

Job attributes: Preferences compared with reasons given for accepting and rejecting job offers

Daniel B. Turban*

Department of Management, University of Missouri, Columbia, MO 65211, USA

Alison R. Eyring

College of Business Administration, University of Houston

James E. Campion

Psychology Department, University of Houston

Applicants of a large chemical company completed an adapted Job Preferences Form (Jurgensen, 1978) and, after making a job offer decision, indicated the importance of the same attributes in their decision to accept or reject the offer. This study investigated which job attributes applicants reported they preferred in a job, which attributes applicants indicated influenced their job offer decision, and whether the preferred attributes actually were important in the job offer decision. The majority of applicants ranked type of work as the most preferred job attribute. There were differences, however, in the reasons applicants gave for accepting or rejecting the job offer. Specifically, the job was rejected because of the location and accepted because of the type of work. A comparison of job attribute preferences with the importance of those attributes in the employment decision suggested that preferences were more similar to reasons given for accepting than for rejecting the job. Finally, the implications of the finding that applicants accept and reject jobs for different reasons were discussed, and it was suggested that applicants may be using a non-compensatory decision process.

Many studies have investigated factors influencing interviewers' perceptions and evaluations of job candidates (for reviews see Arvey & Campion, 1982; Harris, 1989; Schmitt, 1976). Fewer studies, however, have investigated factors influencing job applicants' perceptions and evaluations of employers. Such research seems warranted, given the utility for employers of having their top choices accept a job offer (Murphy, 1986) and because many organizations may face shortages of qualified workers in certain occupations in the future (Hanigan, 1987; Rynes, 1989). Further, much of the research investigating influences on job decisions used intentions to choose organizations rather than actual job choices (Alderfer & McCord, 1970; Harn & Thornton, 1985; Harris & Fink, 1987; Liden & Parsons, 1986; Powell, 1984; Schmitt & Coyle, 1976). Using intentions rather than actual job choice is limited because an applicant might be willing to accept a job,

*Requests for reprints.

although that job might not be the applicant's first choice (Bretz, Ash & Dreher, 1989). Therefore, the current study follows recommendations to obtain a behavioural measure of job choice (Rynes & Barber, 1990; Wanous & Colella, 1989) and investigates the influence of job attributes on actual job offer decisions.

Numerous studies have investigated what applicants report to prefer in a job. In the most extensive of these studies, all job applicants of a utility company between 1945 and 1975 ($N = 56\,621$) ranked the following 10 attributes in terms of what was most important to them in a job: advancement, benefits, company, co-workers, hours, pay, security, supervisor, type of work and working conditions (Jurgensen, 1978). Across the 30 years, security was most important for men whereas type of work was most important for women. For the latest time period (1966–1975), however, type of work was most important for men as well. Further, as educational level increased, the importance of type of work increased and the importance of security decreased. Lacy, Bokemeier & Shepard (1983) used national samples collected from 1973 to 1980 and found that meaningfulness of work was ranked most important followed by income, advancement, security and hours. Finally, Posner (1981) asked 148 college students to rate the importance of 18 job characteristics. Challenging/interesting work received the highest rating followed by opportunities to use abilities and opportunities to learn. In sum, these results suggest that type of work is the most preferred job attribute, although the data were collected, at the latest, during the 1970s and may not reflect current preferences of men and women. Nonetheless, based on previous research, we would expect that type of work will continue as the most preferred job attribute.

The above studies asked subjects to indicate their preferences for certain job attributes and concluded that important attributes are rated/ranked more highly. An alternative methodology used to assess the importance of job attributes manipulates job attributes within hypothetical job descriptions and has subjects evaluate the jobs. The amount of variance in the evaluations accounted for by the job attribute is thought to indicate the relative importance of that attribute. These two methodologies have been labelled direct estimation and policy capturing, respectively (Schwab, Rynes & Aldag, 1987). One limitation of the direct estimation approach is that ratings or rankings of attribute importance have not been linked to employment decisions (Schwab *et al.*, 1987). The current study addresses that limitation by linking job attribute preferences to the actual employment decision and by asking applicants to indicate the importance of those same job attributes in their job offer decision.

Although it seems logical that the attributes applicants indicate are preferred in a job will influence their job offer decisions, some evidence suggests that different job attributes may be important for accept and reject job offer decisions. For example, Tversky's (1972) elimination-by-aspects theory of choice proposes that people choose among alternatives by selecting an aspect of the alternatives and then eliminating alternatives that do not contain this chosen aspect. In other words, jobs that lack certain attributes are eliminated from consideration; however, in choosing among the remaining jobs, different attributes will influence the decision to accept a job offer. Empirical evidence supports the idea that applicants will not interview for jobs that do not meet a minimal level on selected attributes (Osborn, 1990; Rynes & Lawler, 1983; Rynes, Schwab & Heneman, 1983). Further, Friedlander & Walton (1964) found that employees indicated they would stay with an organization because of interest in the work but would leave the

organization because of the environment. Extending such findings to job choice decisions, it seems likely that applicants will accept and reject job offers for different reasons. For example, one might expect that applicants will accept jobs because of interest in the work but will reject jobs because of factors associated with the environment.

To summarize, the current study (1) investigates college recruits' job preferences and compares those preferences with Jurgensen's (1978) results; (2) investigates which job attributes applicants indicated influenced their decisions to accept or reject the job offer; and (3) links job preferences with employment decisions and compares whether the attributes preferred in a job were the same attributes reported to influence the employment decision.

Method

Procedure

Questionnaires were mailed to job applicants of a large petrochemical company. This company recruits at college campuses nationwide and creates a centralized database that includes information on all applicants interviewed. Individual sites use this database to select applicants for site visit invitations. The population for this study was all applicants who were invited for a site visit at a large chemical plant located in the Southwest of the USA during the 1988–1989 recruiting year. Job applicants were mailed a questionnaire after either rejecting a site visit invitation or visiting the site. Applicants who returned the first survey and who were made a job offer were mailed a second questionnaire after either accepting or rejecting the offer. Participants were asked to return the questionnaires to the university and were assured that their responses would be confidential and that only members of the research team would see the completed questionnaires. A dollar was enclosed with each questionnaire to thank participants for their time and effort.

In general, the response rates were high. For the site visit survey, the response rates were 62 (64/104) and 72 per cent (379/527) for the reject and accept site visit invitation groups, respectively. For the job offer survey, the response rates were 54 (111/207) and 66 per cent (69/104) for the reject and accept groups, respectively.

Subjects

The subjects who responded to the site visit survey were predominantly white (85 per cent), males (72 per cent) who were completing their bachelor degree (67 per cent). The majority of the subjects were chemical engineering majors (54 per cent); however, there were also a substantial number of chemistry (14 per cent) and mechanical engineering (11 per cent) majors. The subjects who responded to the job offer survey were a subset of the subjects who completed the site visit survey and were similar in terms of demographic background.

Measures

Job attribute preferences. Jurgensen's (1978) Job Preference Form was adapted to measure applicants' preferences of job attributes. Geographic location was included with Jurgensen's (1978) 10 attributes as evidence indicates it is important in job offer decisions (Campion, Turban, Kendrick & Batten, 1989; Rynes & Lawler, 1983). Further, Jurgensen (1978) collected data from applicants of a public utility who presumably were from the same location. However, location might be an important attribute to college recruits choosing among jobs in different locations. Job preferences were measured, on the site visit survey, by asking applicants to rank the following attributes 'in terms of what is most important to you in a job': advancement, benefits, company, co-workers, hours, location, pay, security, supervisor, type of work and working conditions. The most important attribute was ranked one.

Job attribute importance. Applicants who accepted or rejected a job offer were mailed a second questionnaire that

included a section asking them to rank the same 11 attributes in terms of what was most important in their decision to accept (reject) the job offer.

Job offer decision. The applicant's actual job offer decision was obtained from company records.

Results

To investigate college recruits' job preferences, the mean rank and the percentage that indicated each attribute was most preferred were calculated. Because recent evidence is mixed concerning whether sex influences job attribute preferences (Jurgensen, 1978; Scozzaro & Subich, 1990; Wiersma, 1990), a multivariate analysis of variance was conducted to see whether males and females have different preferences. Results indicated no significant multivariate sex effects on job attribute preferences ($F(10, 268) = 1.57$, $p \leq .1163$); therefore, males and females were combined. (Owing to concerns that the data may not meet the strictest assumptions of analysis of variance, we also analysed the data using the Mann-Whitney U test. Because both analyses led to identical conclusions and because we believe the multivariate analyses provide a more rigorous test of the research questions, we report results from the analysis of variance.) The most important job attribute was the type of work (see Table 1). Approximately 62 per cent of the applicants ranked type of work most important and the mean rank of 2.2 was considerably lower than the mean rank of the next most important attribute, advancement. The Spearman rank correlation between the mean rank of the job attributes for the current sample (excluding location) and Jurgensen's sample was .89, $p \leq .01$. For both samples, type of work and advancement were the two most important attributes and working conditions,

Table 1. Job preferences of applicants invited for a site visit

Job attribute	<i>M</i> rank	Percentage ranked first	Jurgensen's results <i>M</i> rank ^a
Type of work	2.2	62	1.5
Advancement	4.6	8	3.6
Co-workers	5.1	5	5.2
Company	5.7	10	4.4
Security	5.8	6	5.5
Location	6.2	4	^b
Supervisor	6.3	1	5.5
Pay	6.3	2	5.2
Working conditions	7.2	1	7.2
Benefits	7.4	1	7.9
Hours	9.3	0	8.0

Note. Job attributes are presented in order of preference. Only subjects who ranked all 11 attributes were used in these analyses; therefore $N = 110$.

^aJurgensen's (1978) results are calculated from Table 4 and are the mean ranks of the 4535 male and female applicants with college degrees. Although Jurgensen (1978) labelled these 'median' rank, earlier studies using a subset of these data (Jurgensen 1947, 1948) labelled them 'mean' rank, and these ranks appear to be the average rank of an attribute across subjects.

^bJurgensen did not measure location.

benefits and hours were the three least important attributes. Such results suggest that the job preferences of these college recruits are similar to the preferences of applicants with college degrees from Jurgensen's (1978) study.

To investigate which attributes influenced the employment decision, the mean rank of the importance of each attribute in the job offer decision was calculated for applicants who accepted and rejected the job offer (see Table 2). Because multivariate analysis of variance indicated no sex differences ($F(10, 88) = .89, p \leq .5493$) in the importance of job attributes in the job offer decision, the data from male and female applicants were combined. The most important reasons given by applicants who accepted the job offer were the type of work, company, advancement, co-workers and security, respectively. The most important reasons given for rejecting the offer were the location, type of work, advancement, co-workers and pay, respectively. A multivariate analysis of variance found significant differences ($F(10, 121) = 11.18, p \leq .0001$) between the mean ranks of the accept and reject group on the importance of the job attributes in the job offer decision. Follow-up univariate analyses indicated that the accept group ranked the company, security and the supervisor as more important whereas the reject group ranked location, working conditions and hours as more important attributes in the employment decision.

Finally, a multivariate analysis of variance found significant differences ($F(10, 121) = 2.13, p \leq .0267$) in the job attribute preferences of applicants who accepted or rejected the job offer. Follow-up univariate analyses (see Table 2) indicated that applicants who rejected the job offer ranked location higher and supervisor lower than applicants who

Table 2. Mean ranking of the importance of job attributes in the job offer decision and of job preferences: By decision

Job attribute	Decision importance		Job attribute preference	
	Accept group Rank <i>M</i>	Reject group Rank <i>M</i>	Accept group Rank <i>M</i>	Reject group Rank <i>M</i>
Type of work	(1) 2.5	(2) 3.2	(1) 2.3	(1) 2.0
Company	(2) 4.5 ^a	(10) 7.6 ^a	(4) 5.3	(5) 5.9
Advancement	(3) 4.6	(3) 4.8	(3) 5.1	(2) 4.7
Co-workers	(4) 5.6	(4) 5.6	(2) 4.3	(3) 5.2
Security	(5) 5.7 ^a	(8) 7.3 ^a	(6) 5.5	(6) 5.9
Supervisor	(6) 5.9 ^a	(7) 7.1 ^a	(5) 5.4 ^b	(8) 6.4 ^b
Pay	(7) 6.1	(5) 5.6	(7) 6.5	(7) 6.4
Benefits	(8) 6.8	(9) 7.5	(10) 7.7	(9) 7.4
Working conditions	(9) 7.3 ^a	(6) 6.1 ^a	(9) 7.1	(10) 7.7
Location	(10) 7.5 ^a	(1) 3.0 ^a	(8) 7.0 ^b	(4) 5.3 ^b
Hours	(11) 9.6 ^a	(11) 8.1	(11) 9.7	(11) 9.2

Note. The job attributes are presented in order of importance in the job offer decision for applicants who accepted the offer. Only subjects who ranked all 11 attributes were used in these analyses; therefore $N = 80$ for the reject and 52 for the accept group.

^aA significant ($p \leq .05$) difference between the accept and reject group on the importance of this attribute in the offer decision.

^bA significant ($p \leq .05$) difference between the accept and reject group on the preferences of this attribute.

accepted the offer. A comparison of the preferences with the importance of the attribute in the decision suggests that preferences do not necessarily reflect the importance of the attribute in the job offer decision (see Table 2). For example, location was the most important reason for rejecting the job offer but was fourth in terms of what was preferred in a job. To investigate whether preferences are more similar to reasons given for accepting than for rejecting the job offer, a Spearman rank correlation between the ranking of the preferences and of the importance of the attributes in the decision was calculated for every subject. Each correlation indicates the relationship between the individual subject's rankings of the preferences and of the importance of the attributes in the decision. These correlations were transformed to Fisher's z , and a t test was conducted to determine whether there were mean differences between the accept and the reject group correlations. Results indicated that the correlations were significantly greater for the accept group ($t(130) = 3.18, p \leq .005$). Specifically, the average correlations (transformed from Fisher's z back to r) were .64 for the accept group and .47 for the reject group. Such results suggest that job preferences are more similar to reasons applicants accepted rather than rejected the job offer.

Discussion

Results indicating that college recruits reported type of work as the most preferred job attribute corroborated findings from earlier studies (Jurgensen, 1978; Lacy *et al.*, 1983; Posner, 1981). Although the results from the present study are based on applicants of only one firm, this evidence suggests that job preferences have remained relatively constant for applicants with college degrees. Further, the lack of sex effects on job attribute preferences or on the importance of the job attribute in the employment decision suggests that males and females have similar preferences and similar reasons for accepting or rejecting job offers. The current study extended earlier research by relating job preferences to employment decisions and by investigating the relationship between preferences and reasons for the job decision. Applicants who rejected the job reported different preferences from applicants who accepted the job. Future research should investigate whether job acceptance can be predicted from job attribute preferences and other individual difference variables. For example, biographical data, such as where one grew up and one's social activities, might predict job acceptance as it has been used to predict vocational choice (Neiner & Owens, 1985). Additional analyses indicated that job attribute preferences were more similar to reasons given by applicants who accepted rather than rejected the job offer. Such results suggest that when subjects report preferences they think of what would lead them to accept, rather than to reject, a job offer.

The ranking of the importance of job attributes in the employment decision differed depending upon whether the job was accepted or rejected. For example, location was the most important reason for rejecting a job but was less important to applicants who accepted a job offer (10th). Such results are similar to findings by Friedlander & Walton (1964) and suggest that people may reject jobs because of environmental factors and accept jobs because of the type of work. Additional research is needed to confirm or refute this proposition.

The finding that applicants accept and reject job offers for different reasons suggests applicants might be using a non-compensatory decision process such that jobs that do not

meet a minimal criterion for selected attributes (e.g. location) are rejected. Gati (1986) applied Tversky's (1972) elimination-by-aspects theory of choice to career decision making and proposed that people make career decisions by (1) identifying important aspects of occupations; (2) ranking those aspects by importance; (3) identifying the acceptable range for the important aspects; and (4) eliminating alternatives in which the important aspects fall outside the acceptable range. Applicants making job choices may follow a similar process such that they identify and rank important job attributes and reject jobs that do not fall in the acceptable range for these important attributes. Similarly, Soelberg (1967) proposed that applicants evaluate jobs based on primary and secondary goals and that jobs are acceptable if they meet all of the person's primary goals and are inadequate on (at the most) only one or two secondary goals. The results from the current study indicated that applicants rejected the job because location did not meet an acceptable standard and are consistent with non-compensatory decision processes in which jobs that do not meet a minimal level on selected aspects are eliminated from consideration.

Although our results suggest applicants accepted and rejected job offers for different reasons and are consistent with propositions from models of non-compensatory decision processes, such interpretations must be viewed cautiously. Because we used a between-subjects design that had a different group of subjects who accepted and rejected the job offer, it is possible that an alternative explanation for our results is that applicants who rejected the job offer may have been looking for different attributes in jobs than applicants who accepted the job offer. Future research might use a within-subjects design such that each applicant makes multiple decisions about multiple job offers to confirm that applicants have different reasons for accepting and rejecting job offers. Within-subjects designs may lead to other difficulties, however, such as possible instrumentation effects caused by applicants completing the same instrument multiple times and subject mortality caused by difficulties in tracking subjects across time and offers. Nonetheless, such evidence would provide further information about applicant decision processes. Therefore, although our results are consistent with propositions from non-compensatory decision processes, further research is necessary to develop and test non-compensatory models of the employment decision process (Power & Aldag, 1985). For example, researchers might attempt to apply Tversky's (1972) model to job choices or to extend Soelberg's (1967) research.

Applicants reported that location was the primary reason the job offer was rejected. One might expect location to influence job choices because location is a salient job attribute that varies considerably across jobs and evidence suggests that the importance of job attributes in employment decisions is, in part, a function of variability of that attribute (Rynes *et al.*, 1983; Strand, Levine & Montgomery, 1981). For example, in comparing job offers, applicants might have perceived the jobs as similar on all attributes except location and consequently indicated that location was the most important reason the job was rejected. Nonetheless, results from a policy-capturing laboratory study also found that location was important in job offer decisions (Rynes & Lawler, 1983). Future research is necessary to determine which aspects of location influence job offer decisions and whether individual differences interact with location attributes to influence decisions. For example, single applicants might be less likely to move to a small community than married applicants with children.

Type of work was reported as the most preferred job attribute, was the most important

reason the job offer was accepted, and was the second most important reason the job was rejected. In making a job offer decision, applicants may have estimated the fit between their skills and abilities and the type of work offered by the job in a manner similar to how people are thought to choose occupations. Models of person-environment fit in career decision making propose that people choose occupations that provide a good fit between their personal characteristics and job requirements (Brown, 1990; Holland, 1985; Super, 1980). For example, Holland proposed that people choose occupations that allow them to use their skills and abilities and to take on fulfilling problems and roles. Similarly, the image-matching theory of job choice proposes that applicants compare their self-image with their perceptions of the organization and choose jobs that provide the greatest degree of congruence (Wanous & Colella, 1989). Applicants may have reported type of work as important in both accept and reject decisions because they were comparing their skills and abilities with perceived job requirements and accepted (or rejected) the job based on the congruence between their skills and the type of work required. Although considerable research has investigated the role of person-environment fit in vocational decisions (see Brown & Brooks, 1990), in their literature review Wanous & Colella (1989) found only two studies that investigated whether person-environment fit predicts job choice (Keon, Latack & Wanous, 1982; Tom, 1971). While both studies found support for the role of person-environment fit in job choices, more research is needed. Further, researchers interested in job choice might benefit by applying theories of vocational choice (Gati, 1986; Holland, 1985; Super, 1980) to the job choice process.

In order to compare rankings of job attribute preferences with the importance of those attributes in the actual decision, subjects indicated the relative importance of the attributes in their employment decision. However, such self-report data may have certain limitations. For example, even though subjects were assured anonymity and mailed the questionnaires to the researchers, subjects may have responded in a socially desirable manner. Furthermore, because direct estimation and policy capturing can produce differences concerning the importance of job attributes in employment decisions (Feldman & Arnold, 1978; Zedeck, 1977), there is a debate over which method accurately reflects true attribute importance (Schwab *et al.*, 1987). However, earlier research also found that the type of work (Harris & Fink, 1987; Taylor & Bergmann, 1987) and the location (Rynes & Lawler, 1983) were important factors in job decisions and suggests that the self-report data do reflect the important factors influencing the job offer decision. Nonetheless, these results must be interpreted cautiously.

Because the data were collected from applicants of a large petrochemical firm in one location and the sample consisted of college recruits who were, in general, searching for their first career job, the extent to which results from this study generalize to different samples is unclear. Future research should replicate this study with workers at different career stages and should measure specific location attributes that vary across communities (Carruthers & Pinder, 1983). Additionally, although this study provides initial evidence concerning differences in the importance of attributes for accept and reject decisions, this finding needs to be replicated using a within-subjects design.

The results from this study provide several recommendations for organizations that recruit on college campuses. First, because type of work and advancement were important attributes in job offer decisions, organizations should structure the recruitment process to provide applicants with detailed information concerning the actual work that will be

done and the career paths of employees hired into those positions. Second, the evidence that preferences may not accurately reflect the reasons jobs are rejected suggests organizations should conduct their own research to determine why applicants are rejecting job offers rather than relying on published reports of attributes preferred in a job. Organizations can then use the information about the reasons jobs were rejected to present the job in a more positive manner. For example, the current organization could provide applicants with positive, yet realistic, information about the location.

In his career decision making model, Gati (1986) proposed that the importance of attributes of alternatives varies across individuals. By extension, it seems likely that the importance of job attributes varies across applicants. For example, an applicant who is concerned only about his or her career may not view the location as an important job attribute, whereas the applicant who is concerned about non-work issues such as recreational opportunities may view the location as an important job attribute. The current study found that job attribute preferences were related to employment decisions, suggesting that organizations may be able to increase their acceptance rate by measuring preferences, or other individual characteristics, prior to extending site visit invitations. However, additional research is needed before organizations use job attribute preferences, or other individual characteristics, to predict job offer acceptance. Nonetheless, given the costs associated with recruitment, any individual characteristic that predicts job acceptance should have relatively high utility for an organization.

In conclusion, the current study extended earlier research by finding that job attribute preferences differed dependent upon whether applicants accepted or rejected the job offer. Such results suggest that job acceptance might be predicted by job preferences or other individual difference variables. In addition, evidence suggesting that different job attributes were important in the accept and reject decision supports propositions from non-compensatory decision process models. Given the environmental factors facing organizations, continued shortages of qualified workers (Jackson & Schuler, 1990) and fewer young people entering the labour market (Offermann & Gowing, 1990), continued research into the recruitment and placement process and factors influencing job decisions seems warranted. Specifically, future research should attempt to understand how applicants make job decisions and to focus on variables that predict job acceptance.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Tom Dougherty and three anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this manuscript.

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Received 30 November 1990; revised version received 20 February 1992

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