate and test administrator that allows candidates the opportunity to have their views considered.	• Train interviewers to be good listeners. • Include open-ended questions that allow candidates to ask questions as part of the standardized test process.

Interestingly, the best practices for engendering positive candidate reactions are directly aligned with best practices for ensuring that the selection process can identify the top candidates for the job. This consistency is encouraging for candidates and organizations alike, as it suggests that properly conducted selection systems can serve the best interest of both parties. It is important to acknowledge, however, that candidates may not always want the methods that are the most valid and useful to organizations, and that in the end, validity and utility are the primary criteria for employers to consider in choosing selection methods.

Recommendation #1: Use job-related selection procedures.

Gilliland's first rule, that the selection procedure should be job-related, is directly aligned with the recommendation that selection systems be transparent. It is also aligned with Anderson et al. (2010), who found that applicants prefer valid over less valid selection systems, and thus recommended that selection procedures be based on sound scientific evidence. This fits with the desire of organizations to assess applicants using the best methods, as well as with the desire of applicants to be assessed with valid methods.

Recommendation #2: Provide candidates with an opportunity to perform.

Gilliland also recommends that candidates have adequate opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge, skills and abilities. This can be accomplished by ensuring that the selection system is comprised of multiple components, such as a selection interview, work sample, personality inventory, and cognitive ability test. This enables candidates to demonstrate their abilities across a broad range of areas and increases the chances that more competencies are assessed. Further, it is essential that tests/interviews are comprised of multiple items and that the full range of relevant competencies is assessed. Finally, it is important to acknowledge the changing nature of jobs and to ensure that the program is modified over time to keep it relevant.

Recommendation #3: Treat candidates with consistency.

Gilliland's fourth rule is that the content and scoring of the test or selection method must be consistent across all candidates. This can be accomplished by using standardized tests, procedures and interviews that ask the exact same questions of candidates. Standardized testing also ensures that scoring procedures are uniform across candidates. It is also important to provide extensive training to test administrators in order to ensure that standard procedures are followed. Finally, all materials must convey consistent messages about the organization and the position. These techniques can help to ensure that candidates do not perceive any blatant violations of the consistency rule.

Recommendation #4: Provide feedback to candidates about their status.

The fourth rule is to provide informative and timely feedback to candidates. This rule is derived from models of fairness. The most efficient way that this can be achieved is to use computerized application systems that track candidate progress and provide them with updates at various stages of the selection process.

Recommendation #5: Provide explanations and justifications about the selection procedures.

While employers may be hesitant to provide an explanation to candidates, providing a good explanation showcases good organizational practices and makes good business sense. In fact, providing information about the selection decision should become a standard practice for organizations. When providing explanations, give the candidates as much information as possible and be sure to put it in context, such as the number of applicants. Again, this can be accomplished through a computerized system. It is also important to provide explanations regarding the procedures used. Finally, candidates should be treated with respect when providing explanations.

Recommendation #6: Use honesty in dealing with applicants.

This rule stresses the importance of ensuring that administrators are honest when communicating with candidates. To do so, ensure that the entire process is transparent. A properly designed selection system will have nothing to hide, and as such, should be portrayed honestly and openly to candidates. Relatedly, it is important

to train administrators to be honest and to reward them for treating candidates in an open manner. In cases where administrators must provide negative feedback (e.g., to communicate that an candidate did not get the job), it is essential that they are trained to focus on the facts, such as the strong candidate pool, as opposed to commenting on idiosyncratic characteristics of the candidate. Such honesty does not, however, imply that organizations need to reveal all aspects of selection processes or decision-making procedures to applicants. Rather, it suggests that candidates should be treated with honesty at each stage in the selection procedure and that whenever possible should be provided with information in order to allow openness and transparency.

Recommendation #7: Treat candidates with respect.

Gilliland (1993) also highlighted the importance of ensuring administrators treat candidates with warmth and respect. Training programs for HR managers can be particularly useful in this regard. These programs should highlight to administrators the rationale for ensuring the organization is viewed in a positive light. Techniques to put candidates at ease should also be covered.

Recommendation #8: Encourage two-way communication.

The eighth rule focuses on enabling candidates to communicate their views during the selection process. From a practical perspective, this can be accomplished by training interviewers to develop strong listening skills. Ensuring opportunities for candidates to ask questions throughout the selection process is also critical, and can be accomplished

by including open-ended questions for candidate feedback (e.g., "Do you have any questions or comments at this point?") at regular intervals during the testing.

In addition to the aforementioned rules, we offer two additional suggestions. Note that we refrain from labelling these as formal rules, as they do not boast the strong level of empirical support as the rules outlined above. Nevertheless, they are important considerations.

Important Consideration 1: Content appropriateness.

Organizations should carefully consider the extent to which test questions and other selection method items are appropriate in content. This can be accomplished by first ensuring that questions are derived from properly conducted job analysis. It is also important to avoid ambiguous questions, and those that have weak relations with job performance. Further, ensure that there is more than one recruiter administering each test/interview in order to increase accountability and reduce the likelihood of biased and/or illegal questions.

Important Consideration 2: Opportunity to review/appeal.

Organizations should consider allowing candidates the opportunity to review their performance at each stage and to be eligible for reconsideration at a later point if not selected at the current time. The corresponding recommendation is to incorporate a standardized appeal process into the selection system. This may reduce the possibility of litigation by disgruntled applicants.

Conclusion

Applicant reactions research has advanced substantially but is still a developing area.

Key principles established from empirical research have been offered in this white

paper along with implications for practice and potential future research directions.

Treating applicants well is not just good practice – it will likely translate into better job

performance and has the potential to benefit utility paybacks to organizations.

This white paper is based on findings from the following references:

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