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IMPROVING THE CANDIDATE EXPERIENCE:

TIPS FOR DEVELOPING 'WISE' ORGANIZATIONAL HIRING INTERVENTIONS

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on evidence-based techniques for improving the candidate experience that are both practical and actionable. We begin by presenting a conceptual framework that focuses on the provision of explanations as a way of improving the candidate experience. Next, we present data from two empirical studies that directly test the effects of pre-test explanations. In the final section, we consider a broad range of 'wise' interventions that can improve the candidate experience. Organizations can directly translate the implications and recommendations from this paper into policies and procedures that will enhance the candidate experience.

IMPROVING THE CANDIDATE EXPERIENCE:

TIPS FOR DEVELOPING 'WISE' ORGANIZATIONAL HIRING INTERVENTIONS

Organizations that focus on ensuring a high-quality candidate experience are more likely to attract, engage, and connect with top talent. They are also able to bring more visibility to their brand. This is because when individuals feel connected to an organization, their attitudes and behaviors are more positive. As such, it is critical to ensure that the selection process candidates experience is a positive one. Indeed, a 2017 review of the applicant reactions literature was conducted by McCarthy and colleagues, and findings indicated that when candidates have a negative reaction to the selection process they are likely to report lower levels of organizational attractiveness, reduced intentions to recommend the company to others, and decreased propensity to accept a job offer. This can have very significant implications, as demonstrated by the following statistics:

- In [2014], Virgin Mobile estimates that they lose approximately $5.4 million every year as a result of job candidates who are unhappy with their experience applying to the company actually cancelling their cell phone subscriptions.

- Career Arc reported that 72% of candidates who have had a bad experience have shared it online through an employer review site, a social networking site, or directly with a colleague or friend.

- The Talent Board found 46% of candidates who have a "negative" overall experience say they will take their alliance, product purchases, and customer relationship somewhere else.

- CareerBuilder estimates that 42% of candidates who were dissatisfied with their

experience would never seek employment at that company again.

- LinkedIn reported that the cost of having a bad company reputation is as much as $7.6 million for a company with 10,000 employees.

In spite of these figures, it is common for candidates to have negative experiences as a result of the types of assessment tools they are required to complete, as well as the way that they are treated during the hiring process. In fact, a survey of more than 4,500 job seekers over the age of 18 was conducted by CareerBuilder in 2017 and results indicated that 73% of respondents found the job search process to be one of the most stressful life events and over 60% had quit in the middle of filling out online applications because of their length or complexity! Thus, while the use of job-related assessments is critical to organizations and offers a number of benefits, especially the increased ability to select top talent, candidates who complete assessments do not always see their benefits and can react negatively. Such negative reactions can take the form of perceived unfairness, decreased motivation, and anxiety.

There is no doubt that ensuring a positive candidate experience is paramount to the attraction and retention of top talent. However, the precise tools and strategies that organizations can use to accomplish this objective are less clear. This paper focuses on practical, actionable techniques for improving the candidate experience. We start with a conceptual framework that delineates the candidate experience and focuses on the provision of explanations as a way of improving the candidate experience. This technique is a type of 'wise organizational intervention', as it reflects a small targeted strategy that is relatively ordinary, brief, and precise. It is also based on robust psychological theories. We then present data from two empirical studies that directly test the effects of pre-test explanations. The final section of this paper expands the focus to consider other types of 'wise' interventions that can improve the candidate

experience. These broader interventions are drawn from the current research, the broader literature on candidate reactions, and data from The Talent Board. They are presented as a series of organizational recommendations and it is our hope that they will translate into policies and procedures that will enhance the candidate experience.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF THE CANDIDATE EXPERIENCE

We begin by presenting a conceptual framework for understanding the candidate experience as it applies to the assessment process (see Table 1). Drawing from signaling theory, we suggest that candidates interpret the information they receive before, during, and after the assessment process as signals about the organization and its working conditions. For example, the information can serve as a signal of the organization's culture, commitment to employees, and/or ethical practices. Characteristics of the assessment process itself (e.g., types of assessments used) can also serve as a signal to candidates about the organization's underlying attributes.

One of the most notable ways in which organizations can send such signals is through the explanations they give to candidates. In fact, the provision of explanations has been found to be one of the most useful, low-cost techniques for ensuring that candidates have a positive experience. Our focus is on three types of explanations that can be given to candidates before the assessment process begins: (a) informational fairness explanations, or providing information about the assessments and the assessment process; (b) social fairness explanations, or treating candidates with appreciation and respect; and (c) uncertainty reduction explanations, or providing support and reassurance to candidates. As described below, each of these explanations sends signals about employer, such as organizational transparency, respect, and reassurance, which lead to candidate perceptions of fairness, motivation, and anxiety.

Informational fairness. The first type of explanation, informational fairness, involves providing relevant and useful information to candidates to ensure that their experience is viewed as fair. This includes, for example, information about the assessments that they will be asked to complete (types of assessments), and why such assessments are used (e.g., details about job relatedness and test purpose). The underlying premise is that the provision of information serves to increase the transparency of the testing process and shows that legitimate and high-quality practices are being used. In turn, test-takers react more positively to the test and the testing process. Here, signaling theory highlights the importance of credible and reliable signals. Specifically, organizations must signal that legitimate and high-quality practices are being used. Such signals serve as positive indicators of organizational quality and culture, and are a direct precursor to fairness perceptions. By increasing perceptions of fairness, this type of explanation can also serve to motivate candidates to do well, as they feel that the test will be a good reflection of their abilities. Finally, informational fairness heightens feelings of certainty, and in doing so reduces levels of candidate anxiety. This information provided transparency and shows that legitimate and high-quality practices are being used.

> *Sample Informational Fairness Explanation:* The assessment that you are about to take has been designed to assess the skills required for the job. It was developed based on extensive research that has shown that the assessment substantially reduces errors in the hiring process.

Social fairness. The second explanation type, social fairness, focuses on the manner in which test-takers are treated throughout the testing process and provides important signals about cooperative organizational behavior. Treating candidates in a warm and respectful manner can serve to inform them about the corporate culture. It also serves as a direct sign of respect. Thus,

treating test-takers with warmth and appreciation signals respect and shows that the organization is cooperative and considerate. Consistent with this reasoning, recruiter 'personableness' and trustworthiness have been found to be significantly related to organizational attractiveness and job acceptance intentions. Importantly, social fairness is a direct precursor to higher levels of candidate fairness and motivation. Displays of social fairness can also reduce anxiety levels.

> *Sample Social Fairness Explanation:* *Thank you for agreeing to take part in this assessment process. We know that your time is valuable, and we really appreciate your help. We also appreciate the time and effort you are putting into this. Thank you sincerely.*

Uncertainty reduction. The third type of explanation, uncertainty reduction, emphasizes the reduction of test-taker worry prior to testing. This technique involves informing candidates about the content of the test and the test process (e.g., what the test entails, whether the tasks are familiar) in order to increase feelings of control and build/maintain test-taker levels of trust. Here, signaling theory highlights the importance of accurate, honest, and/or hard-to-fake signals. Specifically, employers must ensure that their tests and test processes possess the underlying qualities that are communicated in the uncertainty reduction signal. The underlying premise is that reassuring candidates that there is no need to be concerned about the test process will increase feelings of control and help prevent worrisome thoughts. This kind of reassurance sends a message about the organization's commitment to the well-being of test-takers. This is particularly relevant for internal job candidates, as they often remain in the firm regardless of the promotional outcome. Indeed, the provision of reassurance has been found to be important in reducing anxiety and increasing feelings of control. The reduction of uncertainty can also have an effect on test-taker fairness perceptions and motivation. It can lead to higher perceptions of

fairness because test-takers will have additional information about the test. In turn, higher

perceptions of fairness can drive higher levels of motivation.

> *Sample Uncertainty Reduction Explanation: Rest assured that the assessment you are*
>
> *about to take requires you to complete tasks that are familiar to you. It is called a job*
>
> *simulation because it simulates the actual work required for the job.*

Combined explanation. It is also important to consider combined explanations, which

include informational fairness, social fairness and uncertainty reduction techniques all at once.

While each of the three interventions are broadly based on theoretical models of justice, each is

also conceptually and empirically distinct. Conceptually, informational fairness targets the

content of the message and helps to increase the transparency of the test process; social fairness

targets interpersonal treatment and helps to increase feelings of respect; and uncertainty

reduction targets test-taker anxiety and helps to increase test-taker reassurance. Combined, this

suggests that the three interventions are likely to tap unique variance, or unique aspects, of

candidate reactions, such that when used in combination, the three will produce stronger effects

than when administered alone. This proposition is consistent with signaling theory, which

highlights the importance of signal consistency, or the extent to which signals from one source

are in agreement with one another. This is a crucial consideration, as the dynamic nature of

organizational environments means that job candidates are constantly inundated with a multitude

of signals. By sending multiple positive signals from the same source, a combined explanation is

expected to increase the effectiveness of the signaling process. The question is whether providing

multiple explanations is too much information for candidates, or whether they act together to

improve the candidate experience all the more.

TESTING THE EFFECT OF PRE-TEST EXPLANATIONS ON CANDIDATE PERCEPTIONS

As previously indicated, we conducted two studies to assess the effects of pre-test explanations on the candidate experience. In line with our conceptual framework (see Table 1), our first goal was to examine whether the three categories of wise interventions had a direct effect on perceptions of transparency, respect and reassurance. To accomplish this objective we asked a large sample of employees to complete a work sample test as though they were a candidate applying for a job. Our focus on employees was consistent with the fact that organizations regularly use assessment tests to evaluate current employees for training, development, and promotion processes.

The work sample was developed on the basis of a comprehensive job analysis and simulated core tasks of the job (e.g., inputting and checking data). Employees were asked to answer questions and provide information about 50 digital images. The assessment took approximately 30 minutes to complete. Each employee was randomly assigned to one of our five pre-test explanation conditions: informational fairness, social fairness, uncertainty reduction, combined condition, and a control condition (see Table 2). They were then asked to complete the work sample test. Upon completion of the test, each employee was asked to complete a set of measures that assessed their perceptions of organizational transparency, respect and reassurance.

Findings were consistent with expectations and indicated that employees who received the informational fairness explanation reported higher levels of perceived transparency of the test than those in the control condition; employees who received the social fairness explanation reported higher levels of perceived organizational respect than those in the control condition; and employees who received the uncertainty reduction condition reported higher levels of

reassurance than those in the control condition. Further, employees who received the combined

explanation were found to have higher perceptions of test fairness (albeit no significant

difference in respect and/or reassurance). These results are promising, as they suggest that our

'wise organizational interventions' can have a significant impact on candidate perceptions.

TESTING THE EFFECT OF PRE-TEST EXPLANATIONS ON CANDIDATE

REACTIONS

Our second goal was to assess whether the three types of wise interventions that we

outline in our conceptual model (Table 1) have an effect on candidate levels of fairness, anxiety,

and motivation. Here we examined a large group of product technicians in a large North

American organization. Employees were again randomly assigned to one of the five pre-test

explanation conditions (see Table 2).They then completed the same work sample test as per

above, as well as a set of measures that assessed their reactions after the testing was finished.

Findings indicated that employees who received the informational fairness and

uncertainty reduction explanations did not exhibit higher perceptions of fairness than participants

in the control group. However, participants who received the social fairness explanation, as well

as those who received the combined explanation, reported higher perceptions of fairness than

test-takers who were not given an explanation. These findings are promising, as they indicate

that pre-test explanations not only influence attitudes (i.e., feelings of transparency, respect and

reassurance), but can also have an effect on reactions (perceived fairness).

In this second study, we were also able to consider the context in which the assessments

took place. Specifically, we asked employees about their perceived organizational support, or the

extent to which they felt that the organization values their individual levels of well-being. As

expected, the perceived level of support varied across the employees in our sample. It is

important to consider, as employees' past and current treatment by the organization may create expectations about the levels of fairness that they will encounter. It is also highly relevant given that organizations regularly use assessments to evaluate current employees for training, development, and promotion processes. Thus, the relation between pre-test explanations and candidate reactions may be influenced on perceptions of organizational support.

Findings indicated that perceived organizational support was an important factor to consider in understanding the candidate experience. Specifically, the social fairness, uncertainty reduction, and combined explanation conditions led to higher perceptions of fairness when perceived organizational support was low. However, when perceived organizational support was high, the interventions had little effect on fairness. Thus, when perceived support was high or an explanation was provided, perceptions of fairness were high. In this sense, the explanation seemed to compensate for situations of low organizational support.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ORGANIZATIONS

This research extended the concept of wise interventions to the job candidate experience and demonstrates that simple (wise) interventions in the form of pre-test explanations can have a significant impact on candidate attitudes and reactions. Overall, results suggested that the pre-test explanations enhance reactions by influencing perceptions of transparency, respect and reassurance. They further indicated that the social fairness and combined explanations lead to higher perceptions of fairness. Together, these findings are quite promising, as they indicate that improving the candidate experience does not necessarily require major corporate restructuring, large-scale cultural changes, and/or significant procedural redesign. Instead, the candidate experience can be enhanced, in part, through simple 'wise' interventions in the form of pre-test explanations.

Our findings also demonstrated the importance of considering the social context in which assessments are given. We found that candidate perceptions of organizational support mattered, such that test explanations were particularly important when organizations were viewed as unsupportive. These findings are particularly notable given that applicants and job incumbents often form exchange relationships with organizations (or members within them) by the time they apply. This may occur through interaction with recruiters, referrals by organizational members, or by virtue of being an existing (in the case of job promotions), or past, job incumbent. Ultimately, we found that the social fairness, uncertainty reduction, and the combined explanations can serve to buffer the potentially harmful effects of low perceived organizational support.

This work also directs attention to proactive approaches to managing the harmful effects of negative candidate experience. Instead of focusing attempts on the management of post-assessment reactions, organizations would be better served by adopting a proactive approach and preventing negative reactions from occurring in the first place. In other words, the wise interventions explored in this study can be used strategically to avoid negative reactions before they begin to develop. They are also simple and cost-effective, making them practical in actual organizational settings.

Given these results, we anticipate that recruiters could provide explanations that would accomplish similar goals. Pre-test explanations given verbally by a recruiter may be even more effective than written instructions that applicants may only briefly skim over or even ignore. We also encourage other types of wise interventions in the context of the candidate experience, such as the provision of post-assessment feedback.

BROAD RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTING WISE INTERVENTIONS

THAT SIGNAL TRANSPARENCY, RESPECT AND REASSURANCE

As described above, the use of explanations is a valuable tool for enhancing the candidate experience. However, it is only one of many possible 'wise' interventions that can signal transparency, respect, and reassurance, and ultimately result in more positive candidate reactions. Other possibilities are nicely illustrated by The Talent Board, a non-profit organization, whose focus is on the candidate experience. Every year since 2011, The Talent Board conducts a comprehensive study examining hundreds of organizations and their job candidates. The data are used to identify employers who provide an exemplary candidate experience that is based on candidate overall experiences; the extent to which candidates will reapply, the extent to which candidates will refer the organizations to others; and the extent to which candidates will increase their business relationship with the employer. Using the combined findings from the research we present above, the broader literature on candidate reactions, and the findings of The Talent Board, we offer the following recommendations for organizations to increase transparency, respect and reassurance before, during and after their hiring process.

Increasing Transparency

1. Provide candidates with information about the testing process up front. This information should include the types of tests and assessments that will be used, why these have been chosen, the amount of time each will take, and what the candidate will be required to do.

2. Ensure that all tests and assessments are related to the job. If it is not obvious how they are related, be sure to explain this to candidates. This is particularly relevant given that The Talent Board reports that 85% of companies that have an award-winning candidate experience are using assessment tests to select candidates, and 68% of them conduct in-

house validation analyses! In other words, employers using valid instruments (i.e., there is empirical evidence of their job-relatedness) may want to let candidates know.

3. Provide feedback to candidates after the test(s) have been completed and, for candidates who are not hired, be sure to provide an explanation as to why. In addition to providing the applicant with an explanation in the form of an excuse (e.g., ''the candidate pool was extremely strong and thus we didn't have enough positions to hire all of the strong candidates''), consider providing a justification (e.g., ''the procedure was job-related and valid''). Both types of explanations have significant positive effect on applicant perceptions, regardless of whether the candidate was accepted or rejected.

4. Be sure to communicate with candidates throughout the selection process. This is critical, as a 2016 survey of 826 job seekers for a range of positions was conducted by CareerArc, and findings indicated that 65% of candidates never or rarely receive notice of the decision made on their application from an employer. Make this feedback a priority and consider implementing an automated application system where candidates can track their progress and view results of the decision-making process in real time. Consistent with this recommendation, The Talent Board reports that companies with award-winning candidate experiences are provided with online tracking systems. Advanced systems that include schedule and progress indicators that show the percentage completed are the most ideal.

5. Ensure that all recruitment and selection materials (online and elsewhere) convey consistent and accurate messages regarding the selection process and the organization.

Increasing Respect

1. Let all candidates know how appreciated and important they are from the beginning to the very end of the selection process. Communicate this in written form via recruitment

materials, test instructions, and personal notes. Communicate this verbally when interacting

with candidates before and during tests and job interviews. Consider creating a

communication strategy/plan – The Talent Board reports that 74% of companies that boast an

awarding winning candidate experience have a Candidate Relationship Management (CRM)

system in place. Many types of CRM software systems are available to enhance the process.

2. Provide interpersonal training for all recruiters and test administrators. This training

should highlight the importance of ensuring that the organization is perceived in a positive

light. It should also include diversity training so that recruiters are sensitive to the needs of

all candidates.

3. Reward recruiters and test administrators for being honest and respectful of candidates.

Link candidate respect to their performance evaluations, using feedback surveys as described

below.

4. Ask both internal and external candidates to provide feedback on the selection system.

For example, systematically collect candidate surveys for this purpose (e.g., send a link to a

survey a week later). The Talent Board reports that the vast majority of candidates who

reported a "poor" one-star experience were not asked to provide any feedback, while those

who reported a five-star experience were asked for feedback before the even applied for the

job!

5. Be sure to provide a response to candidates when they have questions or concerns. This is

common courtesy and reflects respect for candidates and social fairness on the part of the

employer.

Increasing Reassurance

1. Give candidates assurance that the testing process will be based on tasks that are familiar

to them and relevant to the job. Provide examples ahead of time.

2. Ensure that the selection procedures are designed in a manner that minimizes candidate
    anxiety. This can be accomplished incorporating the following strategies: include advanced
    information on the assessments; start assessments with easy questions; allow ample time for
    completion; avoid speeded tests unless job requirements are speeded; ensure a comfortable
    setting for the tests; avoid distractions; use reassurances to the candidates; train service
    oriented test administrators; start job interviews with positive small talk; and ensure that
    recruiters are calm and not rushed.

3. Ensure that candidates have the opportunity to ask questions and get help at all stages of
    the recruitment and selection process. The Talent Board has found that top employers are
    making their recruitment teams and chatbots available on career sites and social media sites
    to answer candidate questions.

4. Train recruiters and employees on active listening styles in order to identify and react to
    candidate concerns.

5. Provide candidates with detailed agendas/descriptions for each day of the selection
    process.

CONCLUSION

This paper highlights the importance of using wise interventions to increase the candidate
experience. We present a conceptual model of wise interventions that focuses on increasing
feelings of transparency, respect and reassurance and share two studies that provide evidence in
support of this model. Our findings indicate that:

- Candidate reactions are really important.

- Candidate reactions can be improved through wise interventions.

- Wise interventions include the provision of pre-test explanations.

- Hiring officials should use wise interventions to improve candidate reactions.

We end with a series of recommendations that organizations can use to implement their own 'wise' interventions that can signal transparency, respect and reassurance, and result in a more positive candidate experience. Ultimately, we hope that this paper inspires the use of these interventions, such that a positive candidate experience ultimately becomes the norm!

TABLE 1

Conceptual Framework: Enhancing the Candidate Experience through Wise Interventions

Organizational Signals

Provide Information about Organization and Working Conditions

Specific Purposes of Signals:	Informational Fairness (focus on transparency)	Social Fairness (focus on respect)	Uncertainty Reduction (focus on reassurance)
Description of Organizational Intent	Ensuring that candidates are provided with relevant information during the assessment process	Ensuring that candidates are treated with appreciation and respect during all stages of the assessment process.	Reducing the uncertainty surrounding the assessment process.
Relevant Theories	Theories of Informational Justice	Theories of Interpersonal Justice	Theories of Anxiety and Stress
Predictions	Positively related to test fairness and test-taker motivation; negatively related to test-taker anxiety.	Positively related to test fairness and test-taker motivation; negatively related to test-taker anxiety.	Negatively related to test-taker anxiety; positively related to test fairness and test-taker motivation.
Boundary Conditions	This possibility is more likely when test-takers have low perceived organizational support	This possibility is more likely when test-takers have low perceived organizational support	This possibility is more likely when test-takers have low perceived organizational support

TABLE 2

Types of Pre-Test Explanations Tested

Conditions	Pre-Test Instructions
Condition 1: *Informational Fairness Explanation*	The assessment that you are about to take has been designed to assess the skills required for your job. It was developed based on extensive research, and will provide information that will be used to improve the way [employer name] hires employees. Previous research in the company has shown that the assessment substantially reduces errors. Thus, your participation will help to improve organizational effectiveness.
Condition 2: *Social Fairness Explanation*	Thank you for agreeing to take part in this assessment process. We know that your time is valuable, and we really appreciate your help. The continued success of this organization is a result of employees like you, and we appreciate the time and effort you are putting into this. Thank you sincerely for your help.
Condition 3: *Uncertainty Reduction Explanation*	Rest assured that the assessment you are about to take requires you to complete tasks that are familiar to you. It is called a job simulation because it simulates the actual work you do. As such, the assessment merely asks you to perform a task that you do every day. Do not worry about the assessment.
Condition 4: *Combined Explanation*	The assessment that you are about to take has been designed to assess the skills required for your job. It was developed based on extensive research, and will provide information that will be used to improve the way [employer name] hires employees. Previous research in the company has shown that the assessment substantially reduces errors. Thus, your participation will help to improve organizational effectiveness. Rest assured that the assessment you are about to take requires you to complete tasks that are familiar to you. It is called a job simulation because it simulates the actual work you do. As such, the assessment merely asks you to perform a task that you do every day. Do not worry about the assessment. Thank you for agreeing to take part in this assessment process. We know that you time is valuable, and we really appreciate your help. The continued success of thi organization is a result of employees like you, and we appreciate the time and effort you are putting into this. Thank you sincerely for your help.
Condition 5: *Control Group*	No additional pre-test instructions.

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For more information on the Career Arc survey, please visit the following website: http://web.careerarc.com/candidate-experience-study.html

For more information on The Talent Board and the CandE awards, visit the following website: http://www.thetalentboard.org/. The 2017 TALENT BOARD NORTH AMERICAN CANDIDATE EXPERIENCE RESEARCH REPORT can also be obtained from this website.

Readers who would like to learn more about wise interventions can read G.M. Walton, 2014, The new science of wise psychological interventions. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 23*, 73-82.

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Biographies

Julie McCarthy is a Professor of Management at the University of Toronto. Julie's research examines how organizations can ensure that their practices are viewed favorably by job applicants and employees. She also examines workplace stress and strategies that individuals can use to achieve success in their work and home lives. (Julie McCarthy, Professor, Department of Management, University of Toronto Scarborough, 1265 Military Trail, Toronto, ON. M1C 1A5, tel.: +1 (416) 287-7642, e-mail: julie.mccarthy@utoronto.ca).

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