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The Impact of Level and Type of Collegiate Sports Participation and Gender on Inference Made by Job Recruiters: Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

The first step in the employment selection process, a review of applicants' resumes, determines who may be interviewed for a given position. This paper reviews the literature on how recruiters draw inferences during this process. Major topics examined include: the empirical validity of recruiters' inferences; the various biographical data elements that influence recruiters' inferences; and, the importance given to applicants of the extracurricular activities portion on the resume. This literature review concludes with the identification of a gap in the research regarding the impact that both type and level of sports participation, as well as gender, have on inferences recruiters draw from applicants' resumes.

INTRODUCTION

The first stage of the employment selection process, reviewing resumes, is used to screen applicants for job vacancies. The resume serves as the gateway and the recruiters serve as the gatekeeper; applicants use resumes to showcase their qualifications to recruiters in the hope of being interviewed for the position. Because resume reviews are the most frequently used applicant selection measure (Dipboye & Jackson, 1999), the inferences made from resumes serve as the most important obstacle to overcome for potential job applicants (Thomas, McMasters, Roberts, & Dombkowski, 1999). This paper examines the impacts of three factors—type of sports participation, level of membership in sports, and gender of the applicant—on recruiter inferences drawn from resumes.

Given the role and frequent use of resumes in the employment process, the review of resumes is crucial for both organizations and applicants. For the job applicants, the review of resumes is crucial because applicants want to be selected into the applicant pool, and therefore, want their resume to contain those items most likely to result in positive recruiter inferences. Applicants also want to make a positive and memorable initial impression that may influence how the interview is conducted and the final hiring decision. Thus, the knowledge of what factors influence recruiters' inferences from resumes gives insight to future applicants as they decide how they will use their time as well as what activities they will engage in.

The beginning phase of the selection process is crucial for an organization because a valid review of resumes aids recruiters in their decisions regarding which applicants possess the right combination of skills, knowledge, and experiences for particular job vacancies. Organizations can save on administrative costs by effectively utilizing the information on resumes. By screening out inappropriate candidates, organizations are able to limit the use of expensive selection measures administered after the review of resumes, such as on-site interviews and applicant testing (Cole, Feild, & Strafford, 2005). Removing inappropriate candidates decreases the size of the potential pool of candidates. The organization is then able to more efficiently determine which applicants are going to be better candidates at a lower cost to the organization.

Additionally, the resume reviewing process can have an impact on the outcome quality of the other stages of the selection process. If the review of resumes leads to a better pool of qualified candidates, then other selection measures have the opportunity to make a greater contribution by being able to increase the accuracy of identifying just those candidates who are best suited for the job. Alternatively, if the review of resumes produces a pool of applicants that are poorly matched for the job opening, then the effectiveness of these other selection measures will be reduced. Because recruiters form impressions about applicants from resumes, and because impressions are correlated with an organization's decision to offer a job, the information that comes from these resumes is important (Cable & Judge, 1997) and deserves careful study.

Accuracy of Inferences Made on Resumes

As with any selection measure, organizations need to assess and determine the reliability and validity of recruiters' inferences about applicants from resumes (Cole, Feild, Giles, & Harris, 2009). However,

despite the importance of these factors, there is limited information on the "empirical validity" (how closely the behaviors of the applicants do match up or correlate with the inferences the recruiters make) of the inferences made by recruiters based on resume information (Gatewood, Field, & Barrick, 2008). Brown and Campion's (1994) study on the use of biographical data to make inferences from resumes raised the importance of determining if recruiters make valid inferences regarding an applicant's personality based on just reviewing their resume. Researchers have addressed and furthered the literature on this topic (Cole, et al., 2005; Cole et al., 2009) and have demonstrated that for some important aspects of job performance it is possible for recruiters to make valid inferences about applicants based on the information contained in their resumes.

Research suggests that recruiters make demonstrably valid inferences about several of the "Big Five" personality traits (Brown & Campion, 1994, Cole et al., 2009, Hays & Dunning, 1997). The Big Five personality traits include: agreeableness (trustful and kindness), extraversion (sociability and assertiveness), openness to experience (imagination and insight), neuroticism (moodiness and irritability), and conscientiousness (thoughtfulness and goal directed behaviors). Findings show that extraversion is positively correlated with recruiters' inferences as well as the easiest of the Big Five dimensions to be accessed from the candidates' self-report scores (Cole et al., 2009; Hays & Dunning, 1997). However in the study done by Cole et. al. (2009), the correlations were positive for applicants' extraversion, conscientiousness, and openness to experience, but their "validity coefficients" (the correlation between recruiters' ratings of applicants' personality traits with the applicants' personality inventory self report) were low. This indicates that the recruiters' ratings were not very reflective of the self-reported personality characteristics of the applicants. In addition, the inferences made by recruiters from applicants' resumes were negatively correlated with neuroticism and agreeableness. Thus, Cole et al. (2009) suggested that these recruiters' abilities to make valid inferences from references regarding applicants are inconsistent and dependent upon specific factors.

The above research findings show that recruiters' perceptions are sometimes erroneous, which could potentially lead to a poor person-job, person-team, and person-organizational fit (Cole et al., 2005, pg. 322). Inaccurate inferences might be a function of the tendency for decision makers to use heuristics (Tversky & Kahnerman, 1974). When recruiters use heuristics when evaluating resumes, recruiters' generaliza-

tions can lead to an overestimate of the extent to which a particular set of experiences (college performance or GPA) results in the development of a particular characteristic (job performance). The recruiter's personal beliefs and experiences can also be a source of bias (Macan & Dipboye, 1988). For example, when a recruiter hires a candidate and later receives an evaluation of that employees performance, the recruiter forms perceptions about the type of cues on the resume that are indicators of an effective employee. Finally, some recruiters may lack the skills needed to draw the proper inferences and to understand that certain characteristics reliably correlate with various information on applicants' resumes. Organizations have used training as a way to increase the accuracy of the inferences made by their recruiters as well as to improve recruiters' assessments of candidates' resumes (Cole et al., 2005; London, Mone, & Scott, 2004; Schleicher, Day, Mayes, & Riggio, 2002). Specifically, Cole et al. (2005), determined that after a 45-minute lecture on topics covering Big Five personality traits, resume screening, and the association between resume information and applicants' personality, the validity coefficients for extraversion and conscientiousness personality traits were significantly increased compared to rating accuracy attainted prior to the resume review training.

The above discussion on the validity of inferences sets the context for understanding what factors impact the inferences that recruiters make. However, the focus of this study will not be on the validity of the inferences made by recruiters. Nevertheless, the understanding of how recruiters draw inferences allows us to carefully examine several factors that influence recruiters' inferences. The increasing number of college graduates entering the job market places a greater importance both for organizations and applicants on understanding the impact of such factors on recruiter's perceptions. Recent graduates typically lack the extensive work experience of those who have been in the work place for years. Therefore, organizations are counting on recruiters' abilities to infer whether these candidates are a good fit for their organization based on the various sections of the resume, some of which might be very limited or contain information not directly related to job experience. Additionally, because resumes for entry-level jobs are typically one page in length, applicants must be very selective when it comes to the information that they highlight on their resumes. The applicant's goal is to concisely provide information that will create the most positive impression and enhance their opportunity for receiving a job offer (Higgins, Judge, & Ferris, 2003). The following section examines various factors that influence recruiters' inferences from resumes.

Factors that Influence Recruiters' Inferences on Resumes

As previously noted, Brown and Campion (1994) were two of the pioneering researchers who focused on recruiters' unstructured assessments of the biographical data contained in resumes. Their 1994 study focused on the recruiters' inferences about the abilities and skills listed in biographical data. Biographical data refers to "an applicant's work experience, education, activities, and other life history information contained in resumes" (Brown & Campion, 1994, p. 897). Biographical data (bio data) is shown to be a good predictor of an applicant's future performance in professional entry-level positions (Brown & Campion, 1994). It is valued because it is believed to shape the behaviors and identities of the applicant (Mael, 1991). Additionally, bio data may summarize the information the applicants feel is important and aid the applicant in appearing more marketable than other applicants.

Brown and Campion (1994) recognized that of the various bio data elements, GPA and academic achievement are elements used by recruiters the most in making inferences about candidates' intellectual abilities. Studies indicate that extracurricular activities also influence the resume screening process. These activities distinguish applicants with a more well rounded profile from those applicants with only exceedingly good GPAs (Rubin, Bommer, & Baldwin, 2002; Cariaga, 1998). Again, the importance lies not in whether or not the extracurricular activities are valid predictors of job performance, but rather that recruiters believe they are.

Nemanick and Clark (2002) researched the effects of the extracurricular activities section of the resume on attributions made during the resume evaluation process. Two hundred and nineteen (219) participants were asked to respond to nine questions regarding each resume evaluated based on eight different attributes (quality of work, dedication, getting along with co-workers, leadership, ambition, responsibility, well roundedness, and intelligence). Nemanick and Clark (2002) held GPA, gender, college, type of job, and overall appearance were held constant, while they manipulated the number of activities, leadership roles held in the activities, and relevance of the activities to the applicant's major to determine if the variables had any effects on the inferences made by the raters. Their research showed that based on the factors above, there are consistent inferences made by recruiters based upon the various activities in which applicants participate. Nemanick and Clark's (2002) research

specifically looked at academic and social clubs. In their discussion, Nemanick and Clark (2002) suggest that recruiters may infer that applicants who solely participate in academic clubs are more professionally developed and career focused because of their decision to focus on these activities. Alternatively, recruiters may infer that those who participate in social clubs are well rounded, and have developed social skills, such as communication, which are valuable in the work place. Cariaga (1998) supported this finding by determining that many corporate recruiters target those who not only succeed academically but who also supplement this with involvement as leaders of social teams, such as athletics. In Rubin, Bommer, and Baldwin's (2002) study determined that corporate recruiters who used extracurricular participation in the job selection process was not "a waste of time, a dilution of the evaluation process, or recruiting malpractice" (Rubin, Bommer, & Baldwin, 2001, p. 449). They found that there is a positive relationship between membership in an extracurricular activity and various interpersonal skills (specifically communication, initiative, decision making, and teamwork).

An extracurricular activity that Nemanick and Clark (2002) and Rubin et al. (2001) did not specifically examine was participation in a sport. According to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), there are approximately 420,000 students who participate annually in a collegiate sport in the United States (NCAA Student-Athlete Race / Ethnicity Report, 2008–2009). Being a part of a collegiate sport is a great achievement for any athlete, but it also involves some amount of sacrifice. Due to the time commitment needed for athletics, student athletes typically do not have an opportunity to acquire the type of work experiences that non-athletes have on their resumes. As Nemanick and Clark (2002) suggested about social clubs, recruiters may infer that participation in sports develops well-rounded individuals, and because of the social environment common in sports, recruiters may perceive sports participation to have a positive impact on skill development that can be utilized in the work place. While there are researchers who support this idea, (Astin, 1993; Ewing, Gano-Overway, Branta, & Seefeldt, 2002; Ryan, 1989) others bolster the argument that recruiters will infer that participation in a sport may not have a significant impact, possibly because the activity is not career focused (Fine, 1987; Danish, Petitpas, & Hale, 1990; Spreitzer, 1994). However, to my knowledge, there is no research that examines in what ways different types and levels of sport activities impact recruiter inferences. Similarly, there is no research that examines how these inferences are modified by the participants' gender in a particular level and type of sport activity.

Type of Sports Participation

One area of research that needs to be addressed is how recruiters perceive applicants who participate in different types of sports. This type of information could be very valuable for both applicants and organizations. Applicants might want to know how their selection of a sport might impact their future job opportunities after they complete their collegiate sports careers. Similarly, corporations may want to understand how their recruiters are making decisions to assure that the recruiters are not negatively impacting the selection process. They may want to ensure that their recruiters do not exclude qualified candidates and bias the selection process in some other negative way. Therefore, there is the need to examine the different inferences recruiters make between whether a candidate participates in an individual sport or a team sport.

When reviewing a resume, recruiters try to understand the context in which a candidate's behavior occurs. For example, someone who sought out and obtained part-time college employment on their own might be viewed differently than someone who spent summers working for his/her parent's business. One major contextual factor for athletes is the type of sport in which they participate. The classification of the type of sport that athletes participate in is based on their interaction with their teammates. Athletes who perform their role in coordination with the actions of their teammates participate in team sports (basketball, water polo, baseball). If the athletes compete individually and their individual successes are then combined, they participate in an individual sport (track and field, swimming, golf) (Welch, Law, & Hall, 2007). In order to be successful in their sport, athletes who participate in individual sports focus primarily on their own behavior and their personal successes are summed and combined. However, athletes who participate in team sports need to coordinate and communicate effectively with their peers in order to achieve the group goal.

While few studies explore the differences between the two types of sports, Eagleton, McKelvie, and de Man (2007) compared those who participated in a team sport, individual sport, and non-participants and their scores on the Big Five dimensions. Study results showed that those who participated in a collective team sport scored higher on extraversion than both individual sport participants and non-participants. As stated previously, extraversion is a Big Five characteristic that is positively correlated with recruiters' inferences. Therefore, recruiters may be able to use this information and correctly infer that those who participate in col-

lective team sports would have more developed teamwork and communication skills because of the involvement in talking to groups of people and reaching group consensus. Consequently, recruiters may infer that participation in individual sports creates more of an individual mind-set that doesn't require the level of communication seen in team sports, or the involvement of others in a group goal. Another factor regarding athletics is the level to which the athlete participates in the activity. Athletes have the ability to simply be members of the team and possibly captains of the team they are participating in. Recruiters may see the level of participation of athletes to be another predictor of how they are going to perform in the work environment.

Level of Participation

Surprisingly, even though research on how sports participation impacts the development of skills needed for the work place is somewhat unclear, athletic organizations make a case that athletes develop skills and work ethics from participating in various sport organizations. The participation in an athletic organization has been shown to affect the development of athletes' skills needed for the work place, especially with teamwork skills (Extejt & Smith, 2009). Dupuis, Bloom, and Loughead (2009) concluded that potential job candidates who are team captains develop interpersonal characteristics, and through verbal interactions and task behaviors, also increase various skills essential for being successful in the work place. Recruiters may notice that these various behaviors and characteristics are all elements of leadership and infer that applicants who are team captains of a sports team are better able to handle the entry-level management position then a candidate who has participated in athletics as a member only.

Of the various qualities that recruiters look for in an applicant's resume, leadership and teamwork qualities are frequently seen as characteristics that are necessary to be successful in a managerial position. Research has shown that these qualities, especially leadership, are major factors in the overall success in any organization (Kreitner & Kinicki, 2010). This has a practical suggestion for recruiters looking to fill managerial jobs because these positions require candidates to have leadership skills. As stated above, athletic organizations do believe that sports participation develops these types of skills that can be utilized in the work place. Recruiters may therefore see the level of participation of the athlete as an indicator of how well the applicant will do in their organization as an entry-level manager.

The appointment of a player to team captain for an athletic team is based upon the presumption by teammates and coaches that an individual has the characteristics of an effective team leader. As a team captain, the individual impacts the team's success by motivating themselves and others, leading by example, handling conflict, communicating effectively, and providing team vision and unity. A team captain essentially acts as a surrogate coach, helping those who are in need of support and guidance. Recruiters may infer that these characteristics are present in a team captain and possibly rate them more favorably when compared to an applicant who has solely been a member of a team. Being peer nominated multiple times indicates that peers and coaches believe that an individual has exemplified various leadership qualities and has aided in the betterment of the team. Recruiters may infer that being nominated a captain multiple times indicates that the individual's leadership skills are well developed and that the individual has the potential to be an asset for their organization. Alternatively, recruiters might not recognize any leadership skill development since participation in a sport occurs in a non-work environment. Recruiters may wonder if the skill development that does occur will transfer to the workplace once the athlete is no longer in the athletic arena. An additional issue that has not been examined in relationship to type and level of sports participation is whether the gender of the athlete may also be a major factor in the way recruiters infer certain characteristics about an applicant particularly from participation in sports.

Athlete's Gender

Recent studies on gender biases demonstrate that in the resume reviewing process recruiters continue to make stereotypical judgments based on an applicant's gender (Cole, Feild, & Giles, 2004). The "social role" (Eagly, Wood, & Diekman 2000) and the "role congruity theories" (Eagly & Karau, 2002) are two prominent theories that attempt to explain why recruiters continue to make gender-stereotypical inferences. The social role theory proposes that men and women are expected to adhere to certain qualities and behaviors that society assigns to them based on their gender (Eagly, 1987). An example of this would be women taking on all the domestic tasks while men work outside of the home. The role congruity theory is an extension of the social role theory in that men and women will be positively rated if they go along with those specific societal gender qualities and will be negatively rated if they go against the societal norms (Eagly & Karau, 2002). For males, the tra-

ditional qualities are described as "agentic" qualities (aggressive, self-sufficient, dominant, self-confident, etc). Research has demonstrated that these agentic qualities are commonly linked with leadership (Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Karau, 2002). The qualities that are ascribed to females are labeled "communal" (affectionate, helpful, nurturing, gentle, etc). It is essential that recruiters are aware of these biases because of possible legal penalties for the company as well as the possibility of depriving the organization of potentially valuable assets (Cole, Feild, & Giles, 2004). Finally, because of our evolving society and the changing perceptions of gender, there continues to be a strong need for additional research in the field of gender stereotypes.

For an entry-level management position, women continue to be under-representation in leadership and manager roles. This is mainly due to the "think manager, think male" paradigm (Schein, 1973, 1975). The glass-ceiling barrier, which is associated with the paradigm and prevents many female employees from reaching high-level management positions, is still prevalent in today's workplace (Morrison & von Glinow, 1990). Recent research still supports the finding that managerial and leadership characteristics are associated mainly with agentic characteristics (Cejka & Eagly, 1999; Heilman, 2001, Powell, Butterfield, & Parent, 2002). With the use of the role congruency theory as a framework, women who have equal qualifications as men will be viewed by recruiters as being less capable of managerial leadership positions than men because they are believed to not have these agentic characteristics (Burton, Grappendorf, Henderson, Field, & Dennis, 2008; Cejka & Eagly, 1999). Therefore, it can be said that gender stereotypes still do impact the perception of leadership, even though recruiters recognize that managerial and leadership characteristics are much more androgynous (Sczesny, 2003).

In regard both to gender, and to type and level of sports participation, Die and Holt (1989) demonstrate that female athletes are perceived to have a combination of agentic characteristics and communal characteristics. It has also been found that female athletes are given more respect than female non-athletes, and are rated higher in regards to likeability (Burton et al., 2008). Recruiters' have been shown to still follow the pattern from the role congruity theory and continue to infer that male athletes have greater leadership skills when compared to female athletes (Burton et al., 2008). Burton and colleagues (2008) discussed that a reason why their recruiters determined that male athletes have the advantage was the congruency between masculine characteristics and athletic (agentic) characteristics. Also demonstrated in studies on resume inferences, is the social perception that leadership characteristics that are

essential for the managerial position are less desirable in women than in men (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Therefore, it may be that female athletes who hold a team captain position for multiple years, still may not be seen as having better leadership skills then a male athlete who was only team captain for one year or even just a team member. It possibly could be that having been a captain is inferred by recruiters as being a plus for men and a determent to women. However, recruiters may believe that female athletes are more team oriented because of the perception of the natural communal characteristics (caring for others, compassion, etc.) associated with teamwork skills. This may lead recruiters to infer that females have more developed teamwork skills then male athletes with the result that they may rate the female captains higher on this characteristic. A study of recruiters' ratings of female and male athletes is needed in order to determine if the differences in inferences are consistent with the role congruity theory.

CONCLUSION

While research regarding the accuracy of the inferences made by recruiters on resumes is mixed, the key point is that recruiters do in fact make inferences based on certain factors. The factors that are demonstrated as influencing recruiters' inferences on resumes are various biographical data elements. Of those factors, type and level of sports participation has not been examined. Previous research can be used to suggest that recruiters' inferences about those who participate in athletic organizations may be similar to inferences made regarding participation in social clubs. Thus, it may be that sports participation will positively impact recruiters' impressions of applicants, by giving the sense that the candidate is well rounded. Conversely, recruiters may view them negatively because of a perceived lack of academic focus. There are important implications for human resource management in regards to how level and type of sports participation and gender affect recruiters' selection decisions. With the completion of this study, additional knowledge gained about the impact that type and level of sports participation—as well as gender—have on recruiters' inferences will contribute to the field of resume research.

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