



# What We Know About the Candidate Experience: Research Summary and Best Practices for Applicant Reactions

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### Abstract

The process of recruiting and selecting top candidates is critical 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, decision makers should consider selection systems from the perspectives 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 robust models regarding job candidates' reactions and strategies for how to influence them. We outline why the candidate experience matters, discuss the key findings of the research about job candidates' attitudes and behavior, integrate recent research on the role of technology in the candidate experience, and provide a list of best practices based upon key research findings for employers.

Imagine the following scenario which we've observed 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 more respect, informed him about whether he got the job and/or where he stands in the process, and told him if he is still being considered for a position.

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.* The negative comments may discourage other candidates, and potentially strong ones, from applying and has direct implications for organizational image. It is even possible that consumer behavior may be affected if the organizational image is tarnished. A case in point is Virgin Media, which received 150,000 job applications for 3,500 jobs in 2015. Virgin calculated that rejected applicants who canceled their service with them cost an estimated \$6 million in lost revenue each year (Adams, 2017). To address this, Virgin undertook a program to improve the job candidate experience throughout the company.
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. It is not always clear what specific selection procedures candidates consider invasive. However, research shows that tracking social media is something that organizations routinely do even though it may be an ill-advised HRM practice (Van Iddekinge et al., 2016) and many applicants may not understand that this is happening (Root & McKay, 2014).
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 implications for organizational productivity. The limited research that has been done shows that these effects may linger for months and even years (Konradt et al., 2015; McCarthy et al., 2013). This concern is especially acute for

candidates going through internal promotion and selection procedures within organizations.

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 where job boards are open for all to see with the click of a few links (Anderson, 2011; Salgado et al., 2017).
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?

Considerable research has emerged on candidate perceptions and reactions to selection systems. These applied studies have centered on how candidate reactions impact organizations, focusing on outcomes such as organizational attractiveness, intentions to recommend the organization to others, and propensity for litigation (McCarthy et al., 2017). The framework for this research has primarily revolved around how just or fair job candidates perceive hiring procedures to be. Procedural justice rules focus on the fairness of how decisions get made, that is, whether the hiring process itself is fair, whereas distributive justice focuses on applicants’ perceptions of the outcomes received, that is, was the decision to hire or not hire fair.

**The fairness of the selection system can influence candidate attitudes (e.g., organizational attractiveness), intentions (e.g., to recommend the organizations to others, to take legal action), and behaviors (e.g., interview or test performance).**



Much of this work has been driven by Professor Stephen Gilliland’s model of candidate reactions published now over 2 decades ago (Gilliland, 1993). This model predicts that the fairness of the selection system can influence candidate attitudes (e.g., organizational attractiveness), intentions (e.g., to recommend the organizations to others, to take legal action), and behaviors (e.g., interview or test performance). Gilliland further proposed a total of 10 “rules” that enhance the experience of fairness from the candidate’s perspective. These guidelines provide employers with a way of thinking about the selection process from a candidates’ perspective and include the following:

1. Ensure the system is **job-related**.
2. Give candidates the **opportunity to perform** or show what they know.
3. Give candidates the **opportunity to challenge** their results.
4. Ensure that procedures are **consistent** across all candidates.
5. Provide candidates with useful 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.

**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.**



Bauer and colleagues (2001) developed a comprehensive survey scale to assess Gilliland’s rules that may be used to assess the relative fairness of selection practices in actual organizations. These items can be found in Appendix A. A number of studies have tested Gilliland’s (1993) propositions, and 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 et al., 2005; Hausknecht, Day & Thomas, 2004). Perceptions of fairness have even been found to be related to performance on the job (Konradt et al., 2017; McCarthy et al., 2013).

In terms of specific rules, the most consistently supported strategies for improving the candidate experience are ensuring that the procedure seems 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; McCarthy et al., 2017; Truxillo et al., 2009).

**How Do Candidate Expectations Differ Worldwide?**

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 et al., 2010). This line of research suggests surprisingly small differences in applicant reactions across countries; that is, candidates around the world generally want much the

same things from a hiring process. This is a boon for multinational organizations recruiting outside of the US as well as for global organizations recruiting from within the US for their domestic operations. 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). In terms of preferences, candidates across the globe indicate that their most preferred methods are interviews and work sample tests; favorable methods are resumes, cognitive and personality tests, references, and biodata; and least preferred methods are honesty tests, personal contacts, and graphology (Anderson et al., 2010). Finally, although applicants appear to react positively to online recruitment methods such as Internet-based assessments (Lievens & Harris, 2003), less favorable reactions are reported in response to videoconferencing technology (Chapman et al., 2003) and asynchronous digital interviews (Langer et al., 2017) used for selection purposes. Consequently, a better understanding of technology’s role in applicant reactions is needed.

**How Does Technology Affect Candidate Reactions?**

Technological advances in recruitment and selection over the past 2 decades have rendered the Internet as the primary tool through which many organizations recruit and select employees. The internet enables a continuous conduit of information between job applicants and employers, resulting in web-based recruitment and selection tools that can identify and assess thousands of applicants in an expedient and cost-efficient manner. Automated recruitment tools built on artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning processes, such as web scraping (Landers et al., 2016), allow organizations to extract candidate data from online sources such as social media

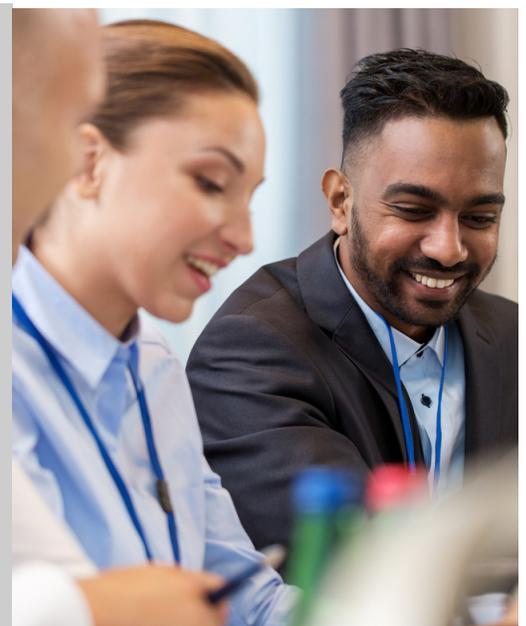
websites. Additionally, assessment tools can be customized to accommodate different applicant groups, applicants can be given immediate feedback and given choice over the order of their assessments, web site content can be designed to facilitate user friendliness, testing can be done via mobile phones, and videoconferencing can be conducted with a range of platforms (e.g., Skype, Google Hangouts, Facetime). Assessments can also be highly interactive, as seen with gamification tools, potentially increasing candidate engagement. In light of these technological advantages, it is critical that organizations develop thoughtful and strategic approaches to how they use these technologies. Not only does the type of technology serve as a signal to applicants about the organization and whether it would be a good place to work (Anderson, 2003; Rynes et al., 1991), but also the extraction and use of non-work-related online information may result in applicant privacy concerns (Bhave et al., 2020).

It is increasingly common for organizations to evaluate the “digital footprints” of job applicants, obtained through social media and networking Web sites (e.g., Facebook, Twitter; LinkedIn; Google), but evidence regarding the predictive validity of this data is mixed. For example, recruiter ratings of Facebook profiles may result in adverse impact and fail to provide a reliable and accurate picture of the future job performance of potential applicants (Van Iddekinge et al., 2016). Conversely, assessments of LinkedIn profiles have been linked to career success, with limited adverse impact (Roulin & Levashina, 2019). Although research on applicant privacy concerns is limited, findings from Stoughton et al. (2015) reveal that the assessment of social media websites for applicant screening purposes may result in intentions to litigate, decreased organizational attractiveness, and feelings of one’s privacy being invaded. Further, the use of this information raises issues regarding discrimination, resulting in ethical and legal implications (McCarthy et al., 2017). For this reason, some countries have outright banned background checks through social media. Thus, before using digital footprints, organizations should ensure that the information they are collecting is a valid and reliable predictor of future job performance and is not viewed as an invasion of privacy by job candidates.

### 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. 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.

**In light of these technological advantages, it is critical that organizations develop thoughtful and strategic approaches to how they use these technologies. Not only does the type of technology serve as a signal to applicants about the organization and whether it would be a good place to work, but also the extraction and use of non-work related online information may result in applicant privacy concerns.**



**Best Practice Checklist**

<b><i>Is your current selection system set for successful reactions? If so, it should be designed so it is...</i></b>
providing informative explanations to applicants.
giving applicants a chance to show what they know.
using selection methods that are job related.
using selection methods based on sound scientific evidence.
giving timely feedback.
giving informative feedback.
treating applicants with due respect throughout the selection process.

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 focus our recommendations on consistent empirical research findings and these are presented on the next pages. The first and second columns of the table below presents Gilliland’s procedural justice rules and a short description of each rule. The third column includes recommendations for practice.

Procedural justice consideration	Description	Recommendations for practice
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.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Develop the selection system based on a job analysis to identify the knowledge, skills, ability, and other characteristics (KSAOs) that are relevant for the job. Use the KSAOs in the design of tests and/or interviews.</li> <li>2. Base the selection system on scientific evidence.</li> <li>3. If the selection method is not obviously job related to candidates, explain it to them.</li> </ol>
2. Opportunity to perform	Having adequate opportunity to demonstrate one’s KSAOs in the testing situation.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. Ensure the selection system is comprised of multiple components: interview, standardized test, work sample, and so forth.</li> <li>5. Ensure that tests are long enough to enable a comprehensive assessment of candidate KSAOs.</li> <li>6. Ensure that the selection process is modified over time to keep it relevant</li> </ol>
3. Consistency	Uniformity of test content, test scoring, and test administration.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>7. Develop and use standardized tests and interviews based on extensive job analysis.</li> <li>8. Ask the exact same questions of each candidate.</li> <li>9. Provide extensive training to test/interview administrators to ensure that standard procedures are followed for all candidates.</li> <li>10. Ensure all materials (online and elsewhere) send consistent messages regarding your organization.</li> </ol>

4. Feedback	Providing candidates with informative and timely feedback on the decision making process.	11. Use a computerized application system whereby candidates can track their progress and view results of the decision-making process. 12. Make timely feedback a priority and track time-to-feedback for each selection hurdle.
5. Explanations & justification	The provision of justification for a selection decision and/or procedure.	13. Give candidates as much information as possible. 14. Put the information in context such as the number of applicants. 15. Provide candidates with information regarding future job applications.
6. Honesty	The importance of honesty when communicating with candidates.	16. Ensure that the process is transparent. 17. Train and reward administrators for being honest with candidates. 18. If providing negative results, focus on the facts and not personal characteristics. 19. 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.	20. Treat candidates with respect. 21. Provide interpersonal training for all administrators. 22. 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.	23. Train interviewers to be good listeners. 24. Include open-ended questions as part of the standardized test process that allow candidates to ask questions.

Interestingly, most of our best practice recommendations 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.

### Conclusion

There is no doubt that the candidate experience has meaningful implications for both job applicants and organizations. 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 likely translates into better job performance and has the potential to benefit organizations.

**Treating applicants well is not just good practice—it likely translates into better job performance and has the potential to benefit organizations.**

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## Appendix A. Selection Procedural Justice Scale (SPJS) Items

Bauer, T. N., Truxillo, D. M., Sanchez, R. J., Craig, J. M., Ferrara, P., & Campion, M. A. (2001). Applicant reactions to selection: Development of the selection procedural justice scale (SPJS). *Personnel Psychology, 54*, 388-420.  
Overall scale  $\alpha = .88$

Subscales:

### Structure Fairness Factor ( $\alpha = .88$ )

#### *Job Relatedness—Predictive*

Doing well on this test means a person can do the [insert job title] job well.  
A person who scored well on this test will be a good [insert job title].

#### *Information Known*

I understood in advance what the testing processes would be like.  
I knew what to expect on the test.  
I had ample information about what the format of the test would be.

#### *Chance to Perform*

I could really show my skills and abilities through this test.  
This test allowed me to show what my job skills are.  
This test gives applicants the opportunity to show what they can really do.  
I was able to show what I can do on this test.

#### *Reconsideration Opportunity*

I was given ample opportunity to have my test results rechecked, if necessary.  
There was a chance to discuss my test results with someone.  
I feel satisfied with the process for reviewing my test results.  
Applicants were able to have their test results reviewed if they wanted.  
The opportunities for reviewing my test results were adequate.

#### *Feedback*

I had a clear understanding of when I would get my test results.  
I knew what I would receive feedback about my test results.  
I was satisfied with the amount of time it took to get feedback on my test results.

### Social Fairness Factor ( $\alpha = .93$ )

#### *Consistency*

The test was administered to all applicants in the same way.  
There were no differences in the way the test was administered to different applicants.  
Test administrators made no distinction in how they treated applicants.

#### *Openness*

I was treated honestly and openly during the testing process.  
Test administrators were candid when answering questions during the tests.

Test administrators answered procedural questions in a straightforward and sincere manner.  
Test administrators did not try to hide anything from me during the testing process.

#### *Treatment*

I was treated politely during the testing process.  
The test administrators were considerate during the test.  
The test administrators treated applicants with respect during today's testing process.  
The testing staff put me at ease when I took the test.  
I was satisfied with my treatment at the test site.

#### *Two-Way Communication*

There was enough communication during the testing process.  
I was able to ask questions about the test.  
I am satisfied with the communication that occurred during the testing process.  
I would have felt comfortable asking questions about the test if I had any.  
I was comfortable with the idea of expressing my concerns at the test site.

#### *Propriety of Questions*

The content of the test did not appear to be prejudiced.  
The test itself did not seem too personal or private.  
The content of the test seemed appropriate.

### **Job-Relatedness Content Factor ( $\alpha = .88$ )**

#### *Job Relatedness—Content*

It would be clear to anyone that this test is related to the [insert job title] job.  
The content of the test was clearly related to the [insert job title] job.