



## Using pre-test explanations to improve test-taker reactions: Testing a set of “wise” interventions



Julie M. McCarthy<sup>a,\*</sup>, Talya N. Bauer<sup>b</sup>, Donald M. Truxillo<sup>b</sup>, Michael C. Campion<sup>c</sup>, Chad H. Van Iddekinge<sup>d</sup>, Michael A. Campion<sup>e</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Toronto Scarborough, Canada

<sup>b</sup> Portland State University, United States

<sup>c</sup> Pennsylvania State University, United States

<sup>d</sup> Florida State University, United States

<sup>e</sup> Purdue University, United States

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### ABSTRACT

The present research tested a set of “wise” interventions (Walton, 2014) designed to improve employee reactions to assessment tests. Drawing upon theories of test-taking reactions, fairness, and social exchange, we generated and pilot-tested pre-test explanations to facilitate positive reactions to the assessments. Across two experimental studies of working adults, we tested a control condition and four experimental groups: (1) an informational fairness condition, (2) a social fairness condition, (3) an uncertainty reduction condition, and (4) a combined condition. In the first study, 256 retail employees were randomly assigned to one of the pre-test explanation conditions before completing a work sample test. Findings indicated higher perceptions of fairness for test-takers in the combined explanation group. In addition, the effects of the test explanations depended upon two contextual variables: test-takers' level of perceived organizational support and the quality of leader-member exchange relationships with their supervisors. In the second study, the mechanisms underlying pre-test explanations were examined using an online sample of 269 working adults. Consistent with our conceptual framework, findings demonstrated that pre-test explanations had direct effects on transparency, respect, and reassurance. Taken together, these findings have implications for understanding the effects of pre-test explanations in organizational settings as well as the boundary conditions for their use.

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Organizations use assessments for a variety of purposes, including applicant selection, employee development, internal promotions, and the evaluation of training outcomes (Guion, 2011). Although the use of job-related assessments offers a number of potential benefits to organizations, research suggests that the applicants and employees who complete assessments do not always see their benefits and can react negatively to assessments or assessment processes. For example, negative test-taker reactions, which include lower levels of perceived fairness, lower levels of test-motivation, and higher levels of test-anxiety, have been found to have meaningful effects on attitudes, intention, and behaviors (McCarthy et al., 2017). Specifically, meta-analytic findings reveal that test-taker reactions are related to organizational attractiveness, intentions to accept the job, and intentions to rec-

ommend the job to others (Chapman, Uggerslev, Carroll, Piasentin, & Jones, 2005; Hausknecht, Day, & Thomas, 2004; Uggerslev, Fassina, & Kraichy, 2012). Going further, evidence demonstrates that test-taker reactions can affect actual behaviors, including test performance (see Hausknecht et al., 2004; McCarthy et al., 2013; Oostrom, Bos-Broekema, Serlie, Born, & van der Molen, 2012), job offer acceptances (Harold, Holtz, Griepentrog, Brewer, & Marsh, 2016; Konradt, Garbers, Weber, Erdogan, & Bauer, 2017), and even job performance (e.g., Konradt et al., 2017; McCarthy et al., 2013). When benchmarked against other research in the field of OBHR, most of the aforementioned findings are medium to large in magnitude (Bosco, Aguinis, Singh, Field, & Pierce, 2015), which suggests that they have significant implications for test design and administration.

Such findings have led researchers to call for studies that explore techniques for improving how applicants and employees react to assessments (e.g., Ford, Truxillo, & Bauer 2009; Ryan & Huth, 2008; Truxillo, Bauer, Campion, & Paronto, 2002). For

\* Corresponding author. Department of Management, 1265 Military Trail, University of Toronto Scarborough, Toronto, ON M1C 1A4, Canada.

E-mail address: [julie.mccarthy@utoronto.ca](mailto:julie.mccarthy@utoronto.ca) (J.M. McCarthy).

example, Ryan and Huth (2008) noted that test-taker reactions research has not been specific enough to be of practical value for organizations. They emphasized the importance of research that focuses on realistic ways that organizations can enhance test-taker reactions. Despite these calls, there remains a dearth of research on practical, actionable techniques for improving reactions. Indeed, most research on test-taker reactions has focused on why or how test perceptions manifest, or on their downstream consequences (Hausknecht et al., 2004; Ryan & Huth, 2008; Saks, 2005), rather than on strategies for how to elicit positive reactions.

One way to begin to address this gap is to develop interventions that attempt to improve applicant and employee reactions to assessments. The term 'organizational intervention' often conjures images of extensive, time-consuming, and costly procedures, such as major corporate restructuring (e.g., Datta, Guthrie, Basuil, & Pandey, 2010), large-scale cultural changes (e.g., Cameron & Quinn, 2011), and job redesign (e.g., Campion & McClelland, 1991). However, recent findings suggest that smaller, more targeted interventions can also yield substantial benefits. Conversely, the concept of *wise interventions* (Walton, 2014) focuses on modifications that are relatively ordinary, brief, and precise. Further, they are grounded in psychological theories and are designed to alter the way that people think or feel. This is accomplished by developing techniques that influence attitudes and behaviors. The resulting wise interventions are used to modify psychological processes in real-world settings. According to this perspective, the efficacy of an intervention should first be tested in a controlled laboratory setting, and then in the field (Walton, 2014). According to Walton, if these tests are successful, the interventions should then be put into practice.

Examples of wise interventions include a study by Bryan, Walton, Rogers, and Dweck (2011) in which the researchers modified the grammatical structure of survey items given to voters prior to an election. Results indicated that subtle changes in linguistic cues resulted in an 11% increase in voter turnout. In another example, Harackiewicz, Rozek, Hulleman, and Hyde (2012) examined course enrollment levels among high-school students and found that a simple intervention highlighting the value of specific courses to parents significantly increased student enrollment.

Given that there are well-developed models of test-taker reactions that are based on robust psychological theories (e.g., Arvey & Sackett, 1993; Gilliland, 1993; Schuler, 1993), and given that many of the predictions based on models of test-taker reactions have been tested in laboratory environments (for examples see Hausknecht et al., 2004), wise interventions would seem to be a viable approach to improving the reactions of test-takers. Thus, in the present study, we draw upon relevant theories and empirical findings to develop pre-test explanations to improve test-taker reactions to assessment tests. Consistent with Walton's (2014) conceptualization of wise interventions, the pre-test explanations we developed are ordinary (i.e., they were not unconventional techniques), brief (i.e., they were relatively short in duration), and precise (i.e., they were targeted at a specific change).

We start by developing a conceptual framework that delineates how our set of interventions can influence test-taker reactions. We then test our interventions across two samples of working adults. The purpose of Study 1 was to assess whether pre-test interventions affect test-taker reactions to a work sample test they took as part of a concurrent validation process. In line with Walton's model, we also considered the context in which our interventions were applied by examining whether reactions to the testing process depend on test-takers existing relationships with the organization. More specifically, we explored the potential role of perceived organizational support (POS) and leader-member exchange (LMX) as boundary conditions that may be associated with employee reactions to assessments. Study 2 was designed

to test the potential mechanisms that underlie the effects of our pre-test explanations.

Our research contributes to the test-taker reactions literature in several ways. First, we draw attention to how interventions can be used to affect test-taker reactions. This is important, as the bulk of past research has focused on how test-taker reactions relate to organizational attitudes and intentions (Hausknecht et al., 2004), or on post-test explanations (Truxillo, Bodner, Bertolino, Bauer, & Yonce, 2009). We focus on how to prevent negative reactions from occurring in the first place through the use of strategic pre-test explanations. Second, we contribute to applicant reactions theory by integrating prior work on test-taker reactions with fairness heuristic theory (Lind, 2001; Van den Bos, 2001), which provides a conceptual basis for understanding how employee judgments of the testing process are formed. We further contribute to theory by showing how the concept of wise interventions applies to research in the realm of fairness. Third, we extend the applicant reactions literature by considering the importance of pre-test explanations from the perspective of current employees, as opposed to job applicants. This extension is important, as organizations regularly use assessments to evaluate current employees for training, development, and promotion processes. Finally, we examine mechanisms (transparency, respect, reassurance) that may underlie the effects of pre-test explanations, as well as potential boundary conditions (POS, LMX) of relations between explanations and test-taking reactions.

## 1. A conceptual framework for understanding test-taker reactions

Our conceptual framework is summarized in Table 1 and draws on fairness heuristic theory (Lind, 2001; Lind & Van den Bos, 2002), which asserts that people use impressions of fairness as a heuristic to determine how to approach uncertain situations, including test-taking scenarios (Truxillo, Steiner, & Gilliland, 2004). According to the theory, people judge procedures as more fair when they are derived from authority figures within a group because such procedures communicate whether they are valued and respected group members (Lind, 2001). This highlights the importance of ensuring that any assessments given to current employees are perceived as fair. The theory also holds that perceptions of fairness are most strongly influenced by information that is available early in an event, as opposed to information provided later in an event. Empirical findings strongly support this primacy effect (Lind, Kray, & Thompson, 2001; Van den bos, Vermunt, & Wilke, 1997). Thus, pre-test explanations are well positioned to influence how employees react to testing.

Our framework also draws from theory and research indicating that the formation of heuristics is dependent on the information that is currently available to employees (Van den Bos, Lind, Vermunt, & Wilke, 1997). As such, internal test-takers are likely to interpret testing procedures in light of their own context within the organization. Thus, we also examined the social context in which assessments are completed. Although social context has been firmly situated in theoretical models of test-taker reactions (e.g., Ford et al., 2009; Hausknecht et al., 2004; Truxillo et al., 2004), only a limited number of empirical studies have focused on context (for exceptions see Macan, Avedon, Paese, & Smith, 1994; Thorsteinson & Ryan, 1997). Context is particularly important when organizations administer assessments to existing employees for promotion, development, or validation purposes. This is because, in contrast to external job applicants, internal test-takers are already embedded within the organizational context (Ford et al., 2009). Thus, social context is a core component of our framework, and we suggest that the social exchange that

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