



Underestimating the importance of expressing intrinsic motivation in job interviews

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ABSTRACT

Across five studies ($N = 1428$), we documented an important prediction problem in recruitment: Job candidates mispredicted how much recruiters valued expressions of intrinsic motivation (e.g., learning that a candidate desired meaningful work). In contrast, candidates more accurately predicted how much recruiters valued expressions of extrinsic motivation (e.g., learning that a candidate desired opportunities for career advancement). Social distance produced this discrepancy: People failed to realize others cared about intrinsic motivation as much as they did; therefore, they underestimated how much expressing that they valued intrinsic motivation mattered to others. Indeed, recruiters giving recruitment pitches also mispredicted how much admitted candidates valued learning that a company emphasized intrinsic motivation. As a consequence of the misprediction, candidates chose suboptimal pitches that failed to express their intrinsic motivation during job interviews, unless explicitly encouraged to take the recruiters' perspective.

1. Introduction

When applying for a job, what qualities about yourself should you highlight to impress a recruiter and secure a job offer? Obviously, you should state your skills, ambitions and long-term goals. But to what extent should you also emphasize your intrinsic motivation—that you value interesting, meaningful work? Similarly, if you want to persuade a job candidate to accept an offer to join your company, how much should you emphasize that employees at your company, including yourself, are not only extrinsically motivated to do work that is important, but are further intrinsically motivated to do work that is interesting and meaningful? Naturally, the extent to which you would emphasize your intrinsic motivation depends on how much you think the other person in the conversation (e.g., the recruiter or job applicant) values it. And if you think they care little for intrinsic motivation, chances are you will understate your intrinsic motivation to them in your pitch.

In general, people wish to make good impressions in recruitment situations. However, knowing what another person finds impressive is not always straightforward, as taking another person's perspective is a not a simple matter (Birch & Bloom, 2007; Epley & Caruso, 2008; Lin, Keysar, & Epley, 2010). How well, then, can people predict how others value their work motivation? To address this question, we tested for a discrepancy between predicted and actual valuations of intrinsic

motivation. We suggest that when predicting what another person finds impressive, people underestimate intrinsic motivation. For example, job candidates do not realize the extent to which recruiters want to hire candidates who are intrinsically motivated. Consequentially, job candidates underemphasize their intrinsic motivation during interviews.

2. Impression management in recruiting

People want others to like them and think highly of them. As a result, they manage their behavior and in particular, reveal information about themselves, in such a way as to make the best impression on others across social and professional settings (Baumeister, 1982; Jones & Wortman, 1973; Schlenker, 1980). Managing impressions is fairly automatic by adulthood (Paulhus & Levitt, 1987), yet it is more effortful and deliberate when the importance of making the right impression is salient, such as in recruiting situations (Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Vohs, Baumeister, & Ciarocco, 2005).

Indeed, job candidates use a variety of self-presentation tactics to manage recruiters' perceptions of them, realizing that recruiters' knowledge is often limited to the information candidates choose to disclose (Ferris, Russ, & Fandt, 1989; Gilmore & Ferris, 1989; Hazer & Jacobson, 2003; Judge & Ferris, 1993). Likewise, a recruiter persuading a job candidate to join a company aims to present the company, and company employees, in such a way as to convey a favorable impression

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to the admitted candidate. In both situations, people manage what information they share with others in order to reflect positively on themselves or their company, choosing to emphasize details that they think others will find impressive.

Having the motivation to make a good impression is one thing, but knowing what will impress others is not as straightforward. Taking another person's perspective is often difficult (Waytz, Schroeder, & Epley, 2014), especially in a recruitment situation where there may be limited attentional resources available for perspective taking (Apperly, Riggs, Simpson, Chiavarino & Samson, 2006; Vorauer, Martens, & Sasaki, 2009). And even if people are able to understand the general impression they convey to others, it can be challenging to work out one specific individual's impression of them (Kenny & DePaulo, 1993), as is the goal in recruiting.

In particular, a large part of the conversation in recruitment situations focuses on people's source of motivation, such as a candidate's intrinsic and extrinsic motives for applying to a particular position. Accordingly, people selectively emphasize the motivations that they think others want to hear. Certain extrinsic motivators can potentially impress the other party—recruiters, for example, want a candidate that expresses stamina and is able to commit to long-term goals in the absence of immediate rewards. However, what is less obvious is whether expressions of intrinsic motivators also impress others, for instance, whether a candidate is more impressive if she says she is looking to enjoy her job than if she fails to mention this.

3. Intrinsic motivation

The distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation is central to recruiting, specifically, and to the workplace, more broadly (Amabile, 1993; Heath, 1999; Herzberg, 1966; Vroom, 1964; Wrzesniewski et al., 2014). When people do something for the sake of pursuing the activity, they are intrinsically motivated—they find the process rewarding and the means and the ends collide (Fishbach & Choi, 2012; Kruglanski et al., 2018; Lepper, Greene, & Nisbett, 1973; Wrzesniewski et al., 2014). For example, intrinsically motivated employees are working to achieve a positive experience (Quinn, 2005), and they invest effort because they enjoy what they do (Grant, 2008). In comparison, extrinsically motivated employees work in order to achieve an outcome for which their work is instrumental; the means and the ends are separated. Importantly, intrinsic and extrinsic motivations are not mutually exclusive, as most jobs offer a combination of both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards. For example, jobs provide a salary and an opportunity to advance one's career (extrinsic rewards) as well as some level of interest and self-expression (intrinsic rewards). And intrinsic and extrinsic rewards are often positively correlated, such that in many organizations, higher positions are associated with better intrinsic as well as extrinsic rewards. Indeed, it is hard to imagine prolonged employment absent the presence of either intrinsic or extrinsic rewards.

Existing research documented that people believe others are less motivated by intrinsic rewards than they themselves are (DeVoe & Iyengar, 2004; Heath, 1999). For example, people hold the belief that friendly colleagues and interesting work tasks are more important to themselves than they are to others. This occurs in part because others' internal states are less cognitively accessible than one's own (Kruger & Gilovich, 2004) and less valued (Pronin, Berger, & Molouki, 2007). Because intrinsic motivation involves pursuit of internal rewards (e.g., interest) that are inaccessible to an observer, people assume others are less intrinsically motivated than themselves. In contrast, because extrinsic motivation involves pursuit of external rewards (e.g., end-of-the-year bonuses), people see the rewards and infer others are as extrinsically motivated as themselves. Thus, although all motivations are unobservable (e.g., whether it is love of money or love of work), because intrinsic rewards are unobservable, intrinsic motivation is particularly hard to intuit from an outside perspective.

In addition to occurring across social distance (self vs. other), a similar intrinsic bias also occurs across temporal distance (current vs. future self). Specifically, people care more about receiving intrinsic rewards when they are currently pursuing an activity than when they are thinking about pursuing an activity in the future (Woolley & Fishbach, 2015). For example, people in the middle of a work task value the enjoyment the work provides them more than those who will pursue the task in the future do. In this way, people not only fail to perceive that others value intrinsic motivation; they also fail to perceive that their future selves will care about it.

4. Discrepancy in valuing expressions of intrinsic motivation

People's lack of awareness that others value intrinsic rewards might in turn influence what motivations people express when trying to impress others. Potentially, people not only underestimate how much others are intrinsically motivated, but also underestimate how much others are impressed by expressions of intrinsic motivation. This misprediction could lead people to underemphasize their intrinsic motivation in recruiting. As an illustration, imagine an MBA applicant applying to business school. To create an application that will impress admissions officers, the applicant tries to predict what admissions officers value. Whereas the applicant can predict that admissions officers want students who are extrinsically motivated, she may not realize that admissions officers also want to admit students who are intrinsically motivated (e.g., find enjoyment in learning).

Yet, because recruiters are part of the organization and hold an inside perspective, they are likely impressed by candidates' expressions of intrinsic motivation. From an inside perspective, recruiters realize intrinsic motivation is valuable, as it is associated with important organizational outcomes including fostering volunteering and prosocial behaviors (Gagné, 2003; Grant, 2007), increasing engagement in organizational citizenship behaviors (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Penner, Midili, & Kegelmeyer, 1997), and enhancing creativity (Amabile, 1985). For example, recruiters may realize that intrinsically motivated employees, who are curious and interested in learning, are more cognitively flexible, willing to take risks, and open to complexity, expanding their access to ideas and potential solutions (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Grant & Berry, 2011). Indeed, intrinsic motivation is often more strongly associated with long-term commitment to goal pursuit than extrinsic motivation (Woolley & Fishbach, 2016, 2017).

To verify that recruiters seek to hire intrinsically motivated employees, we conducted a survey with 85 MBA students at the University of Chicago Booth School of Business. The MBA students were all enrolled in a weekend program (82.4% full-time employed; $M_{\text{age}} = 31.78$, $SD = 8.25$; 22 women) and they ranked a list of 10 traits.¹ Intrinsic motivation was ranked as third most important, after only hardworking and reliable, highlighting the importance that business people place on intrinsic motivation for hiring decisions.

Clearly candidates' intrinsic motivation matters to recruiters, but why do candidates not intuit this? We reason that when making predictions, candidates assume an outside perspective. They do not realize that those inside the organization care about expressions of intrinsic motivation for themselves and for the people they bring in. For example, whereas everyone wants an engaged colleague to some degree, recruiters care about this more than what those outside the organization applying for the job predict.

We compare this potential discrepancy in valuing intrinsic motivation to another possible discrepancy in valuing extrinsic motivation. We expect people to more accurately predict how much others are

¹ The list was modified from a survey used by CareerBuilder to assess popular soft skills companies say they look for when hiring (Grasz, 2014). It included: hardworking, intrinsically motivated, reliable, friendly, team-player, organized, level-headed, well-spoken, adaptable, and confident.

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