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Organizational Search and Choice Revisited: The Role of Human Resource Systems in the Applicant's Decision Making Process

Robert D. Bretz Jr.
Cornell University

George F. Dreher
Indiana University

Ronald A. Ash
University of Kansas

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Keywords

CAHRS, ILR, center, human resource, job, worker, advanced, labor market, satisfaction, employee, work, manage, management, training, HRM, employ, model, industrial relations, labor market, job seeker, pay level, organization, role, reward system, applicant, recruitment

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Robert D. Bretz, Jr.
Cornell University

George F. Dreher
Indiana University

Ronald A. Ash
University of Kansas

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Center for Advanced Human Resource Studies
New York State School of Industrial & Labor Relations
Cornell University
393 Ives Hall
Ithaca, New York 14851-0952
(607) 255-2273

This paper has not undergone formal review or approval of the faculty of the ILR School. It is intended to make the results of Center research, conferences, and projects available to others interested in human resource management in preliminary form to encourage discussion and suggestions.

**Organizational Search and Choice Revisited: The Role of Human
Resource System Variables in the Applicant's Decision Making Process**

Abstract

Over the past decade we have learned a lot about how individuals choose organizations in which to work. However, this literature has generally failed to consider the role of an important class of attributes; the human resource systems that operate within organizations. Reward systems and mobility systems have unique motivating characteristics, are relatively visible, and vary widely between organizations. This paper attempts to make explicit when and how these variables might influence organizational attractiveness and applicants' decision making processes.

**Organizational Search and Choice Revisited: The Role of Human
Resource Systems in the Applicant's Decision Making Process**

Choosing a job can be a difficult and complex decision making process. While a decade of research has provided us with a list of variables that seem to be important to job seekers (e.g. pay level, advancement, job duties, and job security), it has generally failed to provide understanding of how different classes of variables interact with one another, or why some organizations are chosen over others when job offers are extended. While some variables (e.g. pay level, etc.) have received considerable attention, others have been virtually ignored.

How people make organizational choice decisions is likely to become more important to organizations as we move into the 1990s. Labor market realities suggest that many organizations will face mounting pressures to shift from a "selection" mode to an "attraction" mode in order to maintain sufficient applicant pools (e.g. Rynes & Barber, in press). This shift in perspectives should direct attention at organizational differences and the importance of considering the recruitment/attraction processes from an organizational perspective.

The present paper briefly reviews some existing models of how applicants evaluate job opportunities. Next, we describe a set of organizational attributes (i.e. human resource systems) that have been systematically excluded from search and choice models to date in spite of the substantial variability that exists on these attributes, and their potential motivating force. We then examine the role of organizational differences in the applicant's decision making process, and introduce a model suggesting how and when human resource

system variables might influence organizational attractiveness and intention to join. Finally, we suggest how future research designs might incorporate these variables to facilitate richer understanding of the complex decision process involved.

The Organizational Choice Context

Neoclassical economic theory suggests that job seekers will attempt to maximize utility by comparing alternatives and selecting the one with the highest expected return. Job seekers are assumed to have perfect knowledge of all opportunities and the potential outcomes offered by each. Competing alternatives are compared simultaneously on a large number of attributes. The job seeker considers the net advantage offered by each job in regard to each attribute and chooses the alternative which compares most favorably (Schwab, Rynes & Aldag, 1987). This can be thought of as a compensatory decision model since inadequacies on some attributes can be offset by the desirability of other attributes. The attributes may all carry equal weight or may be weighted differentially to reflect various utility functions.

A second approach to job search and choice recognizes that search is costly in terms of outlay and opportunity. Therefore, bounded rationality may better describe how individuals make organizational choices. This model suggests that job seekers establish minimally acceptable standards on a few very important attributes and search sequentially for jobs until one is offered that meets these minimal standards. The model is considered to be noncompensatory since inadequacies on critical attributes cannot be offset by any level of desirability on other attributes. Additionally, the Neoclassical assumptions of perfect knowledge and simultaneous evaluation of alternatives are considered improbable.

There is evidence suggesting that information processing varies as a result of task complexity. When faced with complex decisions, individuals resort to strategies that eliminate alternatives and simplify the evaluation process (Soelberg, 1967; Payne, 1976).

In practice, most organizational entry decisions are made under less than ideal conditions. Applicants rarely have complete information about either the job in question or possible alternatives. This is exacerbated by organizational recruiting strategies that limit the information available to applicants. These strategies include decisions about when to make job offers vis-a-vis other labor market competitors, and imposition of time limits for job acceptance. The organizational choice decision is often accompanied by other important life events such as graduation from school, loss of other employment, relocation, etc. In addition, the choice is often affected by the job opportunities, and preferences of other family members. Therefore, this difficult and important decision is often made with limited information, without sufficient time, in emotional situations, and constrained by the interests of others. Given this, the satisficing choice model described by bounded rationality appears to be a more realistic starting point for modeling the organizational choice decision making process.

At times, search and choice involves mostly choice rather than search. For example, upon graduation from a prestigious university, graduates may be in the enviable position of eliminating rather than generating job alternatives. In such cases, the satisficing model is assumed to eliminate all alternatives that do not meet threshold levels on the important criteria. The remaining alternatives are then hypothetically compared simultaneously in a compensatory fashion. Expectancy theory is useful in explaining choice under conditions of multiple, simultaneous job offers (Arnold, 1981; Einhorn, 1971;

Feldman & Arnold, 1978; Fischer 1976; Huber, Daneshgar & Ford, 1971; Singh, 1975; Strand, Levine & Montgomery, 1981; Zedeck, 1977). However, it should be cautioned that expectancy theory provides a decent approximation of the decision making process when operationalized in an across-subject design, but does not provide proof about how a particular person thinks about the choice process.

Person-Situation Congruence in Search Activity

Making the choice between competing job alternatives can be seen as choosing a setting in which to practice an occupation (Keon, Latack, & Wanous, 1982; Gati, 1989). A decade ago, Wanous (1980) pointed out there had been thousands of studies of the vocational choice process focusing mainly on theories of congruence between individual characteristics and external contingencies. Two theories of vocational choice are particularly applicable to organizational choice. Super (1953) views a person's career as a synthesis of the person's self concept and the realities of the occupational environment. Holland (1966) also assumes that personal and situational factors will drive the vocational choice through the person's attempts to achieve congruence with the setting.

Previous research suggests that vocational choice and self-image are related (e.g. Korman, 1966). However, attempts to study organizational entry using vocational choice theories have been limited. Tom (1971) extended Super's (1953) proposition to the organizational context by asking students to describe themselves and two organizations: one they would most prefer to work for and one they would least prefer to work for. He found more similarity between the individual's description of himself and the most

preferred organization than there was between the self description and that of the least preferred organization.

There appears to be a relationship between self-image and graduate school choice (Keon, Latack, & Wanous, 1982). Within-subject correlational analysis between self-image and school image showed that subjects with positive self-images chose schools similar to themselves, while those with negative self-images chose schools dissimilar to themselves. However, this appears to be nothing more than a main effect for positive school image. Noticing that students prefer schools with positive images is not particularly enlightening.

Burke & Deszca (1982) investigated the relationship between Type A behavior and preferences for particular organizational climates. Type A behavior scores were related to preferences for working environments characterized by high performance standards, spontaneity, ambiguity, and toughness. Since the personality attributes describing Type A individuals include ambition, competitiveness, need for achievement, and impatience, it appears that the drive for congruence in occupational contexts extends to organizational preference as well.

Though this literature is very limited, it suggests that accepted theories of vocational choice have relevance in the organizational choice context and appear to explain some of the variance in organizational choice decisions. This additional explanatory power is based on the individual's drive for congruence between personal characteristics and those of the setting. The organization imposes constraints that define the setting. Some of these defining characteristics are the organization's human resource systems.

Human Resource Systems

Human resource systems are collections of policies, practices, and procedures that work in concert to achieve some common purpose. For example, reward systems include those activities that determine how pay and other rewards are distributed to organizational members. Reward systems can be based on employee merit, longevity, or output (Milkovich & Newman, 1987). They may also be described by their focus on either the individual, the group, or the organization (Staw, 1986). An individually-oriented reward system attempts to create strong instrumentality linkages between performance and rewards by relying on the archetypical "merit system". A group-oriented reward system designs work and distributes rewards on a group basis. An organizationally-oriented system ties the individual's rewards to the performance of the organization by relying heavily on profit and/or gain sharing, bonuses, and stock options.

Heneman (1985) and others have shown that satisfaction with pay is multidimensional. That is, one may be satisfied or not with pay level, pay form, pay structure, and pay system independent of satisfaction with the other dimensions. Given this accepted multidimensionality, and new evidence that organizations tend to distinguish themselves through differences in the contingency of compensation (Gerhart & Milkovich, 1988), it is surprising that organizational entry research has generally not considered the impact of reward system dimensions other than pay level on the applicant's decision making process.

All organizational rewards do not come in the form of pecuniary compensation. While mobility in organizations is often accompanied by increases in compensation, the mobility system itself can have independent motivating characteristics. Mobility or career

systems describe mechanisms by which individuals move into, through, and out of organizations (Rosenbaum, 1984). Sonnenfeld & Peiperl (1988, p.588) define career systems as "collections of policies, priorities, and actions that organizations use to manage the flow of their members into, through, and out of the organization over time". Turner (1960) described mobility systems as either contest-oriented, or sponsored-oriented. Under a contest norm, upward mobility is the result of victory in a fair and open contest. Promotions are made on the basis of recent performance. Therefore, those that excelled in the past must continue to compete for further promotion and those that lost in prior rounds are not disadvantaged in the current competition. In contrast, mobility under a sponsorship norm relies on early identification of those possessing certain characteristics. This select group is afforded different career opportunities than the non-sponsored cohort. The most obvious example of sponsored mobility systems are organizational "fast tracks" and internal promotion policies (Rosenbaum, 1984).

We suggest that human resource systems, particularly the reward system and the mobility system, offer potential for enhancing understanding of why and how individuals are attracted to organizations. Reward and mobility systems are visible examples of the organizational setting that may suggest to job seekers when person-situation congruence is attainable. Since organizations exhibit wide variability on these dimensions, and these systems tend to be reward based (i.e. mechanisms through which raises and/or promotions are determined), they possess independent motivating characteristics and can be expected to interact with other choice related outcomes to influence the decision making process.

Human Resource System Variability and Its Impact

To the extent that different organizational objectives drive the firm's reward and mobility systems, human resource practices signify things about the different underlying nature of organizations. As such, knowledge of the organization's human resource systems should impact job seekers' decision-making process. While many have theorized about both the variability and propriety of human resource systems, little is known about how job applicants interpret human resource system differences between organizations. The examples that follow illustrate these points.

Using the Miles and Snow (1978) typologies, Olian and Rynes (1984, p. 170-171) suggest that "... different recruitment and selection practices attract different types of individuals into organizations". They suggest that in recruiting, Defender-type organizations will emphasize tight organizational control, a concern for efficiency of process, well-defined internal promotion ladders, and a commitment to employee development. These organizational characteristics are hypothesized to attract individuals with high needs for security and structure and low tolerance for ambiguity. Likewise, Prospector-type organizations are expected to emphasize dynamic work processes, more concern over output than process, and a commitment to innovation. These organizational characteristics are expected to attract individuals with a propensity for risk-taking.

Sonnenfeld & Peiperl (1988) suggest that organizations that hire at entry levels and use mobility systems based on group accomplishment (Clubs) will be more attractive to individuals who favor job security over rapid advancement. Those that hire at all levels and base mobility on individual achievement (Baseball Teams) should attract highly motivated, confident, risk-taking individuals. Finally, those that hire only at entry level and

base mobility on individual accomplishment (Academies) should appeal most to those with long-term focus and strong organizational commitment.

We are not aware of any studies that examine whether these issues actually are emphasized by the respective typologies, how potential applicants react to this information, or what applicants infer about the organization on the basis of this information. However, assuming that the desire for person-situation congruence influences organizational choice in the same fashion that it influences occupational choice, we can speculate that applicants form opinions about how well they "fit" the organization on the basis of how it operates and what it rewards.

In their most basic form, these opinions may be nothing more than general feelings that the organizational environment is comfortable. More specifically, contest mobility systems and merit-based reward systems may suggest more competitive, independent environments than those described by sponsored mobility systems and organizationally oriented reward systems. This might impact desire for congruence on the basis of personality dimensions. Applicants might also draw inferences about the organization's sense of fairness. Specifically, contest mobility systems apply different standards than those applied under a sponsorship norm when determining who deserves the promotion. Likewise, individually-oriented reward systems make different assumptions than do organizationally-oriented systems regarding the distribution of merit. This in turn could impact congruence on the basis of values. Ultimately, these are empirical questions that can only be answered through examining the role of human resource systems in the applicant's decision making process.

The examples above (Olian & Rynes, 1984; Sonnenfeld & Peiperl, 1988) are representative of the type of speculation that exists about the messages different human resource practices might be sending. In the single empirical study that has addressed some of these issues Bretz, Ash, & Dreher (1989) hypothesized that individual merit-based reward systems should be preferred by individuals with high need for achievement (nAch), while organizationally-based reward systems should be attractive to those with high need for affiliation (nAff). In an experimental setting, Bretz, et al. found that organizational reward systems did affect the applicant's decision-making process. However, the relationship is not clear-cut. nAch and nAff tended to be essentially the same regardless of organization preferred. However, the nAch X nAff interaction showed that when nAff was low the directional hypotheses held but when nAff was high those individuals characterized by relatively higher nAch were more attracted to the organizationally-oriented reward system, while those characterized by relatively higher nAff were more attracted to the individual, merit-based reward system. The latter results appear contrary to the bulk of theorizing and hypothesizing about person-situation congruence noted above and point to the need for better understanding of the effects of human resource systems on individual choice behavior.

The preceding discussion suggested why human resource systems may influence the decision making process. The following discussion will describe when and how this might occur.

The Model

A decision process based on the bounded rationality model is assumed. This is reasonable given the complex nature of the task, the importance of the decision vis-a-vis other decisions, and the relative infrequency of the process for a particular individual (Soelberg, 1967; Payne, 1976).

Vocational choice is assumed to limit the domain of jobs and organizations which an individual will pursue. In terms of the satisficing choice model hypothesized, the vocation manifests itself in the tasks, duties, and responsibilities which the job requires. Job content is seen as one of the few important attributes on which minimally acceptable thresholds must be met for the job to be considered attractive. In this way, jobs that do not fit the vocational classification are eliminated from the domain of possible employment opportunities.

There is also evidence that economic, social, and geographic factors limit opportunities for particular groups of job seekers. For example, licensing and certification requirements make it difficult or impossible for some individuals to pursue some jobs (Maurizi, 1974). The acquisition of position-specific training may also limit the attractiveness of jobs that do not compensate for the acquired knowledge, skills, and abilities (Mincer, 1962). Readers should consult Fleisher & Kniesner (1984) for a complete discussion of the impact of different barriers to entry on job search and choice activity.

Individual characteristics, constraints, and preferences also limit the domain of jobs and organizations that will be considered. Preferences for particular geographic areas, family member preferences, dual career considerations, and concerns about quality of

educational and medical infrastructures are but a few variables which exclude some job opportunities from consideration for some people. We will discuss individual differences in greater detail in following sections. They are mentioned here only in regard to the role they play in the a-priori elimination of some potential job opportunities.

In summary, occupational choice, barriers to entry, and individual constraints and preferences operate to limit interest in jobs, opportunity for jobs, and desirability of jobs (see Figure 1). These factors define the domain of jobs and organizations which individuals will consider. These limiting factors are assumed to establish what the critical attributes will be and at what threshold level must be present for the job offer to be accepted. The drive for congruence between person and setting is expected to establish job content as one of the critical attributes. Some minimum level of congruence between job content and vocational choice is expected before an alternative will be considered acceptable. Others have suggested that pay level has such a powerful influence on the job choice decision that it too is one of the critical attributes job seekers consider (Jurgensen, 1978; Lacy, Bokemeier & Shepard, 1983; Rynes, Schwab & Heneman, 1983). Reservation wage theory suggests that jobs offering less than a minimum threshold level of pay will not be considered (Ehrenberg & Smith, 1988).

Figure 1 Here

The Acquisition and Saliency of System Information

Individuals cannot be expected to attend to variables of which they are unaware. Therefore, the manner in which job applicants gather information and the type of information gathered should affect how the job choice decision is made. Both automatic and controlled processes take place in attention, information search, detection, and perceptual learning (Schneider & Shiffrin, 1977; Shiffrin & Schneider, 1977). Automatic processes take place when the stimulus is observed in its expected context. Since the person is ready to attend to particular relationships between the stimulus and the environment, when the expected context is noted, this occurs without continuous monitoring. When the stimulus is observed in unexpected relationships a controlled process requiring conscious monitoring and decision making takes over.

Automatic processing has direct implications for how job search is conducted. Assuming a vocational choice has been made, search is activated to identify job opportunities which offer environments consistent with vocational preferences. Job characteristics are visible cues to the degree of fit with the vocational choice previously made. As Figure 1 suggests, individuals are expected to attend first to job characteristics. Since stimulus information is expected to be processed automatically, jobs with tasks, duties, and responsibilities that are consistent with the vocational choice are flagged for further consideration. Those that are incongruent evoke a controlled evaluation process where incongruent job characteristics are assumed to eliminate them from further consideration.

Since the search is assumed to be sequential, the question facing the job seeker is "Do this job's characteristics coincide with the vocational choice I have made?" If the

answer is no, search continues until another alternative is identified (the first loop in Figure 1). If the answer is yes, the job seeker then considers the other critical attributes. Assuming that pay level is one of these attributes, the person asks "Is the pay level for this job above my reservation wage?" If not, the search continues. If yes, this job is considered to be an acceptable job opportunity and may be accepted by the job seeker.

Once critical attributes have been examined and have met threshold levels, human resource systems may be considered. Since people cannot be expected to attend to variables of which they are unaware, if human resource systems are not salient, the job will be accepted. If organizational variables are salient, the job seeker can be expected to examine the congruence between internal characteristics and the organizational environment in much the same fashion as congruence drives vocational choice.

Before proceeding with the model, discussion of how organizational variables become salient is warranted. First, some organizational information may be captured in job information. The manner in which jobs are designed and work is structured may send signals about the organization to the job seeker. While there exists no known research on this topic, it is reasonable to assume that individuals infer certain things about the organization from what they know about the job.

Second, some organizations may intentionally make organizational information salient to job seekers if they believe it gives them a competitive advantage in the labor market. To the extent attention has been deliberately focused on system variables by at least one organization encountered in the job search, they should remain salient throughout the search. Exogenous factors may also limit the salience of these variables. In periods when labor supply exceeds labor demand, job seekers can be expected to not only limit the

number of critical attributes considered but also to lower the thresholds on which those attributes are evaluated. When labor demand exceeds supply and organizations shift from a selection stance to an attraction stance, organizational context may be an important determinant of overall organizational attractiveness (Rynes & Barber, in press).

Additionally, individual characteristics will influence the salience of organizational system variables. Older job seekers and those with more job experiences (as opposed to job experience in a single organization) should be more attuned to organizational variables. Individuals who have worked in organizations exhibiting different human resource systems should be particularly aware of them in the job search and choice process. These variables should be least salient to those entering the job market for the first time.

Returning to Figure 1 where the salience of human resource systems is considered, if they are not salient the job seeker can be expected to accept the job. Once accepted, these variables become salient over time. If they prove to be congruent with the individual's internal characteristics the person is likely to remain in the job. If they prove to be incongruent, post choice dissonance may lead to job search unless other coping mechanisms, labor market constraints, or the limiting factors described above prohibit it.

If organizational system information is salient, the question of congruence again arises. If congruent, the job will be accepted. If incongruent the job seeker is expected to search for additional information about this job possibility. At this point, controlled information processing is evoked since the stimulus has proven to be inconsistent with the expected context. The search will be biased toward the collection of information to support the initial inclination to accept the job (Meehl, 1978; Tversky & Kahneman, 1974; Soelberg, 1967). If supporting information can be found, the incongruent system

information will be discounted and the job will be accepted. If supporting information cannot be found, the job will be rejected and search will continue.

At this point in the search, through one of two routes, job seekers have reached a point where human resource system information is salient (see Figure 1). Search continues in a sequential fashion with job characteristics assuming the central role, and other critical variables such as pay level and human resource systems assuming secondary roles. Failure of any of these attributes to meet threshold levels results in rejection of the job and search continues for another alternative.

Model Implications and Research Directions

The current model suggests that human resource system variables influence decisions of whether to accept a job in a particular organization. It draws from theories of vocational choice that are based on congruence between person and setting (Holland, 1966; Super, 1953), and decision theory that describes how complex decisions might be made (Payne, 1976; Soelberg, 1967). However, human resource system variables have received very little attention in the job search and choice literature. Therefore, much of what is presented here is speculative. Given this, even though considerable research has enhanced our understanding of the search and choice process, the incorporation of human resource system variables appears to offer opportunity for adding to this understanding.

The model (see Figure 1) suggests that the order in which information is acquired affects the decision process. In particular, job-specific (as opposed to organization-specific) information is hypothesized to be acquired first. It was assumed that job characteristics would be most salient since job tasks, duties, and responsibilities are the most visible cues to the degree of congruence between the setting and the vocational choice already made.

System information is also assumed to identify congruence between the organizational setting and vocational preferences but are likely to be less visible than job characteristics.

Therefore proposition 1 follows.

Proposition 1: Job seekers will attend to job characteristics before attending to organizational system characteristics. If job characteristics do not meet some threshold level of congruence with vocational preferences, system characteristics will not be considered.

This proposition could be tested in an experimental setting where subjects' vocational preferences are known and the order in which information is acquired is manipulated. It would also be possible to structure a policy capturing study so that it included both job-specific and human resource system variables. While this would not provide information about the order in which information is processed per se, it would provide information as to the relative weight of organizational variables vis-a-vis other variables. Variables assigned higher weights could be interpreted as being more important and therefore more likely to be attended to by the job seeker.

It would also be possible to structure an experiment in which subjects are told that several pieces of information are available that might help them make the job choice decision. These options would include both job-specific and human resource system-specific items. Subjects would be free to ask for whatever piece of information they desired and could stop information acquisition at any time. By recording the type and order of information requested, it would be possible to determine what information is deemed more vital in the search and choice process.

We know virtually nothing of how job seekers get information about human resource systems. Is human resource system information imbedded in job information? If so, what kind of job information transmits what message about human resource systems? Is system information presented directly to job seekers? If so, under what circumstances is this done? Are particular types of organizations more likely to do so? Do applicants seek out this type of information? If so, what methods do they use? Virtually no research exists to address these questions. Therefore propositions 2, 3, 4, and 5 follow.

Proposition 2: The manner in which jobs are designed and work is structured sends messages about the human resource systems to job seekers.

This proposition could be tested in either experimental or field settings. In experimental settings, subjects could be presented with information about job tasks, duties, and responsibilities and asked to make inferences about the organizational context. In field settings, organizations could be surveyed to determine (1) why work is structured as it is, (2) if there is any relationship between organizational characteristics and job design, and (3) what message, if any, the organization perceives is being sent via the job characteristics. When studying this, care must be taken to control for the effects of the stimulus to which the applicants are responding. For instance, information about how jobs are designed or how work is structured may be conveyed via the job description or through observation of job incumbents. Different inferences may be drawn depending on the source of the information.

Proposition 3: Different sources provide different types of human resource system information.

This proposition could be tested by examining the information job seekers get from various sources. What kind and amount of information comes from informal channels such as peer referrals versus formal channels such as recruiters? Do different sources provide supporting or contradictory system information?

Proposition 4: Selection system attributes will affect job seekers' initial impressions about human resource practices and procedures and will thereby impact organizational attractiveness.

Certain recruiting and hiring practices are likely to be related to impressions about the entire human resource system. For example, the extensive use of work sample and achievement tests may signal an external, individually-oriented system while the use of personality tests designed to measure the need for affiliation may signal a group-oriented system. This proposition could be tested in the laboratory by exposing subjects to simulated hiring procedures and asking them to make judgments about the target organization's approach to human resource management. Independent variables of interest could focus upon (1) type and structure of the employment interview, (2) the use and form of employment testing, (3) the degree to which background and reference information is collected, and (4) the status and positions held by persons encountered during the recruitment selection experience. Dependent measures in this instance would address perceptions about the likely nature of reward, development, and career-oriented practices.

Proposition 5: Once organizational system information is salient it remains so for the remainder of the job search. If one organization makes it salient, the job seeker will search for system information about the other alternatives encountered in the search.

Testing this proposition in field settings would require tracking applicants throughout their job search. It would be necessary to acquire the information they have about various alternatives without priming their attention to human resource systems. In this manner, once system information begins to appear in the subject's description of what they know about the alternative, it would continue to appear in subsequent descriptions until a position is accepted.

It is foolish not to recognize that labor market constraints alter decision processes. When jobs are hard to find, job seekers will likely lower thresholds and minimize criteria considered necessary for job acceptance. Therefore proposition 6 follows.

Proposition 6: System variables will have less influence in the decision when labor supply exceeds demand. However, when demand for labor exceeds supply, job seekers may be expected to more closely examine organizational variables for signs of congruence between person and setting.

Testing this proposition using a longitudinal field design would be difficult since it would require examining the job search activity of the same applicants during times of excess demand and during times of excess supply. However, the effects of human resource system variables could also be examined in two different samples, one operating under conditions of excess labor supply and one operating under conditions of excess labor demand. Covariance analysis could be used to control for differences that exist between the samples.

It may be possible to study this in a two-stage experimental setting where relative labor demand is manipulated by controlling the number of "offers" the subjects could

expect to receive. The relative weight subjects assign (either directly or via policy capturing) to each attribute under excess demand conditions could then be compared to the weights assigned under excess supply conditions.

The manner in which organizational system characteristics become salient may also depend on particular individual characteristics of the job seeker. Bretz, et al. (1989) suggested that failure to find more significant impact of reward system manipulations in their experiment may have been because the student sample used had little job experience. Job experience, particularly, multiple job experiences are expected to increase the salience of human resource system variables since working within organizational contexts provides opportunity to assess the congruence between the setting and the individual's internal states. Therefore, propositions 7, 8, and 9 follow.

Proposition 7: All else being equal, organizational system variables will be more salient to older job seekers than they will be to younger job seekers.

Proposition 8: All else being equal, organizational system variables will be more salient to job seekers with a greater variety of work experiences than they will be to workers with little or no work experience.

These propositions could be tested by examining the information acquisition patterns and choice behavior of different age cohorts. Policy capturing studies could identify the relative weights different age subjects assign to different attributes. If older and/or more experienced job seekers assign more weight to system information than their younger/less experienced counterparts, these hypotheses would be supported.

Proposition 9: Regardless of salience at the time a job is accepted, human resource systems become salient once an individual is on the job. Therefore, HR systems that create incongruence with either the vocational prototype or the individual's internal states are likely to contribute to post choice dissonance that may lead to turnover.

Tests of this proposition would require information about what applicants knew, or thought they knew, about the organization at the time the job was accepted and what is known about the organization's systems after some amount of time on the job. It is possible that what was known (or assumed) at the time of job acceptance was incorrect in which case the incongruent environment may lead to dissonance and eventual turnover. It is also possible that little or nothing was known in advance and system information was acquired later. Intentions to leave what proved to be incongruent settings and/or intentions to stay in congruent settings would support this proposition. Note however that tests of the congruence hypothesis require a-priori classification of subjects. Without the classification of subjects it is not possible to determine if the settings represent congruent or incongruent environments.

Conclusions

This paper has argued that human resource systems, particularly the reward and mobility systems, represent a class of organizational variables that have been overlooked in the job search and choice literature to date. Its purpose is not to propose a new model of organizational search and choice. Rather, we are attempting to make explicit how a particular set of attributes (human resource systems) influence organizational attractiveness

and choice. The few empirical studies that exist suggest that vocational choice theories based on person-setting congruence appear to extend to organizational choice decisions. The drive to seek congruence between internal states and external environments is hypothesized to manifest itself first in an examination of job content. If job content is congruent, the organizational context is the next determinant of congruence which the individual must consider. Attraction to organizations, decisions to join organizations, and decisions to stay in or leave organizations are assumed to depend in part on the perceived congruence between the person and the setting.

Anticipated tight labor supply suggests that organizations will face mounting pressures to fill vacancies. Organizational attempts to differentiate themselves as "the employer of choice" are likely to include not only pay policy decisions to lead the market, but also communication of strategic and cultural differences that are believed to create a competitive advantage in the labor market. Presently we know virtually nothing of how human resource system information is perceived by job seekers, how or if it is used in the decision process, or what weight it carries vis-a-vis other attributes.

This paper suggests why, when, and how human resource system information might influence job search and choice. It is our hope that it will encourage research that will ultimately lead to a better understanding of organizational choice behavior and what organizations can do to ensure the attraction, selection, and retention of a productive work force.

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Figure 1.

The role of organizational system variables in the job search and choice process.

