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HUMOR IN JOB SEARCH AND RECRUITMENT

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As noted by various scholars (e.g. Barber, 1998; Chapman, Uggerslev, Carroll, Piasentin, & Jones, 2005), attracting qualified applicants is an extremely important human resource management practice. The importance of selection practices depends a lot on the quality of the applicant pool, as well as whether the top applicants accept job offers (e.g. Boudreau & Rynes, 1985; Murphy, 1986). From an individual applicant’s perspective, an applicant’s intentions and behaviors toward a specific potential employer (e.g. applying for a job with this employer, intentions to accept a job offer if one is made by this employer) are components of the applicant’s job search process, which typically involves multiple possible employers (Boswell, Zimmerman, & Swider, 2012; Kanfer, Wanberg, & Kantrowitz, 2001). Not surprisingly, studies examining organizational attraction have examined the influence of firms’ recruitment practices, and job and organizational attributes, on the firms’ ability to attract the best applicants (e.g. Collins, 2007; Turban & Cable, 2003). Thus, as individuals conduct their job search they are exposed to various recruitment practices and obtain information about job and organizational attributes, which may influence their job search activities.

This chapter explores the notion that humor might influence job search and recruitment processes and outcomes. Indeed, the use of humor could become an integral part of the strategies used by companies to attract and recruit potential employees, while it also can influence the way job seekers navigate their search for employment. Since a firm’s recruitment processes influence an applicant’s reaction to that firm and also may influence the applicant’s job search processes, the use of humor during these processes can influence job search processes, recruitment processes, and the overall outcomes of both processes, namely whether an offer is made to an applicant, and whether the applicant accepts it.

Although an extensive amount of research examining applicant attraction has taken an organizational perspective (e.g. Barber, 1998; Chapman et al., 2005), it is
critical to note that applicants’ intentions and behaviors are also important aspects of the job search process (e.g. Schreurs, Derous, van Hooft, Proost, & De Witte, 2009). That is, job seekers are active information processors whose attitudes and behaviors towards organizations are dynamic; they change with additional input from organizations, and shape the way job seekers view the whole job search process. Specifically, an organization’s recruitment practices not only influence applicants’ attraction to the firm (e.g. Barber, 1998; Collins, 2007), but also impact applicants’ subsequent job search processes and behaviors. For example, the use of humor in an interview by the recruiter may not only influence the applicant’s attraction to the firm as a potential employer, but might also influence the applicant’s subsequent job search behaviors and the expectations they form about other employers.

Job search and recruitment are “two sides of the same coin” (da Motta Veiga & Turban, forthcoming). On one side, recruiting applicants is an essential human resource management practice for organizations looking to recruit and select the best potential applicants. On the other side, job seekers are attracted to apply for jobs at specific organizations.

Job search is typically defined as behaviors designed to learn about and pursue job openings with the ultimate goal of receiving and accepting a job offer (Boswell et al., 2012), and involves various activities engaged in by the job applicant. The job search process is considered a stressful, self-regulated process, with the job seeker’s goal to find suitable employment (Boswell et al., 2012; Kanfer et al., 2001). Job search behavior is typically operationalized by assessing the frequency of job search activities, such as revising one’s resume, completing applications, or by the overall effort exhibited by the job seeker (Blau, 1994; Boswell et al., 2012; Saks & Ashforth, 2002). Job search behaviors, whether the seeker received an offer, and how many job offers were received, are the most studied job search processes and outcomes. Evidence indicates that job search behaviors are predicted by job seeker personality characteristics, job search self-efficacy, self-esteem, financial need and employment commitment, and social support (Kanfer et al., 2001). Furthermore, since the job search is a stressful, self-regulated process, research has also focused on the regulation of affect, stress, and motivation as influencing persistence during the job search process (e.g. da Motta Veiga & Gabriel, 2016; da Motta Veiga & Turban, 2014; Song, Uy, Zhang, & Shi, 2009).

Recruitment is defined as the organizational practices that influence the number and quality of individuals that apply for vacant positions (e.g. Barber, 1998; Chapman et al., 2005; Rynes, 1991). Specifically, Barber (1998) suggested that the recruitment process includes three phases: generating applicants, maintaining applicant status, and influencing job choice. In the generating applicants phase, organizations are attempting to attract quality applicants who will apply for positions. During the maintaining applicant status phase organizations are attempting to keep applicants interested in the firm as applicants are being exposed to the organization’s selection practices (i.e. interviews, site visits). When a job offer is made, the organization attempts to influence job choice such that applicants will accept the job offer. In general, the recruitment (applicant attraction) literature has examined predictors
of important individual-level recruitment outcomes such as organizational attraction, job pursuit, and job choice (Barber, 1998; Chapman, et al., 2005; Rynes, 1991). Specifically, in their meta-analysis, Chapman et al. (2005) found that recruitment outcomes were predicted by job/organization characteristics, recruiter behaviors, applicant perceptions of the recruiting process, perceived fit, and hiring expectancies.

The scope of this chapter encompasses facets of the job search and recruitment processes that can be influenced by the use of humor by organizations, their recruiters, and by job seekers. In the remainder of the chapter, I explore the important role humor can have in influencing job search processes and outcomes (i.e. the applicant’s perspective). For example, humor can perhaps help job seekers cope with the stress associated with the job search (Song et al., 2009). Furthermore, humor can also serve as an impression management tool to help job seekers obtain higher interview success, and ultimately secure more job offers.

I also explore whether and how the use of humor can influence recruitment processes and outcomes (i.e. the organization’s perspective) directly or indirectly via other predictors (e.g. recruitment ads, recruiter behaviors). For example, humor can perhaps be used by recruiters to signal the culture of the organization to potential applicants, and as such, to help them identify whether such an organization would be a good fit or not (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005). Furthermore, humor can also influence whether job applicants decide to accept or reject an offer made by an organization. Finally, I discuss how future research could integrate the impact of humor into both job search and recruitment simultaneously. Throughout the chapter, I pay more attention to the potential positive role of humor in both the job search and recruitment processes, but remain mindful of some of its downsides as well.

Humor and job search

The role of humor in organizations has received some interest both theoretically and empirically in recent years (Cooper, 2005, 2008; Robert & Wilbanks, 2012; Robert & Yan, 2007; Romero & Pescosolido, 2008). However, there is still a limited amount of empirical research on humor in organizations, and existing empirical research is typically driven by popular notions of humor. In the job search literature, in particular, the role of humor on job search processes and outcomes has not been studied yet. Furthermore, since one of the primary barriers to “mainstreaming” research on humor has been the difficulty situating humor phenomena within more established and well-developed organizational literatures, it seems that the humor and job search literatures are ripe for such research to occur.

The literature on humor suggests that people are motivated to use humor for many reasons. One of those reasons is that humor is thought to act as stress relief (Graham, Papa, & Brooks, 1992) and to help people cope with work-related stress (Abel, 2002). Since the job search is a relatively complex and ambiguous process in which job seekers engage in activities to find a job (Wanberg, Kanfer, & Rotundo, 1999), the conceptualization of humor as a behavior that might help reduce the
perceived stress associated with job seeking can be viewed from both a problem-focused and emotion-focused coping perspective. The purpose of problem-focused coping is to change the stressful relationship between the individual and a specific situation (e.g. job search) by acting on the situation or oneself (Carver, 2011). On the other hand, emotion-focused coping is oriented toward managing the emotions that accompany the perception of stress, such as distracting oneself (Carver, 2011; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). As such, one mechanism that can help resolve job search stress would be to use humor as a coping mechanism.

It would be interesting for future research to examine whether, how, and to what extent the use of humor in job search can help job seekers cope with the process both by helping them adapt their behaviors (i.e. problem-focused coping), but also providing a well-needed break or distraction (i.e. emotion-focused coping) (e.g. Trougakos, Beal, Green, & Weiss, 2008). An example of both problem- and emotion-focused coping would be for job seekers to share their bad experiences in a humorous way with fellow job seekers or career counselors in order to learn from their mistakes while also laughing at themselves (i.e. providing a distraction). Notably, scholars have conceptualized and examined job search behaviors as a type of problem-focused coping behavior (McKee-Ryan, Song, Wanberg, & Kinicki, 2005; Song et al., 2009; Wanberg, 1997). Perhaps using humor in job search could be a behavior that helps job seekers jump the hurdles of the process, while simultaneously helping them manage inevitable negative emotions.

Another avenue for future research examining the role of humor in job search would be to examine whether humor can serve as an impression management tool in helping job seekers obtain interviews and even job offers. Indeed, Cooper (2005) suggested that humor can be a type of ingratiatory behavior in the workplace. Evidence also strongly indicates that impression management influences job search outcomes such as interview success, second-round interviews and job offers (Bolino, Kacmar, Turnley, & Gilstrap, 2008; Stevens & Kristof, 1995; Tsai, Chen, & Chiu, 2005). As such, perhaps the use of humor as an impression management tool can help job search outcomes such as interview success and job offers. Interestingly, Glenn (2010) investigated the role of shared laughter in job interviews, and found that laughter is not always shared and sometimes these laughter asymmetries serve to reinforce the “power distance” between the interviewer and interviewee. As such, it is critical for future research to delineate whether and how humor is used as ingratiatory behavior, and what type of humor is used.

Finally, I also encourage future researchers to examine the influence of humor in recruitment practices, such as recruitment ads, on subsequent job search behaviors. Indeed, although this might overlap with the recruitment literature and the following section of this chapter, the use of humor in recruitment practices can influence the amount of time and effort job seekers want to invest in applying to specific organizations. Relatedly, perhaps job seekers who value the use of humor at work might dedicate their time and effort to applying to companies who portray themselves, through their recruitment ads or recruiter behaviors, as having a climate that supports humor use (Robert & Wilbanks, 2012). This would also be consistent
with the person-organization fit literature, which suggests that job applicants seek organizations that share their same characteristics or values (Kristof, 1996; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Interestingly, though, it will also be important to account for the type of humor used and context in which the humor is used. For example, a company that portrays itself as having a carnival-like atmosphere might not appeal to many job seekers, whereas a company that indicates that humor is an integral part of their laid-back, friendly culture might appeal to a greater number of job seekers.

Humor in job search and recruitment

In the recruitment literature, the role of humor on recruitment processes and outcomes has received very limited attention. In the only study that was somewhat related to the role of “humor” in recruitment, Goltz and Giannantonio (1995) indicated that job applicants made significantly more positive inferences regarding organizational characteristics when recruiters were friendly versus unfriendly, and that recruiter friendliness influenced applicants’ attraction to the job. However, that study did not specifically examine humor, but rather recruiter friendliness. As such, the recruitment literature seems to provide an established and well-developed organizational literature within which the role of humor can be examined and integrated.

One interesting avenue for future work would be to understand whether and how organizations could use humor as a recruitment tool, for example, by introducing humor in recruitment ads or by using humor in recruiter behaviors. Interestingly, there is extensive research looking at the role of humor in marketing, especially in advertising (for a meta-analysis see Eisend, 2009). Humor has been shown to positively influence the impact of advertising, although some research has shown that sometimes humor can also inhibit ad outcomes (Cline, Altesch, & Kellaris, 2003). In terms of recruitment, the use of humor might align with the organization’s desire to signal to potential applicants, through its recruitment ads or recruiter behaviors, that the organization supports humor use at work.

To pursue this avenue, future research could draw from signaling theory to examine the role humor can have in recruitment ads and recruiter behaviors. Signaling theory proposes that individuals interpret available information as providing signals about what is unknown (for a recent review see Connelly, Certo, Ireland, & Reutzel, 2011). Since job applicants do not have complete information about an organization, they interpret available information as signal(s) about the job and organization (Rynes, 1991). For example, evidence suggests that reputation provides a signal about the job and organization, which subsequently influences job pursuit intentions (Turban & Cable, 2003). Furthermore, recruitment behaviors may be interpreted as providing information about an organization such that an unfriendly recruiter may signal an unfriendly environment (Taylor & Bergmann, 1987). In summary, signaling theory has been used to examine various recruitment predictors such as organizational reputation and attractiveness, recruiter behaviors and traits, and recruitment delays (Cable & Turban, 2001; Collins, 2007; Turban &
Perhaps, the use of humor during recruitment could serve as a signal to potential job applicants about the organization’s culture and values.

Future research could thus extend prior work by using signaling theory to examine whether, and how, the use of humor in recruitment ads and/or recruiter behaviors influences various recruitment outcomes, such as applicant attraction, whether job applicants accept an offer from this organization, intention to remain with the organization, etc. Organizations could use these signals to indicate that they have a humorous work environment, and that job applicants who are interested in being in an environment that is supportive of, and perhaps even conducive to, humor use might be more attracted to such organizations and pursue employment. As mentioned earlier, there are opportunities for future research to also integrate the person–organization fit literature (Kristof, 1996) when examining whether and how humor influences recruitment practices. Indeed, while organizations send signals about their values, job applicants receive those and interpret them for fit with their own values (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Even if that humor is not successful, and as long as it is not offensive it could act as a signal to job applicants about the value that the organization puts on humor and related qualities, such as friendliness and cohesiveness.

Another avenue for future research would be understanding whether, and how, the use of humor at any point during the recruitment process influences the ultimate goal of getting a job offer accepted (or rejected) by a top applicant. Indeed, although humor can play a positive role at various stages of the process, when can humor make or break the deal? When is too much humor too much? When is it a bad time to use humor? It would be interesting to answer these questions from an organization’s perspective of trying to recruit top applicants. Furthermore, these questions could very well apply to job seekers as well. When should they use or avoid humor? For example, should they use humor or not when negotiating a job offer? Companies such as Glassdoor.com present researchers with rich databases, which include information about the recruitment process, including whether applicants received an offer or not, and whether they accepted it or not. Furthermore, the website also contains information (content data) about the recruitment process itself (e.g. friendly recruiter, slow process, etc.). Using such websites and databases such as Glassdoor.com could help answer some of the questions above.

Finally, both recruitment and job search can be perceived as persuasion processes: the applicant is trying to persuade the potential employer to give them an offer, while the organization is trying to persuade the applicant to accept their offer. The elaboration likelihood model (ELM; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Roberson, Collins, & Oreg, 2005; Turban, Forret, & Hendrickson, 1998) might provide a useful lens through which to view humor’s role in the persuasion process. At the core of the ELM is the notion that persuasive messages are processed along either a peripheral route, which involves limited cognitive effort and reliance on shortcuts and signals, or along a central route, involving more focused attention and effort at evaluating the quality of persuasive arguments (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). People who are less motivated or able to process persuasive arguments are likely to employ the peripheral
route, whereas individuals who are motivated and able to evaluate persuasive arguments employ the central route. The value of humor, for both job seekers and recruiters, might be dependent on whether humor is used in a context in which the other party is engaging in peripheral- or central-route processing. Light humor that is used primarily to generate positive affect and good feelings in the other party might be ineffective in persuasion if a party is employing central-route processing. For example, the context of an informal unstructured interview might make both the job seeker and recruiter engage in peripheral processing of information about the other party. Humor used in such a context might influence both parties’ judgements in that they might simply rely on the “feeling” they get from the other party, rather than evaluating the quality and decision-relevance of persuasive messages. In contrast, structured interview contexts generally indicate that interviewers are motivated to engage in careful scrutiny of information from job seekers. This might suggest that humor use by job seekers might backfire if the interviewer perceives the job seeker to be avoiding providing relevant answers to structured job relevant questions. That being said, even central-route processing might benefit from humor if the humor itself is relevant to the organization’s decision. For example, humor might be used as a way of signaling an organization’s or applicant’s values, or might be used as a subtle way of conveying information that might be otherwise difficult to communicate in a direct manner (e.g. salary demands).

**Integrating humor, job search, and recruitment**

Throughout the chapter, I have opened the door for future humor research to take either an individual (i.e. job search) or organizational (i.e. recruitment) approach. However, applicants and organizational representatives influence each other throughout the job search and recruitment processes, with these reciprocal effects being strongest in interviews. Indeed, considerable evidence indicates recruiter behaviors influence applicant attraction (Chapman et al., 2005). For example, when recruiters are seen as friendly, applicants tend to report greater attraction to the firm (Turban & Dougherty, 1992). Extending prior research, future work could thus investigate the influence of recruiters’ use of humor not only on applicant attraction, but also on job search intentions and behaviors.

It would be interesting to consider whether, and how, applicants and recruiters (or other organizational representatives) influence each other, especially since humor is a dyadic process with reactions (i.e. laughter, smile, smirk, etc.) and responses (Robert & Wilbanks, 2012). For example, emotional contagion theory suggests that individuals have a tendency to experience emotions that are similar to, and influenced by, those of others (Barsade, 2002; Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994; Kelly & Barsade, 2001). Since evidence indicates that applicants’ positive emotions influence the likelihood of obtaining a call-back interview (Burger & Caldwell, 2000; Turban, Stevens, & Lee, 2009), and that humor is related to positive affect (Goel & Dolan, 2007; Sy, Côté, & Saavedra, 2005), perhaps humor interactions during job interviews could help generate more positive affect and increase the
interview experience for both parties. This would be consistent with emotional contagion theory, and with research on interpersonal affect regulation (Niven, Holman, & Totterdell, 2012; Niven, Totterdell, Holman, & Headley, 2012), which suggests that people engage in various interpersonal behaviors (including humor) in order to regulate others’ emotions.

More broadly, future work might investigate whether, and how, applicant personality characteristics, including humor styles or propensity to use humor, influence recruiter behaviors and outcomes. For example, in a study examining service interactions, customer personality traits influenced displays of positive emotions by the service provider in a very brief interaction (Tan, Foo, & Kwek, 2004). Specifically, service providers displayed more positive emotions to customers higher on agreeableness and lower on negative affectivity, with this display of positive emotions resulting in increased customer satisfaction. Perhaps future research could extrapolate these findings and extend them to the influence of personality traits on the use of humor in dyadic interactions. Research might also examine how applicant humor styles and propensity to use humor influence recruiter behaviors, which then influence applicant attraction. In summary, future research that examines applicant and interviewer use of humor during the initial interview is warranted, perhaps using dyadic data analysis techniques (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006).

To bridge the gap between the job search and recruitment literatures by introducing the important role humor can have in these processes, future work could utilize additional research methodologies, such as multilevel (e.g. examining job applicants across multiple organizations’ processes), or repeated measures (e.g. following applicants throughout one recruitment process). For example, several recent studies that have examined job seekers’ emotions, behaviors, and motivations daily or weekly over time, have provided valuable insight into job search behaviors (e.g. da Motta Veiga & Gabriel, 2016; da Motta Veiga & Turban, 2014; Song et al., 2009). Similarly, it could be interesting to pursue research examining the role of humor in influencing job search behaviors, and job search and recruitment processes and outcomes, over time. For example, by collecting multiple measures throughout the job search and recruitment processes, organizations could understand why and when the use of humor leads applicants to change their intentions and perceptions about the organization, and vice versa.

Another promising methodological development in the job search and recruitment literatures would be to use qualitative data from job seekers and recruiters, using interviews or focus groups. For example, a qualitative study of applicants may provide insight into how the use of humor influences applicants’ search for jobs, how they cope with the process, and how potential employers’ use of humor in recruitment activities influence job search behaviors. I encourage research that simultaneously examines applicants’ perceptions of, and reactions to, potential employers and how such perceptions influence job search activities. Specifically, qualitative analysis might be better able to deal with nuances that are inherent in humor use, including nuances in timing, content, and reactions to humor, which might not be easily captured in some quantitative methodologies (e.g. surveys).
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Conclusion

Although researchers have expressed some interest in the study of humor in organizations, very few empirical studies on the topic have been published in the organizational literature. As mentioned earlier, perhaps the primary barrier to “mainstreaming” research on humor has been the difficulty situating humor phenomena within more established and well-developed organizational literatures.

This chapter proposes ways to integrate existing humor research and theoretical approaches with the job search and recruitment literatures, both independently and simultaneously. This approach offers both theoretical and empirical opportunities for future work to answer many questions, and contribute to all three literatures. Indeed, humor can help job seekers cope with the stress associated with the process, and manage recruiters’ and interviews’ impressions. Humor can also help organizations signal to these same job seekers that their work environment is supportive of humor, and hopefully help make the job search and recruitment processes more fun and less dreadful.

References


