

Individuals reentering the workforce: Biases, stereotypes, and gender roles.

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Abstract

The purpose of the proposed study aims to investigate the potential biases that individuals may experience when reentering the workforce after taking time off to raise children. The Ambiguity Aversion Theory (AAT) and the Role Congruity Theory (RCT) are possible theories to suggest reasons why individuals may engage in certain biases when selecting an applicant with or without a gap in the resume. Participants will be asked to either hire or not hire an applicant for a job based on the applicant's qualifications described in a narrative. Gender of the applicant will vary across conditions. The narrative will include information about the applicant's education and experience that clearly meets the requirements for the job. If an applicant has a gap in the resume, the narrative will also include either an explanation for the gap (i.e., is a time-out from the workforce to raise children), or there will not be an explanation for the gap. Depending on the pattern of results (i.e., participants' decision to hire or not hire an applicant based on their qualifications described in the narrative) will provide an indication about which theory (or theories) best explain the results.

Summary

Background

According to Drange & Rege (2013), some individuals take time off from their jobs for a variety of reasons including taking care of a sick relative and raising children, despite of the negative consequences associated with having a gap in the resume. Nevertheless, these authors suggest that reentering the workforce becomes challenging for most individuals as they experience barriers that affect their overall performance.

Ambiguity Aversion Theory

The ambiguity aversion theory states that if given the opportunity to choose between two options, one option providing thorough information and the other option with little to no information, an individual will most likely choose the option that provides more information (Becker & Brownson, 1964; Hersch & Shinall, 2016; Lee, 2016) or has known risks as opposed to unknown risks (Ellsberg, 1961). From a selection point of view, when hiring finalist applicants, we are interested in the role that the ambiguity aversion theory plays when there is a gap in the resume. This leads to the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1a. Individuals will be more likely to hire a male applicant with a reason given for the gap in the resume as compared to a male applicant who has an unexplained gap in the resume.

Hypothesis 1b. Individuals will be more likely to hire a female applicant with a reason given for the gap in the resume as compared to a female applicant who has an unexplained gap in the resume.

Role Congruity Theory

According to the role congruity theory, Eagly (1987) suggests that women are associated with communal dimensions of behavior including care for others, nurturing qualities, interpersonal sensitivity, and emotional connection. On the other hand, Eagly contends that men are traditionally associated with agentic dimensions of behavior such as assertiveness, controlling, strong, and independent. The role congruity theory expects a match between the social behavior (i.e., communal or agentic) and the gender of the individual. The term *role incongruence* suggests that individuals disrupt or do not adhere to the expected roles associated to their gender (Eagly & Karau, 2002). For women, role incongruence may occur when they engage in agentic dimensions of behaviors such as leading in organizations (Heilman & Okimoto, 2007). For men, incongruence may occur when they engage in communal behaviors, such as staying-at-home raising children (Wayne & Cordeiro, 2003). I am interested in seeing whether there are biases in selection when the applicants do not adhere to their expected gender role, according to the role congruity theory. This leads to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Individuals with traditional views of gender roles will be less likely to hire a male applicant with a gap in the resume for being a stay-at-home father, but more likely to hire a female with a gap in the resume for being a stay-at-home mother.

Participants and Materials

This study proposes to recruit undergraduate students using the SONA Participant Research Pool at MTSU. To measure perceptions towards social roles in society, Baber and Tucker's (2006) Social Roles Questionnaire will be used. Participants will decide to hire or not hire an applicant for a position after evaluating their qualifications (e.g., education, experience).

Analyses

In order to test the hypotheses, a 3x2 repeated measures ANOVA will be conducted.

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