



Revisiting the relationship between impression management and job performance



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ABSTRACT

Although theoretical arguments suggest that impression management should be related to job performance, empirical results have been unsupportive of the association. We argue that this relationship, however, may be found for specific jobs (sales) using a specific objective criterion (sales revenue). We tested this hypothesis across two samples. The first sample utilized a concurrent design and found a significant association between impression management and objective job performance. Furthermore, impression management demonstrated incremental validity over conscientiousness. In the second sample, using a different impression management scale and a predictive design we found that impression management was related to sales revenue, and showed incremental validity over cognitive ability. Implications for research and practice are discussed.

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1. Introduction

The past two decades have witnessed a resurgence of the interest in examining personality traits as predictors of job performance outcomes. Meta-analytic reviews support the criterion related validity of personality assessments for predicting job performance (e.g., Barrick, Mount, & Judge, 2001; Ones, Dilchert, Viswesvaran, & Judge, 2007). However, a common criticism of the use of personality assessments for selection purposes is the possibility that job applicants might engage in response distortion or faking (e.g., Morgeson et al., 2007). As a result, researchers have also examined the role played by social desirability responding on personality assessments. Social desirability responding (SDR) is usually conceptualized as having two components: self-deception and impression management (Paulhus, 1984). *Self-deception* occurs when the respondent genuinely believes that his or her positive responses reflect reality, whereas *impression management (IM)* occurs when the respondent consciously and deliberately distorts his or her responses (Paulhus, 1984, although see Uziel, 2010 for a review and critique of this definition).

Self-deception and impression management have been investigated as both indicators of response style and as substantive personality traits. As *indicators of response style*, research examined if SDR has an impact on the criterion validity of personality assessments as a moderator or suppressor variable (e.g., Barrick & Mount, 1996; Hough, 1998). The results seem to indicate that social desirability does not impact the criterion related validity of personality (Hough & Oswald, 2000). Social desirability scales have also been examined as – mostly ineffective (e.g., Ellingson, Sackett, & Hough, 1999) “validity scales”, developed with the purpose of identifying job applicants who artificially inflate their scores.

As a *substantive personality trait*, SDR (primarily the IM component of SDR) may indicate how well an individual is socialized (Gough, 1948) and can therefore be considered “more substance than style” (McCrae & Costa, 1983). Research shows a meaningful association between SDR and personality. In a meta-analytic study, Ones, Viswesvaran, and Reiss (1996) found a consistent association between SDR and the Big Five traits of Conscientiousness and Emotional Stability. In a more recent meta-analysis, Li and Bagger (2006) examined the two components of SDR separately and found that IM had observed correlations of .33 with Conscientiousness and Agreeableness, and of .27 with Emotional Stability. Based on this evidence, Uziel (2010) concluded that SDR scales are unsatisfactory measures of response style and actually seem to measure

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a substantive personality trait. Consistent with the empirical evidence in the current paper we will focus on IM as a substantive trait.

2. Linking impression management to job performance

Research has also examined SDR as an actual predictor of job performance (e.g., Li & Bagger, 2006; Ones et al., 1996; Viswesvaran, Ones, & Hough, 2001). Most of the research linking SDR to job performance focused on IM (cf. Berry, Page, & Sackett, 2007). Hogan's (1998; Hogan & Shelton, 1998) socio-analytic theory provides an explanation for the possible link between impression management and job performance. According to Hogan (1998), responses to personality items are a form of self-presentation similar to any other form of social interaction. Johnson and Hogan (2006) contend that an individual's responses on personality assessments will create the same impressions that his or her behavior will create in everyday life. Additionally, the extent to which individuals engage in effective impression management is limited by their social skill and knowledge. Therefore, an individual who can use impression management to his or her advantage is likely to be socially competent, and this competence may lead to effective job performance.

Despite these theoretical arguments, empirical research has found little support for the impact of impression management on job performance. A meta-analysis conducted by Ones et al. (1996) found no association between SDR and job performance. However, Ones et al. (1996) examined SDR as a unitary construct without distinguishing between self-deception and IM. More recently, Li and Bagger (2006) found slightly higher associations than Ones et al. (1996) between both self-deception and performance (observed correlation of .08) and between IM and performance (observed correlation of .10). Although Li and Bagger (2006) did make the distinction between self-deception and IM, they did not make distinctions between objective and subjective job performance.

After reviewing the research linking IM and job performance, Uziel (2010) speculated that “the contribution of IM to performance is probably essential for some types of work but is completely irrelevant for others” and that “IM may thus contribute to performance on tasks that require interpersonal competence but not technical competence, such as customer service” (p. 255). Consistent with Uziel (2010) and Viswesvaran et al. (2001), we propose that IM will predict job performance but only in some jobs and only with objective criteria. The focus of our study is on sales jobs using objective criteria: actual sales revenue. Sales jobs are concerned with selling products or services to customers. Sales personnel engage in activities such as finding new customers, assessing their needs, providing information to customers about products and services, persuading customers to make purchases, negotiating sales terms and providing services after the sale (Hausknecht & Langevin, 2010). They also have to deal with demands from both customers and supervisors (Weatherly & Tansik, 1993) and have limited flexibility and control, which can lead to experiencing a variety of stressors (Wetzels, de Ruyter, & Bloemer, 2000). Research suggests that high IM individuals might be better suited for sales jobs than their low IM counterparts. The self-control of individuals high in IM is not compromised under stressful social conditions, they function better in social contexts (Uziel, 2010), and they deal better with rejection (Blackhart, Eckel, & Tice, 2007), which is very common in sales activities.

Borrowing from the influence tactics literature (e.g., Higgins, Judge, & Ferris, 2003; Wortman & Linsenmeier, 1977), we propose that IM is more important in situations where the interactions between the ratee (the employee) and the rater (manager or

customer) are limited in duration. Customers and sales personnel usually have short, limited, focused and infrequent interactions where high IM individuals can use influence tactics to their advantage. Individuals high in IM are rated favorably by their peers after short periods of acquaintanceship (Uziel, 2010). On the other hand, supervisors can observe the employees across time and across different situations making it difficult for the employee to employ influence tactics. Uziel, Sagiv and Roccas (2008) found that although high IM individuals were liked in the beginning of the relationship by their roommates, the ratings of likeness were lower after three months. It appears that despite a positive initial reaction to them, the high IM individuals are rated less favorably long-term in externally enforced situations (i.e., situations where the participants did not have a choice such as being assigned a roommate; Uziel, 2010). This can explain why previous research using almost exclusively supervisor ratings found little to no association between IM and job performance.

Hypothesis 1. IM is related to objective performance.

3. Incremental validity of impression management

Predictors used in personnel selection can be evaluated according to two major criteria: efficiency and equity (e.g., Murphy, 2002). The efficiency of the predictor refers to its relationship with performance outcomes, while equity refers to making fair decisions when using the predictor. While efficiency is mainly examined as the predictor's direct association to performance, one could argue that a more important aspect is the incremental validity provided over well-established predictors. Incremental validity refers to the degree to which a measure increases the ability to predict an important phenomenon (Haynes & Lench, 2003). Two commonly examined predictors both in general personnel selection (Schmidt & Hunter, 1998) and specifically for sales personnel (Verbeke, Dietz, & Verwaal, 2011; Vinchur, Schippmann, Switzer, & Roth, 1998) are Cognitive Ability and Conscientiousness. In order to show incremental validity over Conscientiousness and Cognitive Ability, IM should show small correlations with both constructs. For the relationship between IM and conscientiousness, Li and Bagger (2006) found an observed correlation of .33 across twenty-one samples. IM and cognitive ability are generally not correlated (e.g., Schermer & Vernon, 2010).

Hypothesis 2. IM will show incremental validity for predicting objective performance over Conscientiousness (H2a) and Cognitive Ability (H2b).

4. Differential prediction of impression management

Equity refers to the extent to which it has subgroup bias or shows discrimination against minority groups. The presence of bias is examined by comparing the regression slope for the same predictor-criterion relationship, in different groups (differential prediction). Examining differential prediction is important for practical and legal reasons, and fairness concerns arise when test scores do not predict performance as well for minority subgroups. We are not aware of studies investigating the differential prediction of impression management, and generally speaking the differential prediction of personality traits is an area in need of more research (Berry, Kim, Wang, Thompson, & Mobley, 2013). Given the nature of our samples (100% white), we can only examine differential prediction by age and gender.

Research Question: Does IM show differential prediction by age and gender?

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