



Attracting safe employees: How job adverts can affect applicants' choices



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ABSTRACT

It is not known how organisations in high risk contexts can attract employees with personal attributes that are likely to support organisational safety. Using questionnaires ($n = 179$), we investigated whether explicit prioritisation of safety in job adverts influences attraction to an organisation based on individuals' safety attitude, prevention–promotion focus and pessimism. Individuals with a more positive safety attitude rated the safety-focussed company as attractive and rejected the business-focussed company. Prevention focus, did not relate to attraction to either of the companies. However, a more pronounced promotion focus in individuals was associated with a positive perception of both jobs, indicating that the desire to get a job might be an overriding factor. Furthermore, pessimism did not clearly relate to participants' preferences of the two job adverts. The results suggest that attracting applicants that hold safety related attributes might take more than highlighting safety in job adverts and requires conveying a real sense of commitment to safety and consideration of the management of risks.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Theoretical background

Despite technical and organisational advances in health and safety, nearly 4 million people suffered a workplace injury in the USA in 2011 and 13 people died at work each day that year (OSHA website, accessed April 2013). It therefore remains important to investigate organisational safety by considering novel areas of corporate activities that could influence accident rates. One unexplored aspect, with the potential to enhance organisational safety, concerns the recruitment process – that is whether a safe individual can be attracted to an organisation, based on their perception that it prioritises safety (Christian et al., 2009). The first impression of an organisation that job seekers form (e.g. from a job advert) can influence whether they become interested in the organisation and are likely to apply (Schneider, 1987), whereby possible applicants self-select themselves. This effect has also been found to be relevant to safety specific goals of an organisation as a study by Vredenburg (2002) identified hiring practices as critical

in predicting hospital staff injury rates. Vredenburg (2002) suggests that organisations can attract applicants who hold safety attitudes and expectations valued by the organisation by actively fostering a safety conscious image. This study adds to the literature by investigating whether a focus on safety in job adverts can in fact increase the attraction of employees that hold attributes known to be linked to organisational safety outcomes.

The safety literature has principally focussed on two groups of factors that can affect safety related behaviours and other safety outcomes at work: environmental, or workplace related factors, and individual level factors. Workplace related factors that have been found to influence safety outcomes include safety climate and culture, often consisting of perceived management safety commitment, supervisor safety commitment, safety related human resource management practices or safety systems (Beus et al., 2010; Christian et al., 2009; Clarke, 2006; Flin et al., 2000; Griffin and Neal, 2000; Neal and Griffin, 2006; Zohar, 2000). A study by Hofmann and Stetzer (1996) reports employees' general observations about the interaction of team members in addition to perceptions of safety climate as linked to accident involvement. Leadership has also been identified as a central workplace related influence on safety outcomes in organisations (e.g. Barling et al., 2002; Griffin and Hu, 2013; Kelloway et al., 2006; O'Dea and Flin, 2001; Zohar, 2002). A number of individual level attributes that are relevant for safe behaviour at work have also been documented in the literature. It has, for example, been shown that personality traits (the Big-Five) relate to accident involvement (Clarke and

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Robertson, 2008). Employees' safety attitudes have been found to be related to their risk propensity, fatalism (expecting negative outcomes), motivation, agreeableness, sensation seeking and type-A behaviour (Henning et al., 2009). A meta-analysis by Christian et al. (2009) found safety knowledge, safety motivation, locus of control, propensity to take risks, job attitudes and conscientiousness to be associated with safety performance. Hofmann and Stetzer (1996) showed perceived role overload to be related to accident involvement.

While behaviours of employees can be changed through training (Landy and Conte, 2009), and organisational level factors can be addressed through organisational change management and other interventions, personal attributes of employees are relatively stable (Conley, 1985). Accordingly, organisations are likely to influence their workforce's level of safety consciousness at a trait level most effectively by attracting those individuals who already have characteristics that are likely to support them in acting safely. The organisation can then select and endeavour to retain those applicants (as proposed by the attraction–selection – attrition cycle, Schneider, 1987). Through selective hiring from a pool of applicants that is likely to be focussed on safety, organisations can maintain their safety climate and even develop it positively. Senior managers involved in a survey on talent management were found to expect recruiting and retaining the right employees for a given job to become harder in the future (the Economists Talent Unit, 2008). Accordingly, with safety being at the core of safety critical businesses, insights on how to attract individuals that hold attributes associated with safe behaviours are likely to become even more critical in the future.

1.2. Attraction–selection–attrition and safety in organisation

The attraction–selection–attrition (ASA) cycle by Schneider (1987) proposes that the personal values of individuals and organisations, determine which individuals will want to work for an organisation, be selected and remain as employees. The model suggests that individuals and organisations are more likely to remain together if their values match, and by doing so, the ASA process reinforces socialisation (Schneider et al., 1998).

The ASA process has been investigated for a number of attributes (e.g. Jackson et al., 1991; Schneider et al., 1998; Ployhart et al., 2006; De Cooman et al., 2009; Satterwhite et al., 2009). The attraction stage has been tested in relation to personality (Cable and Judge, 1997) and personal values (Glazer and Beehr, 2002), extraversion and emotional stability (Slaughter et al., 2005). A study by Stevens and Szmerekovsky (2010) found that personality related wording in job adverts influenced the degree to which individuals with different personality traits (Big-Five) were attracted to an organisation. Despite its wide use, the ASA model has not been investigated for values related to safety.

Our study investigates to what extent organisations' explicitly stated focus on safety can influence their success in attracting applicants that hold traits known to be positively related to safety. The attraction stage of the ASA cycle suggests that individuals are differentially attracted to an organisation based on the types of activities that take place in it (Schneider, 1987), and specifically due to the overlap they perceive of their own attributes (personality, values and attitudes) with the attributes of an organisation (for example its culture, Schneider et al., 1998). In a similar vein, by emphasising safety in job adverts, organisations are likely to achieve better access to individuals with a trait-driven focus on safety. Because safety climate has been established as a core attribute of organisations in safety critical environments (e.g. Christian et al., 2009; Beus et al., 2010) and personal attributes have been found to relate to safety in the workplace (Clarke and Robertson, 2008), we investigated the role of expressed organisational safety

values in job adverts in attracting more or less safety concerned individuals, measured by three attributes that have been identified as related to safety critical behaviours.

1.3. Personal attributes related to the attraction to more or less safety focussed organisations

Safety attitudes reflect beliefs and emotions regarding safety policies, procedures, and practices at an individual level (Neal and Griffin, 2004; Rundmo and Hale, 2003). Mearns et al. (1998) found safety attitudes concerning issues such as speaking up about safety, rule violations, cost versus safety as well as rules and regulations, to be related to the accident history of the individual. Based on the proposition that an overlap between the organisation's values and the person's values will increase perceived attractiveness (Schneider, 1987), we suggest individuals with a positive safety attitude will be more attracted to a job in an organisation that formulates safety as one of its core goals.

H1. A positive safety attitude will positively relate to the perceived attractiveness of a job in an organisation that focuses on safety.

The achievement motivation construct of regulatory focus by Crowe and Higgins (1997) may also influence employee attraction to job adverts. Regulatory focus describes individuals as approaching goals through a focus on positive achievements (promotion focus), as well as through an avoidance of negative outcomes (prevention focus, Higgins, 1997). Both these foci represent continuums and are not mutually exclusive so that individuals can be motivated by varying degrees of prevention and promotion focus at the same time. A pronounced promotion focus leads individuals to follow an eagerness strategy, desiring to complete tasks quickly, and a pronounced prevention focus leads individuals to follow a vigilant strategy and avoid barriers (Wallace et al., 2008). Wallace and Chen (2006) found individuals with a high promotion focus were more likely to focus on maximising production whereas prevention focussed individuals were more likely to focus on safety in their work. Individuals with a pronounced prevention focus are likely to favour an organisation with a safety focus, as this fits with their tendency to approach goals by avoiding negative issues, whereas individuals with a pronounced promotion focus will be more attracted to an organisation that fits their own strategy by offering a good opportunity to achieve business success and to get ahead. Accordingly we propose:

H2. An individual's promotion focus will positively relate to the perceived attractiveness of a job in an organisation that focuses on business success.

H3. An individual's prevention focus will positively relate to the perceived attractiveness of a job in an organisation that focuses on safety.

Finally, we consider pessimism in relation to applicants' preferences of job adverts. Optimists, at the upper end of this uni-dimensional construct, are likely to have a positive view of the future, expecting good things to happen, whereas pessimists will be more inclined to focus on negative issues and expect bad things to happen (Scheier et al., 1994). This also applies to the anticipation of risks (van der Velde et al., 1992) and engagement in risk reducing behaviours (Weinstein, 1982). Optimists tend to feel more invincible than pessimists, leading to reduced willingness to change their behaviour in order to avoid risks (van der Velde et al., 1992). A pessimistic tendency to anticipate that each day might be a bad one has been suggested by Reason (1997) as beneficial for organisational safety. We propose that pessimists

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