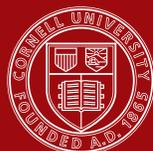


RULES OF ATTRACTION: JOB SEEKERS USE NEGATIVE NEWS TO FILTER INITIAL SEARCH

Key Findings

- In contrast to popular belief that any publicity is good publicity, the researchers found that exposure to negative information about a company had both immediate and longer lasting effects on important recruitment outcomes.
- Job seekers exposed to negative information about a previously unknown company were much less attracted to that company immediately after exposure, and had fewer intentions to apply for jobs there.
- The effect of negative information on job seeker attraction is persistent—one week later, its impact remains much larger than that of positive information.
- Job seekers also found it easier to recall more overall judgments of organizations one week after being exposed to negative versus favorable information.



Topic

How unfavorable information impacts job seekers' attraction to potential employers

A job seeker's initial attraction to an organization is an important, yet understudied, stage in the workforce development process. Initial attraction is important because job seekers only apply to firms to which they have developed some level of initial attraction. In order for organizations to improve new employee recruitment—especially in the early stages of the process—it's critical for them to identify and understand what initially attracts job seekers to an organization.

Increasing amounts of evidence suggest that job seekers develop opinions about companies even before they start looking for jobs (Cable & Turban, 2001), and that these early opinions influence their responses to later company recruitment efforts (Stevens, 1997). While prior studies have identified some of the factors that attract job seekers to a particular company, none have studied the role that unfavorable information—such as negative media coverage—plays in the initial job search stage and subsequent recruitment efforts (Collins & Stevens, 2002; Highhouse & Hoffman, 2001).

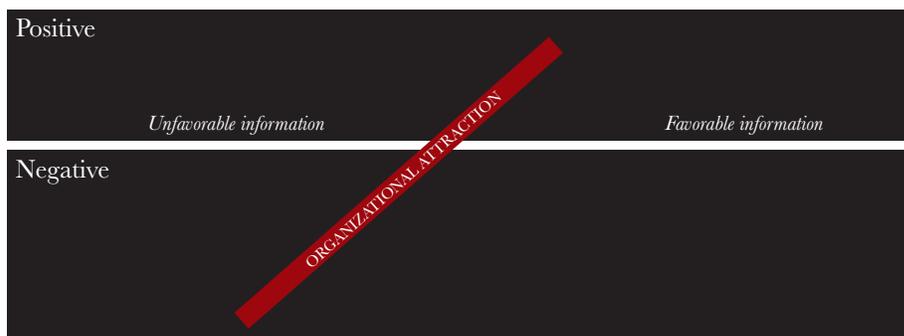
While it seems commonsensical that negative information would have a negative impact on a job seeker's opinion of a company, research in other fields suggests this relationship is not so straightforward; negative information could have no impact or sometimes even a positive one. This study addresses the issue directly by examining how job seekers, early in the recruitment process, handle favorable and unfavorable information about companies differently—and how those differences may impact their immediate and future attraction to those companies.

Study Questions

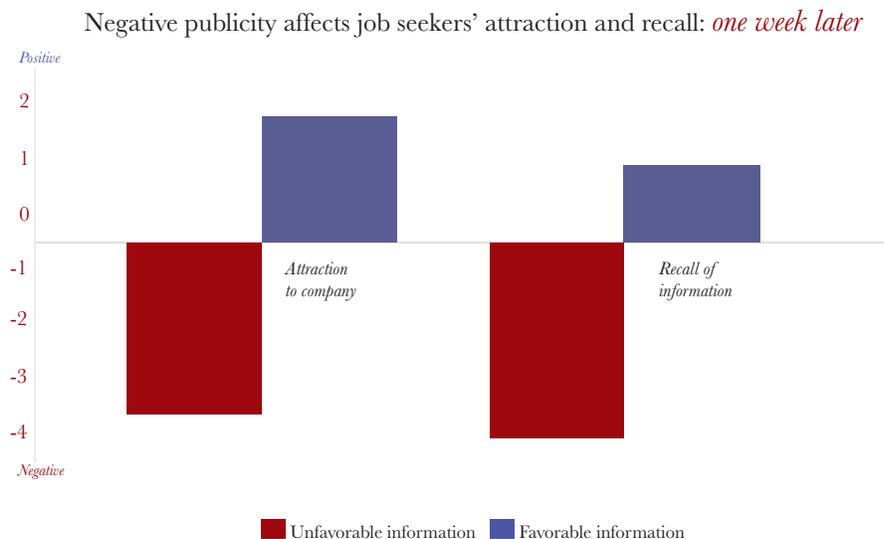
- Does unfavorable information about an organization have a greater impact than favorable information on a job seeker's attraction to that organization?
- If so, does this impact last over time?
- Does the relationship between unfavorable information and job seekers' later organizational attraction depend on how much they can recall overall about the organization, how they categorize those recollections (i.e., a "good" or "bad" company to work for), and how attracted they were to the organization initially?

Results

- Unfavorable information had an immediate impact on job seekers' organizational attraction. Job seekers exposed to unfavorable information were much less attracted to the organization compared to participants exposed only to neutral information.
- Favorable information had relatively little immediate impact on job seekers' organizational attraction. Because job seekers use information to screen companies out—not in—during the initial phase of job search, positive information may be less useful to job seekers during the early stages of the recruitment and job search process.
- One week after exposure, unfavorable information still had a much larger impact on job seeker attraction than did favorable information. Negative information may have lasting effects on job seekers' attraction, potentially affecting their future interest in applying for jobs at the organization.
- Unfavorable information is more memorable to job seekers. One week after exposure, job seekers who saw negative information recalled more overall judgments of organizations than those who saw positive information.
- Job seekers' organizational attraction one week later was positively related to their intentions to apply for employment at that time.



The negative effect of unfavorable information on job seekers' organizational attraction is *much greater* than the positive effect of favorable information.



Negative information: useful to early stage job seekers

These results strongly suggest that unfavorable information is more distinctive than favorable information and therefore—though organizations may not like to hear it—more useful. During the early stages of a job hunt, job seekers are flooded with positive information about companies. However, because it's less common, negative information can help job seekers screen out undesirable organizations during this initial stage (Boudreau & Rynes, 1985; Gatewood, Gowan & Lautenschlager, 1993).

As anyone who has ever looked for work knows, finding a job—particularly a good, career-building job—is hugely time-consuming. The need for efficiency is enormous, so job seekers are likely to continue using negative information to help them winnow down the large list of potential employers to a manageable number.

Even if a company doesn't get immediately screened out, negative information has long-lasting effects on job seekers' attraction and may subsequently kill their interest in applying for a job at that organization down the road. So while the adage says there's no such thing as bad publicity, in this case there very well may be.

Possible limitations

This study measures job seekers' reactions to an unfamiliar organization. Arguably, this approach mirrors the experience of many college-level job seekers, who tend not to be familiar with many companies that recruit on campus. However, in reality, job seekers might have a favorable opinion of a well-known company going into a search, possibly mitigating the effects of negative information they encounter.

Also, the study gave job seekers either all favorable or all unfavorable information. Clearly, though, job seekers will encounter combinations of both in their searches. Future research that uses such a combination would provide further valuable insight.

Data Source

Data came from job seekers who were recruited from a large northeastern university. The 202 respondents who filled out a survey were contacted a week later for a follow-up; 175 of the initial respondents filled out the second survey.

Participants were told that Career Services was interested in their opinions about a company that was coming to recruit on campus the following semester. They were presented with a one-page description of an unfamiliar company (adapted from a company profile on yahoo.finance.com, with the name slightly altered) and then sent an email that contained either favorable or unfavorable information. After that, they were asked to complete a 29-item survey, as well as another survey sent a week later with seven items to measure their recall and organizational attraction.

Takeaway

- Companies may not be able to build a larger applicant pool if individuals in their target labor pool have been exposed to unfavorable information about the company. Therefore, practitioners need to find ways to mitigate the effects of exposure to unfavorable information during the early stages of recruitment and job search.
- HR practitioners and hiring managers can take a more proactive role in mitigating these effects by planning, tracking and analyzing different company recruitment interventions to begin identifying the most effective ways to overcome early-stage job seekers' reactions to unfavorable information.
- It's critical for companies and practitioners to be aware of the sources and variety of information available to job seekers—and to use that awareness to head off or turnaround potential problems. As the study finds, the harmful effects of unfavorable information persist, and evidence suggests that later in the recruitment process, applicants seek to confirm their initial impressions about organizations (Stevens, 1997). If recruiters don't address these issues early in the process, it may be too late.

Researchers

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