

The Career Path Component in Realistic Job Previews: A Meta Analysis and Proposed Integration

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Nineteen RJP experiments were separated into two groups depending on whether they contained career-related information. Separate meta-analyses revealed a mean effect size $d = .185$ for the six studies with a career path component ($N = 2,377$), and a mean effect size $d = .051$ for the thirteen studies ($N = 10,676$) that did not contain career-related information. These differences were examined in terms of estimated annual reduction in replacement costs if career information is provided in RJPs. These results provide tentative support for the notion that career-related information is important for RJP effectiveness. We argue for broadening the notion of realistic recruitment to include career information, and suggest a framework for integrating such information into the RJP.

In a Realistic Job Preview (RJP), the job candidate is given a description of the position in which negative information is balanced with the description of the positive job attributes. RJPs have received considerable attention since the first experimental study was reported by Weitz (1956). RJPs are now widely employed in both civilian and military organizations, and RJP research has been accelerating, especially in the last decade (Wanous, 1989; Wanous & Colella, 1989). The volume of research is evidenced by the seven literature reviews which have been conducted in recent years, including two based on meta-analysis (McEvoy & Cascio, 1985; Premack & Wanous, 1985). These reviews generally conclude that RJPs reduce initial expectations and result in a modest but tangible increase in job survival rates.

The basic rationale for employing the RJP can be described in terms of Wanous' (1980) notion of realistic recruitment. Expectations held by job applicants tend to be unrealistically high, and the discrepancy between expectations and experience leads to dissatisfaction and turnover (Porter & Steers, 1973). Traditional recruitment tends to contribute to applicants' unrealistic expectations, because the organization is typically interested in maximizing the size of the applicant pool. The RJP lowers initial expectations in the manner of an "inoculation", leading to a higher probability of met expectations, satisfaction, and survival (Popovich & Wanous, 1982; Wanous, 1980).

Beyond this basic "met expectations explanation", the understanding of how or why RJPs work is incomplete. While other hypotheses have been investigated and have received support (e.g. "ability to cope", "air of honesty", "perception of volition" -- Meglino, Denisi, Youngblood, & Williams, 1988; Breugh, 1983), the RJP has not been woven into the larger fabric of organizational science. Without such integration, there is a lack of guidance as to the optimal content of the RJP, and the contextual factors which would maximize its impact. Wanous' (1980) general prescription was to provide applicants with all pertinent information without distortion. In fact, there exists no consensus as to the exact content of RJPs, and they have been defined and operationalized in a variety of ways; some have provided information beyond a description of the job and working conditions. Premack and Wanous (1985) suggest that one reason for the relatively modest effect of RJPs on survival may be that RJPs deal with only a subset of the factors influencing job survival. These authors also suggest that another possible reason for the modest effect of RJPs might be the lack of content validity in the previews themselves.

The Career Path Components

One dimension along which RJPs have varied is whether they contain a career path component, that is, information about the sequence of positions that exist in an organization, and information relating to the job applicant's expectations about the probability and timing of promotion into these positions. There are a number of reasons why the career path component might be expected to have an impact on RJP effectiveness. Wanous (1980) himself noted that in the original AT&T study (Bray, Campbell, & Grant, 1974), the most unfavorable attitudes were found among those employees who had not progressed up the career ladder.

Wanous (1980) also suggested that some incumbents may accept a position primarily to gain entry into a particular organization because of the expectation of upward promotion.

The importance of providing career path information has become increasingly apparent in recent years because of a number of factors. These include work force demographic shifts, slow economic growth, budgetary deficits, and technological change. All of these factors have conspired to vastly reduce the possibility of upward career mobility, and have heightened awareness about the phenomenon of plateauing (Bardwick, 1986; Ferrence, Stoner, & Warren, 1977; Latack & Dozier, 1986; Kaufman, 1982; O'Boyle, 1985), particularly as it affects the baby boom generation. This group represents a bulge in the population of 56 million individuals aged 26-40 comprising 55% of the U.S. labor force and includes a dramatically increased number of working women. The boomer generation is poised on the threshold of middle management, creating intense competition within the generation as well as between it and the older generation. For example, it is estimated that there are currently 10.4 million individuals vying to enter the ranks of middle management, but only 1.4 million new management positions (Bardwick, 1986, p. 25). Because of this, an oversupply of highly educated white collar workers can be expected for years to come (Kaufman, 1982). The plateauing phenomenon might be expected to be especially irksome to the baby boomers, since these individuals are characterized as having a high need for autonomy, a focus on the self, and a tendency to question authority (Hall & Richter, 1990).

With the declining possibility of upward promotion, organizations increasingly recognize the need for a broader approach to career development (Latack & Dozier, 1986). A good place to begin in this broader approach is to confront the unrealistic expectations that prospective employees have about promotion, expectations which persist from an era when there was a relative shortage of managerial talent. Career development models are paying increasing attention to the importance of the availability of career information and the ability of individuals to make use of such information in formulating career decisions (Caldwell & O'Reilly 1985; Greenhaus, 1987; Hall, 1976; London, 1983; Mihal, Source, & Compte, 1984; Rhodes & Doering, 1983; Rosenbaum, 1979). London (1983), for example, theorizes that the completeness and accuracy of information about career opportunities is a key factor underlying career motivation, and that inferior information, misconceptions, or inaccurate

interpretation of information may result in poor decisions and/or inappropriate or dysfunctional behaviors. This conclusion is supported by Veiga's (1981) finding that plateaued individuals were more likely to be in a position in which the prior occupant had also plateaued. It is also supported by the work of Caldwell and O'Reilly (1985), who found highest turnover rates among individuals who extensively consulted non-useful career information sources. In sum, since these models suggest that individuals must have access to accurate career information for successful career management, we hypothesized that career-related information might be a key component of RJP effectiveness.

The purpose of the present study was to re-examine the RJP literature in order to determine whether RJPs which have provided career-related information have had a greater impact than RJPs which have not included a career path component.

METHOD

RJP Studies

The studies in this investigation were assembled from four sources: the literature review by Wanous and Colella (1989); the meta-analytic reviews by McEvoy and Cascio (1985) and by Premack and Wanous (1985); a computer search using the ABI/Inform database.

These sources yielded a total of 20 RJP experiments. The criteria for inclusion in the present study were that the RJP experiment (1) was a field study involving an actual employment situation where some turnover had occurred; (2) included a measure of job survival; (3) contained a detailed description of the RJP; (4) did not contaminate the experimental group with subjects from the control group; (5) and reported the sample size and a statistic (e.g., F , t , χ^2 , or ϕ) describing the relation between the RJP and turnover which could be converted into an effect size (d).

The Career Path Component

Because the theory reviewed above suggested that a career path component would moderate RJP effectiveness, the first step was to objectively classify the RJPs along the career path dimension. To this end, a group of graduate students in organizational behavior or industrial psychology acted as coders. Because two of the twenty studies involved

two experiments each, a total of eighteen RJP descriptions required coding. The coders remained blind as to the hypothesis under investigation. Detailed written instructions provided the coders with a definition of the RJP and concrete examples of what a career path component might consist of. Using these instructions, the coders were asked to separate RJPs into two categories: those containing career-related information and those that did not contain this information. The questionnaire then presented the eighteen RJP descriptions, each printed on a separate page. The descriptions were taken from the RJP experiments, and were presented in a randomly selected order. After reading each description, the coder checked off whether he/she judged that a career path component was present.

Results of Moderator Coding

An 80% coder agreement rule was adopted. The RJP description of one experiment (Horner, Mobley, & Meglino, 1979) did not meet the 80% agreement rule (60% of the judges coded it as having a career path component), and was not included in the subsequent analysis. All statistics relating the administration or non-administration of RJPs to the turnover criterion (stay or leave) were converted to a measure of effect size (d). Table 1 lists the experiments which were classified as not having a career path component ($n=13$), and those that were classified as having a career path component ($n=6$). For each experiment, Table 1 also shows the experiment's sample size and the effect size (d). The present study thus employed 19 RJP experiments (listed in the Appendix) having a total of 13,053 subjects.

For purpose of illustration, we reproduce sample descriptions which were coded in each of the two categories of RJPs:

Sample RJP descriptions classified as not having a career path component:

From the results of this questionnaire, a booklet was made up consisting of a brief introduction stating that the hours shown for each activity in the booklet were approximate but should give the applicant a fair idea of how he would be spending his time if he were hired for the job. The rest of the

booklet consisted of sketches showing an agent engaged in each of the various activities, a brief description of the activity, and the approximate number of hours agents currently employed spent in each activity (Weitz, 1956).

Table 1

Studies and Effect Sizes Used in Meta-Analysis

Study	Sample Size	d
Experiments Without Career Path Component		
Colarelli (1984)	155	.038
Dugoni & Ilgen (1981)	119	.254
Farr et al. (1973)	160	.217
Githens & Zalinski (1983)	3,296	.026
Ilgen & Seely (1974)	468	.197
Lockman (1980)	2,607	.012
	2,051	.020
Reilly et al. (1981)	717	-.036
Wanous (1973)	71	.248
Weitz (1956)	474	.191
Youngberg (1963)	404	.289
Zaharia & Baumeister (1981)	94	.126
	60	.234
Experiments With Career Path Component		
Avner et al. (1982)	437	.221
Dean & Wanous (1984)	249	-.148
Haccoun (1978)	235	.242
Macedonia (1969)	1,245	.167
LIAMA (1966)	187	.477
Suszko & Breough (1986)	24	1.142

Applicants were randomly assigned to one of three groups, 40 each to Groups A and B and 80 to Group C. Group A was not administered any test prior to employment. Applicants in group B were administered two locally developed apparatus tests (a pinboard and a formboard). Group B was included in the experimental design in order to assess the effect of pre-employment testing, per se, upon job acceptance and turnover. Group C applicants were administered the two apparatus tests and a work sample test prior to employment. The work sample test required about two hours to complete and was composed of items which required the applicant to handle pieces of fabric and to thread and actually operate the sewing machine. It should be noted that pre-employment testing times were not equated for Groups B and C (Farr, O'Leary, & Bartlett, 1973).

Sample of RJP descriptions classified as having a career path component:

More recently, another life insurance company studied the "Career Orientation Program" (COP) developed by LLAMA as a job sample-oriented precontract program to give the agent a realistic picture of the job. The COP consists of five units which describe the career, the market, the job of selling, the product, and the need for planning. Action projects force the agent into the field to experience the sales process (LIAMA, 1966).

The purpose of the RJP was to gain general knowledge about the teller job, so that a subsequent questionnaire could have at least part of it written in the "language: of those in this particular organization (i.e., an empathic questionnaire" Alderfer & Brown, 1972). As a result of these interviews three issues/concerns were uncovered – a) how to get a raise, b) how to receive a promotion, and c) how to move into branch management. The interviewees were asked to supply their own ideas of how these might occur, and bank managers were asked the same three questions (Dean & Wanous, 1984).

RESULTS

Effect sizes were averaged across the two sets of studies using the method described by Hunter and Schmidt (1990, Chapter 7). Observed

variance, variance due to sampling error, and variance corrected for sampling error are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Results of meta-analysis with career path component as moderator

Statistic	Career Path Component	
	No	Yes
Mean effect size	.0511	.1854
Number of studies	13	6
Sample size	10,676	2,377
Observed variance	.0066	.0283
Variance due to sampling error	.0006	.0013
Variance correct for sampling error	.0060	.0270
95% Confidence interval		
Lower Bound	.002	.114
Upper Bound	.100	.256

Table 2 shows that mean effect size for RJPs with a career path component is .19 as opposed to .05 for RJPs without a career path component. Table 2 also shows the 95% confidence intervals for these statistics. Because the two sets of confidence intervals do not overlap, the hypothesis that career information moderates RJP effectiveness is supported.

The observed differences in average *d* across the two sets of studies can be interpreted as an increased job survival rate of .19 standard deviation units for career path component RJPs versus .05 standard deviations units for non career path component RJPs relative to control groups (Premack & Wanous, 1985). Premack and Wanous (1985) point out that the impact of RJPs should be interpreted in relation to the base rate of

survival. That is, the relative increase in job survival resulting from the use of an RJP is greater in an organization with a lower base rate of survival. Following this logic, Table 3 shows the impact of RJP's with and without a career path component for organizations with low, medium and high job survival rates. For organizations with a high job survival rate (.80 without RJP's), the percentage increase in the survival rate for RJP's having a career path component can be expected to be 9%, as opposed to a 3% increase in survival for RJP's without a career path component. Similarly, for organizations with a medium survival rate (.50 without RJP's), the career path component versus non-career path component RJP's will be expected to result in a 18% versus 6% increase in survival; while for organizations with a low survival rate (.20 without RJP's) the career path component versus non-career path component RJP's will be expected to result in a 35% versus 10% increase in survival.

These survival rates may be translated into estimates of employee replacement costs for career path component versus non-career path component RJP's. For purpose of illustration, Table 3 shows the relative cost savings assuming the replacement cost of \$2,000 per entry level employee, as estimated by Dean and Wanous (1984). Using this estimate Table 3 shows that the annual replacement cost per 100 retained employees using RJP's with a career path component for low, medium and high survival would be \$1,274,000, \$529,200, and \$338,800 respectively, while for RJP's with a career path component the costs would be \$1,036,000, \$473,200, and \$319,200 for low, medium and high survival rates respectively. In other words, the estimated annual savings due to reduced replacement costs per 100 employees that can be attributed to the presence of career information in an RJP is \$238,000, \$56,000, and \$19,400 for low, medium and high survival rates respectively.

DISCUSSION

Premack and Wanous (1985) suggested that possible reasons for the relatively modest effect of RJP's might be the lack of content validity and the fact that RJP's might not be addressing all of the factors which are important to job survival. This is consistent with Rynes, Heneman, and Schwab's (1980) observation that, without a theory or model of recruitment, no framework is available with which to integrate research findings.

Table 3

Estimates of Employee Replacement Costs for RJPs with and without a Career Path Components (CPC)^a

Statistic	Job Survival Level		
	Low	Medium	High
Mean job survival without RJP	.20	.50	.80
Standard deviation of job survival ^b	.40	.50	.40
Amount of increase in job survival rate (d X SD)			
RJP without CPC	.02	.03	.02
RJP with CPC	.07	.09	.07
Expected job survival rate			
RJP without CPC	.22	.53	.82
RJP with CPC	.27	.59	.87
Percentage increase in job survival rate			
RJP without CPC	10%	6%	3%
RJP with CPC	35%	18%	9%
Number of hires needed to retain 100 at the original survival rate	500	200	125
Number of hires needed to retain 100 at expected survival rate with			
RJP without CPC	455	189	121
RJP with CPC	370	169	114

Estimated annual replacement costs^c

RJP without CPC	1,274,000	529,200	338,800
RJP with CPC	1,036,000	473,200	319,200

Estimated annual reduction in replacement costs if career information is provided in RJP

238,000	56,000	19,600
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^aThe logic of this presentation follows Premack and Wanous (1985).

^bSD is equal to the square root of the probability of leaving times the probability of staying (Abelson, 1985, p.130).

^cBased on a cost estimate of \$2800 per entry level employee (Dean & Wanous, 1984).

The present study has attempted to link the rationale for employing RJPs with recent thinking in the area of career development that suggests that high quality career information is important for individual career management. The present study should be viewed as a preliminary indication that the career path component might be a key factor in RJP effectiveness. This hypothesis should be further investigated with research which directly tests the effectiveness of RJPs having a career path component. At the same time, however, the present findings are in some sense a conservative estimate of the importance of the career path component, since the factors which would make career information especially important (i.e., limited upward mobility because of demographic shifts, slow economic growth, etc.) are more salient today than they were when many of the studies reviewed were conducted. In fact, the reality of limited upward promotion suggests that career-related information will likely carry increasing weight in RJP effectiveness as time goes on, and that RJPs without such information will be critically deficient.

The present results may be compared with the meta-analytic review by McEvoy and Cascio (1985), who found that task complexity moderated the effect of RJPs on turnover. The implication that both task complexity and career information moderate the RJP-turnover relationship suggests

some important questions for further research on how to optimize RJP content for particular situations.

Expanding the model of realistic recruitment

In his seminal work on the topic, Wanous (1980) viewed the use of realism as a general approach to recruitment rather than a specific technique. Observing that the inflated expectations of employees result from the fact that traditional recruiting involves "selling" only the positive characteristics of an organization, Wanous concluded that the traditional recruitment model is inadequate because it is concerned only with organizational entry and not with retention.

In the present study, we are arguing for the expansion of the notion of realistic recruitment to include a variety of career-related perspectives in addition to job-related information. First, job applicants should be made aware of the range of career options that are realistically possible with a particular organization. Secondly, the organization should attempt to cast such career information in a developmental framework, emphasizing that success may be defined in many ways, and that nature of rewards may change over the course of a career. Finally, we argue that in providing career information to the prospective employee, the organization take the broadest possible approach to career management, emphasizing the relation between work and other spheres of life, and exploring the ways that various life spheres may be balanced over the course of an individual's career.

Designing the career path component

Career-related information in the RJP should be based on an analysis of what is needed in a career in order to fulfill the expectations of prospective employees. In addition to a consideration of the unique characteristics of the present workforce (e.g., Hall & Richter, 1990), a body of theory exists which can provide guidelines in this area. For example, Hall's (1976) psychological success model of careers posits that individuals who set challenging but attainable career goals experience a sense of enhanced competence and self-esteem, which in turn contributes to satisfaction, involvement, and setting new goals. London (1983) has proposed a theory of career motivation, defined as a set of individual characteristics and associated career decisions and behaviors reflecting the person's

career identity, insight into factors affecting his/her career, and resilience in the face of unfavorable career conditions. Career decisions and behaviors are thought to be guided in part by desired outcomes and the individual's expectations about whether they can be achieved. The model stresses the notion of "prospective rationality", that is, that choice processes are based on a search and use of information that allows the decision maker to form rational expectations about how good or bad the alternatives are likely to be. Prescriptive models of career management could be used in conjunction with an analysis of the psychological needs of contemporary employees in order to formulate the optimal content of an expanded RJP.

An expanded RJP might begin with a description of the organizational hierarchy and a realistic assessment of the potential for upward career movement. This part of the RJP could focus on the pyramidal shape of the organizational hierarchy (e.g., Schien, 1971), and might present a proportional diagram representing the number of individuals at each level of the organization. The organizational chart of a large corporation might in itself serve as an antidote for an applicant's unrealistic career expectations (cf., Dean & Wanous, 1984). A range of typical and/or ideal career patterns could then be presented, including the number of years likely to be spent in each grade level, and how many levels a career is likely to comprise. The probability of promotion should be made clear, emphasizing the number of positions in successive levels of the organization relative to the number of individuals who might be competing for them.

The emerging range of career options could be presented, stressing the importance of the role of individual responsibility in career management. Hall and Richter (1990) summarize the expanding array of possible career options that are emerging in contemporary organizations. These include career paths based on functional specialization, local generalization, consulting, project management, fast versus slow track into management, permanent part-time employment, job specialization, as well as multipath options. Non-promotional reward possibilities should also be presented. Potential rewards other than promotion include lateral transfers and job rotation, entrepreneurial possibilities, the opportunity for further training and development, the opportunity to do community work on company time, leaves of absence -- particularly those associated with child rearing, and transitional retirement.

The RJP could discuss the notion of the career plateau and its various forms. Bardwick (1986) distinguishes between structural plateauing, which is a result of the organization's hierarchical structure, and content plate-

auing, where work fails to present continuing challenge and fulfillment. Since content plateauing can be alleviated through job and career design, such a discussion could be used to communicate to the prospective employee that the organization is committed to the personal development and growth of its members. Discussion could focus on such issues as the interaction between work and personal life over the course of a career, how the demands of career and family might be reconciled, and the issue of retirement and second careers.

For its part, the organization must accept the reality that plateaued managers will increasingly constitute the core of the work force (Bardwick, 1986; Ferrence, et al., 1977). Organizations should attempt to integrate realistic career planning into their strategic human resource outlook and match recruitment practices to long-range promotion possibilities. Unless the organization is prepared to be open about the realities of promotion, and to offer alternate rewards that can actually be delivered, the unfulfilled expectations of its workers will lead ultimately to the high frustration and low satisfaction that originally led to the notion of the RJP.

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APPENDIX

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