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Examining the relationship between employer knowledge dimensions and organizational attractiveness: An application in a military context

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This study uses Cable and Turban's (2001) employer knowledge framework as a conceptual model to formulate hypotheses about a broad range of possible factors affecting the attractiveness of an organization (i.e. armed forces) among potential applicants (576 high-school seniors). Results show that gender, familiarity with military organizations, perceptions of job and organizational attributes (task diversity and social/team activities), and trait inferences (excitement, prestige, and cheerfulness) explained potential applicants' attraction to military organizations. Relative importance analyses showed that trait inferences contributed most to the variance, followed by job and organizational attributes, and employer familiarity. Finally, we found some evidence of interactions between the three dimensions. Specifically, trait inferences and job and organizational attributes had more pronounced effects when familiarity was high. From a theoretical perspective, these results generally support the framework of employer knowledge. At a practical level, implications for image audit and image management are discussed.

In recent years, researchers have directed their attention to potential applicants' attraction to organizations as employers in early recruitment stages (Barber, 1998; Cable & Graham, 2000; Cable & Turban, 2001; Carlson, Connerley, & Mecham, 2002; Collins & Stevens, 2002; Highhouse, Zickar, Thorsteinson, Stierwalt, & Slaughter, 1999; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Turban, 2001). According to Barber (1998), early recruitment stages are characterized by an extensive search and screening, the gathering of rudimentary information about multiple opportunities, and little or no personal contact between the parties involved (e.g. people have not been interviewed by the organization). Recent recruitment research has confirmed the key role of potential applicants' impressions of organizations as employers early in the recruitment process. Evidence has been found

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that impressions of an organization as an employer measured in early recruitment stages are strong predictors of applicants' attraction measured in later recruitment stages, for example, after a campus interview (Turban, Forret, & Hendrickson, 1998), which in turn is related to applicants' final job acceptance decisions (Powell, 1991; Powell & Goulet, 1996).

Despite the importance of applicants' early impressions of organizations as employers, the content or basis of these impressions has remained virtually unexplored (Barber, 1998; Cable & Graham, 2000; Cable & Turban, 2001; Highhouse & Hoffman, 2001; Rynes, 1991). Therefore, Cable and Turban (2001) draw upon conceptualizations of brand knowledge to develop a model of employer knowledge. According to Cable and Turban, the dimensions of employer knowledge play a central role because what people know or think they know about an organization influences to a great extent how they respond to the given employer in the various recruitment phases (see also Collins & Stevens, 2002). Applicants' employer knowledge also has key ramifications for recruitment theory and practice because 'without mapping and understanding the concept of applicants' employer knowledge, it is difficult to advance theory regarding how, why, and when recruitment influences applicants and what . . . recruitment strategies need to be enacted to maximize recruitment competitiveness' (Cable & Turban, 2001, p. 118).

Therefore, in this study, the dimensions of employer knowledge serve as a common and integrative framework to formulate hypotheses about factors affecting the attractiveness of one specific kind of organization as a place to work, namely the armed forces. This military context is relevant because military organizations typically employ a large number of people. For instance, in 2004 there were more than 200,000 people working for the British Army and more than 40,000 for the Belgian Army. Moreover, the armed forces are amongst the organizations that increasingly face difficulties in attracting and enlisting new recruits (Bachman, Segal, Freedman-Doan, & O'Malley, 2000; Knowles *et al.*, 2002). In many European countries, the importance of attracting new recruits has also been bolstered by the transition to a voluntary military service (Lescrève, 2000; Matser, 2001). However, prior research on military propensity and enlistment of high school seniors has focused on demographic, biographic, educational, and family background factors and attitudes about military service (Bachman *et al.*, 2000; Martin, 1995), ignoring the specific determinants of high school seniors' perceived attraction to military organizations as an employer.

Theoretical background

Cable and Turban (2001) define employer knowledge as a job seeker's memories and associations regarding an organization as a (potential) employer. Thus, employer knowledge provides applicants with a template to categorize, store, and recall employer-related information. Consistent with conceptualizations of brand image (see Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993), Cable and Turban (2001) differentiate between three broad dimensions of employer knowledge: employer familiarity, employer image, and employer reputation. These related dimensions are posited to influence applicants' attraction to an organization as a place to work. Therefore, in this study, we focus on the effects of these three employer knowledge dimensions on initial perceptions of organizational attractiveness. In addition, we try to determine the relative importance of each dimension in determining an organization's attractiveness and examine how familiarity interacts with the other two dimensions. Below we discuss each of the

employer knowledge dimensions and their expected effects. It should be noted that Cable and Turban's theory is broader than the effects tested in this study. For example, Cable and Turban posit various antecedents that might influence the three employer knowledge dimensions. They also incorporate a person-organization fit perspective (e.g. Kristof, 1996) and posit that applicants' values and needs will moderate the effects of the employer knowledge dimensions on organizational attractiveness. However, these other components of Cable and Turban's theory are not examined in the current study.

The first dimension is employer familiarity or the level of awareness that a job seeker has of an organization (Cable & Turban, 2001; Collins & Stevens, 2002). Generally, previous studies in the recruitment field have demonstrated that an organization's overall familiarity is related to applicants' perceptions of a company's attractiveness as an employer, with more familiar organizations being perceived as more attractive (Cable & Graham, 2000; Gatewood, Gowan, & Lautenschlager, 1993; Turban, 2001; Turban & Greening, 1997; for a divergent view see Brooks, Highhouse, Russell, & Mohr, 2003). In a similar vein, in the marketing literature, brand familiarity or brand awareness has been found to be an important anchor to which other information is attached (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993). Theoretical evidence for the importance of familiarity also comes from the social psychological literature on 'mere exposure' indicating that increased familiarity with previously neutral objects leads to an increase in liking (Bornstein, 1989; Zajonc, 1968). Given this theoretical and empirical evidence about the role of familiarity, we formulate the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis 1. Familiarity with the armed forces as an employer will be positively related to the perceived attractiveness of the armed forces as an employer.

Employer image represents the second dimension of employer knowledge. This dimension pertains to the content of the beliefs that applicants have about the organization as an employer (Cable & Turban, 2001; Highhouse *et al.*, 1999). Specifically, Cable and Turban (2001) argue that potential applicants hold beliefs about objective aspects of the organization (employer information), varying from factual or historical aspects of organizations to organizational procedures and policies. Examples of employer information are size, location, level of centralization or geographical dispersion. Additionally, Cable and Turban (2001) posit that potential applicants have some knowledge about the attributes of a specific job at the organization to which they might consider applying (job information). Examples of job information are pay, benefits, type of work to be performed or advancement opportunities. Lievens and Highhouse (2003) refer to many job and organizational attributes as instrumental attributes because they describe the job or organization in terms of objective, concrete, and factual attributes that a job or an organization either has or does not have.

The few studies that have examined potential applicants' attraction in early recruitment stages have confirmed that organizational attraction is influenced by applicants' perceptions of job or organizational characteristics such as pay, opportunities for advancement, location, career programmes, or organizational structure (Cable & Graham, 2000; Highhouse *et al.*, 1999; Honeycutt & Rosen, 1997; Lievens, Decaestecker, Coetsier, & Geirnaert, 2001; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Turban & Keon, 1993). In this study, we expect that the results found in the personnel recruitment literature will generalize to a military context. Therefore, we expect that perceptions of job and organizational attributes will play a significant role in people's attraction to the armed forces, as reflected in the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis 2. Perceptions of job and organizational attributes of the armed forces will be positively associated with the perceived attractiveness of the armed forces as an employer.

The third dimension in Cable and Turban's (2001) framework of employer knowledge refers to employer reputation or the public evaluation of an organization. Although employer reputation is often cast in economic terms (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990), some recent studies provide an interesting new trait-oriented perspective to employer reputation (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Slaughter, Zickar, Highhouse, & Mohr, 2004). In particular, these studies reveal that potential applicants reliably and meaningfully ascribe traits to organizations. For example, people refer to some employing organizations as trendy, whereas other employing organizations are seen as prestigious. Trait inferences about organizations are different from the aforementioned job and employer information for two reasons. First, they describe the organization in terms of subjective, abstract, and intangible attributes. Second, they convey symbolic company information in the form of imagery that applicants assign to organizations (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003).

The finding that prospective applicants assign traits to employers is similar to findings that people associate human traits with themselves (Shamir, 1991), with others (Watson, 1989), with objects (Prentice, 1987), or with brands (Aaker, 1997, 1999; Plummer, 2000). With regard to the latter, substantial advances have recently been made in our understanding of the human traits that consumers ascribe to brands. Results of a comprehensive study by Aaker (1997) show that the symbolic use of brands (in terms of the human traits associated with them) could be represented by five broad factors: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness. Three of these factors (sincerity, excitement, and competence) are similar to the five-factor model underlying human personality (Costa & McCrae, 1992). The two remaining factors, namely sophistication (characterized by traits such as upper-class and prestigious) and ruggedness (represented by traits such as masculine and tough) are different from the five-factor model underlying human personality (see also Caprara, Barbaranelli, & Guido, 2001). According to Aaker (1997), these latter traits capture more aspirational images associated with, respectively, wealth and status, and individualism.

In personnel recruitment, there is growing empirical evidence that such trait inferences about organizations play an important role in early recruitment stages. Slaughter *et al.* (2004) show that trait inferences about various organizations are related to the attractiveness of these organizations. They also find that specific traits of organizations are more attractive depending on applicants' personality traits: applicants tend to be especially attracted to employing organizations that have traits similar to their own traits (see also Tom, 1971). Moreover, Lievens and Highhouse (2003) discover that trait inferences (e.g. innovativeness) about Belgian banks account for incremental variance over and above job and organizational attributes in predicting a bank's perceived attractiveness as an employer. On the basis of these studies, we expect that people will also make trait inferences about the armed forces. So, the following hypothesis is proposed.

Hypothesis 3. Trait inferences about the armed forces as an employer will be positively related to the perceived attractiveness of the armed forces as an employer.

Cable and Turban (2001) did not propose a causal order among the three employer knowledge dimensions (employer familiarity, employer image, and employer reputation). Instead, they posited that these three broad dimensions are related to

each other and have a combined influence on applicants' attraction to an organization as a place to work. So far, no studies have examined how the effects of the three employer knowledge dimensions on perceived organizational attractiveness compare with each other. In other words, what is the unique contribution of each component and its relative importance *vis-à-vis* the others? Therefore, in this study we examine the relative importance of employer familiarity, image, and reputation in determining organizational attractiveness. As we do not have firm expectations about the relative importance of the employer knowledge dimensions, this part of the study is exploratory.

From the above discussion about relationships among the three employer knowledge dimensions it also follows that these three dimensions might interact in their effect on organizational attractiveness. For example, do high familiarity and positive perceptions of employer image/reputation lead to higher attractiveness than low familiarity and positive perceptions of employer image/reputation? Cable and Turban's (2001) model anticipates such interaction effects among the employer-knowledge dimensions. For example, they propose that familiarity is a necessary precursor of employer image and reputation. Indeed, it is hard to imagine that one could possess employer knowledge without having at least some basic level of awareness of that company. Given that little research evidence is available, we conduct exploratory analyses to investigate how familiarity with the armed forces as an employer will interact with perceptions of job and organizational attributes of the armed forces and with trait inferences about the armed forces as an employer.

Method

Sample and procedure

As noted above, this study addressed research questions related to early recruitment phases. Barber (1998) used the term applicant population instead of applicant pool for the individuals involved in these stages. Barber defined the applicant population as the group from which the organization can recruit given its recruitment decisions (i.e. decisions to target a particular segment; see also Turban, 2001). In light of these characteristics of early recruitment stages, it was important that a sample was drawn from the applicant population targeted by the Belgian Army.

It has been demonstrated that people who enlist in the US armed forces during the first years after high school, already knew they would do so by the end of their senior year in high school (Bachman *et al.*, 2000; Segal, Burns, Falk, Silver, & Sharda, 1998). Moreover, a recent study found that the majority of people who had visited a career office of the Belgian Army and had not yet applied (i.e. the applicant population) were final-year high school students ready to enter the labour market (Schreurs, Derous, De Witte, & Proost, 2004). Therefore, we decided to sample final-year students of high schools. In particular, our sample consisted of 1,100 final-year students of Belgian high schools. Care was taken to ensure that all types of high schools were included and that the sample of high schools was geographically dispersed. We visited these schools and explained that the purpose of the study was to examine the attractiveness of the armed forces. Students were given about 2 weeks to complete the surveys. Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous. Completed surveys were gathered by the respective teachers and sent back to us. We received complete and usable responses from 576 final-year students (84% men, 16% women; mean age = 17.9 years, *SD* = 0.96 year, range = 17-22 years), yielding a response rate of 52%.

Measures

Background information

Respondents were asked to fill out their gender, age, educational background, and type of school. We also measured respondents' family background. We requested the occupation of their father, the occupation of their mother, and whether someone in their family works for the armed forces.

Familiarity with the armed forces as an employer

This 3-item measure was similar to the one used by Turban (2001). Respondents answered these items using a 5-point rating scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. The internal consistency of this measure was .81. All items are shown in the Appendix.

Job and organizational characteristics of the armed forces

A concern inherent in past studies on organizational attractiveness was that researchers often determined *a priori* a fixed number of employer attributes (Breugh, 1992). As it was important to ensure that all relevant job and organizational attributes were included, we used an inductive strategy for identifying attributes possibly related to the attractiveness of the Belgian Army as an employer. In particular, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a representative sample of 195 military employees (89% men, 11% women). We asked respondents to state various reasons for joining the Belgian Army. These interviews were audio taped and transcribed. The primary reasons per interviewee were extracted from the interview transcripts and sorted in 16 non-redundant categories (see Table 1). Next, we removed reasons that were tied to a specific military occupation (e.g. 'become a pilot'), that were given by less than 1% of the interviewees (e.g. 'wear a uniform'), that were related to background characteristics (e.g. 'someone of my family is in the Army'), or that referred to trait inferences (e.g. 'working in the Army is prestigious', 'working in the Army is adventurous'). This resulted in a remaining set of nine job and organizational attributes. These nine attributes served as a basis for writing four to five items per attribute, resulting in a 45-item measure of the armed forces' employer and job information. Respondents answered these items using a 5-point rating scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*.

The psychometric properties of this questionnaire were examined by checking the internal consistencies of the scales. Items within the scales were removed if this meant that the internal consistency of the scale increased. On the basis of this criterion, 11 of the 45 items were removed. Next, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis using EQS (Bentler, 1995). This confirmatory factor analysis showed that the nine factor model produced the best fit to the data, RMSEA = .046 [.042-.051], TLI = .92, and RNI = .93. As shown in Table 2, the internal consistencies of the scales were satisfactory. All remaining items are shown in the Appendix.

Trait inferences about the armed forces

Similar to Lievens and Highhouse (2003), we used an adapted version of Aaker's (1997) 42-item scale that measured five distinct factors, namely sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness. Aaker derived her measure from a comprehensive list of 309 person-descriptive traits. She also validated this measure

Table 1. Results of pre-study examining reasons for joining the armed forces (N = 195)

	f	P (%)
A job in the Army involves a lot of physical activities ^a	52	14.9
Working in the Army provides you with job security ^a	48	13.8
Someone of my family is in the Army	43	12.4
Working in the Army is adventurous	27	7.8
Working in the Army provides you with a good salary ^a	23	6.6
The Army gives you educational opportunities (other than school) ^a	23	6.6
The Army provides you with opportunities for advancement ^a	20	5.7
A job in the Army involves a varied set of tasks/activities ^a	18	5.2
In the Army you can become a pilot	15	4.3
A job in the Army involves a lot of social/team activities ^a	14	4.0
A job in the Army involves a lot of travel opportunities ^a	13	3.7
In the Army you work in a well-defined structure ^a	7	2.0
Working in the Army is prestigious	6	1.7
In the Army you work on board of a ship	5	1.4
In the Army you wear a uniform	3	< 1.0
In the Army you serve your country	2	< 1.0

Note. N = 195. Because respondents typically gave more than one reason, the cumulative frequency of the responses exceeds the sample size.

^a These nine reasons served as a basis for constructing a measure of the armed forces' employer image.

across 37 product categories. Because military organizations were not included in these categories, it was unlikely that all of the 42 trait adjectives were relevant with respect to trait inferences about the armed forces. Therefore, we replicated one of the pre-studies conducted by Aaker (1997) to identify adjectives relevant for describing the armed forces. Fifty-two enlisted military employees (40 men, 12 women) of the Belgian Army were asked to rate each adjective of Aaker's (1997) measure, with 1 = *not at all descriptive of the Belgian Army's personality* and 5 = *extremely descriptive of the Belgian Army's personality*. Twenty adjectives (e.g. sentimental, family-oriented) that received an average rating of 3 or lower were removed. Unfortunately, all adjectives (e.g. upper class, good-looking) belonging to the factor *sophistication* (prestige) had to be removed. Because our pre-study indicated that status and prestige were among the possible reasons for joining the Belgian Army (see Table 1), we wrote three new items to capture this prestige component. These items were 'high status', 'highly regarded', and 'well respected'. Hence, the final measure consisted of 25 items. Respondents indicated their agreement with these items using a 5-point rating scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*.

The psychometric properties of this measure were examined by checking the internal consistencies of the scales. We removed items within the scales if this meant that the internal consistency of the scale increased. On the basis of this criterion, seven of the 25 adjectives were removed. Then, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis using EQS (Bentler, 1995) on the remaining 18 items. This analysis revealed that the five-factor model produced a poor fit to the data, RMSEA = .081 (.074-.088), TLI = .86, and RNI = .88. Inspection of the modification indices showed that especially the items of the first factor *sincerity* caused problems. A closer inspection of the content of these items confirmed this. Some of the items (e.g. honest, sincere) captured the honest component of the

Table 2. (Continued)

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23		
<i>Trait inferences</i>																											
17. Sincerity	3.03	0.94	.02	.05	-.04	.10	-.02	-.06	.08	.26	.17	.11	.16	.18	.15	.15	-.08	.25	.80								
18. Excitement	3.59	1.06	.07	.00	-.05	.04	-.04	.01	.10	.22	.24	.20	.12	.24	.10	.11	-.03	.26	.31	.87							
19. Cheerfulness	2.69	0.95	.07	.14	-.13	.03	-.08	-.09	.16	.25	.24	.07	.23	.24	.19	.21	.01	.39	.41	.40	.73						
20. Competence	3.32	0.83	.05	-.01	.07	.06	-.01	-.01	.16	.26	.22	.12	.26	.19	.23	.20	-.09	.31	.43	.43	.37	.69					
21. Prestige	2.98	0.97	.12	.14	-.12	-.03	-.06	-.01	.12	.22	.42	.21	.27	.28	.28	.19	.08	.34	.28	.38	.39	.29	.74				
22. Ruggedness	3.17	1.07	.02	-.10	.02	-.09	.00	-.03	.00	.13	.28	.17	.07	.07	.10	.02	.07	.16	.07	.36	.17	.23	.33	.73			
<i>Dependent Variable</i>																											
23. Attractiveness as an employer	2.18	1.11	.24	.08	-.07	.07	-.02	-.02	.30	.30	.22	.12	.23	.29	.15	.22	.01	.41	.23	.38	.37	.26	.34	.17	.89		

Note. Due to listwise deletion of cases, this table is based on N = 492. Gender (0 = female; 1 = male); Education (0 = technical/ professional school; 1 = general secondary school); Military history (0 = none; 1 = family member served in the Army); Employment status mother/father (0 = unemployed; 1 = employed). Correlations $\geq .09$ are significant at $p < .05$ and correlations $\geq .12$ at $p < .01$. All measures were rated on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.

sincerity factor, whereas others (e.g. cheerful, friendly) captured the cheerful component of this factor (Aaker, 1997, p. 354). Therefore, we ran a confirmatory factor analysis that specified these items as loading on two distinct factors (i.e. sincerity and cheerfulness). This six-factor model provided a good fit to the data, RMSEA = .049 (.042-.057), TLI = .95, and RNI = .96. On the basis of the item loadings on the factors, we labelled the factors as follows: sincerity, cheerfulness, excitement, competence, prestige, and ruggedness. As shown in Table 2, the internal consistencies of these scales were satisfactory and similar to the values found by Aaker (1997) and Lievens and Highhouse (2003). All remaining items are shown in the Appendix.

The armed forces' attractiveness as an employer

Three items were adapted from the measure of perceived organizational attractiveness proposed by Highhouse, Lievens, and Sinar (2003). Respondents rated these items on a 5-point rating scale, ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. The internal consistency of this scale was .89. All items are shown in the Appendix.

Results

Test of hypotheses

Table 2 presents the means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations of the study variables. Nearly all variables were significantly related to organizational attractiveness. This is not surprising in light of our pre-study to identify relevant variables. To test our hypotheses, we conducted a multiple regression analysis. In this multiple regression analysis, all variables were entered simultaneously. Apart from the variables related to the three employer-knowledge dimensions, we also entered demographic, educational, and family background variables (gender, age, education, military history in family, and employment status of parents) in the regression equation because prior research on military propensity and enlistment of high school seniors has demonstrated their importance (Bachman *et al.*, 2000; Mael & Ashforth, 1995; Martin, 1995).

The results of the multiple regression analysis are shown in Table 3. With regard to the background variables, only gender significantly affected the attractiveness of the armed forces as an employer. In line with previous research (Bachman *et al.*, 2000), men were more attracted to the armed forces than women. In support of Hypothesis 1, employer familiarity had a significant positive beta weight ($\beta = 0.18, p < .001$), showing that higher familiarity leads to higher attractiveness of the armed forces. Among the set of job and organizational characteristics, task diversity ($\beta = 0.16, p < .001$) and social/team activities ($\beta = 0.10, p < .05$) emerged as significant predictors, supporting Hypothesis 2. Finally, Hypothesis 3 was also confirmed as three of the six trait inferences were significant predictors, namely excitement ($\beta = 0.20, p < .001$), cheerfulness ($\beta = 0.12, p < .01$), and prestige ($\beta = 0.11, p < .05$). Our total model explained 36% of the variance in perceived attractiveness (adjusted $R^2 = .33$).

Relative importance analyses

As noted above, Cable and Turban (2001) posited that the three broad dimensions of employer knowledge (employer familiarity, employer image, and employer reputation) are related to each other and have a combined influence on applicants' attraction to an organization as a place to work. To determine the unique contribution of each employer

Table 3. Regression of the armed forces' attractiveness as an employer on study variables

	Standardized regression coefficients	Relative weights ^a	Percentages of predictable variance ^a (%)	
<i>Background variables</i>				12.9 ^b
Gender	.18***	.04	11.5	
Age	-.04	.00	0.3	
Education	.04	.00	0.4	
Military history	.02	.00	0.6	
Employment status mother	.02	.00	0.0	
Employment status father	-.01	.00	0.1	
<i>Familiarity</i>				11.0 ^b
Familiarity with the armed forces as an employer	.18**	.04	11.0	
<i>Job/organizational characteristics</i>				34.8 ^b
Social/team activities	.10*	.02	4.8	
Physical activities	-.01	.01	2.3	
Structure	-.05	.00	0.6	
Advancement	.03	.02	4.3	
Travel opportunities	.06	.02	5.2	
Pay and benefits	.01	.00	0.9	
Job security	-.01	.01	2.5	
Educational opportunities	-.03	.00	0.1	
Task diversity	.16**	.05	14.1	
<i>Trait inferences</i>				41.3 ^b
Sincerity	.00	.01	2.8	
Excitement	.20***	.05	13.0	
Cheerfulness	.12**	.05	13.3	
Competence	-.04	.01	3.3	
Prestige	.11*	.03	7.3	
Ruggedness	.00	.01	1.6	

Note. Due to listwise deletion of cases, this table is based on $N = 492$.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. $R^2 = .36$ and adjusted $R^2 = .33$.

^a The relative weights and the percentages of predictable variance were computed using the analytical approach of Johnson (2000, 2001).

^b These percentages were obtained by summing the predictable variance across a specific employer knowledge dimension.

knowledge dimension *vis-à-vis* the others, we examined the relative importance of the three components of employer knowledge in determining organizational attractiveness. Given that regression coefficients are not interpretable as measures of relative importance in the presence of interrelated independent variables (Darlington, 1968), we supplemented the regression coefficients with relative weights. These relative weights were computed with the analytical approach of Johnson (2000, 2001). Relative weights are defined as the proportionate contribution of each independent variable to R^2 , considering both its unique contribution and its contribution when combined with other variables. For ease of interpreting the relative weights, it is also possible to express them as percentages of the predictable variance (R^2). The last two columns of Table 3 present the relative weights and the percentage of predictable variance.

Inspection of the relative weights showed that gender and familiarity with the employer each contributed 11% to the predictable variance. All instrumental job and organizational attributes combined contributed 34.8%. All trait inferences combined made the largest contribution to the predictable variance, namely 41.3%.

Interactions between employer dimensions

Finally, we investigated possible interaction effects between employer familiarity and the other employer knowledge dimensions on the attractiveness of the armed forces as an employer. For example, we examined whether the interaction between familiarity and social/team activities was a significant predictor. To this end, we computed the product term between familiarity and social/team activities and entered it in the regression equation after entering familiarity and social/team activities. In line with recommendations for dealing with problems of multicollinearity that arise from the use of cross-product terms, independent variables were standardized prior to computing their cross-product terms (Aiken & West, 1991; Jaccard, Turrisi, & Wan, 1990). We followed the same approach for investigating possible interaction effects between familiarity and the other employer image and employer reputation dimensions.

Our examination of possible interactions between the three employer knowledge dimensions revealed a fairly consistent picture. Employer familiarity significantly interacted with six of the nine job and organizational characteristics. Employer familiarity also significantly interacted with four of the six trait inferences. Even though the interactions were significant, the percentage of additional variance explained was small (between 1% and 2%). Graphical plots of these interactions always lead to the same conclusion. That is, the relationship between an employer image/reputation dimension and attractiveness was stronger when familiarity was high. Conversely, the relationship between an employer image/reputation dimension and attractiveness was weaker or nonexistent when familiarity was low.

Discussion

Main conclusions

This study uses Cable and Turban's (2001) employer knowledge model as a framework for examining the factors that determine potential applicants' initial attraction to a specific kind of organization, namely the armed forces. Our results generally confirm the validity of this framework. We found empirical support for all three dimensions of employer knowledge (employer familiarity, employer image, and employer reputation) because attributes related to all these dimensions emerged as significant predictors of attractiveness. First, familiarity with the armed forces was positively related to the perceived attractiveness of the armed forces, in line with previous research (Cable & Graham, 2000; Gatewood *et al.*, 1993; Turban, 2001; Turban & Greening, 1997). Second, employer image dimensions (i.e. task diversity and social/team activities) were significantly related to organizational attractiveness. Previous studies have already demonstrated their importance in early impressions of an organization as an employer (Cable & Graham, 2000; Highhouse *et al.*, 1999; Turban, 2001). So, our study corroborates the importance of job/organizational attributes, even though it should be noted that only a limited number of these attributes emerged as significant predictors. Third, employer reputation dimensions in

the form of trait inferences (i.e. excitement, cheerfulness, and prestige) were positively related to the attractiveness of the armed forces. This finding has key theoretical implications because most prior research on organizational attractiveness has focused on job and organizational attributes and has neglected these trait inferences (Cable & Graham, 2000; Highhouse *et al.*, 1999; Turban, 2001). It adds to the validity of the new trait-oriented perspective to employer reputation and suggests that future research should incorporate trait inferences about an organization as an employer as one of the factors that determine organizational attractiveness (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Slaughter *et al.*, 2004). In conclusion, since all three dimensions of employer knowledge significantly affected attractiveness, the validity of Cable and Turban's conceptualization of employer knowledge was supported.

Beyond testing the validity of Cable and Turban's (2001) employer knowledge model, this study also investigates the relative importance of the three employer knowledge dimensions in determining an organization's attractiveness and examines how employer familiarity interacts with employer image and reputation. First, this study contributes to the literature by determining the relative importance of the three employer knowledge dimensions. We found that employer reputation in the form of trait inferences was the most important employer knowledge dimension. The finding that such trait inferences emerged as the largest contributor confirms and strengthens our previous conclusion that conceptualizations of what determines an organization's attractiveness as an employer should be broadened to include these trait inferences. A second conclusion deals with interaction effects between the three employer knowledge dimensions. Specifically, we discovered that employer image and reputation dimensions had more pronounced effects when familiarity was high. Along these lines, Cable and Turban (2001) have posited that familiarity with the organization serves as an anchor to which other associations can be attached (see also Aaker, 1991; Collins & Stevens, 2002; Keller, 1993).

Directions for future research

Future studies are encouraged to use Cable and Turban's (2001) framework of employer knowledge to identify factors determining organizational attractiveness. In terms of operationalizing employer reputation, the use of trait inferences seems to be particularly promising (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Slaughter *et al.*, 2004). Moreover, since this study was the first to examine interactions between the three employer knowledge dimensions and to investigate their relative importance, future research is needed to confirm our findings.

As previously mentioned, Cable and Turban's (2001) theory is actually broader than the effects tested in this study. Future research could, therefore, extend the current study and increase the percentage of explained variance (36%) by incorporating other elements of the framework. An important antecedent of employer knowledge is the source of information about an organization as an employer. Future studies could investigate how characteristics of these information sources (e.g. credibility, internal versus external) affect the three dimensions of employer knowledge. This would offer important practical implications for recruiters in organizations who want to change the knowledge of potential applicants. Cable and Turban further posit that potential applicants' values and needs moderate the effects of employer knowledge on organizational attractiveness. Therefore, an intriguing question for future research is to cast the effects of employer knowledge dimensions on organizational attractiveness in

terms of person-organization fit (Chatman, 1989; Judge & Cable, 1997; Kristof, 1996; Tom, 1971; Turban & Keon, 1993). For example, future research could determine whether the variance in an organization's attractiveness as an employer explained by specific trait inferences can be increased by taking individual differences into account. It seems plausible, for instance, that potential applicants high on a personality trait such as extraversion would be more attracted to organizations appearing to be more exciting and adventurous, whereas potential applicants low on extraversion would not be.

A final interesting avenue for future research consists in contrasting potential applicants' knowledge of the armed forces as an employer to those of actual applicants, selectees, and experienced military. Along these lines, longitudinal models of the job search and recruitment process posit that in the early stages potential applicants only have rudimentary information about possible job opportunities (Barber, 1998; Barber, Daly, Giannantonio, & Phillips, 1994; Blau, 1993; Saks & Ashforth, 2000). In a military context, Mael and Ashforth (1995) suggested that there exists a 'gap between a romanticized view of this profession and organization, as portrayed in fiction and drama, and the realities of the "hurry up and wait" stance required in many military jobs' (p. 324). If potential recruits generally have a romanticized view of the armed forces as an employer, another interesting research question is whether they carry these perceptions forward into employment (Bauer, Morrison, & Callister, 1998) and whether these flawed perceptions affect job performance and turnover (see realistic job preview research, Meglino, Ravlin, & DeNisi, 2000; Phillips, 1998; Wanous, Poland, Premack, & Davis, 1992). Thus, longitudinal studies are needed to examine the individual and organizational consequences of potential applicants' knowledge of the armed forces as an employer.

Implications for practice

Recruitment efforts are not always based on a thorough image audit of what factors make an organization an attractive employer (Arnold *et al.*, 2003; Highhouse *et al.*, 1999). Accordingly, it is often complicated to decide which characteristics an organization should promote to enhance its attractiveness as an employer. In this respect, this study has key practical ramifications because we tried to better understand the primary dimensions of prospective applicants' employer knowledge. This is a prerequisite for understanding how, when, or why recruitment practices work.

Applied to a military context, it seems that the Belgian Army should include familiarity, job and organizational characteristics, and trait inferences in its image audit as was done in the current study. With regard to image management, the results of this study suggest that in order to increase the attractiveness of the Belgian Army, recruitment practices should be aimed at increasing the Army's familiarity among potential applicants. Furthermore, they should promote the task diversity and social/team activities offered by the armed forces and should emphasize the excitement, cheerfulness, and prestige inherent in working for military organizations.

Limitations

Some limitations should be acknowledged. First, this study's results are based on self-reports gathered by a single survey. Therefore, common method variance may be an alternative explanation for our results. Second, this study used Aaker's (1997) trait taxonomy as a framework to measure the trait inferences that potential applicants associate with the armed forces. It is possible that the use of different measures

(see Slaughter *et al.*, 2004; Van Oudenhoven, Prins, Bakker, Schipper, & Tromp, 2003) might have resulted in other trait inferences emerging as significant predictors of the armed forces' attractiveness. Along these lines, more research is needed to examine the underlying structure of measures of trait-based inferences of organizations and whether this underlying structure is similar to the underlying structure of personality descriptive traits.

A last limitation relates to the generalizability of our results. Our study was conducted in the Belgian armed forces. It is possible that other attributes are related to the attractiveness of armed forces in other cultures and populations. Indeed, the role of armed forces might not be the same across countries. For instance, in Belgium, the role of soldiers has changed from fighter to peacekeeper so that a wider range of skills and staffing approaches (recruitment, selection, promotion, and training) need to be utilized (Lescrève, 2000). That said, we believe that the specific attributes within each of the broad dimensions of employer knowledge will indeed differ across armies in different countries, whereas the broad dimensions and hence the general framework of employer knowledge will be generalizable.

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Appendix

Overview of items measuring study variables

Familiarity with the armed forces as an employer

- I am familiar with the Army as an employer.
- I have heard from others what goes on in the Army.
- I have already heard many things about the Army.

Social/team activities

- The Army offers the possibility to work together with different people.
- The Army offers the possibility to be amongst people.
- The Army offers the possibility to enjoy a group atmosphere.
- The Army offers the possibility to work in teams.
- The Army offers the possibility to make lots of friends.

Physical activities

- Working in the Army offers the possibility to practice many sports.
- The Army offers the possibility to do a lot of manoeuvres.
- If you work in the Army, you can do a lot of sports.
- Working in the Army offers a lot of physical challenges.

Structure

- The Army is a good place to work if you like getting orders.
- The Army offers the possibility to be tied to strict rules.

- The Army offers the possibility to gain some discipline.
- The Army offers the possibility to work in a well-defined structure.

Advancement

- The Army offers a lot of opportunities for advancement.
- The Army offers diverse career opportunities.
- The Army offers prospects for higher positions.
- The Army offers the possibility to build a career.

Travel opportunities

- The Army offers the possibility to see a lot of the world.
- The Army offers the possibility to do a lot of foreign assignments.
- The Army offers the possibility to live far away from home.
- The Army offers the possibility to travel a lot.

Pay and benefits

- The Army offers the possibility to make a lot of money.
- In general, the wages in the Army are high.

Job security

- The Army offers the possibility to hold a permanent position.
- The Army offers job security.
- The Army offers people a job for life.
- The Army offers prospects for a certain future.

Educational opportunities

- Working in the Army is a way out if you are tired of studying.
- Working in the Army is the ideal solution for school tiredness.
- The Army offers the possibility to escape from school.

Task diversity

- The Army offers the possibility to practice a diverse range of jobs.
- The Army offers the possibility to choose from a diversity of jobs.
- Working in the Army offers a lot of variety.
- The Army offers a wide range of jobs.

Sincerity

- Honest
- Sincere
- Down-to-earth

Cheerfulness

- Cheerful
- Friendly
- Original

Excitement

- Daring
- Exciting
- Thrilling

Competence

- Intelligent
- Technical
- Corporate

Prestige

- High status
- Highly regarded
- Well respected

Ruggedness

- Tough
- Rugged
- Masculine

The armed forces' attractiveness as an employer

- For me, the Army would be a good place to work.
- The Army is attractive to me as a place for employment.
- A job in the Army is very appealing to me.

