

IMPRESSIONS OF THE RESUME: THE EFFECTS OF APPLICANT EDUCATION, EXPERIENCE, AND IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT: Business persons each read a hypothetical variation of a resume arrayed in a 2 (relevant versus irrelevant education) \times 2 (relevant versus irrelevant job experience) \times 2 (impression management versus no impression management statements) factorial design and completed a survey on their perceptions. Results showed that relevant education produced more positive perceptions of competence, potential, and predicted salary, while relevant experience enhanced perceptions of competence, potential, self-confidence, and background checking. Education and experience interacted on several variables. Impression management produced positive perceptions of interpersonal skill, self-confidence, and hireability. Implications for writing resumes were discussed.

The resume is an important component of the selection process. It provides the initial information on the applicant, which can lead to strong first impressions (Knouse, 1989b; Rasmussen, 1984; Wyant & Vise, 1979). In light of its crucial input into the selection process, it is not surprising that there is an abundance of advice from both practitioners and academicians on how to construct the resume in order to produce maximal impact (e.g., Feild & Holley, 1979; Feldman & Klich, 1991). Yet much of this advice is prescriptive; there is relatively little empirical evidence for the influence upon the reader of the various types of information contained in the resume. The present study proposes to test the effects of several types of information in the resume upon reader perceptions of the resume and of the applicant.

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EDUCATION AND JOB EXPERIENCE

There is general agreement among both researchers and human resource management practitioners that the two most important sections of the resume are education and past job experience (Feild & Holley, 1976; Hutchinson, 1984; Pibal, 1985; Spinks & Wells, 1987). The education section lists the schools and areas of study in which formal education has been completed. The resume reader may use this section to match educational accomplishments of the applicant with job requirements (e.g., a marketing job requiring a marketing degree). In addition, the reader may try to discern the level of competence of the applicant from the reputation of schools attended (e.g., a prestigious private school versus a regional state university) and the type of educational program (e.g., a rigorous computer science degree versus a general studies degree). The reader may even attempt to discern the motivational level of the applicant in terms of length of duration of study (e.g., four years to complete college work versus five or six years).

The job experience section may be the most important part of the resume. The reader attempts to compare the job titles, duties, and responsibilities of the jobs listed by the applicant with the requirements of the job to which the applicant is applying. In particular, the reader attempts to evaluate how closely the applicant's past work experience matches the needs of the prospective job (Schneider & Schmitt, 1986). For example, past experience in sales would be perceived as a closer match to a sales management position than past experience in teaching.

Academics and human resources managers have noted that applicants put considerable effort into constructing resumes where past education and work experience are perceived to be consonant with current job objectives (Feldman & Klich, 1991). Further, research has shown that the employment interviewers pay particular attention to appropriate education and job experience in the resume, even in the presence of other strong applicant characteristics, such as applicant attractiveness and interpersonal skills (Dipboye, Arvey, & Terpstra, 1977). Therefore, the present study hypothesizes that education and job experience listed in the resume that are appropriate to the job being sought produce more positive perceptions of the applicant than inappropriate education or experience.

In the highly competitive environment for the better jobs, applicants may find that their education or job experience does not fit their career objectives as well as they would like. For example, they may be pursuing a career in an area that differs from their college major (e.g., a music major who has decided to become a retailing manager). Or their prior job experience reflects less important jobs they were forced to take because of few job opportunities when they graduated. How, then, does

this "lack of fit" between the applicant's past experience and present employment aspirations affect the reader?

Perhaps stronger credentials in one area compensate for weaker credentials in another. There is evidence, for example, that relevant education becomes more impressive in resumes where other qualifications are vague or irrelevant for the job to which the applicant is applying (Oliphant & Alexander, 1982). Therefore, education and job experience are hypothesized to interact. Relevant job experience in the resume should compensate for irrelevant ("out of field") education in the eyes of the reader, and vice versa.

IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT

Another potential influence upon the reader is impression management (IM), a person's attempt to control the image others have of that person (Schlenker, 1980). Impression management is viewed as a broad interpersonal influence process (Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Schlenker, 1980). Within the area of organizational behavior, Gardner and Martinko (1988, p. 332) have delineated a number of commonly used impression management tactics: self-description (e.g., an applicant tells an interviewer that he is a "real go-getter"), opinion conformity (e.g., an employee tells his boss "you're absolutely right"), acclaiming (an explanation of a favorable event designed to maximize desirable implications to the impression manager; e.g., a salesman says "sales have doubled since I was hired"), and enhancement (favorable evaluations of events; e.g., a junior executive tells his superior he really admires his accomplishments). In employment selection, impression management techniques have been shown to influence perceptions in the interview (Baron, 1986; Gilmore & Ferris, 1989; von Baeyer, Sherk, & Zanna, 1981) and in the letter of recommendation (Knouse, 1989a).

The resume, however, provides a more difficult situation for successful use of impression management. In employment situations like the interview, the audience (interviewer) is confronted face-to-face and thus impression management tactics can be tailored to the audience. In the resume, however, the audience (reader) is generally unknown when the resume is being constructed, and thus the applicant must use techniques that may or may not be effective with a given resume reader. Moreover, the flexible format of other employment devices, such as the letter of recommendation, allows for creative use of impression management tactics, such as self-description and enhancement of the applicant's accomplishments (Knouse, 1989a); while the standard format of the resume (i.e., a more or less straight listing of job titles, schools attended, and inclusive dates) restricts attempts at impression manage-

ment. Further, much of the information in the resume is objective (directly verifiable), thus limiting self-presentational tactics, such as embellishment of credentials (Broussard & Brannen, 1986). Most important, impression management can be easily overdone in the resume, leading to a backfire effect; the reader may downgrade impressions of an applicant displaying a resume perceived as too exaggerated (Knouse, Giacalone, & Pollard, 1988).

Still, research has shown that impression management can enhance some perceptions of applicant motivation, in particular self-confidence (Knouse et al, 1988). Therefore, it is hypothesized that impression management enhances reader perceptions of the applicant.

Further, impression management may enhance reader perceptions of an applicant with weak credentials in some areas; i.e., an impressive listing of performance accomplishments may lessen the perceived negativity of an "out of field" degree or irrelevant job experience. Feldman and Klich (1991) term this the "illusion of linearity". The applicant emphasizes various accomplishments in the resume in order to create the impression that "out of field" past experience is actually the logical career progression toward current job aspirations. To illustrate, they give the example of a former Spanish teacher applying for a managerial job who emphasizes the organizational and presentational skills of the teaching job in the resume and lists Spanish as a good skill for international business. This applicant is trying to create the impression that there is a logical career progression from teaching to management. Therefore, in the present study, it is hypothesized that in the situation where past experience may be viewed as irrelevant or "out of field", impression management may compensate for such weaker credentials.

THE PRESENT STUDY

The present study was a field experiment in which business persons read a version of a hypothetical resume of a job seeker containing either relevant or irrelevant education to that job, relevant or irrelevant work experience for the job, and either the presence or absence of impression management statements. The readers then completed a survey on their perceptions of the applicant described in the resume.

METHODS

Subjects

Two hundred survey packages were sent to Chamber of Commerce members of a medium-sized Southern city; 95 surveys were returned (47.5% return rate), of which 89 surveys were usable. Of these 89 sub-

jects, 61 were male and 27 female (1 unidentified). Their average age was 40.38 years with 10.06 years with their present company. They read 1.74 resumes per week and 7.36 resumes per month.

Subject positions included 29 executives (president and vice president), 34 managers, 21 professionals (attorneys, consultants, engineers, and personnel and public relations specialists), and 5 others. Subjects' companies were mostly in service industries: 15 in finance (banking, investing, and insurance), 12 in health and medical, 8 in professional (law and CPA firms), 8 in retail, 5 in local government, 5 in marketing and advertising, and 24 in other service. Twelve firms were in the manufacturing, construction, and petrochemical industries.

Experimental Resume

The basic experimental resume was composed of five sections reflecting the typical information desired by human resources managers: job objective, education, work experience, activities and interests, and references (Feild & Holley, 1976; Hutchinson, 1984; Pibal, 1985; Spinks & Wells, 1987). All resumes described an individual, Edward C. Johnson, who was pursuing the job objective of a marketing management position, who possessed a bachelors and masters degree, and who had worked two previous jobs.

Independent Variables

The variations of the experimental resume were arrayed in a 2 (relevant versus irrelevant education) \times 2 (relevant versus irrelevant job experience) \times 2 (impression management versus no impression management statements) factorial design. There were thus eight resume variations which were each read by an average of 11 business persons.

Education. In the relevant education condition (RelEd), half of the resume variations listed the applicant's degrees as a BSBA in marketing and an MBA in marketing. In the irrelevant education condition (IREd), the other half of the variations listed the degrees as a bachelors in education and a masters in education.

Job Experience. In the relevant job experience condition (RelExp), half of the resume variations displayed two previous jobs for the applicant, first as a salesperson and then as an assistant director of marketing. In the irrelevant job experience condition (IRExp), the other half of the variations listed the previous jobs as benefits specialist and assistant director of benefits.

Impression Management. In the impression management condition (IM), half of the resume variations contained five self-description statements. Two acclaiming statements describing favorable events linked to the ap-

plicant were in the Education section (invited to assist in a graduate research project and earned a 3.50 GPA while working 20 hours a week as an undergraduate). Two enhancement statements describing favorable evaluations of the applicant were in the Job Experience section (praise from customers for personal attention and praise from supervisors for innovative work). One applicant self-description item was in the Activities and Interests section (stating interest in areas improving personal and career development). In the no impression management condition (NoIM), the other half of the variations omitted the five statements.

Survey

The survey completed by the readers was based on an instrument evaluating impression management influences in the resume developed by Knouse, Giacalone, and Pollard (1988). The reliability as Cronbach's alpha of that survey was 0.89 in preliminary work. The present survey contained 11 items which tapped readers' perceptions of the applicant fit for the job (competence in marketing, managerial potential in the new job, writing skill, interpersonal skill, self-confidence, overall competence, overall impressiveness, hireability into the new job, reader certainty of hiring the applicant for the new job, reader desire to check the applicant's background, and reader prediction of the applicant's salary in 5 years). Items contained 7-point scales anchored by "very much" on the high end and "not very much" on the low end.

Five manipulation checks in the survey evaluated the successful manipulation of the three independent variables upon the readers. Readers were asked to rate relevance of education, relevance of job experience, applicant attempts to impress the reader, the impressiveness of resume, and believability of the resume.

Data Analysis

Analyses of variance F tests evaluated the manipulation checks. It was assumed the independent variable manipulations were successful if readers in the relevant education, relevant job experience, and impression management resume conditions respectively rated applicant educational relevance, job experience relevance, and resume impressiveness highly; while readers in the irrelevant education, irrelevant job experience and no impression management conditions rated these items significantly lower. Believability was assumed to be rated equivalently over conditions (nonsignificant F test).

The overall effects of the three independent variables of education, experience, and impression management on reader perceptions were

evaluated with multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA). (See Huberty and Morris, 1989, for a discussion of the relative merits of using MANOVA to test overall effects and univariate F tests to test individual effects, such as individual survey items).

Based upon the previous literature review, the following hypotheses were tested:

1. Education listed in the resume appropriate to the job being sought (the RelEd condition) should produce more positive reader perceptions of the applicant than inappropriate "out of field" education (REd).
2. Job experience listed in the resume appropriate to the job being sought (the RelExp condition) should produce more positive reader perceptions of the applicant than inappropriate experience (RExp).
3. Appropriate education or appropriate job experience should compensate respectively for inappropriate ("out of field") job experience or education. The RelEd-RExp and REd-RelExp resumes should produce more positive perceptions than the REd-RExp resume.
4. Impression management statements listed in the resume (the IM condition) should produce more positive perceptions than the absence of impression management statements (the NoIM condition).
5. Impression management statements should compensate for "out of field" qualifications in education or job experience. The REd-IM and RExp-IM combinations should produce more positive perceptions than the REd-NoIM and RExp-NoIM combinations.

RESULTS

Education

Table 1 shows the influence of educational relevance on reader perceptions of the applicant. Concerning the manipulation check, the RelEd resumes were rated significantly more relevant in terms of education than REd resumes. Thus the independent variable manipulation of education was successful.

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) showed a significant effect for education on reader perceptions overall, $F(16,65) = 11.42$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .77$. Table 1 also shows univariate F tests for the influence of education on individual survey items. The RelEd condition produced higher perceptions of marketing competence, managerial potential, and a higher future predicted salary than REd. Therefore, the

Table 1
Mean Reader Perceptions for Education

Item	RelEd		IREd		F (1,81 df)	eta ²
	M (n = 39)	SD	M (n = 50)	SD		
Manipulation Checks:						
Relevant Education	5.38	1.63	1.56	0.81	199.23***	.71
Relevant Experience	3.95	2.01	3.20	2.30	2.18	
Impress Reader	3.03	2.36	3.66	2.47	1.33	
Impressive Resume	2.00	1.36	2.20	1.41	<1	
Believable Resume	3.92	1.63	3.74	1.74	<1	
Applicant-Marketing Competence	3.67	1.58	2.66	1.36	10.37***	.11
Managerial Potential	4.28	1.64	3.36	1.69	6.90*	.07
Good Writer	3.03	1.60	2.98	1.65	<1	
Interpersonal Skills	3.79	1.78	3.54	1.78	1.24	
Self-Confidence	4.28	1.81	4.20	1.88	<1	
Competent Overall	3.97	1.50	3.76	1.45	<1	
Impressive Overall	3.13	1.63	3.16	1.50	<1	
Hireability	3.00	1.63	2.84	1.71	<1	
Certainty of Hiring	4.15	2.23	4.80	2.10	1.35	
Check Background	5.49	2.00	4.78	2.26	2.96	
Predict Salary (Prediction)	3.03	1.65	2.16	1.21	7.89**	.09
	(\$40,150)		(\$35,800)			

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

results support the first hypothesis that relevant education listed in the resume produces more positive perceptions of the applicant.

Job Experience

Table 2 shows the influence of applicant job experience on reader perceptions. In terms of the manipulation check, RelExp resumes were rated more relevant in terms of job experience than IRExp resumes. Thus the independent variable manipulation of experience was successful.

The MANOVA revealed a significant job experience effect on reader perceptions overall, $F(16,65) = 4.85$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .58$. Table 2 shows univariate F tests for survey items. The RelExp condition produced higher perceptions than IRExp of marketing competence, managerial potential, self-confidence, and reader desire to check applicant background further. Therefore, the data support the second hypothesis that relevant job experience results in more positive perceptions of the applicant.

Education × Job Experience Interactions

The MANOVA interaction of education and experience was nonsignificant for overall reader perceptions, $F(16,65) = 1.40$. There were two

Table 2
Mean Reader Perceptions for Job Experience

Item	RelExp		IRExp		F (1,81 df)	eta ²
	M (n = 42)	SD	M (n = 47)	SD		
Manipulation Checks:						
Relevant Education	3.31	2.19	3.17	2.36	<1	
Relevant Experience	5.10	1.72	2.13	1.54	68.05***	.46
Impress Reader	3.38	2.51	3.38	2.38	<1	
Impressive Resume	2.17	1.59	2.06	1.19	<1	
Believable Resume	3.55	1.58	4.06	1.76	2.48	
Applicant-Marketing Competence	3.71	1.63	2.55	1.23	13.15***	.14
Managerial Potential	4.19	1.80	3.38	1.57	5.62*	.06
Good Writer	3.19	1.73	2.83	1.51	1.59	
Interpersonal Skills	3.67	1.91	3.63	1.66	<1	
Self-Confidence	4.60	2.01	3.91	1.63	4.07*	.04
Competent Overall	3.98	1.47	3.74	1.47	1.22	
Impressive Overall	3.36	1.59	2.96	1.50	2.89	
Hireability	3.02	1.84	2.81	1.51	<1	
Certainty of Hiring	4.50	2.31	4.53	2.06	<1	
Check Background	5.67	1.82	4.57	2.34	7.75**	.08
Predict Salary (Prediction)	2.83 (\$39,150)	1.62	2.28 (\$36,400)	1.29	3.32	

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

significant individual survey items, however. For the self-confidence survey item, the IREd-RelExp applicant was perceived as most self-confident ($M = 4.91$), while the IREd-IRExp applicant was least self-confident ($M = 3.64$), $F(1,81) = 4.20$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .05$. For the item on hiring certainty, readers were most certain about their decision not to hire the IREd-IRExp applicant ($M = 5.25$) and more certain about their decision to hire the IREd-RelExp applicant ($M = 4.20$) than the RelEd-IRExp applicant ($M = 3.47$), $F(1,81) = 6.33$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .08$. Therefore, the results only marginally support the third hypothesis that education and job experience compensate for a weak showing in either area.

Impression Management

Table 3 shows the effects of impression management upon reader perceptions. There was a successful manipulation of the impression management independent variable. The perceptions that the applicant was trying to impress the reader and that the resume was more impressive were both higher for the IM resumes than for the NoIM resumes. There was no difference between IM and NoIM in believability.

The MANOVA showed a significant effect for impression manage-

Table 3
Mean Reader Perceptions for Impression Management

Item	IM		NoIM		F (1,81 df)	eta ²
	M (n = 44)	SD	M (n = 45)	SD		
Manipulation Checks:						
Relevant Education	3.34	2.30	3.13	2.26	2.37	
Relevant Experience	3.57	2.13	3.49	2.29	1.06	
Impress Reader	5.11	2.06	1.69	1.31	84.60***	.50
Impressive Resume	2.57	1.56	1.67	1.02	13.15**	.11
Believable Resume	3.75	1.83	3.89	1.56	<1	
Applicant-Marketing Competence	3.11	1.63	3.09	1.46	<1	
Managerial Potential	3.95	1.72	3.58	1.71	1.53	
Good Writer	3.18	1.81	2.82	1.40	2.05	
Interpersonal Skills	3.98	1.80	3.33	1.71	4.49*	.04
Self-Confidence	4.86	1.69	3.62	1.79	14.45***	.12
Competent Overall	4.11	1.35	3.60	1.54	3.80@	
Impressive Overall	3.52	1.64	2.78	1.38	6.21*	.06
Hireability	3.45	1.77	2.38	1.39	10.01**	.11
Certainty of Hiring	4.59	2.18	4.44	2.18	<1	
Check Background	5.59	1.93	4.60	2.29	7.21**	.07
Predict Salary (Prediction)	2.77 (\$38,850)	1.70	2.32 (\$36,600)	1.20	3.28	

@p = .05; *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

ment on reader perceptions overall, $F(16,65) = 6.70$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .66$. For the univariate F tests, the IM condition produced higher perceptions than NoIM of applicant interpersonal skills, self-confidence, overall impressiveness, hireability, reader desire to check applicant background further, and overall applicant competence (marginally). Thus, the fourth hypothesis that impression management influences reader perceptions was supported.

There were no significant interactions of impression management with either education or experience. Therefore, the fifth hypothesis that impression management could compensate for weak education or experience credentials was not supported.

DISCUSSION

Education and Job Experience

The results show that resumes that presented education and job experience appropriate to the prospective job enhanced several reader perceptions of the applicant. These data nicely support prior findings in the

resume literature for the importance that relevant education and job experience play in employment selection judgments (e.g., Dipboye et al., 1977; Feldman & Klich, 1991). In particular, the present study showed that relevant education and job experience influence important perceptions of applicant competence and potential. In addition, the education \times experience interactions showed some evidence for a compensatory effect with some perceptions. Relevant credentials in one area tended to compensate somewhat for weaker credentials in the other area.

Impression Management

Impression management appears to enhance the reader perceptions of applicant interpersonal skill and self-confidence. In addition, impression management influenced the crucial perception of hireability of the applicant. At the same time, the reader was more apt to want to check the applicant's background further. One explanation for these seemingly disparate findings is that impression management impresses the reader but at the same time generates some suspicion about the applicant that warrants further investigation. The written comments of the readers presented a second possible explanation. Readers saw the background check as the logical next step in the selection process after they had identified the applicant as a potentially good candidate for the job using the impression management statements. This supposition is further supported by reader desire to check the background of the relevant job experience applicant as another potentially good candidate. In other words, an increased desire for a background check may be a positive sign.

There is a basic question of why the present study showed a positive effect for impression management on several perceptions, while a previous study (Knouse et al., 1988) showed a decidedly negative impression management effect. The answer may lie in the type of impression management statements used in the resume protocols of the two studies. In the Knouse et al. study, the statements contained adjectives, such as "excellent, extremely hardworking, energetic, sharp, informed, loyal", designed to enhance the image of the applicant, but which may actually have had the opposite effect of being seen by the reader as blatant exaggeration and perhaps even self-serving ingratiation. Emerging research on impression management in employment selection confirms that impression management tactics are easily overdone (Baron, 1986). Moreover, many readers may possibly view such tactics in the very negative sense of intentional distortion of credentials (Broussard & Brannen, 1986).

In the present study, on the other hand, impression management tactics were limited to self-presentation efforts describing concrete ex-

amples of accomplishment, positive feedback from customers and supervisors, and recognition of the importance of self-improvement. Such statements were perhaps viewed as reasonable and even expected by many readers. In addition, several readers commented that this additional information was helpful for evaluating the applicant more fully. Therefore, successful impression management tactics in the resume would appear to center upon self-descriptive statements that clarify and enhance credentials in a reasonable manner rather than statements which exaggerate and thus appear to be self-serving.

Overall, it appears that education, experience, and impression management influence somewhat different kinds of perceptions. Education and experience affect the more job-related perceptions, such as competence and potential, while impression management influences more general views of the applicant (impressiveness, interpersonal skill, and self-confidence). It should be noted, however, that impression management also contributed to the important perception of hireability of the applicant, perhaps by providing unique personal information to the reader.

Implications for Writing Resumes

When the applicant is considering how to present education and work experience in the resume, he or she may find that stronger credentials in one area may compensate in some cases for weaker credentials in another. Therefore, an applicant, for example, with educational credentials which are "out of field" in regards to career objectives might compensate somewhat by emphasizing "in field" work experience in the resume. In particular, the applicant might want to emphasize job duties, responsibilities, and accomplishments that reflect well on the job objective (Feldman & Klich, 1991). It should be pointed out, however, that this compensation effect did not occur for crucial perceptions of competence, managerial potential, or hireability. In other words, this compensation effect may help an applicant who is strong in several areas but weak in a few. Most likely it will not, however, help a basically weak applicant.

In terms of impression management, the conclusion seems to be that some impression management tactics work in the resume and others do not. Among those tactics that do not work are exaggeration of personal traits and accomplishments and ingratiation toward the reader. Further, impression management does not compensate for weak education or experience credentials. Impression management can, however, enhance some overall perceptions, such as interpersonal skill and self-confidence, apparently by listing accomplishments and experiences that further clarify information in the resume for the reader. Therefore, when putting together the resume, the applicant is best advised to em-

phasize such self-descriptive items as accomplishments in work and education, recognition earned in educational and job situations, and self-improvement efforts that enhance one's career.

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