The Influence of Employment Screening on Employee Attachment

Robert P. Vecchio

In an examination of the possible impact of differences in the number of employment screening devices on employee attachment, cognitive dissonance theory was used to deduce the hypothesis that increases in the number of screens would be associated with more favorable job-related attitudes. Contrary to the prediction, results from a national probability sample of 702 full-time employees yielded evidence that an increase in screening was related with increasingly negative responses. Statistical controls for employee demographic differences and organizational size did not alter the conclusion. The need for additional study of the possible marginal utility of multiple screens in the hiring process is highlighted.

KEY WORDS: employee screening; employee attachment to employer; cognitive dissonance and employee screening; multiple screens for employment.

INTRODUCTION

A substantial proportion of the research conducted in the field of human resources management focuses on the ability of various predictors to identify prospective employees who will display superior performance, greater organizational attachment, and more positive job-related attitudes. Such research seeks to improve prediction beyond a base-line level of forecasting. With careful attention to the development of relevant criteria derived from job analytic techniques, it is often possible to develop an evaluation-oriented screening experience that will aid in predicting the job success of applicants. Popular wisdom in the field also advocates the identification of multiple predictors, as additional predictor variables (to the extent that they are not redundant, yet are correlated with unique sources of variability in a criterion) will improve overall predictive accuracy. The addition of assessment/screening devices is often viewed in terms of developing a battery of devices. Heretofore ignored in the empirical literature on multiple prediction has been a concern with the impact of multiple screening devices on the applicants. That is to say, we do not know whether the addition of screening devices, in and of itself, to the job application process improves or detracts from hires' subsequent behaviors and attitudes. Alternatively, multiple screens may have no real association with hires' behaviors and attitudes.

1Department of Management, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, Indiana 46556.
Beyond the purely practical concern that relates to this issue, there is also a theoretical basis from which one can predict the impact of multiple screens. Cognitive dissonance theory offers predictions for forced compliance settings. In two well-known demonstrations that people who go through a great deal of trouble to attain something are inclined to value it more highly than those who exert less effort, Aronson & Mills (1959) and Gerard and Mathewson (1966) showed that severity of an initiation experience tends to enhance liking of a group. These studies demonstrated that experiencing social anxiety as a consequence of being embarrased or threatened resulted in a need to justify the value of the obtained goal (admission to group membership). Other research in the field of buyer behavior and on pre- and postdecision processes in organizational choice has also supported predictions derived from Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance (Hawkins, Coney, & Best, 1980; Hunt, 1970; Menasco & Hawkins, 1978). Collectively, these studies suggest that job applicants who are required to experience multiple screening devices (e.g., skill testing, plus paper-and-pencil testing, drug testing, providing letters of reference, etc.) will have more positive job attitudes and express greater attachment, relative to employees who experience fewer formal screening hurdles. This should occur because increases in the number of screens increases the social cost to the applicant. To the extent that employees have paid a greater personal price to attain employment by submitting themselves to drug testing, psychological testing, etc., they would be expected to have more positive responses because of a need to justify to themselves and others the additional personal expense. This hypothesis follows from cognitive inconsistency being enhanced by increases in the social cost of goal attainment.

In order to test this hypothesis, it is necessary to examine a range of settings, as a single organizational setting may not provide sufficient variance on the use of applicant screening. Also, the range of organizations that needs to be studied should be substantial in order to generalize beyond a single site. At the same time, statistical controls would be necessary in order to adjust for the association of demographic factors with attachment and job-related attitudes, as well as the likelihood of being subjected to multiple screening experiences. Chief among these control variables are the dimensions of age, education, gender, income, race, and organizational size. While individual demographic differences can reasonably be predicted to be associated with the above criteria (at least, in part, because such demographic differences as race and gender are correlated with the dimensions of employment status, income, and educational opportunities, cf. Vecchio, 1980), organizational size requires additional consideration as its association with attitudes is generally recognized (Porter & Lawler, 1965), and its association with the use of multiple screens can be reasonably expected (i.e., larger firms would be more likely to use a greater variety of screens). Hence, control for organizational size seems essential, and simultaneously argues for the need to study a range of employing firms rather than studying a single employer.