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DETECTION OF DECEPTIVE COMMUNICATION: DECEPTION IN HIRING SITUATIONS

G. M. MURRY* **M. AMBERGER****

Abstract: *The examination of the different stages of the hiring process provides numerous occasions for potential employees to deceive their future employer. Impression management in multi-faceted ways is used on both sides to favourably influence the other party's opinion, leaning towards the potential employment contract being closed. Inflation of job titles or faking of situations experienced and mastered by the applicant, up to the point of telling sheer lies in order to impress and secure a vacancy in a tight job market. Based on a literature review supported by exploratory empirical cross-sectional research, this paper will discuss different levels of deceit during several stages of the employment selection process.*

Keywords: *deception, interviews, personnel selection, hiring.*

1. Introduction

Ever since the formalization of hiring procedures and the forming of human resource management departments within organizations, attempts have been made to standardize and formalize the process of hiring using diverse and manifold selection tools (Schuler 152; Hentze & Kammel 277). Most formal hiring starts with submitting a written application in various forms for the job announced. In order to discuss deception in this hiring process, first the process itself needs to be elaborated on, then the terminology used needs to be clarified.

a) Subsequently, the other segments of this paper will be concerned with the manifold sources of potential deception within the hiring situation, in particular: a) job title inflation, which might lead to favourable job considerations based on inflated experience cited;
b) impression management, the conscious attempt to leave a positive impression;
c) the interview process, in particular the face-to-face encounters; and
d) applicant faking, the pretence of traits and characteristics considered desirable in order to fulfil the duties of a particular job.

Afterwards, a brief conclusion with implications for human resource professionals concerned with the validity of the hiring process is provided.

2. The Application Process

In the context of applicant selection, some employers or applicants might opt to deceive or "persuade" during several stages of the process in the communication between the potential employer and applicant and use this persuasion as an

* Assistant Professor, University Amberg-Weiden, Germany; corresponding author.
** Independent Scholar.

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advantage over other competitors for the same vacancy or employee respectively. As such, the application process consists of several consecutive phases, most of which are mandatory in order to fill vacancies. Typically, the duties of a vacant position are examined, a job description is written or updated, and a job title and appropriate pay levels or grading in accordance to the tasks to be performed are assigned, adjusted or confirmed.

Based on such a job description, the applicant's profile of qualifications is developed, resulting in either the internal or external announcement of the vacancy via several media available. Then the interested applicant noticing this job announcement will supply application paperwork, typically consisting of a bundle of documents or copies thereof, a resume, letters of testimony or recommendation, references, and credentials in the form of degrees or certifications, just to name a few. Upon review of the documents received by the applicant, the hiring organization will make a first pre-selection, which results in some applicants considered to be interesting and invited for further interviews, tests, or assessments, and others being deselected. During the interview, one or more organizational members meet face-to-face or via communication technology (video-telephone-conference or phone conference) with the applicant to discuss qualifications, past experience, and potential tasks within the organization. Tests, mostly in regard to personality traits and leadership ability with direct relation to the job to be filled, are sometimes administered on location as part of an applicant screening procedure. Additionally, further assessments, particularly in especially designed assessment centres with trained observers are carried out to estimate the applicants' abilities to perform under pressure, to present information, to discuss job relevant facts, and to display social/soft skills all important for future performance once hired.

3.1. Clarification of Terminology

When examining the application process with regard to deception, initially it needs to be agreed on that the term deception, which has been defined by scholars with varying meanings (Knapp 10; Vrij 12), will be used in this paper as provided by Miller (1982) as cited in Neuliep and Matteson (410):

> "Deceptive communication refers to message distortion resulting from deliberate falsification or omission of information by a communicator with the intent of stimulating in another or others, a belief that the communicator himself or herself does not believe."

Therefore, with the assumption that the communicator, in this paper either the job applicant or the potential employer, is purposefully influencing the other(s) in the communication process, deception is essentially used persuasively as a technique to either result in an employment offer to be made or to gain a new employee for the organization using different specific persuasion strategies (Marwell & Schmitt 358).

4. Sources of Potential Deception

As becomes clear after having reviewed the application process and the definition of deception, both parties have opportunities to deceive.

4.1. Job-Title Inflation

Initially, Greenberg and Ornstein (296) investigated the phenomenon of feelings of high status job titles in conjunction with extra job responsibilities that deserved these high status job titles versus another group of individuals receiving same high

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status job titles, but not being assigned the extra responsibility. While high job titles are not only used to make up for underpayment to establish apparent fairness, which can be explained when applying Adam's Equity Theory (Swiercz & Smith 121) as a base for cognitive comparison of inputs and outcomes, job titles in general appear to be based on social conventions that enable efficient communication (Martinez *et al*. 20). As such, job titles are symbolic exchanges, implying reciprocity in dyadic interactions (Cropanzano & Mitchell 881), with job title inflation as the intentional violation of cooperative principles (Grice 27) in order to gain some type of advantage from the violation (Martinez *et al*. 20).

As such, job title inflation may be committed in two ways: either through an organization or through an individual applying for a vacancy.

Organizations that use inflated job titles deceive their competitors in the market in the rivalry for customers through either pretending that they have a far larger organizational structure with more resources available to them, or higher levels of hierarchy and employees with far higher degrees of responsibility being sent to consult with respective customers, while in fact having less experience, resources, and company to back up their pretence (Martinez *et al*. 25). While such an organizational behaviour in the short-run might increase the chances of being awarded more customer contracts and result in higher revenue, in the long-run this type of strategy might back-fire through customers, who feel mislead and unsatisfied through the pretentious behaviour of the organization and the inflated job titles used.

On the other hand, individuals applying for job vacancies are able to artificially inflate their previously or currently held job titles in order to gain apparent value for the hiring organization, whether through alleged experience associated with the respective job title, or responsibility or projects assumed to have been taken on in past jobs. With bigger and better jobs and respective titles as great opportunities in reach, applicants, who are also only human, might either purposefully commit one of the following or be tempted to fall victim to such deeds as major misrepresentation in resumes, with approximately 25 % of all resumes displaying such flaws (Knapp 306). According to another source cited in Knapp (306), Koeppel indicates that about 43 % of resumes contain at least one substantial inaccuracy. Often times, those are composed of using inflated language beyond the sheer use of job titles, making applicants' experience appear much more attractive than what it in fact is through impressing the reader of the resume by fluffing up the content, in turn gaining a competitive advantage over other applicants (Knapp 306). In order to gain such an "additional edge" over the competition, applicants not inventive enough or having the proper amount of criminal energy might even consult websites and services, describing in elaborate detail how to manipulate information and deceive to one's advantage (i.e. www.fakeresume.com), making the artificial versus historical construction of information on a resume one of the acts considered applicant faking. This site is providing intricate details like in an introductory college level course "101 Applicant Faking," starting with the basics such as elaborating on experience, to higher degrees of fraudulent activities such as manoeuvring past background checks and making up references to even faking college degrees. Finally, visitors to this site are led to believe in the section "How common is resume fraud" that

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everyone is faking application paperwork, as such implying that the reader of this site has to do it, too, in order to remain competitive.

4.2. Impression Management

The term impression management typically is used as a deliberate effort towards distorting one's reactions and responses in order to generate a positive impression from others (Barrick & Mount, 262), which is covering a broad range of actions.

Self-Deception. One of the impression management techniques is self-deception, which Zerbe and Paulhus (1987) discuss as the dispositional inclination to consider oneself in a more favourable light than others that one chooses to compare oneself with. While this aspect of impression management certainly has value for other contexts, it does not have particular meaning to the function of impression management concerned with hiring procedures.

Impressing and deceiving others. Every applicant truly desiring the vacancy applying for would be genuinely concerned with leaving a favourable impression with the potential employer; concern about proper manners and business behaviour would fall into the mildest category of such impression management that certainly has nothing to do with any type of deceit. However, stronger kinds of this behaviour fall into the arena of response distortion towards more socially desirable traits or behaviour (Zerbe & Paulhus 258). According to a study by Mount, Barrick and Strauss (277), individuals are far more apt to positively distort the impression they give in applicant situations than in regular discourse, which they tested using applicant scores on personality tests administered.

Furthermore, Leary and Kowalski (35) distinguish two components of impression management: a) the actual motivation to manage impressions, determined by the goal relevance, the value of the desired goal, and the discrepancy between the desired and current image of the impression manager, and b) the impression construction, consisting of the individuals' self-concept, desired and undesired identity images, the role constraints as well as target's values, and the current or potential social image. These two components of impression management may be used in many different settings of the actual hiring process, with the most relevant being discussed in the following pages.

4.3. Interview

Especially when used in its traditional form as a face-to face communication, the interview is allowing many opportunities to manage impressions and deceive, whereas this exchange can be seen as a two-way process, in which the organization wants to evaluate the prospective candidates, who most likely will attempt to impress in varying degrees, whereas the organization's representatives, especially when high-profile positions and the "war for talent" on the employment market is concerned, might also engage to a certain degree in impression management (Oelsnitz, Stein & Hahmann 189). As has become apparent throughout the deception literature, individuals observing a communication or being part of a dialogue typically assume to have a good ability in detecting truthfulness of such exchange (Vrij 164).

However, most of the cues perceived to be indicators of deceit fall into the category of myths, which entail all types of signalling behaviour used by the communicator, falsely identified by the

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observer(s) as behaviour salient when individuals communicate untruthfully. The reliance on non-verbal cues gets even bigger when observers watch individuals unfamiliar to them since no basis for comparison exists; hence, this over-reliance on non-verbal cues causes them to neglect in their analysis, superficial as it may be in a direct dialog, any verbal message, which is even harder to judge (Stiff 77).

Contrary to this observation, individuals rely entirely on verbal cues to determine whether deceit took place if the situation and communicator are familiar to them; therefore, the observer's evaluation of honesty or deceit is heavily influenced by communicator manipulations to both, verbal and non-verbal cues in unfamiliar contexts (Stiff *et al.* 559), such as the employment interview. Furthermore, the more applicants believe that the impression they make is detrimental to goal achievement, the more they are motivated to employ impression management (Leary & Kowalski 38), while on the other hand a truthful person might not be as concerned with impression management in comparison with deceivers (Vrij 46; 194). To support the evaluation of the applicant and to allow potential forecast of performance in employment situations, often times additional applicant appraisals are performed.

4.4. Applicant Faking

The hiring process offers several opportunities for applicants to fake abilities and personality. Most commonly, assessment centres and personality tests serve the purpose to evaluate the skills, competencies and abilities of the applicant to supplement the written documentation supplied with the application paperwork and the first personal impression gained through an interview (Schuler 166; 170).

Assessment centres offer diverse, job-related simulations, tasks, and exercises that a group of applicants needs to complete, with the goal to select the applicant with the best knowledge, skill, and abilities for the vacancy in direct comparison to the competitors. Even though the content of the selection procedure should be directly related to the vacancy, often times this is not clear to the applicant, therefore blurring contours between content, methodology used, and perceived job relatedness, which might be lacking face validity; interestingly enough, Ryan and Huth (122) contend that clear face validity results in the applicant perceiving the measure as less fakable.

When taking a closer look at personality tests as a basis for applicant selection, a study by Griffith, Chmielowski and Yoshita (350) finds that a large percentage of applicants (between 30 to 50%) raise their test scores in the application process, which might be attributed to some instruments being rather obvious, which then might result in self-deceit and impression management on the part of the applicant. Even though personality measures are in general considered to be an effective tool in the human resource selection process, Wesman (113) as early as 1952 contended that personality test scores might be faked.

5. Empirical Data

In order to assess the prevalence of applicants' and employers' deception in the job selection process, an exploratory cross-sectional survey of a convenience sample of organizational members was collected. After a brief pilot test, the survey was placed via www.surveymonkey.com. It is structured into two sections facilitating skip logic, consisting of employers being asked about their practices in announcing vacancies and conducting interviews, and employees or potential applicants being asked about

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their practices when having applied previously or applying currently.

Of the survey responses, 139 were completed and used for the evaluation of this paper. The questionnaire was made up of a total of 25 open and closed questions, and a few semi-structured follow-up interviews were conducted with some organizational members to provide more detailed insights.

The demographics of the sample subjects ranged from eighteen to over sixty-five years of age, a broad educational level starting with high school drop-outs all the way up to PhDs. The branches surveyed were cross-sectional, from producing industry to educational institutions, banking, insurances, retail, IT, and service industry.

5.1. Job-Title Inflation

The survey results reflect that those organizations being realistic and honest in announcing their vacancies do not pay attention to job titles, but stress specialist knowledge, skills, experience and responsibilities held in previous employment. Additionally, these organizations state that an applicant picture and shiny portfolio (as it is custom in Germany as part of the documents submitted for a vacancy) does not impress them or matter to them. Similarly, those organizations providing more creative job titles in their announcements leading to an inflation of the job titles pay less attention to the previously held job titles of the applicants and stress skills and technical knowledge as well as previously held responsibilities and experience gained.

When examining applicant behaviour, again those inflating their own job titles do not pay attention to job titles when searching for vacancy listing.

Both, the behaviour of the organizations and applicants inflating job titles leads to the conclusion that they expect that job titles are potentially inflated and therefore do not pay attention to them.

5.2. Impression Management

According to the survey results, 94 % of participants reported to adjust their skills positively to reflect the needs of the vacancy, something within the normal realm of impression management. However, 10 % of the participants exaggerated or faked details in their resume. The threshold to exaggerate or fake paperwork was much lower than in face-to-face interaction, where only one third of the participants continued their exaggerating and faking behaviour.

These same participants do not focus on the decision maker and avoid eye contact, while those applicants being honest focus on the decision maker and seek eye contact.

5.3. Interview

During the interview process, the employers indicated, that they do not see the interviewee as trustworthy, if applicants offer pre-conceptualised answers (68%), are hesitant to answer (65%), or appear nervous and anxious (40%).

On the other hand, employers evaluate it as a sign of trustworthiness, if applicants display naturalness (100%), directness in their answers (95%), establish eye-contact (95%), possess good manners (90%), appear self-assured (87%), provide well thought-through answers (80%), and submit a custom-tailored resume and letter of application offering the required background knowledge (60%). It must be noted, though, that some of these employer expectations, especially directness of speech and establishment of eye contact, are culturally dependent, while the answers reflected in this survey presented German organizations' expectations.

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5.4. Applicant Faking

When the organizational representatives were asked their opinion of applicant faking, the employers stated that detecting faking is a matter of experience (90%). Of those, 34% indicated that resume faking has actually increased, while 33 % also admit, that results of reference checks had surprised them, just as 33% indicated that they initially misjudged applicants.

To avoid applicant faking to the extent possible, the organizational representatives rely on thorough background checks as well as questioning of references and potential follow-up interviews (85%), use triangulation through the presence of a second or third organizational representative during the interview (55%), and search of the Internet (33%), in particular social network sites.

6. Conclusion

While it is documented that deception and faking behaviour is known to take place in hiring situations for over half a century so far, no remedy has been found yet to eliminate this deception from occurring. In general, it can be agreed on that a combination of selection procedures can reduce the likelihood of a very deceitful person to be hired for a vacancy, but overall, the practical implications are the reliance on less non-verbal cues in future interview encounters.

At the same time, methodology and test validity should be fine-tuned to exempt applicant faking to the highest degree possible. Furthermore, both, employing organizations and potential employees should restrain from utilizing job-title inflation, which is in direct contradiction to the cooperative principle and social conventions.

Overall, more effective selection tools, instruments and measurements have to be developed, and applied research needs to take place to help develop a body of knowledge concerning selection processes while at the same time providing pragmatic tools for practitioners.

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