

Running head: ORGANIZATIONAL ATTRACTIVENESS

From Attraction to Applying: The Effects of Initial Face-to-Face Contacts

Jeroen Smeulders

Belgian Ministry of Defense

Bert Schreurs, Karel De Witte, and Karin Proost

University of Leuven

Eva Deros

Erasmus University of Rotterdam

Presented at the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the International Applied Military Psychology Symposium, Oslo 2004. Corresponding concerning this article may be addressed to Bert Schreurs, University of Leuven, Centre for Organizational and Personnel Psychology, Mechelsesteenweg 95, 3012 Leuven, Belgium. Electronic mail may be sent to [schreurs.bert@skynet.be](mailto:schreurs.bert@skynet.be).

TITLE

From Attraction to Applying for the Military: The Effects of Initial Face-to-Face Contacts

ABSTRACT

This study examined potential applicant reactions to career office personnel in the Belgian military. We found that the relationship between career consultant characteristics and intentions toward the organization was fully mediated by attitude toward the organization, and that intentions fully mediated the relationship between career consultant characteristics and application behavior.

PRESS PARAGRAPH

This study examined whether potential applicants considering a military occupation would be influenced by the personality and behavior (warmth, informativeness, competence) of the personnel working in military career offices. We found that job seekers were more attracted to the military when career consultants were perceived as warm and competent. These characteristics increased respectively the odds of willingness to apply and application behavior. We found some indications that potential applicants were discouraged from applying by very informative consultants. This finding closely fits the idea that a lot of youngsters initially have an idealized image of what the military is really like.

### From Attraction to Applying for the Military: The Effects of Initial Face-to-Face Contacts

A large number of studies have focused on applicants' reactions to recruiter behaviors and personality during the screening interview. Recruiter warmth is consistently found to be associated with applicant attraction, with applicants more attracted when the recruiter is perceived as warm (Goltz & Giannantonio, 1995; Taylor & Bergmann, 1987). Also frequently reported in the literature is the positive relationship between attraction and the amount of information provided during the interview (Maurer, Howe, & Lee, 1992; Rynes & Miller, 1983). A third characteristic that has received considerable attention is recruiter competence. Applicants are more attracted to the organization when the recruiter is perceived as competent (Harris & Fink, 1987; Liden & Parsons, 1986). Because the screening interview is one of the most frequent means of establishing interpersonal contact and influencing applicants' job choices (Rynes, 1989), few studies have investigated other types of initial face-to-face contacts (Barber, 1998). Nonetheless, organizations facing difficulties in attracting applicants typically fall back on other forms of initial contacts, such as open houses and job fairs (Glickstein & Ramer, 1988). Still other organizations make use of career offices. The goal of this study is to examine whether prior conclusions on applicant reactions to recruiters conducting the initial screening interview also go for other forms of initial face-to-face contacts.

#### Potential Applicants' Attraction to the Military

Contrary to research on applicants' reactions to the selection interview, research on potential applicants' reactions to early recruitment activities is still in its infancy. Recently, Anderson, Born, and Cunningham-Snell (2001) called for more research on "candidate reactions to recruitment processes, especially as it is *at this early stage* that many may decide to self-select out in order to avoid further time commitments in attending selection procedures with the organization" (p. 202). The present study examines potential applicants' attraction to the

military. This organisation typically uses career offices to establish the first interpersonal contact with potential applicants and to inform them about job characteristics and working conditions.

Probably the most important distinction between the traditional screening interview and an information session in a career office is that a consultant in a career office does not intend to make any evaluation about a potential applicant and cannot prevent him/her from applying, even if it would be clear to him that the person is not suited for the job.

### Direct and Indirect Measures of Attraction

The most direct measures of potential applicant attraction would be actual applications for employment and ultimate choice of one place to work (Sinar & Highhouse, 2000). Yet, because behavioral measures of attraction are hard to obtain, most previous studies on applicant attraction used nonbehavioral, indirect measures of attraction. Nonbehavioral measures typically include items assessing general organizational attractiveness (Turban, Forret, & Hendrickson, 1998), and intentions (Liden & Parsons, 1986). An appealing characteristic of attitude and intention items is that they seem to map on to the components of Fishbein and Ajzen's (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) theory of reasoned action (TRA) (Sinar & Highhouse, 2000).

According to the TRA, the most proximal determinant of behavior is a person's intention to engage in it, and intention is a function of attitude toward the behavior. Thus, attitudes influence behavior to the extent that they influence intentions to engage in that behavior.

### Present Study

In the present investigation we assess both attitude and intentions toward the organization as nonbehavioral measures of applicant attraction. In addition, we include potential applicants' decision to apply as a behavioral indicator of attraction. Based upon the vast amount of evidence on the effects of recruiter characteristics on real applicants' attractiveness to organizations and

willingness to pursue employment, we expect career consultant characteristics to have a positive effect on potential applicants' attitude and intentions toward the organization as well.

Hypothesis 1. Career consultant characteristics have a positive effect on potential applicants' attitude and intentions toward the organization after controlling for background variables.

Additionally, in line with the TRA, we hypothesize attitude toward the organization to play a mediating role between career consultant characteristics and intentions toward the organization.

Hypothesis 2. The relationship between career consultant characteristics and potential applicants' intentions toward the organization is at least partially mediated by potential applicants' attitudes toward the organization.

Next, we investigate the effects of career consultant characteristics on potential applicants' decision to apply. We do not know of any previous research findings investigating this issue.

Research Question 1. Do potential applicants' perceptions of career consultant characteristics have an effect on their decision to apply after controlling for background variables?

Research Question 2. In case there is an effect, is this effect mediated by potential applicants' intentions toward the organization?

## Method

### Procedure and Sample

Between October 2001 and March 2002 1144 surveys were sent to all persons who recently (two weeks before) had visited a career office of the Belgian Defense and had an

information session with a career consultant at that time. The survey included an autobiographic form, measures of organizational attractiveness, and a measure of career consultant characteristics. 651 individuals completed and sent back the survey, which corresponds with a response rate of 57%. We removed from further analyses all individuals who did not comply with the preliminary legal conditions (i.e., age, diploma, criminal record) ( $n = 26$ ). We also removed all individuals who completed the survey after applying ( $n = 180$ ) and all individuals who did not write down the completion date ( $n = 27$ ). The analyses conducted were based on the remaining total of 418 potential applicants.

The majority of the respondents were male (82.5%). Some visitors had a job at the time they visited the recruiting station (17.2%). Most of the respondents, however, were secondary school students (53.6%) ready to enter the labor market. The majority of respondents had no (53.3%) or very little (less than one year) (18.4%) work experience. Most of the respondents also had no experience with selection procedures (90.6%). The average age of the respondents was 20.

### Measures

Background information Respondents were asked to fill out their gender, age, and educational background. We also measured work experience and prior experience with selection procedures.

Career consultant characteristics. Three career consultant characteristics were of special interest to us, given their ubiquitousness in previous research on recruiter characteristics, viz., warmth, informativeness, and competence. Warmth was measured with a scale consisting of nine items from 1 (strongly disagree) to 8 (strongly agree). The reliability estimate revealed a Cronbach alpha value of .89. To measure informativeness, we used a scale consisting of four items from 1 (strongly disagree) to 8 (strongly agree). The reliability estimate revealed a

Cronbach alpha of .77. Competence was measured with a scale consisting of six items from 1 (strongly disagree) to 8 (strongly agree), showing a Cronbach alpha value of .81. All scales were developed by the authors, based on preceding discussions with career consultants and job seekers.

Attitude toward the organization. Attitude was measured with a single item asking “how attractive is this company as an employer, for you?” (1 = not attractive at all, 6 = very attractive).

Intentions toward the organization. To measure intentions, subjects were forced to make a choice between whether or not they intended to apply (0 = I do not intend to apply, 1 = I intend to apply).

Application behavior. As a behavioral measure we used subjects’ decision to apply. For all visitors we verified in a central database whether or not they applied within a time span of six months after their first visit (0 = did not apply within six months, 1 = applied within six months).

## Analyses and Results

### Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations. All career consultant characteristics are significantly related to attitude toward the organization. Warmth significantly correlates with intentions toward the organization (Spearman  $r = .12$ ,  $p < .05$ ), but not with application behavior. Informativeness has significant correlations neither with intentions, nor with application behavior. Competence correlates significantly with both intentions (Spearman  $r = .14$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and application (Spearman  $r = .11$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Finally, high positive correlations between attitude and intentions (Spearman  $r = .40$ ,  $p < .01$ ), intentions and application behavior (Spearman  $r = .32$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and attitude and application behavior (Spearman  $r = .28$ ,  $p < .01$ ) are observed.

### Test of Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1. First a hierarchical linear regression analysis was performed with attitude as the dependent variable. Gender, age, educational level, work experience and prior experience with selection procedures were entered in the first step. These background variables explained 3.6% of the variance,  $F(5, 340) = 2.55, p < .05$ . The set of career consultant characteristics, which were entered in the second step, were responsible for a significant proportion of additional variance in the criterion of 6.8%,  $F(3, 337) = 8.59, p < .001$ . As is shown in Table 2, only warmth emerged as a significant predictor ( $\beta = .29, p < .01$ ). To test the second part of the hypothesis, a hierarchical logistic regression analysis was performed with intentions toward the organization as the dependent variable. The model with only the set of background variables, that were entered in the first step, was significant,  $\chi^2(5, N = 345) = 14.85, p < .05$ . By entering the set of career consultant characteristics in the second step, the model significantly improved,  $\chi^2(3, N = 345) = 12.02, p < .01$ . The model with the career consultant characteristics correctly classified 0.87% of the remaining 15.07% of the sample who were misclassified by the model with only demographical variables. Although the addition turned out to be significant, there was little room for improvement. As can be concluded from Table 3, gender,  $W(1) = 7.54, p < .01$ , warmth,  $W(1) = 4.38, p < .05$ , and informativeness,  $W(1) = 3.87, p < .05$ , emerged as significant predictors.

Hypothesis 2. When attitude was controlled for in the analysis (Baron and Kenny, 1986), the set of career consultant characteristics was no longer significant,  $\chi^2(3, N = 345) = 3.86, n.s.$  Consistent with what we had predicted, these results suggest that the effects of career consultant characteristics on intentions are fully mediated by potential applicants' attitude toward the organization.

### Research Questions

Research question 1. A hierarchical logistic regression analysis was performed with application behavior as the dependent variable. Gender, age, educational level, work experience and prior experience with selection procedures were entered in the first step. This model proved significant,  $\chi^2(5, N = 346) = 16.53, p < .01$ . By entering the set of career consultant characteristics in the second step, the model significantly improved,  $\chi^2(3, N = 346) = 10.70, p < .05$ . The final model correctly classified 2.31% of the remaining 39.88% of the sample who were misclassified with only demographical variables. Compared with a model without predictors, the model at step 2 improves with 5.78%. As is shown in Table 4, competence,  $W(1) = 6.75, p < .01$ , and informativeness,  $W(1) = 4.43, p < .05$ , emerged as significant predictors.

Research question 2. When intentions toward the organization was controlled for in the analysis, the set of career consultant characteristics was no longer significant,  $\chi^2(3, N = 345) = 7.48, n.s.$  Competence, however, remained significant,  $W(1) = 5.58, p < .05$ .

### General discussion

Consistent with previous findings from research on applicants we found that potential applicants had a more positive attitude toward the organization as an employer and were more willing to apply when the career consultant was perceived as warm and friendly (Goltz & Giannantonio, 1995, Taylor & Bergmann, 1987). Yet, no effect of warmth on application behavior was found. In addition, we found that when warmth and informativeness were taken into account, potential applicants were more likely to apply when the career consultant was perceived as competent and reliable. Contrary to earlier research on this topic (Harris & Fink, 1987; Liden & Parsons, 1986), we found no effect of competence on potential applicants' attitude and intentions toward the organization. On the contrary, we found that the perception of career consultant competence on application behavior remained significant even when controlling for

intentions to apply. This finding indicates that the perception of competence, contrary to other characteristics, may have a direct effect on potential applicants' decision to apply. Further research is needed on this subject.

Also contrary to earlier findings (Maurer, Howe, & Lee, 1992; Turban & Dougherty, 1992), was our observation that the odds of intending to apply and actual applying decreased as the score on informativeness increased. Although the logistic regression coefficients were significant, the correlation coefficients were not. Because of these contradictory findings and the inconsistency with previous research, we evince some reservation with regard to these results. Nevertheless, we would like to offer one possible explanation for the reverse relationship between informativeness and applying, which need further examination. Visitors are provided with ample information that enables them to make well-considered decisions whether or not to join the military. It is likely that some of them are scared off by what they are told. This argumentation closely fits the idea behind 'realistic job previews' (RJPs).

A noteworthy contribution of this study is that we made a distinction between attitude, intentions, and actual behavior in order to conceptualize potential applicant attraction. This enabled us to examine whether attitude and intentions toward the organization acted as mediating variables as predicted by the TRA. Overall, the results are in line with this theory. As a whole, career consultant characteristics had an influence on potential applicants' intentions to apply only indirectly through attitude; and as a whole, career consultant characteristics affected application behavior only through behavioral intention.

#### Limitations, future research opportunities and contributions

For future research it certainly would be interesting to examine the importance of career consultant characteristics in relation to job and organizational attributes and pre-interview organizational attractiveness.

Second, both attitude and intentions toward the organization were measured with a single item. Besides, our measure of intentions was dichotomized. Dichotomizing a continuous variable restricts the variance that can be accounted for, so modest predictions may be due to the dichotomization of continuous measures.

A third limitation relates to the generalizability of our results. Our study was conducted in Belgium within the applicant population of the Armed Forces. Hence, our results need to be replicated in other cultures, applicant populations, and industries. In particular, there is a need for research that samples from the entire applicant population and simultaneously uses true, instead of surrogate measures of behavior. This study is limited in that we started with a population that already was considering a military career at the moment we surveyed them.

The limitations of this study are offset by several strengths. First, we focused on career consultant instead of recruiter characteristics. Until now, other forms of initial contact besides the screening interview have been heavily neglected. We were also able to survey potential applicants instead of real applicants. This is valuable, since until now, relatively little is known about factors influencing potential applicants' impressions of an organization's attractiveness as an employer (Barber, 1998; Turban, 2001).

Perhaps the largest strength is that all three components of the TRA, attitudes, intentions, and behaviors, were addressed in this study. The effect of recruitment characteristics on organizational attractiveness depends to a large extent on the definition of attractiveness. Too often behavioral researchers content themselves with surrogate measures of behavior, despite the fact that there is a huge discrepancy between what a person feels or intends and what he actually does. We believe a careful examination of the relationship between intention and actual behavior in the job search context is necessary to get a better understanding of the processes involved.

## Conclusions

To a large extent our results were consistent with prior research conclusions on applicant reactions to recruiter characteristics, suggesting that organizational representatives have an influence on potential applicants' attraction to the organization through the way they manage them. We found that warmth was positively related to attitude and intentions toward the organization, and that competence was positively related to application behavior. With regard to informativeness, our findings were inconclusive. Consistent with the TRA, we found that career consultant characteristics had an influence on potential applicants' intentions to apply only indirectly through attitude, and on application behavior only through behavioral intention.

## References

- Ajzen, I., & Fishbein, M. (1980). Understanding attitudes and predicting social behavior. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Anderson, N., Born, M., & Cunningham-Snell, N. (2001). Recruitment and Selection: Applicant Perspectives and Outcomes. In N. Anderson, D. Ones, H.K. Sinangil, & C. Viswesvaran (Eds.), Handbook of Industrial, Work, and Organizational Psychology: Volume 1 Personnel Psychology (pp. 200-218). London: Sage.
- Bachman, J. G., Segal, D. R., Freedman-Doan, P., & O'Malley, P. M. (2000). Who chooses military service? Correlates of propensity and enlistment in the U.S. Armed Forces. Military Psychology, 12, 1-30.
- Barber, A.E. (1998). Recruiting employees: Individual and organization perspectives. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Baron, R.M., & Kenny, D.A. (1986). The moderator-mediator variable distinction in social psychological research: Conceptual, strategic, and statistical considerations. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 51, 1173-1182.
- Fishbein, M., & Ajzen, I. (1975). Belief, attitude, intention, and behavior: An introduction to theory and research. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Glickstein, G., & Ramer, D.C.Z. (1988, February). The alternative employment marketplace. Personnel Administrator, 100-104.
- Goltz, S.M., & Giannantonio, C.M. (1995). Recruiter friendliness and attraction to the job: The mediating role of inferences about the organization. Journal of Vocational Behavior, 46, 109-118.
- Harris, M.M., & Fink, L.S. (1987). A field study of applicant reactions to employment opportunities: Does the recruiter make a difference? Personnel Psychology, 40, 765-784.

- Liden, R.C., & Parsons, C.K. (1986). A field study of job applicant interview perceptions, alternative opportunities, and demographic characteristics. Personnel Psychology, *39*, 109-122.
- Maurer, S.D., Howe, V., & Lee, T.W. (1992). Organizational recruiting as marketing management: An interdisciplinary study of engineering graduates. Personnel Psychology, *45*, 807-833.
- Meglino, B. M., Ravlin, E. C., & DeNisi, A. S. (2000). A meta-analytic examination of realistic job preview effectiveness: A test of three counterintuitive propositions. Human Resource Management Review, *10*, 407-434.
- Rynes, S.L. (1989). The employment interview as a recruitment device. In R.W. Eder & G.R. Ferris (Eds.), The Employment Interview: Theory, Research, and Practice, pp. 127-142. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Rynes, S.L., & Miller, H.E. (1983). Recruiter and job influences on candidates for employment. Journal of Applied Psychology, *68*, 147-154.
- Saks, A.M., Wiesner, W.H., & Summers, R.J. (1994). Effects of job previews on self-selection and job choice. Journal of Vocational Behavior, *49*, 68-85.
- Saks, A.M., Wiesner, W.H., & Summers, R.J. (1996). Effects of job previews and compensation policy on applicant attraction and job choice. Journal of Vocational Behavior, *49*, 68-85.
- Sinar, E.F., & Highhouse, S. (2000, April). Organizational Attraction Measures: Construct Delineation and Theoretical Framework. Paper presented at the 15<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology, New Orleans, Louisiana.
- Taylor, M.S., & Bergmann, T.J. (1987). Organizational recruitment activities and applicants' reactions at different stages of the recruitment process. Personnel Psychology, *40*, 261-285.

- Turban, D.B. (2001). Organizational attractiveness as an employer on college campuses: An examination of the applicant population. Journal of Vocational Behavior, *58*, 293-312.
- Turban, D.B., & Dougherty, T.W. (1992). Influences of campus recruiting on applicant attraction to firms. Academy of Management Journal, *35*, 739-765.
- Turban, D.B., Forret, M.L., & Hendrickson, C.L. (1998). Applicant attraction to firms: Influences of organization reputation, job and organizational attributes, and recruiter behaviors. Journal of Vocational Behavior, *52*, 24-44.
- Wanous, J. P., Poland, T. D., Premack, S. L., & Davis, K. S. (1992). The effects of met expectations on newcomer attitudes and behaviors: A review and meta-analysis. Journal of Applied Psychology, *77*, 288-297.

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations of Study Variables in Potential Applicant Sample (N=408)

	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>	a	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
Characteristics								
1. Warmth	7.21	.70	.89					
2. Informativeness	7.29	.88	.77	.70**				
3. Competence	7.08	.88	.81	.72**	.59**			
Potential applicant attraction								
4. Attitude	5.18	.90	--	.27**	.16**	.26**		
5. Intentions	.85	.35	--	.12*	.02	.14**	.40**	
6. Application	.43	.50	--	.05	-.03	.11*	.28**	.32**

Note. \*  $p < .05$  (2-tailed) \*\*  $p < .01$  (2-tailed).

Table 2

Hierarchical Regression of Potential Applicants' Attitude toward the Armed Forces on  
Demographics and Career Consultant Characteristics

	<u>b</u>	SE ( <u>b</u> )	$\beta$	<u>t</u>	<u>p</u>	<u>R</u> <sup>2</sup> increment
Step 1						
Age	-.03	.02	-.10	-1.15	.25	
Gender	-.02	.12	-.01	-.13	.89	
Work Experience	.01	.07	.01	.21	.83	
Selection Experience	-.15	.10	-.08	-1.49	.14	
Educational Level	-.04	.06	-.05	-.76	.44	.04*
Step 2						
Warmth	.37	.11	.29	3.37	.01	
Informativeness	-.12	.07	-.12	-1.63	.10	
Competence	.05	.08	.05	.69	.49	.07**

Note. N = 346. Parameter estimates are for final step, not entry.

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .001$ .

Table 3

Logistic Regression of Potential Applicants' Intentions toward the Armed Forces on  
Demographics and Career Consultant Characteristics

	<u>b</u>	SE ( <u>b</u> )	Wald	<u>p</u>	Exp ( <u>B</u> )	CI (odds)
Step 1						
Age	-.03	.08	.17	.68	.97	.82 - 1.14
Gender	-1.00	.36	7.54	.01	.37	.37 - .75
Work Experience	-.17	.23	.59	.44	.84	.84 - 1.31
Selection Experience	-.44	.27	2.65	.10	.64	.64 - 1.09
Educational Level	-.03	.21	.02	.87	.97	.97 - 1.45
Step 2						
Warmth	.78	.37	4.38	.04	2.17	1.05 - 4.49
Informativeness	-.58	.30	3.87	.05	.56	.31 - 1.00
Competence	.26	.24	1.14	.29	1.30	.80 - 2.10

Note. N = 345. Parameter estimates are for final step, not entry.

CI = Confidence interval.

Table 4

Logistic Regression of Potential Applicants' Application Behavior on Demographics and Career Consultant Characteristics

	<u>b</u>	SE ( <u>b</u> )	Wald	<u>p</u>	Exp ( <u>B</u> )	CI (odds)
Step 1						
Age	-.11	.06	3.30	.07	.89	.79 – 1.01
Gender	-.02	.29	.00	.95	.98	.55 – 1.75
Work Experience	-.13	.17	.55	.46	.88	.63 – 1.23
Selection Experience	-.30	.29	1.06	.30	.74	.42 – 1.31
Educational Level	.04	.15	.06	.81	1.04	.78 – 1.38
Step 2						
Warmth	-.06	.28	.04	.84	.94	.55 – 1.62
Informativeness	-.40	.19	4.43	.03	.67	.46 - .97
Competence	.58	.22	6.75	.01	1.78	1.15 – 2.76

Note. N = 346. Parameter estimates are for final step, not entry.

CI = Confidence interval.