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Abstract

This study attempted to describe the structural and content characteristics of actual employment rejection letters (following job screening interviews). Their impact on applicants' feelings about themselves (self-concept and self-satisfaction) and about letters (perceptions of letter clarity, "personalness" and appreciative tone) are assessed. Results provide a profile of the "typical" rejection letter and indicate that while few of the letter characteristics affected applicants' feelings about themselves, a number of these attributes were related to applicants' perceptions of the letters.

Although numerous tools and procedures are utilized by organizations to select and recruit new employees, the interview is consistently the most frequently used selection device (e.g., Alderfer & McCord, 1970; Schmitt & Coyle, 1976; Wanous, 1980). Given its apparent importance as a selection and recruitment tool, it is not surprising to discover that a plethora of research has been conducted exploring the dynamics of the interviewing process (e.g., Arvey & Campion, 1982; Jablin & McComb, 1984). At the same time, however, it is interesting to note that researchers have devoted scant attention to probably the most frequent outcome of selection interviews—the rejection of job applicants/interviewees as potential employees. Moreover, to our knowledge, to date no empirical studies have examined the effects and characteristics of the communication medium by which this employment exclusion process most often occurs—the rejection letter.

Given this dearth of our knowledge regarding a communication process that almost every individual will experience sometime in his or her working life, the present study attempts to provide (1) an empirical description of the structural and content characteristics of actual rejection letters (following employment screening interviews), and (2) an assessment of the impact of the attributes of rejection letters on applicants' feelings about themselves and the letters.

Literature Review

Rejection letters are one example of what many business communication experts categorize as disappointing, unfavorable, or uncertain (Himstreet & Baty, 1981; Huseman, Lahiff, & Hatfield, 1981; Lesikar, 1982; Sigband, 1982; Treece, 1983; Wolf & Aurner, 1974). Sometimes referred to as "bad news" messages, the overwhelming majority of experts consistently associate "well-written" rejection letters with the following properties: (1) a sincere "you attitude," or some indication that the writer is looking at the situation from the reader's point of view; (2) a "buffer," which consists of one or two opening paragraphs that tell what the letter is about but do not yet state a decision outcome; (3) an analysis of the situation that includes some explanation or reason for rejecting the applicant; (4) a diplomatic statement of the decision in terms of how it might benefit the applicant; and (5) closing the letter in a friendly, positive manner, possibly by mentioning a related idea that places emphasis on something other than the bad news.

While the use of a sincere you-attitude is considered important in conveying good or bad news, the remaining four properties noted above represent an "indirect" approach to letter writing and are recommended by most experts specifically for writers who must convey bad news, such as rejection following an employment interview. In general, an indirect approach to writing rejection letters involves practices such as softening the "no" (Eisenberg, 1982; Fielden & Dulek, 1982) and not stating negative specifics about the interviewee's performance (Fielden & Dulek, 1982). Although no empirical research exists demonstrating the validity of these prescriptions, they are reflective of other research findings that indicate that people try to avoid direct communication of unpleasant news to others (Blumberg, 1972; Tesser & Rosen, 1975) and often positively distort such messages when required to transmit them (Fisher, 1979).

Typically, two basic reasons are posited for using an indirect versus direct style of writing in rejection letters. First, it is frequently suggested that indirect as compared to direct styles of rejection are more socially appropriate in employment decision situations since these are contexts involving persons who are not well acquainted with one another. As Blumberg (1972) and Shrauger and Schoeneman (1979) note, in our culture situational norms exist that inhibit people from providing direct negative appraisals to persons with whom they are not well acquainted. Thus, to some extent organizations that write indirect rejection letters do so because of a desire to conform to social norms. Concomitantly, it is likely that such "socially acceptable" indirect letters of rejection serve a more positive public relations function for organizations than do letters using direct styles of rejection (e.g., Fielden & Dulek, 1982).

A second reason for writing indirect rejection letters, and an implicit assumption of the above discussion, is the belief that an indirect form of rejection takes more of the "sting" out of being rejected than does a direct form of rejection; that is, an indirect rejection will have less of a negative impact on an applicant's self-concept than will a direct form of rejection. However, as noted earlier, no empirical research yet exists to support this assumption. In fact, given the limited (and often unrepresentative) samples of behavior on which applicants are evaluated in screening interviews (the typical screening interview lasts thirty minutes), it would seem very likely that rejected applicants would discount any

negative evaluations they receive from an employer (e.g., Shrauger & Schoeneman, 1979), although such effects would likely be moderated by applicants' degrees of motivation to join the organization (e.g., Wanous, 1980). Moreover, as Shrauger (1975, p. 582) observes, "evaluative feedback which is incongruent with important elements of one's self-concept will be ascribed less credibility . . . [and] attributed less often to enduring elements of the self." In brief, given the above general reactions that people have to dubious evaluative feedback, coupled with the low trust and credibility that applicants typically attribute to recruiters (the sources of evaluation; e.g., Fisher, Ilgen, & Hoyer, 1979), it would seem somewhat debatable to assume that applicants' perceptions of themselves would be affected by rejection letters written in direct or indirect styles.

In addition, the recommendations of business communication experts concerning the effects of the specific letter characteristics described earlier require exploration. In other words, it would seem important to determine if rejection letters that possess a sincere you attitude, include reasons for rejection, statements of the benefits of the rejection, buffer the rejection, or possess positive closings have any effects on applicants' perceptions of themselves or the rejection letters they receive. Further, it remains to be determined whether or not practitioners have taken the advice of business communication experts with respect to the composition of rejection letters, resulting in little variability in the types of letters that applicants receive.

In conclusion, given the lack of empirical research existing on the characteristics and effects of employment rejection letters, the present study will attempt to answer two basic research questions:

RQ1:   What are the structural and content characteristics of actual rejection letters job applicants receive after employment screening interviews?

RQ2:   What impact do the various structural and content characteristics of rejection letters have on applicants' perceptions and feelings about themselves and the letters they receive?

Methodology

Subjects

Participants in the research were obtained by contacting persons who were listed in the 1982–1983 resume book of the business placement office at a large southwestern university. Students who indicated that they would be graduating in December 1982 were contacted during November of the fall semester, while May 1983 graduates were contacted during March of the spring 1983 semester. Of those contacted during the fall semester 60% ($n = 65$) agreed to participate in the research and returned completed questionnaires. During the spring data collection 52% ($n = 114$) of those contacted returned completed questionnaires. In total, 179 persons participated in the research.

The subject population can be characterized as follows: (1) 52% of the participants were male, and 48% were female; (2) the median age of a respondent was 22 years; (3) at the time of data collection only 14% of the applicants had already accepted employment in

organizations; (4) the average applicant had participated in seven (median) previous screening interviews and two (median) onsite (determinant) interviews; and (5) 16% of the applicants were applying for jobs in sales/marketing, 20% in accounting, 23% in finance, 27% in management, 8% in data processing, and the remaining 6% in other miscellaneous areas of business.

Procedure

Job applicants were contacted by mail and asked to participate in a research project exploring the types of written communication they were receiving from organizations subsequent to on-campus screening interviews. Respondents were asked to complete a questionnaire with respect to the most recent letter they had received from an organization they had interviewed with at the placement center that did not offer them a second (onsite) interview. Subjects were instructed to complete the questionnaire only after they re-read the letter referred to above. In addition, job applicants were requested to send back to the researchers the letters they were reacting to when completing the questionnaire. Subjects were assured of complete anonymity in their responses, and provided with self-addressed stamped envelopes with which to return the questionnaire. Of the subjects contacted, 170 (95%) returned their rejection letters with their questionnaires.

The Questionnaire

The questionnaire contained a number of attitude scales to which subjects responded. First, each applicant was asked to give his or her reaction to the rejection letter itself by responding to 15 five-point semantic differential items about the letter. A factor analysis of this scale (Principal Components–Varimax Rotation) indicated that it was composed of three dimensions: (1) the degree to which the letter expressed an appreciative tone (appreciative-unappreciative, supportive-unsupportive, understanding-indifferent, courteous-discourteous; $v = 36.9\%$), (2) the clarity and directness of the letter (clear vague, direct-indirect, informative-uninformative, complete-incomplete; $v = 15.2\%$), and (3) the uniqueness or "personalness" of the letter (personal-impersonal, creative-uncreative, unique-standardized; $v = 11.1\%$). Reliability analyses indicated that each of these measures was internally consistent (appreciation, alpha = .81; clarity, alpha = .79; personal, alpha = .82).

Subjects also responded to a scale designed to measure how they felt about themselves after having read their letters. A factor analysis (Principal Components–Varimax Rotation) of this 15-item, five-point semantic differential scale revealed that it was composed of two basic dimensions: (1) perceptions of one's self-concept (worthy-unworthy, proud-ashamed, in control-not in control, confident-uncertain, successful-unsuccessful, secure-insecure, useful-useless, accepted-unaccepted; $v = 52\%$), and (2) feelings of self-satisfaction (encouraged-discouraged, satisfied-dissatisfied, content-discontent; v = 10.7%). Reliability analyses showed that each of the scales was internally consistent (self-concept, alpha = .90; dissatisfaction, alpha = .81).

Additionally, one other scale of interest was contained in the questionnaire. This measure attempted to assess the degree to which applicants were interested in employment with the organizations from which they had received the rejection letters. This scale was composed of three five-point, Likert-type items that required respondents to indicate their

interest in employment prior to their screening interviews, immediately subsequent to their interviews, and after receiving their rejection letters. A factor analysis (Principal Components–Varimax Rotation) of the scale indicated it was unidimensional in structure ($v = 71.0\%$), while a reliability analysis showed it to be internally consistent (alpha = .79).

Finally, it should be noted that the questionnaire also contained a number of demographic items and a "manipulation check" which is described at the beginning of the "Results" section of this article. Presentation of the various scales contained within the questionnaire were counterbalanced across questionnaires in order to control for order effects.

The Rejection Letters

The actual rejection letters that applicants sent back along with their questionnaires were content analyzed. A content analysis scheme was developed by creating categories consistent with those suggested by the literature review as well as by examining the letters for commonalities in structure and content. The resulting analysis scheme coded the letters with respect to the following:

(1) *Salutation*—"Dear Mr./Ms." or "Dear first name";
(2) whether or not some reference was made to the *on-campus interview*;
(3) whether or not the letter *expressed appreciation* for the applicant's interest in the organization;
(4) whether or not the letter *praised* the past accomplishments and qualifications of the applicant;
(5) whether or not the letter *wished the applicant success* in his or her future endeavors;
(6) whether the letter was *direct or indirect in rejecting the applicant* for employment (i.e., open and explicit statement of rejection vs. a restrained, subdued statement of rejection, e.g., "we have no position for you at this time" vs. "we cannot encourage you at this time");
(7) the *rationale given for rejection* (unstated; mismatch of applicant's skills, qualifications, etc.; the nature of the position; too many qualified applicants);
(8) *paragraph* in which the actual rejection occurred (first, second, or third);
(9) *number of paragraphs* in the letter (two, three, or four);
(10) *number of words* in the letter;
(11) whether or not the *position* of the person who wrote the letter was included; and
(12) whether or not the letter indicated that the applicant's credentials would be *kept on file*.

One judge coded each of the letters provided by the applicants with respect to all of the above categories. In order to obtain an estimate of the reliability of these ratings, a second judge coded a 36% ($n = 62$) random sample of the letters. This judge was in 100% agreement with the other coder's ratings for each of the categories except for expression of appreciation (93% agreement), directness of the rejection (89% agreement), rationale for the rejection (95% agreement), and expression of praise (97% agreement). These high levels of

agreement would suggest substantial reliability for the coding of the letters into the twelve analytical categories.

Data Analysis

Initially, descriptive statistics were computed to determine the content and structural attributes of the actual rejection letters. Subsequently, applicants' reactions to the letters and their self-perceptions were analyzed by comparing these respective measures across the subcategories of each of the content analysis categories for which there was sufficient variability. Thus, for example, the attitudes of those receiving direct versus indirect rejections were compared across the various attitude scales. These comparisons were made via a series of Multivariate Analyses of Variance (MANOVA), since there was considerable collinearity (significant correlations exceeding $r = .30$) among some of the attitude scales. Specifically, the two subscales of the self-perception measure (self-concept, self-satisfaction) were tested together in the same MANOVAs while the three attitude scales associated with perceptions of the letter (appreciative, clear/direct, personal) were tested together in the same MANOVAs. Univariate statistics were examined and appropriate probing procedures employed if the MANOVA results were significant. The alpha level for all statistical tests was set at the .05 level of significance.

Results

Manipulation Check

In order to ensure that the letters subjects were responding to in this research were characteristic of the rejection letters they had received from other organizations, an item was included in the questionnaire that asked, "How typical is the letter you have been referring to of other letters you have received from organizations you have interviewed with, and who have not offered you second (onsite) interviews?" Subjects responded to this question on a five-point Likert-type scale with answer options ranging from "very typical" (scored 5) to "very atypical" (scored 1). The mean response across respondents was 3.6 (s.d. = 1.10, median = 3.78) suggesting that applicants perceived their letters to be fairly typical of other rejection letters they had received.

In addition, manipulation checks were conducted to determine if respondents' ages, sexes, and amounts of previous interviewing experience (number of screening interviews, number of onsite interviews) might have affected results. In order to conduct these checks, a series of 1 × 2 MANOVAs were performed, with each of the above background variables successively serving as the independent variable (median splits were computed to create "high" and "low" groups for all the variables except sex), while the attitude scales were included as the dependent variables. Results of these statistical tests indicated that applicants' perceptions were not significantly differentiated by their ages, sexes, or amounts of previous interviewing experience.

Rejection Letter Characteristics

Analysis of the characteristics of the rejection letters indicated that with respect to some attributes they were very similar to each other, while for other attributes a fair amount of variability existed among the letters.

Similarities

Almost all of the letters (95%) made reference to the earlier employment interview in which the applicant had participated. Further, the great majority of letters made some statement of appreciation of the applicant's interest in the organization (94%), and also wished the applicant success/luck in his or her future interviews and/or career (88%). Most of the letters contained three paragraphs (80%) and positioned the actual statement of rejection in the second paragraph of the letter (86%). Interestingly, the great majority of letters did not indicate that the applicant's file/credentials would be saved (78%), yet did include the organizational position of the letter writer (87%). Computations indicated that the typical letter contained a median of 88 words (mean = 89.07, s.d. = 27.15).

Differences

As noted above, while similar in some respects, the letters did differ among one another with regard to other characteristics. Some variability was evident in the salutations of the letters. While 40% of the letters opened with "Dear Mr./Ms.," 60% included "Dear first name" in their salutations. Only about one-half of the letters made an attempt to praise the applicant. Specifically, 42% of the letters praised the applicant's qualifications and past accomplishments, while 58% of the letters excluded such references. With respect to the "directness" of the rejection itself, 33% of the letters utilized the "direct" approach while 67% were "indirect" in rejecting the applicant. Reasons given for rejecting the applicant also varied. In 18% of the letters no explanation for rejection was provided, while in 51% of the letters applicants were told that a "mismatch" existed between the applicant's skills and qualifications and the nature of the position for which she or he had applied. On the other hand, 31% of the letters suggested that the applicant was rejected because too many qualified people had applied for the job while only a few could be employed (i.e., a high applicant-to-job ratio).

Differences in letters among job areas

The letters were also examined to determine if their attributes varied among the major areas (data processing/programming, sales/marketing, accounting, finance, and management) in which applicants were applying for jobs. In order to ascertain if any significant differences in letter attributes existed among job areas, a series of two-way contingency tables (job areas by letter attribute) were prepared and explored by chi-square tests of independence.

Results of these tests revealed significant effects for only two of the letter attributes: (l) whether or not the applicant's credentials were filed/saved (χ^2 = 12.12, *df* = 4, *p* < .02), and (2) whether or not the letter included the organizational position of the writer (χ^2 = 21.94, *df* = 4, *p* < .001). However, it is noteworthy to report that the chi-square test for the "directness" of the rejection approached statistical significance (χ^2 = 7.96, *df* = 4, *p* < .09).

An examination of the significant contingency tables indicated that the letters received by students applying for accounting positions differed somewhat from the letters received by applicants in the other job areas. Specifically, accounting rejection letters rarely stated that the applicant's credentials would be saved/filed, and more frequently failed to include in the letter the organizational position of the writer. With respect to the "directness" of the rejection, it also appears that accounting letters were much more explicit and direct in rejecting applicants than were letters written by persons in other areas of business. Moreover, the data suggest that letters received by applicants applying for jobs in data processing/programming were much more "indirect" in rejection than were the letters in the other business areas.

Rejection Letter Characteristics and Applicants' Perceptions

The effects of the letter attributes upon applicants' perceptions could be tested only for those letter characteristics for which there was sufficient variability: salutation, praise of applicant's qualifications, directness of rejection, and rationale for rejection. Additionally, the effects of letter length were explored by trichotomizing the distribution of words in the letters into three groups: short (74 words or less), moderate (75–94 words), and long (95 words or more).

Further, the effect of the degrees to which applicants were interested in employment with the organizations was explored by computing a median-split on the distribution of scores on this measure (median = 9.52). As a result, for "job interest" high and low groups were formed. Subsequently, differences between these groups with respect to their perceptions of their rejection letters and self-perceptions were explored. Finally, tests were conducted to see if applicant's perceptions differed across the five major areas of business in which they had applied for jobs.

Salutation

Results of the MANOVA tests revealed a significant difference only for the cluster of self-perception scales (Mult. F = 2.99, df = 2,145, $p < .05$, R^2 = .04). Moreover, examination of the univariate F-ratios indicated a significant difference only for self-satisfaction (F = 5.04, df = 1,146, $p < .03$). An inspection of the means indicated that those applicants who received letters that opened with "Dear Mr./Ms." felt more self-satisfaction (mean = 7.86, s.d. = 2.47) than those applicants who received letters that included a "Dear first name" salutation (mean = 6.99, s.d. = 2.22).

Praise

Results of the MANOVA analyses indicated a significant difference only for the cluster of scales associated with applicants' perceptions of the letters (Mult. F = 3.75, df = 3,158, $p < .01$, R^2 = .06). Inspection of the univariate F-ratios indicated significant main effects for letter clarity (F = 4.48, df = 1,160, $p < .04$) and the personalness of the letter (F = 9.64, df = 1,160, $p < .002$). Examination of the means revealed that applicants who received rejection letters that included statements praising their qualifications and accomplishments perceived their letters to be clearer (mean = 14.59, s.d. = 3.52) and more personal (mean = 7.46, s.d. = 3.26)

than applicants whose letters did not praise them (clarity, mean = 13.35, s.d. = 3.81; personal, mean = 5.97, s.d. = 2.83).

Directness of rejection

Results of the MANOVA analyses revealed a significant difference only for the cluster of scales associated with applicants' perceptions of the letters (Mult. F = 3.16, *df* = 3,158, *p* < .03, R^2 = .06). Examination of the univariate F-ratios indicated significant effects for perceptions of letter clarity (*F* = 4.86, *df* = 1,160, *p* < .03) and personalness of the letter (*F* = 4.18, *df* = 1,160, *p* < .03). Inspection of the means suggested that those applicants who received letters in which their job rejections were direct perceived their letters to be less clear (mean = 12.94, s.d. = 3.95) and less personal (mean = 5.88, s.d. = 2.75) than individuals receiving letters in which the rejection was "indirect" (clarity, mean = 14.32, s.d. = 3.55; personal, mean = 6.95, s.d. = 3.21).

Rejection rationale

Results of the MANOVA analyses showed no significant multivariate effects for any of the clusters of scales. However, two of the univariate effects were significant and are noteworthy. Specifically, significant univariate F-ratios obtained for letter clarity (*F* = 3.11, *df* = 2,159, *p* < .05) and the personalness of the letter (*F* = 3.30, *df* = 2,159, *p* <.04). Table 1 reports the means and standard deviations for the attitude scales for the three subcategories of rejection rationale.

As the means in Table 1 suggest, and post hoc Newman-Keuls multiple comparison tests confirmed, applicants whose letters did not include any explanation for their employment rejection perceived their rejection letters to be less clear and personal than applicants whose letters include some statement of rejection rationale.

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations for Applicants' Perceptions for Rejection Rationale

Applicants' Perceptions[a]	Rejection Rationale								
	Unstated			Inadequate "Match"			High Selection Ratio		
	Mean	SD	(n)	Mean	SD	(n)	Mean	SD	(n)
Letter Perceptions									
Appreciative	12.41	3.05	(27)	l3.18	3.45	(84)	13.35	3.93	(51)
Clear*	12.33	4.14	(27)	14.02	3.35	(84)	14.47	3.93	(51)
Personal	5.26	2.60	(27)	6.77	3.15	(84)	7.06	3.14	(51)
Self-Perceptions									
Self-Concept	23.37	6.22	(30)	23.14	5.78	(87)	23.12	6.26	(51)
Self-Satisfaction	7.03	2.24	(30)	7.25	2.29	(87)	7.25	2.58	(51)

a. n's vary because of incomplete data
p < .05

Letter length

Results of the MANOVA analyses indicated a significant multivariate effect only for the cluster of scales associated with applicants' perceptions of the letters (Mult. F = 3.68, *df* = 6,330,

$p < .001$, $R^2 = .12$). Inspection of the univariate F-ratios showed significant effects for appreciative tone of the letter ($F = 4.01$, $df = 2,167$, $p < .02$) and personalness of the letter ($F = 8.91$, $df = 2,167$, $p < .004$). In addition, letter clarity approached statistical significance ($F = 2.78$, $df = 2,167$, $p < .07$). Table 2 displays the means and standard deviations for the attitude scales for the three levels of letter length.

Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations for Applicants' Perceptions for Word Length of Rejection Letter

Applicants' Perceptions[a]	Word Length								
	Short			Moderate			Long		
	Mean	SD	(n)	Mean	SD	(n)	Mean	SD	(n)
Letter Perceptions									
Appreciative*	12.11	3.43	(54)	12.96	3.34	(52)	13.92	3.60	(64)
Clear	12.94	3.72	(54)	14.62	3.34	(52)	13.90	3.87	(64)
Personal**	5.33	2.56	(54)	6.65	2.99	(52)	7.61	3.14	(64)
Self-Perceptions									
Self-Concept	22.86	4.94	(57)	23.40	6.33	(53)	23.50	6.24	(68)
Self-Satisfaction	7.21	2.14	(57)	7.02	2.46	(53)	7.59	2.55	(68)

a. n's vary because of incomplete data

*$p < .05$

**$p < .005$

The significant univariate effects were probed by Newman-Keuls multiple comparison tests. Results of these tests indicated the following: (1) Applicants who received short rejection letters perceived their letters to be significantly less appreciative than applicants who received long letters, and (2) applicants who received short rejection letters perceived their letters to be significantly less personal than individuals who received moderate or long letters. Although not statistically significant ($p < .07$), the means also suggested a trend indicating that recipients of short letters perceived them to be less clear than recipients of moderate or long letters.

Job interest

Results of the MANOVA analyses indicated a significant multivariate effect only for the self-perception cluster of scales (Mult. F = 6.63, $df = 2,175$, $p < .002$, $R^2 = .07$). Inspection of the univariate F-ratios revealed significant effects for self-concept ($F = 8.41$, $df = 1,176$, $p < .004$) and self-satisfaction ($F = 12.17$, $df = 1,176$, $p < .001$). Inspection of the means showed that an applicant whose job interest was high also perceived his or her self-concept (mean = 22.04, s.d. = 6.18) and self-satisfaction (mean = 6.70, s.d. = 2.42) to be more negatively affected by the rejection letters than did an applicant who was low in job interest (self-concept, mean = 24.54, s.d. = 5.24; self-satisfaction, mean = 7.92, s.d. = 2.23).

Business area

Results of the MANOVA analyses revealed a significant multivariate effect only for applicants' perceptions of the letters ($F = 1.79$, $df = 12,399$, $p < .05$, $R^2 = .13$). Inspection of the univariate F-ratios revealed a significant effect only for letter clarity ($F = 2.64$, $df = 4,153$, $p < .04$). Table 3 displays the means and standard deviations for the attitude scales for the five business areas.

The significant main effect for letter clarity was probed by Newman-Keuls multiple comparison tests. The results of these tests indicated that persons applying for management jobs perceived their letters to be significantly less clear than persons applying for data processing positions.

Discussion

Given that only a limited amount of research exists exploring the characteristics and effects of employment rejection letters, the present study attempted to (1) describe the structural and content characteristics of *actual* rejection letters (following employment screening interviews), and (2) assess their impact on applicants' feelings about themselves and the letters. Findings of this study as they relate to each of these research foci are briefly summarized and discussed below.

Rejection Letter Characteristics

Results of the research suggest the typical rejection letter is rather short, generally containing less than 90 words compressed into three paragraphs of text. Most letters open by making reference to the earlier screening interview and express appreciation to the applicant for his or her interest in the organization. The employment rejection itself is typically positioned in the second paragraph of the letter, communicated in softened, indirect terms, and is usually preceded or followed by an explanation of the rejection. The final paragraph of the letter typically wishes the applicant success in his or her future endeavors, although about 20% of the letters also inform the applicant that his or her credentials will be kept on file in the organization. Additionally, the signature block or letterhead typically provides the applicant with an indication of the organizational position/title of the person who wrote the letter.

While rejection letters generally are indistinguishable from one another with respect to the above characteristics, they do seem to vary among one another in terms of other attributes. Specifically, while about one-half of the letters utilize formal, business salutations (Dear Mr./Ms.), the other half address the reader informally (Dear first name). Similarly, while about one-half of the letters praise the applicant for his or her qualifications and accomplishments, the other half avoid such accolades. The letters also vary with respect to the reasons given for rejecting the applicant for employment. In about one-half of the letters the applicant is told that the selection process was terminated because an adequate match did not exist between the applicant's skills and abilities and the nature of the position for which she or he had applied. On the other hand, about 30% of the letters suggest the applicant was rejected because a large number of qualified people had applied for the job (a high selection ratio) while only a few could be hired. Unfortunately, our analyses

Table 3. Means and Standard Deviations for Applicants' Perceptions across Business/Job Areas in Which Applicants Applied

Applicants' Perceptions[a]	Business/Job Area														
	Data Processing			Sales-Marketing			Accounting			Finance			Management		
	Mean	SD	(n)	Mean	SD	(n)	Mean	SD	(n)	Mean	SD	(n)	Mean	SD	(n)
Letter Perceptions															
Appreciative	13.50	2.07	(14)	12.65	4.56	(26)	12.66	3.57	(35)	13.08	3.63	(38)	13.20	3.25	(45)
Clear*	15.71	2.84	(14)	14.42	2.97	(26)	13.74	4.62	(35)	14.39	3.10	(38)	12.56	3.95	(45)
Personal	6.36	2.10	(14)	6.31	3.12	(26)	5.80	3.16	(35)	7.60	3.40	(38)	6.60	2.78	(45)
Self-Perceptions															
Self-Concept	26.64	3.91	(14)	23.00	6.03	(28)	22.47	5.92	(36)	23.38	6.24	(40)	23.45	5.52	(47)
Self-Satisfaction	8.00	2.18	(14)	7.29	2.37	(28)	6.44	1.98	(36)	7.35	2.48	(40)	7.53	2.42	(47)

a. n's vary because of incomplete data

*$p < .05$

also revealed that in about 20% of the letters absolutely no explanation for rejection was provided to the applicant.

Additionally, it should be noted that results indicate that the letters received by students applying for accounting positions are somewhat distinct from the rejection letters received by applicants in other business areas. Letters directed to accounting applicants rarely indicate that the applicants' credentials will be saved, more frequently fail to include the writers' organizational positions/titles, and are somewhat more direct in their rejection of applicants.

In conclusion, it is important to observe that the above empirically derived rejection letter "profile" seems to follow fairly closely the often cited prescriptions for writing bad news messages described earlier. Specifically, it is evident that the letters, via their expressions of appreciation to applicants, were probably trying to create a sincere you-attitude. Moreover, almost all of the letters buffered the rejection by first referring to the earlier interview and then by expressing appreciation for the applicant's interest in the organization. In only 9% of the letters did the rejection occur in the first paragraph. Further, as often suggested by business communication experts, the majority of letters expressed the rejection in an indirect style and provided some form of explanation for the rejection. Additionally, almost all of the letters attempted to close in a positive manner by wishing the applicant success in his or her future endeavors. The only prescription often suggested by experts that was not evident in the letters was the inclusion of a statement of how the rejection might benefit the applicant. Apparently, such remarks are either too difficult and timely to prepare and/or considered inappropriate by actual writers of rejection letters.

The Impact of Rejection Letters on Applicants

In part, this study was also an exploratory effort at determining the impact rejection letters have on applicants' perceptions of themselves and the letters they receive. Contrary to commonly held expectations the structural and content characteristics of the letters, and in particular the directness of the statement of rejection, did not seem to have a large effect on applicants' self-perceptions. In fact, the only significant effect obtained was for the type of salutation used in the letter. Specifically, analyses revealed that applicants felt significantly more self-satisfaction when they received letters using formal versus informal forms of address. Initially, this finding seems quite surprising, since intuition would suggest that the informal form of address would make the applicant feel closer to the organization, and consequently take some of the sting out of the rejection. However, this does not seem to be the case.

While at this point we can only conjecture as to the reasons for the above finding, it seems reasonable to propose that it may be related to the types of psychological coping strategies that applicants utilize to manage the rejection they are experiencing. If, as noted earlier, applicants tend to cope with their rejections by psychologically discounting the validity of their employment appraisals, they may find rejection letters that address them in informal terms to be impediments to the discounting process. Specifically, by suggesting a considerable degree of familiarity or closeness between the letter's author and applicant, informal forms of address may frustrate the applicant's attempt at rationalizing his or her

rejection by attributing it to the letter writer's limited knowledge of the applicant. Thus, applicants may perceive a formal salutation as preferable in a rejection letter since it is congruent with the psychological distance that they are trying to establish between themselves and the rejecting parties. The fact that none of the other structural or content characteristics of the rejection letters significantly affected applicants' perceptions of themselves would seem to lend further support to the notion that they cope with rejection through some form of psychological discounting. Obviously, future research needs to explore this possibility.

While the structural and content characteristics of the letters did not seem to have much impact on applicants' feelings about themselves, a number of these characteristics were related to applicants' perceptions of the letters. Specifically, inclusion of a statement of praise, an indirect style of rejection, some form of explanation for the rejection, and a letter at least moderate in length were all associated with perceptions of the letters as clear and personal. Further, applicants who received short letters perceived these communications as significantly less appreciative in tone than applicants who received long letters. In summary, it appears that while the qualities of rejection letters do not necessarily have a strong impact on applicants' self-perceptions, they do affect applicants' perceptions of the letters themselves. In particular, results suggest that indirect styles of rejection are perceived positively by applicants and as socially appropriate.

Finally, results related to the rejection letters and applicants' levels of job/organization interest warrant discussion. In brief, findings indicate that applicants who were high versus low in interest had their self-concepts and feelings of self-satisfaction more negatively affected by the rejection letters. In essence, these results suggest that the effect of job rejection on one's self-concept is more closely associated with one's desire for employment with an organization, than with the characteristics of the rejection letter.

In conclusion, this study has attempted to fill a gap in our knowledge of one of the most frequent forms of written business communication: the rejection letter. It is hoped that the results of this research, while exploratory in nature, can stimulate and provide direction for future investigations in this area.

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