

Relationship Between Hiring Decisions and Applicant Similarity to A Previous Employee

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Abstract

The present research examines the relationship between hiring decisions and applicant similarity to a previous employee. Four dimensions are tested and compared, namely gender, educational background, region of origin and personality of a new job applicant and a previous employee. This work anticipates that personality would have the strongest impact, followed by gender, region of origin and educational background. If validated by real life experiments, this work will provide a novel hypothesis on hiring bias in the private educational industry in China.

Keywords

Similarity, hiring, previous employee.

1. Introduction

Biases in hiring are evident in numerous past researches. For example, since 1989, white receive on average 36% more callbacks than African Americans and 24% more callbacks than Latinos, and this trend remains largely unchanged over the years[1]. Similarly, in general, men are preferred over women for a job[2]. Other types of stereotypes are also widely studied. An example would be hiring managers holding more negative automatic stereotypes against the obese were less likely to invite an obese applicant for an interview[3]. These past researches mostly focus on how the stereotypes or biases against certain groups and the hiring decisions are correlated and such biases are recognised as the main reason for the gaps in hiring. However, few researches actually focus on other factors that may affect hiring decisions, with an exception of a research done by Dalessio and Imada(1984), which suggests that interviewer's final decisions were related to the degree of similarity between the interviewers' perception of the ideal employee and the applicant, and the degree of similarity between the interviewers' self-perception and the applicant. Such results could be due to Byrne's theory of interpersonal attraction, where similarity to another person increases the likelihood that one will obtain consensual validation for one's view and opinions from that person, hence leading to an increase in positive feelings towards the other person[4].

This previous research inspires us to explore further into how the perceived similarity between people would affect hiring decisions. In particular, the present research aims to examine whether the degree of similarity between the previous employee of a company and the new job applicants would lead to a difference in the possibility of a person being hired.

1.1. Loss Aversion and Status Quo Bias [5]

First proposed by Kahneman and Tversky(1984), loss aversion is the psychological tendency that the disutility of giving up an object is greater than the utility associated with acquiring it. The status quo bias is the natural consequence of this asymmetry--the disadvantages of a change is perceived greater than its advantages. Hence, people are more inclined to remain at the status quo and are generally more afraid of changes.

Such psychological tendency for people to stick to their status quo might affect hiring decisions. When hiring new employees, people have a tendency to follow what the previous employee is

like, as hiring someone with vast differences to the previous employee could be associated with incurring high risks.

Following this theory, the present research tests the hypothesis that human resource professionals have a tendency to hire new employees who have similarity to the previous employees in terms of gender, region of origin, personality and educational background. This paper will specifically focus on the private education industry in China and conduct a laboratory experiment to compare the degree of similarity between the new job applicants and the “stimulated” previous employees in the above mentioned four dimensions separately. This work anticipate that such a hypothesis does exist, and the personality of the previous employee would have the greatest impact on hiring, followed by gender, region of origin and educational background.

2. Method

Thirty human resource professionals(HRs) from various provinces of China would participate in this study. The participants will be invited into a standard interview setting. Instead of asking the HRs to recall the real information about their respective previous employees, the experimenter will try to stimulate a part of memory into the HRs’ minds. The participants are instructed to imagine a teacher working in their tuition center with one particular characteristic from the four dimensions, namely gender, region of origin, personality and educational background. The participants are then required to write a five-hundred-word write-up on the spot to describe what they think will be like if a teacher with this particular characteristic is actually working in their tuition center. The following guiding questions are provided to the participants:

- (1) What do you think will happen during his or her first lesson in your institution?
- (2) What do you think are his or her strengths and limitations?
- (3) How do you think his or her students will comment on her?

The participants are reminded by the experimenter to consider only the given one characteristic, and to prevent further inferences on other possible characteristics as much as possible. Upon finishing the write-up, the participants will be brought to a two-hour tea break. Furthermore, a set of ten distractive questions will be provided to the participants in a questionnaire format, regarding the information about the participants’ own tuition center. Following that, the participants will be provided with 20 pre designed resumes and are given one hour to rate the resumes using a 6-point Likert scale with the extreme anchors ranging from “very unlikely that this person will be hired” to “very likely that this person will be hired”. The degree of similarity between the resumes and the characteristics used in the stimulated memory process will then be compared to examine whether a job applicant with similar characteristics will be rated with a higher score, and hence more likely to be hired.

2.1. The Resume Design

The designed resume would include the name, gender, region of origin, educational background, and a self-introduction paragraph. This paper assumes all the job applicants have recently graduated from campus, so work experiences are not included, unlike a standard resume. The four dimensions will be each used as the only variable for different resumes and are measured and assessed as follows:

2.1.1. Gender

This paper specifically examines two genders, male and female.

2.1.2. Region of Origin

The region of origin is the place of birth of the job applicants. According to the level of socio-economic development in China, the country is divided into four major economic regions(see Figure 1), including the eastern, central, northeast, and western regions. These four regions have different levels of economic development and are set with different developmental goals due to geographical, cultural and economic reasons. On the resumes, the region of origin will be presented simply in terms of provinces and follow the classification of the four major economic regions when analysing the similarity in terms of regions.



Figure 1. Four major economic regions of China [6]

2.1.3. Personality

This paper adopts the Myers–Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) as a scale for determining the personality of the previous and new employees. The scale consists of four dimensions--sensation, intuition, feeling, and thinking. For each dimension, a set of descriptive adjectives will be used to describe a particular type of character, as shown by Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive adjectives for different types of personalities in a MBTI scale

Quality	Descriptive adjective	Quality	Descriptive adjective
Extraversion	talkative, outgoing,	Introversion	reserved, private
Thinking	reasonable, level-headed,	Feeling	warm, empathetic
Sensing	realistic, practical	Intuition	creative, imaginative
Judging	systematic, organized	Perceiving	tactful, flexible

These eight types of qualities will be hinted in the self-introduction paragraphs in the applicants' resumes using the descriptive adjectives or simple paraphrasing. A few irrelevant descriptions could also be provided, but should be largely kept consistent throughout the set of resumes. For example, an extroverted person could be introduced as follows:

I am very talkative and could adapt quickly into a fast-paced environment. I am inclined to work out ideas with others and enjoy group work. I love listening to music and I have a dog named Charlie.

2.1.4. Educational Background

The Chinese Universities will be classified using the Project 985 and 211 in China. The universities under the two projects are funded heavily by both local and national governments to build world-class universities in China. Project 985 consists of 39 universities and Project 211 consists of 115 universities (includes all Project 985 universities). Classification of universities under these two projects are widely adopted by Chinese companies in determining the educational background and academic ability of a person when hiring. Under this classification system, the educational background of the job applicants will be divided into three categories-- Project 985 universities, Project 211 (but non-985 universities) and other universities.

2.2. The Control Group

A control group consisting of the four dimensions would be introduced. The information of the control group would follow the cultural or traditional hiring bias suggested by previous researches. The information of the control is shown in the following table (Table 2).

Table 2. Information of the control group

Name	Li Lei
Gender	Male
Region of Origin	Jiangsu Province, China
Educational Background	Bachelor of Mathematics Nanjing University Sep. 2015- Jun. 2019
Profile	I am very talkative and could adapt quickly into a fast-paced environment. I am inclined to work out ideas with others and enjoy group work. I am also very practical. I love paying attention to fact and details, and I am able to describe things in a specific, literal way. I love listening to music and I have a dog named Charlie.

The information used for the stimulated memory process will be different from that of the control group. This provides a stronger test on whether the existence of a previous employee who is different from cultural norms would affect the hiring decision. When designing the rest of the resumes, only one of the variables will differ from the control group each time.

3. Results

3.1. Anticipated Results

The table below (Table 3) will be used to analyse our results.

Table 3. Anticipated Results

Resume\ Stimulated memory	Personality	Gender	Educational Background	Region of origin
Personality	4.8	3.0	2.6	2.5
Gender	2.5	4.5	2.9	2.5
Educational Background	2.7	2.6	3.6	2.7
Region of origin	3.0	3.2	3.0	3.8
Control Group	3.5	3.5	3.1	2.6

The horizontal rows represent the dimension the participants are instructed to focus on during the stimulated memory process; whereas the vertical columns represent the only variable used when designing resumes. The scores in the table represent the average scores rated by the participants for each variable (the scores are randomly assigned here to show the anticipated results). For example, the cell (personality, personality) represents the score rated by a participant with a stimulated memory of a previous employee with personality characteristics of Introversion or Intuition (opposite from the control group--Extroversion and Sensing) on a resume with the only variable in personality.

If our hypothesis is valid, the data in the diagonal cells would be of significant difference from the rest of the cells in the same column, assuming that the stimulated memory of the previous employee will only affect the hiring decisions in one out of the four dimensions. Furthermore, the scores in the diagonal cells would be higher than the control group (last row), hence suggesting there is indeed a tendency for human resource professionals to hire someone with similar characteristics to the previous employees.

If the hypothesis is validated by real experiments, future researches would be able to further examine which dimension out of the four would have the strongest impact in hiring. This work anticipates that personality would have the strongest impact, followed by gender, region of origin and educational background.

3.2. Alternative Results

Due to the constraints in the study design and limited scale of the present study, there is a possibility that there are no observable results turned out for the study. That is, there is no significant difference between the scores in the diagonal cells and the rest of the cells in the same column. Furthermore, there is a possibility that the scores for the control group are significantly higher than the rests, suggesting the cultural tendency to hire someone described in the control group is too glaring to ignore, or the stimulated memory is not successful, such that the presence of a previous employee would not affect hiring decisions at all.

4. Discussion

This paper studied the hypothesis that human resource professionals have a tendency to hire new employees with similarity to the previous employees in terms of gender, educational background, personality and region of origin, and we infer that such hypothesis is valid due to the status quo bias.

However, there are a few limitations of the present study. Firstly, the stimulated memory about the previous employee might be largely different from the real situations in life. Despite the fact that the participants are asked to describe the imagined previous employee as detailed as possible, and this description is probably based on previous real-life experiences of the participants, the real situation of working with such an employee might still be very different from what the participants have expected. Secondly, the MBTI questionnaire adopted in this research was criticised as not being able to truly represent a person's personality. The Big Five personality traits model might be able to capture the personality of a person more precisely, despite the overlap of the two models[7]. However, this paper still choose to adopt the MBTI scale since it is more widely adopted by businesses and companies when hiring. Also, the common resumes used by most job applicants nowadays may not include a profile, or a self-introduction paragraph. The personality of an applicant could only be assessed at the interview stage, where applicants may deliberately hide their true personality traits in presenting a "better self" to the interviewers. Thirdly, the present study only examines four dimensions of an employee, neglecting other possible relevant factors such as attractiveness, age and language, making the study not fully comprehensive. Also, the race factor is eliminated as the study is fully conducted in China, a country dominated by a single race. However, race would in fact be a very significant consideration during hiring processes in other countries. Lastly, the scale of the research is still limited, with only thirty participants assessing the four dimensions. Also, as this work only focused on the private education industry in China, such results may not be able to generalize into other industries.

However, if proven by real life experiments and data, the present study does provide a novel hypothesis on why hiring bias exists. Moreover, the hypothesis may suggest that the influence of automatic biases against certain groups on hiring decisions might not be as strong as we previously assumed. Human resource professionals could also be reminded to not stick to their status quo when hiring new employees, as a diverse workforce might be able to bring in new ideas and increase the efficiency in the workplace overall.

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