

The Interview as an RJP Medium: Shooting Oneself in the Foot?

ROBERT D. COSTIGAN

Wanous and Colella (1989) stated that the interview is the most commonly used medium for delivering realistic job preview (RJP) information to applicants. RJPs incorporated into the interview typically involve a question-and-answer period in which the applicant is encouraged to ask questions. This study examined whether interviewer ratings are influenced by the kind of questions (realistic favorable vs. realistic, moderately unfavorable vs. unrealistic, highly unfavorable) asked in the RJP segment of the interview. The temporal placement of the question-and-answer segment (beginning of the interview vs. at the end) was considered as well. ANOVA results indicated no significant differences in job-related ratings, and MANOVA results indicated no significant differences in personal-trait ratings. Implications and directions for future research are also addressed.

Wanous (1992) described the realistic job preview (RJP) as a recruitment strategy that provides applicants with an accurate, realistic view of the job and can lead to higher employee job satisfaction and longer job tenure. The perceived high utility of RJPs makes it attractive for use in organizations. RJPs are, by and large, assumed to be a harmless recruitment strategy. The overall purpose of this study is to explore the dark side of RJPs.

Many approaches have been used, with varying degrees of success, to deliver RJP information to applicants (e.g., videotapes, booklets). Wanous and Colella (1989) stated that the interview is the most commonly used medium for delivering RJP information. In their view, applicants should be encouraged to ask the interviewer any unanswered questions about the job and about the organization. Not only did Wanous (1989) advocate the use of RJPs in the interview, but he further stated that RJPs involving two-way communication in the interview may be the "method of choice for the future" (p. 130). He stated that "little research has been done on the effectiveness of the interview as a medium for the RJP" (p. 125). Harris (1989) commented that more research is necessary to determine whether the effectiveness of the interview as a selection

Robert D. Costigan is an assistant professor of management at St. John Fisher College, Rochester, New York. The author wishes to thank Cynthia Edmonds for her outstanding work as the confederate. Correspondence regarding this article should be sent to Robert D. Costigan, St. John Fisher College, 3690 East Avenue, Rochester, NY 14618.

tool suffers when it is simultaneously used as a communication tool (e.g., exchange of RJP information). This study investigates Harris's concern, which is: Are interviewer ratings biased by the kind of questions asked by applicants in the RJP segment of the interview?

RJPs incorporated into the interview are designed to facilitate two-way communication between the interviewer and the applicant. In line with Petty and Cacioppo's (1986) work in the area of central route versus peripheral route to persuasion, RJPs that allow applicants to ask job-related questions of a credible source should be more effective than passive approaches (e.g., reading a booklet) in changing applicants' naive impressions (Popovich & Wanous, 1982). This two-way communication typically involves a question-and-answer period in which applicants can ask any question or validate any concern that they may have about the job or the organization. Many times, interviewees may ask easy or favorably worded questions. However, some of the information exchanged between the interviewer and the applicant may not always be pleasant. At times, unfavorable or tough questions that are more or less realistic of the job may be asked. Historically, interviewers have attached greater weight to unfavorable information presented by the interviewee than to favorable information (e.g., Springbett, 1958). Greater weight of unfavorable information usually translates into lower interview ratings. Similarly, tough questions asked by the interviewee may be unfavorably received and may ultimately lead to lower ratings.

Another possibility is that Heider's (1958) attribution processes may mediate between the kind of RJP questions asked and the impression left with the interviewer. That is, unfavorable questions may be perceived positively by the interviewer because it indicates courage or boldness on the part of the interviewee. Conversely, favorably worded questions from the interviewee could at times be negatively received by the interviewer because it is considered too ingratiating. Baron (1989), for instance, found that interviewees using too many impression management tactics were rated lower than were interviewees who used only one tactic.

The primary purpose of this study was to determine whether interviewer ratings are influenced by the kind of questions (realistic favorable vs. realistic, moderately unfavorable vs. unrealistic, and highly unfavorable) asked by the applicant in the RJP segment of the interview. Considering that either of the previously mentioned processes (i.e., weighing unfavorable information heavily or attributing courage to unfavorable questions) may be operating, no prediction concerning the direction of mean differences was made.

The temporal placement of the RJP questions (i.e., positioning of the question-and-answer segment in the interview) was also considered. Are interviewer ratings influenced more when the question-and-answer segment is positioned at the beginning of the interview than at the end? Does it matter that the interviewee asks unfavorable, tough questions at the beginning rather than at the end? Interview research (e.g., Bolster & Springbett, 1961) has shown that primacy effects (i.e., the influence of early information) will prevail over recency effects when the interviewer is responsible for making a final decision. Katz and Kahn's (1978) role theory may also be relevant because the roles of the interviewer and interviewee are reversed when the interviewee is encouraged to ask RJP questions. In the RJP segment, the interviewee becomes the interrogator and the interviewer fields questions. Might this role reversal be more difficult for the interviewer (i.e., lead to lower ratings) when the RJP question-and-answer segment is positioned at the beginning of the interview rather than at the end?

METHOD

Participants and Experimental Design

Graduate students in a human resource course ($N = 101$) voluntarily participated in this experiment. Two factors were used in a 3×2 factorial design. The first factor, question content, consisted of three levels of RJP questions (realistic favorable vs. realistic, moderately unfavorable vs. unrealistic, highly unfavorable). Temporal placement of the RJP questions (beginning of interview vs. end) was the second factor.

Procedure

Graduate student interviewers were told that the purpose of this project was to involve them in the selection process for a new master of business administration coordinator at the college because this job involved extensive contact with MBA students. Specifically, the student interviewers would be responsible for interviewing candidates for the position, and their ratings of each applicant would be given strong weight in the final selection decision. Interviewers were given instructions, a job description, and five structured interview questions. They were told not to vary the interview questions or to ask any other questions not listed. In the RJP segment of the interview, interviewers explained the purpose of the RJP to the applicant and stated that it was an opportunity for the applicant to ask

any questions about the job, the program, or the college. One half of the interviewers opened the interview with the RJP; the other half closed the interview with the RJP. All student interviewers, unaware of who the applicant actually was, interviewed a confederate, a middle-aged woman who played the role of the applicant. The applicant was not told about the purpose of this study. Her responses to the five interview questions were thoroughly memorized and rehearsed, and she gave the same verbal and nonverbal response to each question. One third of the interviewers was asked two realistic, moderately unfavorable questions by the confederate in the RJP segment of the interview; another one third was asked two unrealistic, highly unfavorable questions; and the final one third was asked two realistic, favorable questions. After a 13- to 14-minute interview, interviewers completed two rating forms and then were debriefed.

RJP Questions

A pilot study involving another 48 MBA students was used to develop, in an iterative fashion, the six RJP questions used in this study. The realistic, favorable questions were (a) I have heard that your college's MBA students are very friendly people—is this true? If so, it would make the job a lot easier. and (b) I have also heard that your college's MBA students are highly motivated, which should also make the job easy—is this accurate? The realistic, moderately unfavorable questions were (a) I have heard that your college's MBA students complain a lot about courses, teachers, MBA policies and procedures—is this true? Will it affect me in my job? and (b) I have also heard that your college's MBA students are troublesome to deal with around exam time because they are anxious and excitable about their tests—is this accurate? Will this impact me in my job since I will be doing some academic advising around finals? The unrealistic, highly unfavorable questions were (a) I have heard that your college's MBA students are immature and narrow-minded—is this true? Will this affect me in my job? and (b) I have also heard that your college's MBA students want an MBA degree in the easiest possible way—they have a reputation of not wanting to work hard for their degree—is this accurate?

Dependent Measures

Four job-related items in the first rating form assessed were the following: (a) the applicant's qualification for the position, (b) suit-

TABLE 1

Descriptive Statistics of Average Rating for Question Content and Temporal Placement

Temporal Placement/Ratings	Question Content									
	Realistic Favorable			Realistic Unfavorable			Unrealistic Unfavorable			
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	
Job-Related Ratings										
Beginning	4.41	0.64	17	4.59	1.13	17	4.32	0.97	15	
End	4.43	1.07	18	4.24	1.06	19	4.67	0.56	15	
Personal-Trait Ratings										
Beginning	5.30	0.77	15	5.44	0.57	17	5.30	0.57	14	
End	5.56	0.86	18	5.45	0.75	19	5.70	0.56	15	

DISCUSSION

This study found no significant differences in job-related and personal-trait ratings. Asking realistic favorable; realistic, moderately unfavorable; or unrealistic, highly unfavorable questions had no bearing on either job-related and personal-trait ratings assigned to the applicant. This study also found no significant interactions, indicating that ratings were not influenced by the placement of unfavorable RJP questions at the beginning or at the end of the interview. Thus, the interviewers' ratings in this study apparently were unaffected either by negative information presented in the form of RJP questions or by attribution processes (i.e., evaluating the applicant positively when bold, unfavorable questions were asked). No main effects were found for the temporal placement factor, indicating that ratings were unaffected by the positioning of the RJP question-and-answer segment. Hence, interviewers in this study seemed to experience few problems with role-reversal (i.e., fielding rather than asking questions in the beginning of the interview).

These results provide good news for interviewers and interviewees alike. Interviewers apparently were not biased in their evaluation of the applicant, even when the applicant in this study asked unrealistic, highly unfavorable questions. These findings offer hope that the interview may be used, without too much risk, as a medium to deliver RJP information. The applicant can also be more daring than one might think when asking RJP questions. This study's results, which indicated no bias in the interviewers' ratings, are consistent with recent findings in the interviewing literature; namely, the results of McDaniel, Whetzel, Schmidt, and Maurer's (1994) and Huffcutt and Arthur's (1994) meta-analyses showed the predictive validity of the structured interview to be surprisingly high. In addition, Dunn, Mount, Barrick, and Ones (1995) found that the applicant's level of agreeableness had little influence on the hiring decision, whereas both general mental ability and conscientiousness were strong determinants of the decision. Dunn et al.'s (1995) results seem to support this study's findings. That is, applicants can ask controversial, less agreeable RJP questions without repercussion.

Whether these results generalize to other interviewers, to male interviewees (this study used a female interviewee only), and to other settings is a worthwhile question, especially considering the high stakes for asking tough questions. Future research should also consider the effects of the question favorableness manipulation when interviewers have different levels of job knowledge. Kozlowski, Kirsch, and Chao (1986) found that raters who were less knowledgeable about the job, rated with greater rating error

(i.e., halo) than did raters who were more knowledgeable. In a similar vein, less knowledgeable interviewers may be more susceptible to the question favorableness manipulation. At times, organizations use interviewers who are less knowledgeable about a job (e.g., recruiters with a Human Resources background interviewing applicants for technical positions). Finally, the use of an MBA student sample in the current sample is a concern, limiting its external validity.

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