Organizational Website Usability and Attractiveness Effects on Viewer Impressions

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Previous research on the rapidly growing field of Internet recruitment has operated under the implicit assumption that recruitment websites can and do influence viewers’ opinions of recruiting organizations. This study empirically tested this assumption using a pre/post-test experimental design. Results indicated that viewers’ ratings on company familiarity, favorability, image as an employer, and organizational attractiveness were affected by organizations’ recruitment websites. Moreover, changes in viewers’ evaluations of these companies were directly related to the usability and attractiveness of their websites. Specifically, greater increases in favorable evaluations from the pre- to post-test measures occurred with companies that maintained websites that were easy to navigate and that were appealing in terms of their colors, fonts, and images.

The use of the Internet for recruiting by organizations has been on the rise throughout the past decade. Recent survey results indicate that approximately 90% of large companies have official recruitment web pages (Cappelli, 2001) and that these pages are the second most frequently visited sections (after the home page) of a company’s website (Peters, 2001). Moreover, companies in both the private and public sectors use their websites to recruit applicants more than for any other human resource management activity (Elliot & Tevavichulada, 1999). Despite the widespread use of the Internet for organizational recruitment, research on the efficacy of this medium lags considerably behind practice. For these reasons, several authors have called for increased research on Internet recruitment (Cober, Brown, Keeping, & Levy, in press; Highhouse & Hoffman, 2001; Lievens & Harris, 2003).

Recently, researchers have responded to these calls for additional Internet recruitment research by investigating conditions that may facilitate effective use of the Internet as a recruitment tool. This research has largely focused on website design features and content-related variables that influence applicants’ perceptions of an organization’s recruitment image, its image as an employer, applicants’ job pursuit intentions, and applicants’ person-organization (P-O) fit perceptions (e.g., Braddy, Thompson, Wuensch, & Grossnickle, 2003; Cober, Brown, Levy, Cober, & Keeping, 2003). Website design features investigated have primarily included usability (i.e., ease of navigation of the website), the attractiveness of recruitment websites in terms of their colors, fonts, pictures, and bulleted versus paragraphs of text (e.g., Braddy et al., 2003; Cober et al., 2003; Thoms, Chinn, Goodrich, & Howard, 2004; Zusman & Landis, 2002), and P-O fit assessment tools (Dineen, Ash, & Noe, 2002). Content variables studied have included information regarding compensation, organizational culture, and training opportunities (Braddy, Kroustalis, & Meade, 2004; Cober et al., 2003).

Despite these recent research efforts, however, a fundamental gap in the Internet recruitment literature remains. Namely, while previous studies have examined the correlates of recruitment website features using cross-sectional designs, researchers have not empirically demonstrated that viewers’ impressions of an organization can be changed by viewing the organization’s recruitment website. Therefore, the purpose of the present study was to empirically determine if applicants’ overall familiarity, favorability, and perceptions of organizations as employers changed after viewing their respective recruitment websites using a pre/post-test design. This study also assessed the extent to which any
changes in participants’ perceptions of organizations may be attributed to the usability and attractiveness of these organizations’ websites.

**Signaling Theory and Changes in Job Seekers’ Perceptions of Organizations**

When considering whether or not an organization’s recruitment website can change viewers’ impressions of the organization, it is important to consider the psychological processes utilized by the viewer of the website. Signaling theory (Spence, 1973; 1974) provides a theoretical underpinning for why an organization’s recruitment website may affect a viewer’s perception of the organization. According to signaling theory, when an individual does not have complete data, or is uncertain of the position they should take on a matter, he or she will typically draw inferences based on cues from available information. Job seekers are often limited in knowledge about a potential hiring company (Rynes & Miller, 1983). Signaling theory suggests that any information that a job seeker views will guide their impressions of the hiring company; thus, variables that do not seem to have a direct connection to a job or organization can become cues for what it would be like to work for that organization, including individuals’ attraction to the organization (Rynes, Bretz, & Gerhart, 1991; Turban, 2001; Turban, Forret, & Hendrickson, 1998).

With regard to Internet recruiting, signaling theory suggests that in the absence of other information about an organization, applicants will draw inferences about the organization based on peripheral cues gained from an employer’s website. This occurs primarily because applicants assume that these cues or characteristics are representative of the entire organization (Rynes et al., 1991). For example, if an organization maintains a website that is difficult to navigate, job seekers may form a general negative impression of the organization or form a specific conclusion that the organization is disorganized, that the entire recruitment process will be too cumbersome to complete, or that the organization is more focused on profits than peripheral work context factors. Regardless of the specific perceptions formed by prospective job applicants, an organization’s recruitment website has salient signaling value for job seekers under many different circumstances, particularly when they have little knowledge about the hiring organization (Rynes et al., 1991).

In short, given that signaling theory suggests that any information about an organization will be used to form impressions of an organization, we proposed the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 1:** Participants’ ratings of organization familiarity, favorability, overall image as an employer, and attractiveness as an employer will change after their exploration of organizations’ recruitment websites.

**Hypothesis 2:** Participants viewing an organization’s recruitment website will indicate that their experiences of viewing the website changed the way they felt about the organization.

If changes in participants’ perceptions of organizations do occur after exposure to their recruitment websites as predicted, it is important to further ascertain what aspects of these websites may be responsible for these changes. While many possibilities exist, this study specifically focused on the role of website usability and attractiveness.

**Website Usability**

The usability of websites has traditionally been defined as the perceived ease with which applicants can access desired information from a website (e.g., Karat, 1997; Nielson, 2000). While research on Internet recruiting is still in its infancy, several studies have examined the effect of website usability on viewers’ organizational impressions. Braddy et al. (2003) showed that the ease of navigation to a job advertisement on a company’s website was related to positive general impressions of the hiring organization under investigation. Similarly, Cober et al. (2003) demonstrated that favorable usability perceptions were associated with participants’ increased inclinations to pursue a job with an organization and to recommend a prospective employer to their friends. Finally, Sinar, Reynolds, and Paquet (2003) investigated the effects of system speed and website user-friendliness on job applicants’ evaluations of company image after these job applicants (who were in sales positions) completed the recruitment and selection processes implemented by these companies. Results revealed that both usability variables were moderately positively correlated with job seekers’ company image evaluations. Additional research investigating the effects of website usability on organizational attractiveness (Williamson, Lepak, & King, 2003) website attitudes or evaluations (Chen, 1999), and satisfaction with website use (Plamer, 2002) have been similarly supportive. On the basis of this literature, we propose the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 3:** Participants’ website usability perceptions will be positively related to their
Hypothesis 4: Participants’ impressions of website usability will be positively correlated with their ratings of how favorably they view the company in general and their overall impressions of the organizations’ images as employers.

Hypothesis 5: Participants’ website usability perceptions will be positively related to their self-reported changes in the way they feel about these organizations.

Website Attractiveness

Prior research has examined the attractiveness of recruitment websites by looking at a variety of dimensions, such as colors, fonts, layouts, pictures, and type of text (i.e., bulleted vs. paragraphs; e.g., Braddy et al., 2003; Zusman & Landis, 2002). Zusman and Landis (2002), for example, exposed applicants to three websites that varied in terms of their appeal and found that applicants preferred to work for the organization that maintained the website with the most appealing colors, fonts, and pictures. In addition, Cober et al. (2003) found that job seekers’ evaluations of aesthetic features (e.g., color) of two organizational websites chosen from Fortune Magazine’s Best Companies to Work for List were positively associated with their job-pursuit intentions and their willingness to recommend these prospective employers to a friend. Additional studies examining the role of website appeal have also found appeal to be positively correlated with people’s overall impressions of websites (Chen, 1999; Schenkman & Jonsson, 2000), their ratings of organizational attractiveness, and their intentions to apply for a position with the hiring companies that maintain these websites (Thoms et al., 2004). By contrast, however, a study conducted by Braddy et al. (2003) investigated text formatting (i.e., bulleted text vs. paragraphs of text) of a job ad on participants’ impressions of a hiring company’s recruitment image, the hiring company itself, and participants’ willingness to apply for a position with the hiring company and found no significant relationships between text formatting and these three criterion variables.

In sum, there has been a dearth of studies investigating website attractiveness and its effect on applicants’ evaluations of companies. To seek further clarification regarding the role of website attractiveness on individuals’ company evaluations, and based on the findings in the aforementioned literature, we propose the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 6: Viewers’ website attractiveness perceptions will positively correlate with their attraction to the organization as an employer.

Hypothesis 7: Viewer’s website attractiveness perceptions will positively correlate with their overall ratings of how favorably they viewed the organization and their overall image of the organization as an employer.

Hypothesis 8: Participants’ website attractiveness perceptions will positively relate to their self-reported changes in the way they felt about respective organizations.

Method

Participants

Participants in the present study were 48 undergraduate students enrolled in psychology courses at a large southeastern university. The sample was 58% female, and the mean age of participants was 19.02 (SD = 2.45). Seventy-seven percent of participants were Caucasian, 12.5% African American, 2.1% Hispanic, 2.1% Asian American, and 6.25% listed “other” as their racial group. In terms of class standing, the sample consisted of 68.75% freshmen, 16.67% sophomores, 8.33% juniors, and 6.25% seniors. Approximately 19% of participants reported that they had previously submitted a job application online, and participants indicated that they spent an average of 14.83 (SD = 10.30) hours on the Internet per week.

Procedure and Measures

Data collection took place in a small research laboratory. Each data collection session consisted of only one participant and lasted approximately an hour and a half. When participants arrived in the lab, they were given an overview of the experimental task and the assumptions they were expected to make while performing this task. Specifically, participants were asked to assume the role of job seekers who had recently graduated (or were about to graduate) from college and to review the “jobs” or “careers” portions of four organizational recruitment websites. In each session, these websites were randomly chosen from a pre-selected list of ten Fortune 500 companies (See Appendix A), which were selected by the authors of the present study for the diversity of their websites in terms of usability and appeal. Participants were also asked to assume that all jobs were in their areas of interests, were in equally attractive locations, and that they offered...
equally acceptable pay and benefits. In other words, participants were told to consider all things about the jobs to be equal and to evaluate these organizations based exclusively on their recruitment websites.

After receiving their task instructions, participants completed a pre-task survey (Time 1) that asked questions about the Fortune 500 company whose recruitment website they would subsequently be exploring. The first three items of the survey measured participants’ familiarity with the company (i.e., “In general, how familiar are you with this company?”; Turban, 2001), how favorably participants viewed the company in general (i.e., “How favorable is your impression of this company in general?”), and how they evaluated the company’s overall image as an employer (i.e., “Overall, how would you evaluate this company’s image as an employer”; Turban, 2001). Participants used a seven-point Likert-type scale for all items but were allowed to choose a “?” response for the favorability and image items. In addition, participants completed an eight-item measure of attraction to the organization as an employer (α = .90; e.g., “I am not interested in this organization”) that was created by combining existing measures from Turban (2001) and Turban and Keon (1993) with new items written by the authors of the present study. Again, a “?” response option was provided for participants that had little prior exposure to the organization. Responses of “?” were later treated as missing data in all analyses.

After responding to the pre-task survey, participants were instructed to view a Fortune 500 company’s “jobs” or “careers” website for ten minutes. Afterwards, they completed a post-task survey (Time 2) containing the same pre-task items, though “?” responses were not allowed. Additionally, participants responded to four items that measured their website usability perceptions (α = .73; e.g., “It was easy to find what I was looking for on this website”), four items that measured perceived attractiveness of the company’s website in terms of color, layout, image, and overall look (α = .91; e.g., “The layout of this website was really appealing”), and a final item that asked if exposure to the company’s website affected their impressions of the organization under investigation (i.e., “This website changed the way I feel about the hiring company”).

The entire procedure used for evaluating the first company’s website as described above was repeated for three more Fortune 500 company websites. Afterwards, participants completed a final survey. This survey asked questions about participants’ demographic characteristics, the amount of time they spent on the Internet per week, and whether they had ever submitted a job application online.

Data Analysis Issues

Because participants were randomly assigned to rate four companies out of a possible ten, the nature of the data was highly complex. The same participants rated four organizations, so observations were not independent (i.e., the sample size could not be treated as 4 * 48 or n = 192), and the random order of viewing the websites further complicated the data. In order to account for the multilevel nature of the data, SAS’s Proc Mixed statement was used (see Verbeke & Molenberghs, 1997 for an overview). This procedure assesses both fixed and random effects in order to control for the interdependence of the data (within individuals), the order of web page viewing, and the incomplete design (only 4 of 10 websites were viewed by each respondent), as well as main effects of the specific company being rated. Thus, results reported below are controlled for these factors and the interactions between them.

Results

Time 1 and Time 2 descriptive statistics for the study variables appear in Table 1. Hypothesis 1 predicted that participants’ perceptions of organizations would change after viewing their respective recruitment web pages. Results indicated significant increases between pre and post-test measures for familiarity (Pre M = 3.80, SD = 1.80; Post M = 5.08, SD = 1.15; p < .001), overall favorability (Pre M = 4.70, SD = 1.28; Post M = 5.27, SD = 1.15; p < .001), overall image as an employer (Pre M = 4.87, SD = 1.25; Post M = 5.46, SD = 1.18; p < .001), and attractiveness as an employer (Pre M = 4.65, SD = 1.04; Post M = 5.20, SD = 1.19; p < .001). Of note, familiarity and employer attractiveness showed an interaction between the companies being rated and time such that companies rated as lower in familiarity and attractiveness at Time 1 showed larger increases in these variables at Time 2 than did companies rated as more familiar and attractive at Time 1.

Hypothesis 2 anticipated that participants viewing an organization’s recruitment website would indicate that their experiences of viewing the website changed the way they felt about the organization. This hypothesis was tested by examining participant responses to the statement, “This website changed the way I feel about this organization.” The mean response to this item was 4.85 (SD=1.50) on a seven-point rating scale, lending tentative support to this proposition. Interestingly, there were no significant differences for this variable by company or order of website administration indicating that respondents tended to uniformly report that their impressions were somewhat changed by the website for all
companies, regardless of the order in which they were viewed.

Positive relationships between viewers’ perceptions of website usability and organizational attractiveness as an employer (H3), changes in overall favorability impressions and the organization’s image as an employer (H4), and self-reported changes in the way the respondent felt about the company (H5) were proposed. These hypotheses were assessed in two ways. First, we examined the zero-order correlations of these variables at Time 2 (see Table 2). Second, we computed change scores for familiarity, general favorability, overall image as an employer, and attractiveness as an employer as the difference between the ratings across the two time periods (i.e., Time 2 - Time 1) and then computed correlations between these change scores and website usability (see Table 3). As expected, website usability was significantly related to three (i.e., favorability, image as an employer, attractiveness as an employer) of the four impression variables for both sets of analyses. Interestingly, though website usability was significantly related to company familiarity when using the change scores, this relationship was not significant using the post-test ratings at Time 2. These results suggest that common method effects were not responsible for the support of Hypotheses 3-5.

Hypotheses 6-8 predicted positive relationships between the attractiveness of an organization’s webpage (in terms of fonts, colors, etc.) and participants’ attraction to the organization as an employer, general favorability impressions, overall image of the organization as an employer, and participants’ self-reported changes in their feelings about the organization. As shown in Tables 2 and 3, each of these hypotheses was supported.

Finally, in addition to testing this study’s proposed hypotheses, we conducted post-hoc exploratory analyses that investigated the relationships among organizational familiarity, favorability, image as an employer, and organizational attractiveness using both change scores as previously described and post-test ratings. As indicated in Tables 2 and 3, these results revealed moderate to strong positive correlations among all four study variables.

Discussion

1 When computing change scores and their associated correlations, we were forced to use a different data structure. Thus the interdependence of the data within individuals was not accounted for with these correlations.
Turban’s (2001) findings, which revealed a positive correlation between undergraduates’ familiarity and attraction ratings of a local petro-chemical firm. Furthermore, these results contradict the findings of Lemmink et al. (2003) that there is no relationship between company familiarity and company employment image. Second, these results also suggested moderate to strong positive correlations among participants’ ratings on organizational favorability, image as an employer, and organizational attractiveness. These findings reinforce the notion proposed by previous researchers (e.g., Gatewood et al., 1993) that job seekers are more attracted to companies for whom they have positive regard.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Findings of the current study should be interpreted in the context of three notable limitations. First, a student sample was utilized, which tended to be quite young and inexperienced as job seekers compared to the broader population of applicants. Thus, respondents in this sample may have had less information about the companies viewed than would have an older population. Importantly, with an older population, other sources of information (e.g., experience as a customer, knowing a current employee, etc.) about an organization may exert a stronger effect on organizational impressions than does an organization’s website. As with all laboratory studies using undergraduate participants, there is also the additional risk that participants did not take the study seriously. However, by limiting sessions to one participant and one administrator and forcing participants to view the websites for an allotted time period, we believe participants were diligent in their responses. Finally, this younger sample of participants may have been more technologically savvy than may be reasonably expected in the general population. One possible implication of this is that the present study’s sample may have been more familiar with the Internet (as evidenced by reports of many hours per week spent online) and thus more discerning in their ratings of usability. Although usability was significantly related to many study variables for this sample, it is potentially even more important with populations with less experience navigating the Internet. Future research should be done with an older sample to address these limitations.

A second limitation that may initially appear to affect the present study is its small sample size of 48 participants. However, because this study employed a within-groups research design (i.e., each participant was exposed to four different companies’ recruitment websites), the effective sample size was actually much larger than 48. As such, we believe this sample is adequately representative of younger job seekers in general and that it does not exert a substantial adverse effect on the generalizability of this study’s findings.

A final limitation was the study’s narrow scope. This study attempted to answer basic research questions about website features that influence job seekers’ perceptions of organizations, but it failed to provide specific guidelines on how to improve organizational recruitment websites. For example, though our results suggest color, font, and image are influential, the findings do not provide ideas about the types of colors, fonts, and images that companies should include on their websites to enhance their appeal to job seekers. Future research should address this limitation. Moreover, if companies are to fully realize the potential of the Internet as a recruiting tool, future research should also be geared towards determining the specific aspects of additional website features (e.g., size and content) that predominately influence job seekers’ impressions of organizations.

A final promising area of study is to influence job seekers’ impressions of organizations. Likewise, the influence of company perceptions of climate and culture in the recruitment process also need to be weighted against more tangible factors (e.g., salary and benefits) when applicants evaluate a prospective employer.

In sum, research on the role of the Internet in employee recruiting is still very much in its infancy. Thus, technological resources and the amount and variety of information that appear on the Internet far outpace empirical theory-based research on this topic (e.g., Anderson, 2003; Williamson et al., 2003). We attempted to address this void in the literature by showing that recruitment websites have an effect on viewers’ perceptions of hiring organizations and by indicating several features (i.e., website usability and appealing colors, fonts, and images) partially responsible for the impact these websites have on job seekers. Nonetheless, many important research questions regarding the use of the Internet as a recruiting tool still remain to be empirically examined.
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Appendix A

List of Ten Fortune 500 Organizations Whose Recruitment Websites Were Used in the Present Study

3M Company  
Capital One Financial Corporation  
Dell Computer Corporation  
Eastman Kodak Company  
Lowe’s Companies, Inc.  
Wachovia Corporation  
General Motors Corporation  
IBM  
General Electric

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Table 1

*Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables at Time 1 and Time 2*

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<td>SD</td>
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<td>192</td>
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<td>192</td>
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<td>Favorability</td>
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<td>Image as an Employer</td>
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<td>192</td>
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<td>1.18</td>
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<td>Attractiveness as an Employer</td>
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<td>4.65</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>192</td>
<td>5.20</td>
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<td>SR Change in Opinions</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>192</td>
<td>4.85</td>
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Note: Time 1 = Pre-test Measures; Time 2 = Post-test Measures.
Table 2

*Correlations between Website Usability and Attractiveness and Perception Variables at Time 2*

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<tr>
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<td>Website Attractiveness</td>
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<td>Familiarity</td>
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<td>Favorability</td>
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<td>0.50**</td>
<td>0.55**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Image as Employer</td>
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<td>SR Change in Opinion</td>
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<td>0.43**</td>
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Note: * p < .05, ** p < .01
Table 3

Correlations between Website Usability and Attractiveness and Changes in Perception Variables

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
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<th>Website Attractiveness</th>
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<th>Δ Favorability</th>
<th>Δ Image as Employer</th>
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<tr>
<td>Website Attractiveness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Δ Familiarity</td>
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<td>0.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Δ Favorability</td>
<td>0.36**</td>
<td>0.19*</td>
<td>0.43**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Δ Image as Employer</td>
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<td>0.25*</td>
<td>0.45**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Δ Attractiveness as Employer</td>
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<td>0.28**</td>
<td>0.19*</td>
<td>0.43**</td>
<td>0.35**</td>
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Note: Δ indicates change (Time 2 - Time 1). * p < .05, ** p < .01