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Information Exchange in Personnel Selection Decisions

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Information Exchange in Personnel Selection Decisions

Abstract

Personnel selection decisions often involve group decisions in which individual group members do not share all the available information about candidates. Serial interviews are one example of this situation. Although serial interview techniques are commonly used to select employees, the selection literature has not extensively investigated serial interviewing, especially the process of coming to a selection decision as a group at the conclusion of the process. The information exchange literature is used to shed light on this process. Results showed that groups often failed to exchange sufficient information to come to the correct decision, discussed a higher proportion of negative than positive information, and discussed more information that was already common knowledge to all group members than information initially known only to one member. Implications for selection procedures are discussed.

Making decisions in groups is becoming increasingly common as organizations find that they must rely on many areas of expertise in order to remain competitive. Increased use of empowerment techniques and increased use of teams means that more employees at all levels will have a say in selection decisions (Klimoski & Jones, 1995). Notwithstanding repeated cautionary messages about their reliability and validity, interviews are still among the most popular selection methods (Pulakos & Schmitt, 1995). Several researchers recommend multiple interviewers in order to improve recall, reduce the effects of idiosyncratic biases, and increase reliability (Campion, Palmer, & Campion, 1997). Multiple interviews may take the form of a panel (e.g., Campion, Pursell, & Brown, 1988; Pulakos, Schmitt, Whitney, & Smith, 1996), in which interviewers conduct the interview together (e.g., a team interviewing a potential new member), or a serial interview, in which interviews are conducted separately (perhaps so that individual concerns or assessment expertise of each interviewer may be addressed or merely because of scheduling). These interviewers will then come together as a group to determine which candidate to hire. Although the interviewing literature has investigated individual and panel interviews extensively, there has been much less investigation of serial interviews. Much of this research is fairly old (Bobbitt & Newman, 1944; Trankell, 1959), and has neglected the process by which individual interviewers pool their information to come to a selection decision, focusing instead on interrater reliability (e.g., Conway, Jako, & Goodman, 1995).

One advantage to utilizing groups to make selection decisions would seem to be the potential to gather and combine the information to which each group member has access. It is this group decision making process following serial interviewing with which the present study is concerned. The present study proposes to utilize the

literature on information exchange in group decision making to investigate the effectiveness of a serial interview approach. The focus will be on the group decision portion of the process. The study will investigate how well information is shared amongst the selection committee. Biases in terms of information use will be explored.

Information Exchange

Ideally, once individual interviewers have gathered information from candidates, they will meet together, exchange the information they have received, and come to a decision on which candidate to hire. Typically, all group members will share some basic information about the candidates, such as resume information, test scores, etc. as well as the criteria upon which the selection decision is to be based. This pool of information can be termed shared or common information. However, each interviewer also has a body of knowledge to which, initially at least, only he or she has access, as a result of his or her private interaction with the candidate. It is at an individual group member's discretion to communicate this unshared or unique information to the rest of the group.

Unfortunately, research on information exchange in groups has found that group members are often poor disseminators of information related to a decision. Group members are more likely to discuss information common to all group members than to exchange information that they alone know, thus neglecting to discuss a significant portion of the information at their disposal. Many studies exist that demonstrate this effect (Dennis, 1996; Gigone & Hastie, 1993; Kim, 1997; Larson, Christensen, Abbot, & Franz, 1996; Stasser & Stewart, 1992; Stasser, Stewart, & Wittenbaum, 1995; Stasser, Taylor & Hanna, 1989; Stasser & Titus, 1985, 1987; Wittenbaum, 1998).

Several conditions which are relevant to an interviewing scenario exacerbate this problem. First, information exchange is poorer when the decision is perceived as a judgment and members focus on achieving a group consensus rather than trying to determine the correct answer (Stasser & Stewart, 1992). Stasser and Stewart's (1992) study in which students made a selection decision on candidates for student body president found that this type of decision was perceived as a matter of individual preference rather than as having an objective answer. Since most organizational decisions are made under conditions of risk or uncertainty--the correct answer cannot be demonstrated in advance--this bias is particularly problematic. Groups will have no incentive to make certain that all members contribute all information relevant to the problem.

Second, the more information there is and the less of it that is known by all group members prior to any face-to-face meetings, the less group members are inclined to bring up anything but the information already shared in common (Stasser & Titus, 1987). Individual interviewers may have access to a wealth of information about candidates.

Finally, the tendency to discuss only common information increases as group size increases (Stasser, Taylor, & Hanna, 1989). Research has found that six-person groups discussed considerably less information that was not initially held in common than did three-person groups. Selection committees in organizations can easily be six members, if not more.

Several possible reasons why full exchange of information does not occur have been proposed. First, information held in common simply has a greater probability of being mentioned (Stasser & Titus, 1987). Each member has the opportunity to bring

up a particular item of information held in common versus only one member for unique information. Second, time constraints may not allow members to discuss all information at their disposal (Parks & Cowlin, 1995). The selection committee may be in a hurry to make an offer to a candidate in order to fill a vacant position or to be the first organization to make an offer to a particular candidate. Additionally, group members may fail to recognize the importance of certain information to the group decision or may simply not remember all of the information (Stasser, 1992). Finally, group members may see achieving consensus and not information recall as their primary task (Stasser, Kerr, & Davis, 1989). One result of this perception is a group member may not wish to upset the emerging consensus by bringing up information counter to the prevailing group opinion. On the other hand, group members may believe that it is their responsibility to advocate for a particular candidate based on the information they hold, and therefore will select the information they present to the group accordingly (Stasser, 1992). In sum, how the task is formulated as well as social validation may affect how information is exchanged. Following the results of previous research, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 1: Groups will discuss more shared information than unshared information.

Although previous information exchange research has emphasized comparing information exchange of shared vs. unshared information (e.g., Larson et al., 1996; Wittenbaum, 1998), total information exchange, particularly total relevant information exchange, is an equally if not more important consideration. Regardless of how many members initially had access to particular information, its presence in the discussion signals relevance for the decision. Additionally, discussions in which not all

information is exchanged tend to perpetuate biased views rather than correct them (Gigone & Hastie, 1993; Stasser and Titus, 1985). Admittedly, individuals also may have irrelevant information that need not be discussed, and that may in fact steer the group away from an effective decision (Nisbett, Zukier, & Lemley, 1981) or dilute the effectiveness of the relevant information (Stewart, Billings, & Stasser, 1998). However, failing to discuss information that is relevant is a more significant problem.

As previously mentioned, the amount of information involved in the decision task is a pertinent factor as well, since the greater the amount of information, the more challenging it is for a group to disseminate and discuss it (Stasser & Titus, 1987). Gigone and Hastie (1993), for example, used a task that involved only six pieces of information; the difficulty for groups was not in neglecting to contribute information, but rather in how that information could be combined and used most effectively. In contrast, Larson et al. (1996) used a complex medical diagnosis task with 22 pieces of information in which the decision was difficult to determine even if over 70% of information was utilized. This type of information intensive task clearly signifies the importance of making sure team members have all the information at their disposal. The selection decision process is information intensive as well.

For an information intensive problem in which alternatives must be evaluated, the distribution of positive and negative, common and unique information must be considered as well. Thus, another concept in the information exchange literature which is relevant for interview decision processes is that of the "hidden profile" (Dennis, 1996; Stasser & Stewart, 1992). Information has the possibility of being distributed in one of three general ways. If all positive and negative information about candidates is known to all interviewers, the group will have the least difficulty in choosing the optimal

candidate; however, in the case of serial interviewers all information is not shared in common. If some information is unique, but positive and negative information is still distributed evenly among interviewers, failing to share unique information will be less problematic because all individual interviewers will still choose the same candidate based on their own pool of information; however, this is an unlikely situation as well. The difficulty in choosing an optimal candidate exists because of a “hidden profile,” the likelihood that positive and negative information about a candidate will be unequally distributed among the unique information known by each individual interviewer. One interviewer may have elicited more negative responses than another interviewer from a particular candidate. One interviewer may have more positive information about one candidate than another, but a second interview finds the opposite to be true. The ratio of positive to negative unique information the individual interviewers have is also likely to be different from the common information. Thus, the candidate’s profile is initially “hidden” and individual interviewers may be biased for or against certain candidates unless information is adequately shared.

The above discussion regarding total relevant information, information load, and the hidden profile leads to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Greater total positive and negative (i.e., relevant) information exchange will result in a better quality decision.

Positive versus Negative Information

Previously, the information exchange literature has not paid much attention to what type of information is most likely to be exchanged. This question may have serious implications for selection decisions, however. Previous research on individual interviews has found that interviewers’ initial impressions of candidates led them to

engage in questioning which confirmed their initial impressions (Dougherty, Turban, & Callender, 1994), that interviewers recall more negative than positive information (Dipboye, Stramler, & Fontenelle, 1984), and that interviewers give more weight to negative information than positive information (Constantine, 1976; Rowe, 1989) in making a selection decision. Negative information has a stronger influence on impressions of others than positive information (Klein, 1991; Skowronski & Carlston, 1989). This may be because interviewers have made a first impression based on the application (Cable & Gilovich, 1998; Dipboye et al., 1984) or because negative information makes a salient contrast to the interviewer's impression of what a good candidate should be like (Constantine, 1976). Studies using more realistic stimulus conditions found results that were similar to those using paper credentials (Dipboye et al., 1984).

Research has not investigated the negativity bias in group selection decisions. It may be, as Cable and Gilovich (1998) have suggested, that multiple interviewers will offset individual interviewer's initial biases. A hidden profile situation in which some selection committee members have more positive information and others have more negative information may prompt a realization that both types of information exist and must be discussed. However, it is also likely, given the evidence from research on individual interviews and the robustness of the negativity bias, that in a group discussion, interviewers will be more likely to exchange negative than positive information.

Hypothesis 3: A greater proportion of negative than positive information will be exchanged.

Discussion Content and Group Perceptions

Because decision making processes are likely to play an important role in the decision outcome, it was felt that examining the discussion content in more detail would be instructive. Accuracy of stated information and types of statements were investigated. Likewise, the study assessed group members' perceptions of other group members and of the group processes. Due to the exploratory nature of these processes, no a priori hypotheses were set forth.

Method

Participants

Study participants were 244 students from psychology, management, political science and economics classes who received extra credit for participation. Participants were randomly assigned (within sex) to the three experimental conditions (all-male, all-female, and mixed-sex) in groups of four. There were 80 subjects in the all-male and mixed-sex conditions and 84 subjects in the all-female conditions.

Task and Materials

The study focused on the group decision segment of the interview process rather than interviews themselves. Participants were given descriptions of three hypothetical candidates for student body president which contained information one might discover during an actual interview. Participants were to use this information to decide which candidate would be best suited for the position. These descriptions included both common and unique information.

To compile the descriptions, complete profiles of each candidate were first developed, each containing a total of 19 items of information. This information consisted of neutral biographical information (e.g., where they were from, age, pets), and positive and negative information about experience (e.g., served on Freshman

Experience committee), positions on university issues (e.g., supports obtaining funding for a new science building), and personal characteristics (e.g., has trouble juggling his schedule).

Prior to the experiment, an independent sample rated all profile items on the basis of their desirability and importance for the position of student body president. Four different descriptions (one for each group member) based on the 19-item candidate profiles were then constructed each containing a subset of the information in the profile and including a specific number of positive, negative, and neutral items of information. Final descriptions used in the study contained 10 pieces of information, seven of which were common (available to all three group members) and three of which were unique (initially known to only one participant). Both the common and unique information were important for the final decision. The seven shared pieces of information included four pieces of neutral biographical information, two pieces of positive information and one piece of negative information having to do with positions on university issues or personal characteristics. Thus, discussing only shared information would make it difficult for the group to make an accurate distinction between candidates. The remaining unique information was distributed such that group members received varying proportions of positive and negative information about each of the three candidates (a "hidden profile"). This was done to bias individual members' pre-group preferences toward or against particular candidates. In actuality, an independent, pre-experimental sample from the same population as study participants and same sex composition unanimously evaluated Candidate A as the superior candidate for student body president. Thus, if groups were to share and discuss all

relevant pieces information, they should come to the same conclusion as the pre-experimental sample.

Procedure

The experimenter first introduced the study and explained that the group discussion session would be audio-recorded. After receiving the signed consent forms, individuals each received a folder containing information about each candidate. Subjects were told that they would not be receiving identical information. When the participants finished reading (5-10 minutes), the folders were collected and participants were given a form upon which to record their individual choice for student body president. After all participants had recorded their choices, these forms were collected and participants were instructed to discuss the candidates for student body president within their group and to come to a group consensus decision on which one they would select. The discussion was audio-recorded in order to assess which pieces of information were exchanged in the group, the frequency with which they were mentioned, and the number of statements made by each group member. At the conclusion of their discussion, participants were given a questionnaire upon which they recorded their group's choice and responded to questions regarding their impressions of the group and the group discussion

Measures

Decision quality was assessed by whether or not groups chose the best candidate (Candidate A). Information use was assessed by coding the audio recordings (see below under Content Coding). In addition, individual group member perceptions were assessed by a short questionnaire administered at the end of the study. It asked participants to assess on 7-point Likert scales their agreement with the group decision

(2 questions: “How certain are you that your group chose the best candidate?” [1 = very uncertain; 7 = very certain] and “To what extent would you be likely to agree with a decision the rest of the group made if you were not there to participate and shape the outcome? [1 = very unlikely; 7 = very likely]), satisfaction with the group process (1 item), and importance of the group agreeing with the individuals views (1 item).

Participants were also asked how well they personally liked the other group members (1 item about the group in general) and the extent to which they felt similar to group members (1 item about the group as a whole and an item about each of the other individual participants in the group). Regarding similarity, they were also asked to check off items from a list on whether their perception of similarity or dissimilarity was based on personality, knowledge, values, age, race, or gender.

Content Coding

Audio-taped discussions were analyzed in two ways. First, coders checked off whether or not a piece of information had been brought up in the discussion, whether the statement of information was accurate, and how many times that piece of information was repeated. Two coders analyzed each discussion and achieved a 92% agreement. Since it was determined that disagreements usually occurred because of failing to count an utterance (rather than counting one that did not occur), disagreements were resolved by using the higher number of statements.

Secondly, group discussions were analyzed according to the type of statements that were made. Categories of statements included: reporting actual information about the candidate from the materials provided (e.g., “Candidate B was a Resident Advisor”), discussion of criteria to choose a candidate for student body president (e.g., “We should have someone with good interpersonal skills.” Good interpersonal skills was

not an explicit statement about any candidate.), evaluation of information (e.g., "I don't think creativity is relevant." One candidate was described as creative.), and discussion of group process (e.g., "Well, how should we decide?"; "Let's go around and each say our opinion."). Two coders analyzed each group discussion. Reliability was 82% between coders. Disputes were resolved by a third coder.

Results

Information Exchange

Similar to findings in previous research (e.g., Stasser & Titus, 1985, Stasser & Stewart, 1992), only 42.6% of groups overall ($n = 21$) selected the "best" candidate (the one unanimously chosen by an independent sample with access to all information about the candidates). Subjects brought up in group discussion only 28.8% of the information at their disposal.

Hypothesis 1 was supported. Sixty percent of non-neutral common information (all participants read it in their descriptions of the candidates) was brought up in the group discussion, while only 22.7% of unique information was brought up ($t(1,56) = 20.12$, $P < .0001$). Forty percent of total common information was brought up in the group discussion compared to 22.7% of unique information ($t(1,56) = 8.643$, $P < .0001$).

Decision Quality

Hypothesis 2 predicted that groups that exchanged more relevant information would produce a higher quality decision. This hypothesis was not supported: total positive and negative information ($M = 30.15\%$ used) brought up in the group discussion did not predict choosing Candidate A ($R^2 = .018$, $F(1,55) = .001$, $P = .974$). However, groups did discuss a greater proportion of information for candidates they

eventually selected (36.8%) than for candidates they did not (33.2%; $t(1,54) = .304$, $P < .005$).

Positive versus Negative Information

Hypothesis 3 was supported. Consistent with research on selection (e.g., Rowe, 1963), groups discussed more of the negative information (53.5%) than the positive information (21.6%) about candidates ($t(1,56) = 17.96$, $P < .0001$).

Additionally, logistic regression analysis using a forward likelihood ratio test showed that the type of information discussed predicted the choice of candidates (Model Cox and Snell $R^2 = .731$; χ^2 (df 10, $n = 57$) = 74.82, $P < .00001$; -2LL = 2.773, Goodness-of-Fit = 2.000) with 98.25% correctly classified; the histogram showed the two groups clustering well at their respective ends of the plot. This analysis shows that when variables representing use of pieces of information were entered into the equation, not discussing negative information about Candidate A and discussing negative information about Candidates B and C was positively related to selecting Candidate A.

Group Member Perceptions

Although the task appeared to be very involving for participants, 78% reported that, regarding their initial individual choices, choosing a candidate was largely a matter of preference. Individual-level analysis of the group members' perceptions of the group decision showed that individuals were fairly certain that their group made the correct decision ($M = 5.44$, $SD = 1.14$ on a 7-point Likert scale) and moderately certain that the group would make the same decision in their absence ($M = 4.48$, $SD = 1.47$). Participants thought it moderately important that members agree with their views ($M = 3.11$, $SD = 1.43$), were satisfied with the group process ($M = 5.48$, $SD = 1.34$), and

showed positive liking for other group members ($M = 5.41$, $SD = 1.46$, 1 = neither liked nor disliked and 7 = liked very well).

Discussion

If one purpose of utilizing groups for selection decisions is to have access to more information and points of view, the reality falls far short of the ideal. Although the amount of information able to be gathered by individuals on the selection committee may be increased, this information is not effectively made available to all members of the group. Groups discuss only a minority of the information at their disposal, appear to concentrate on the information already known by all members, and neglect information that would allow them to select the superior alternative.

Part of the reason for this situation may well be how the decision task is perceived. In the current study, as in other research (Stasser & Stewart, 1992) most participants thought that selecting a candidate for student body president was largely a matter of preference and that there was no objective answer. This may have constrained their motivation to look for all relevant pieces of information (Stasser & Stewart, 1992). This situation is likely to be common in organizational decisions, such as hiring, where the correct answer cannot be demonstrated in advance and/or other concerns besides finding the optimal solution, such as consensus-building, enter into the picture. The view that selection is a matter of preference is also likely to become increasingly common as organizations are staffed by younger employees who have embraced the relativistic postmodern view that there is no "correct" answer.

It is also true that some information was neutral, and other information, though positive or negative was not particularly helpful in distinguishing among candidates (e.g., although only one candidate was described as believing that the college was the

best in the Midwest, it is likely that students would believe that other candidates had similar feelings). Thus, as in real life, it does make sense that not all information was discussed by the group since not all was relevant. Nevertheless, relevant positive and negative information was not used to its fullest level of effectiveness. As mentioned previously, a hidden profile condition and an information intensive decision imply that a significant majority of relevant information needs to be discussed in order to arrive at a correct decision.

Although there are many benefits to using multiple interviewers (Campion et al., 1997), it is clear that they are not perfect. More attention must be given to how they are actually used in organizations. Although multiple judgments can cancel out random interviewer errors (Dipboye, 1992), they do not appear to offset the negativity bias, even though individual group members had differing amounts of positive and negative information. Nor do interviewer groups make use of their various areas of expertise about a candidate to inform the other members of the group.

Limitations and Future Research

The present study focused on the evaluation stage of information processing in the group decision process. Future research should examine other aspects of the serial interview selection process, including influence processes, group composition, and other aspects of information processing, including attention, encoding, storage, and retrieval of information in the context the interviews themselves.

Future research should also investigate how information exchange is tied to influence processes. Parks and Cowlin (1996) found that on unfamiliar topics unverifiable facts (those that can only be advocated from memory) required two advocates; if only one person is privy to a particular piece of information it is less likely

to be accepted by the group (and conceivably less likely to be even brought up for fear of not being accepted). Nonetheless, if individual advocates are able to express confidence in their view, supported by their expertise, a single advocate may be sufficient (Stasser, Vaughan, & Stewart, 2000).

Another factor to be considered more fully may include how group members' level of familiarity with one another affects information exchange (Gruenfeld, Mannix, Williams, & Neale, 1996). Demographic differences between group members may be investigated more fully as well. In the present study all candidates were male, however candidates of different sexes may have brought about different patterns of information exchange. This is especially likely if individuals view the task as a matter of preference and as one of advocacy rather than finding the optimal choice. Stewart (1998) found that in an information sharing context, individuals rated a male applicant higher than a female applicant for a masculine gender-typed position.

The present study uses a policy-capturing paradigm (Brannick & Brannick, 1986) in which group members evaluate information about hypothetical candidates rather than interacting with candidates themselves. This paradigm is appropriate to assess the information processing aspect of group decision making in this study because it focuses on the evaluation stage. As future selection research examines other stages of the serial interviewing process more specifically, real interaction would be beneficial.

Although the information is presented in paper form, the group interaction is realistic and generalizable to real world settings. McNamara and Bromiley (1997) have commented that behavioral decision theory researchers often violate assumptions of normal communication that decision makers typically make, such as relevant, coherent communication. It is true that in the case of information exchange research,

one typical experimental parameter is that study participants have access to information profiles for only a limited time and do not have access to it during the discussion. This situation has the potential to contribute to lower information exchange if participants do not recall what has been stated. However, Hollingshead (1996) found that access to information during the group discussion had no effect on decision quality.

Suggestions for Practice

Although the goal of the study was not prescriptive in nature, it should be noted that there is hope for making group decision making more efficacious. Both groups and individuals have been found to be more accurate on tasks perceived as having a more objective solution (Kelly, Jackson, & Hutson-Comeaux, 1997). A task can be structured so that information exchange is more likely to occur by emphasizing that there is a correct (though possibly not demonstrable) answer to the task (Stasser & Stewart, 1992). This will prompt group members to develop criteria for the best solution and to look for information that supports these criteria. Groups have also been found to be more likely to exchange information and to consider all alternatives thoroughly when members were asked to rank order alternatives rather than simply choosing the best one (Hollingshead, 1996).

Additionally, there is some evidence that instructing members that they have a particular expertise (a particular subset of information that no one else has) and, most importantly, what that expertise is, will encourage greater information exchange (Stewart & Stasser, 1995; Stasser et al., 2000). It is not enough, however, simply to tell participants that they will receive different information from each other (Stasser, Stewart, & Wittenbaum, 1995). Group members must be told, though not necessarily publicly, what their particular expertise is (Stasser et al., 2000). It is quite likely that

serial interviewers would have such differential expertise and also be aware of the individual expertise of group members. It may also be beneficial to review areas of expertise or situations in which particular group members had contact with the candidate (e.g., who on the selection committee went to lunch with the candidate, who has particular ability to evaluate the candidate's capacity to demonstrate certain skills, etc.).

Finally, the group leader can take on an information management role, facilitating information exchange and recall by being familiar with group members expertise, soliciting new information, and repeating information, especially unshared information, already mentioned in order to keep it fresh in the group members' minds (Larson et al., 1996). Training group members to set aside the first few minutes of the group discussion in order to plan how to go about making the decision can also increase the amount of both shared and unshared information (Larson, Foster-Fishman, & Keys, 1994). Managing time is also important since groups tend to mention unshared information relatively late in the discussion (Larson et al., 1994). Thus, although the promise of serial interviewing and group decision making has not always been fulfilled, the potential for improvement exists by more closely managing the process.

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