Job Interview Strategies For People with a Visible Disability[1]

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A total of 117 students participated in the present investigation, which compared wheelchair-user and able-bodied job applicants as well as two interview-taking strategies available to wheelchair users: disclosing the disability during the telephone screening or not doing so and acknowledging it only during a face-to-face interview. Results show that wheelchair-user applicants were evaluated more favorably than able-bodied applicants during the telephone interview, a finding consistent with the positivity bias and "sympathy effect" findings of others. After a face-to-face interview, wheelchair-user applicants who did not disclose their disability over the telephone were evaluated somewhat more favorably than those who did so. However, they were less likely to be selected for the job. The implications of the results for theory, research, and practice are discussed.

Many consider the high unemployment rate in North America to be a major social problem. For persons with a physical disability the problem is exacerbated because their participation in the labor force is quite restricted when compared to that of able-bodied individuals (Asch, 1984; Levitan & Taggart, 1973).

People with physical disabilities who are seeking employment need to be aware of the image they portray to potential employers. Because impairments are not positively valued in our society, individuals with disabilities must not only possess the requisite job skills but also must be knowledgeable about impressing management in order to obtain employment.

To help people with disabilities acquire jobs, vocational rehabilitation centers have emerged (G. N. Wright, 1980). We all know the importance of

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having good job skills; but if people with disabilities cannot demonstrate these because they cannot obtain a job interview, the skills are irrelevant. Therefore, vocational rehabilitation centers have also provided instruction in job search and impression-management techniques. Such centers prepare applicants with simulated interviews, instruct them in filling out application forms, and help them deal with questions regarding their impairment.

Leviton (1973) noted that vocational counselors prefer that their clients disclose the facts about their disability not on a curriculum vitae or an application form, but during an interview where they can explain the irrelevance of the disability and stress their strengths. It is often recommended to clients that an obvious disability be mentioned early by the applicant to clarify misconceptions and to explain why the disability will not interfere with job productivity and performance.

But how early is "early"? Most job-search training programs recommend that an application form be followed up by a telephone call. It is during this telephone interview that disabled job applicants need to know how to conduct themselves in order to form a favorable first impression, ensure that an interview is granted, and maximize the likelihood of getting the job. This is particularly important because hiring decisions are frequently made within the first few minutes of an interview (cf. Arvey & Campion, 1984).

The literature on impression formation shows that, generally, information received early about an individual is more important in shaping a final impression than information received later. This primacy effect has been well documented by Asch (cited in Schneider, Hastorf, & Ellsworth, 1979), who showed that when positive information about a person is presented before negative information, the final impression is likely to be more favorable than if the reverse sequence had been used. However, under certain circumstances, it is also possible that information received later may determine the final impression (Miller & Campbell, 1959).

Visible physical disabilities are highly salient and usually dominate the overall impression. The salience of the disability often results in negative perceptions (Fichten, 1988; Fichten & Amsel, 1986; Robillard & Fichten, 1983). Because negative information is more important than positive in the formulation of final impressions (Fiske, 1980), the overall evaluation of disabled job applicants is likely to be unfavorable. Furthermore, people are more likely to recall characteristics of an individual that are consistent with their stereotypes and implicit personality theories (Cohen, 1981). Therefore, revealing one's disability during a telephone interview could not only diminish the chances of obtaining a face-to-face interview but could also have a negative effect on impressions formed during the subsequent face-to-face encounter. But, stressing one's strengths during a telephone interview and minimizing one's liabilities, such as having a disability, can

lead to a positive first impression. As well, it might ensure that an interview is granted.

The averaging model of impression formation (Anderson, 1974) suggests that a mixture of favorable and unfavorable perceptions will result in a more positive overall evaluation than will two unfavorable impressions. Therefore, the recommendation based on the averaging model is that applicants not disclose their disability during the telephone interview. The averaging model does not, however, adequately take into account the importance of the role of context and the shift-of-meaning phenomenon (Wyer, 1974; Zanna & Hamilton, 1977). Positive characteristics, when placed in a new context, can have negative connotations. If the applicant is believed to have "tricked" the interviewer by not disclosing the disability during the telephone interview, a previously formed positive impression could shift to a highly unfavorable final evaluation. Thus, it is not obvious that nondisclosure of the disability during a telephone interview is the best strategy.

Given the possible influence of primacy, recency, and shift-of-meaning effects, one wonders exactly when job applicants with visible physical disabilities should disclose their impairment. Is it better not to disclose the disability during a telephone screening, thereby producing a positive first impression while risking a negative final evaluation due to perceptions of deceit? Alternately, is it better to disclose the disability over the telephone, even though this may entail the risk that no face-to-face interview is granted or that only information consistent with the interviewer's stereotypes will be remembered?

Although there are guidelines to follow concerning how to acknowledge the disability once it is necessary to do so (e.g., Belgrave & Mills, 1981; Hastorf, Wildfogel, & Cassman, 1979; B. A. Wright, 1983), the question concerning whether it is most effective to do this on the telephone or only during a face-to-face interview remains. Therefore, it was the objective of the present investigation, an analogue study, to explore this issue and to highlight impression-management concerns in the context of job interviews. A pilot study compared male and female observers' ratings of simulated telephone and face-to-face job interviews with two wheelchair-user and two able-bodied applicants. In the main body of the investigation, the goal was to examine the effects of two possible interview-taking strategies available to wheelchair users: disclosing the disability during the telephone screening portion of a job interview or withholding this information until the face-to-face interview.

Method

Overview

A pilot study was conducted to explore sex differences, differences between the two applicants who were evaluated in the study, and differences between telephone and face-to-face interviews. Because no consistent differences on these variables were found, subjects were exposed to two applicants' simulated telephone and face-to-face job interviews for the position of computer programmer. One of the applicants disclosed being a wheelchair user during the telephone screening; the other did not. Both applicants acknowledged having a disability during the face-to-face interview. Ratings were made after each telephone and face-to-face interview segment.

Subjects

A total of 117 volunteer college students who did not participate in the pilot study served as subjects (64 female and 53 male). They were enrolled in four sections of General Psychology.

Interviews

Two job interview scripts were prepared. A 22-year-old male computer science diploma program graduate applied for the job of programmer in each script; neither applicant was outstanding. Interviewees' academic qualifications and relevant work experience were equated. Questions asked by the interviewer were identical for both scripts.

Each interview was divided into two 3-minute phases; a telephone (audio-taped) and a face-to-face (video-taped) phase. During the first (telephone) phase of the interview applicants responded to the interviewer's questions concerning qualifications and previous experience. The second phase was a face-to-face sequel to the telephone interview; questions at this stage centered around the reasons why the applicant sought this particular job, his strengths and weaknesses, and his aspirations for the future.

Two versions of each applicant's interview (both phases) were prepared. In one version, the applicant was a wheelchair user; in the other, the same applicant was able-bodied. Professional actors played the roles of the job

applicants and the interviewer. The actor playing the role of Applicant 1 had the same script for the able-bodied and wheelchair user interviews. A second actor played the role of Applicant 2, again in both conditions.

The two versions of each script were identical for each applicant with one exception. Embedded in the applicants' responses to the interviewer's questions in the wheelchair-user scripts was an acknowledgment of the disability. This was true for both the telephone as well as the face-to-face interview segments; in the face-to-face portion of the interview the wheelchair was also clearly visible on the screen.[3]

Procedure

Subjects were told that the study concerned interview-taking strategies and that they would be exposed to two simulated job interviews in which each applicant was first interviewed on the telephone and then was seen in a face-to-face interview. Half of the subjects first were presented with the nondisclosure condition applicant (i.e., Applicant 1's nondisclosing audiotape, where he portrayed himself as would an able-bodied applicant, followed by his wheelchair-user videotape). Then they were shown the disclosure condition applicant (i.e., Applicant 2 who acknowledged having a disability in both the telephone and face-to-face interview segments). For the other half of the subjects the disclosure and nondisclosure sequence was reversed (i.e., Applicant 1 in the disclosure condition followed by Applicant 2 in the nondisclosure condition). After each phase of each interview subjects completed an interview evaluation form consisting of 10 traits: 8 socially desirable and 2 undesirable characteristics selected from the literature as important employee characteristics. Subjects made ratings on 10-point scales that ranged from 1 (not at all characteristic) to 10 (very characteristic). They also made a final evaluation that rated each applicant's

[3]Interview scripts can be obtained from Catherine Fichten. The exact language used to disclose the disability in the two telephone phases was: "I should tell you that I'm a paraplegic and that I'm in a wheelchair. Although this makes it tougher to get around, I found that in this (past employment) job I really had no difficulties doing the work." or "I'd better tell you that I'm confined to a wheelchair (we believe that it would have been preferable to state that one is a wheelchair user rather than using the word "confined"). I was a bit concerned when I started to work (past employment) whether I'd be able to manage. But there really were very few problems and I learned that I could do this sort of job from a wheelchair." In the two videotaped face-to-face interview segments the wordings were as follows: "Being in a wheelchair did put some restrictions on my career choices. First of all, it does make people who don't know me a little uncomfortable. But in computers one works with people that one gets to know. So that is O.K. And computer work doesn't require too much running around." or "As you can see, I'm a paraplegic. Being in a wheelchair tends to put people off. Also, I had to select a field where I could work sitting, without having to run around. Computers was an ideal choice for me."

suitability and likely satisfaction with the job (10-point Likert-type scales) and indicated whether the applicant should be hired (yes or no). Interview evaluation forms were anonymous and were collected after each interview segment. Once subjects completed their evaluations of both applicants, they were asked to choose one of them for the job.

Results

Because the pilot study on 101 college students showed no consistent differences between applicants, telephone and face-to-face interview scripts or male and female subjects, data from the two applicants and from male and female subjects were pooled. The telephone phase of the nondisclosure condition portrayed, in essence, a nondisabled applicant, whereas the face-to-face phases of both conditions portrayed wheelchair users. In addition, the pilot study indicated that the wheelchair user applicants were evaluated more favorably than the able-bodied applicants on 12 of the 13 qualities evaluated. Therefore, it was inappropriate to use analysis of variance. Paired *t* tests were used instead. Comparisons of the face-to-face interviews provided an answer to the question: Should one disclose the disability during the telephone interview? Comparisons on the telephone interviews examined whether wheelchair user or nondisabled applicants are evaluated more favorably.

Evaluation of Telephone Interviews: Able-Bodied Versus Wheelchair-User Applicants

On 9 of the 10 comparisons on traits of disclosing and nondisclosing applicants, evaluations favored the disclosing (wheelchair-user) applicants, with 8 of these reaching significance at the .05 level or better (see Table 1). Nondisclosing (able-bodied) applicants were favored on only one comparison. This disclosing applicants were significantly favored on two of the three final evaluation comparisons as well. However, the results also show that nondisclosing applicants were preferred on the crucial item, decision to hire.

Evaluation of Face-to-Face Interviews: Disclosing Versus Nondisclosing Applicants

On 7 of the 10 comparisons on traits, evaluations favored the nondisclosure condition applicants (see Table 1), although only 2 of these were significant: ambitious and insecure. On the three comparisons where the disclosure condition applicants were favored, only one reached

Table 1

Comparisons of Disclosure and Nondisclosure Condition Applicants

	Interview phase					
	Telephone			Face-to-face		
Quality	Disclosure condition	Nondisclosure condition	t^1	Disclosure condition	Nondisclosure condition	t^1
Positive traits						
Honest	8.58	7.91	5.71***	8.55	7.91	5.71***
	(1.43)	(1.46)		(1.31)	(1.75)	
Ambitious	7.53	6.94	3.97***	6.25	6.60	2.36*
	(1.44)	(1.68)		(2.40)	(2.07)	
Intelligent	7.89	7.30	6.86***	7.58	7.51	.81
	(1.97)	(0.26)		(1.26)	(1.94)	
Creative	6.37	6.17	1.33	7.14	7.23	.60
	(1.70)	(1.77)		(1.82)	(1.60)	
Cooperative	7.78	7.62	2.91**	7.44	7.48	.35
	(1.39)	(1.62)		(1.70)	(1.58)	
Hardworking	7.49	7.15	3.68***	7.45	7.51	.57
	(1.52)	(1.53)		(1.54)	(1.57)	

Self-disciplined	7.49	7.12	3.30**	7.18	7.20	.18
	(1.42)	(1.27)		(1.70)	(1.45)	
Competent	7.47	7.08	3.65***	7.22	7.34	1.28
	(1.42)	(1.35)		(1.43)	(1.33)	
Negative traits						
Insecure	5.11	4.71	2.53**	5.42	4.89	2.86***
	(2.36)	(2.42)		(2.27)	(1.91)	
Overconfident	5.68	6.04	2.63*	5.75	5.87	.88
	(2.30)	(2.11)		(2.46)	(2.31)	
Final evaluation						
How suitable is candidate	7.17	6.88	2.66**	7.07	7.07	1.36
	(1.62)	(1.42)		(1.63)	(1.74)	
How satisfied would he be?	7.97	7.48	4.67***	7.62	7.80	1.71*
	(1.52)	(1.72)		(1.74)	(1.63)	
Decision to hire	1.86	1.71	5.00***	1.79	1.81	.67
	(.35)	(.45)		(.41)	(.39)	

Note. Values are means. Numbers in brackets are standard deviations. Maximum score is 10 except for decision to hire where 1 = hire and 2 = do not hire.
[1] $df = 114$.
***$p < .001$; **$p < .01$; *$p < .05$.

significance— honest. On the final evaluation which assessed suitability, satisfaction and whether the applicant should be hired, the nondisclosure condition applicants were evaluated significantly more favorably on only one comparison—satisfaction.

A chi-square test was conducted to assess overall applicant choice. This showed a trend for subjects to choose the applicants who disclosed their impairment early (i.e., in the telephone interview), $\chi^2(1) = 3.08, p < .10$.

Discussion

Able-Bodied Versus Disabled Applicants

The findings of the pilot study and the telephone interview phase of the present investigation both show a sympathy effect; people who have a physical disability were evaluated more positively than equivalent able-bodied individuals, even when the performances of both were mediocre. It was only when the crucial hiring decision was made that subjects evaluated the nondisclosing (i.e., able-bodied) applicant more favorably.

The present results are consistent with those of studies that have found that in evaluations of stigmatized individuals there is a tendency to make overly favorable ratings (e.g., Gibbons, Stephan, Stephenson, & Petty, 1980; Scheier, Carver, Schultz, Glass, & Katz, 1978), but only when there are no possible personal consequences for the evaluator (Eberly, Eberly, & Wright, 1981; Snyder, Kleck, Strenta, & Mentzer, 1979). In the case of employment, data from other investigations have also shown that although disabled applicants are evaluated more positively, they are less likely to be hired than able-bodied candidates (cf. Arvey & Campion, 1984). Thus, the favorable ratings accorded in the present study to job applicants who have a disability may have been an artifact of the laboratory setting and the lack of personal relevance for the evaluators. Further research should be conducted in the field.

Nevertheless, knowing why applicants who disclosed their disability during the telephone interview were evaluated more favorably than their nondisclosing counterparts is important. We believe that, in part, this may have been due to the way the applicants disclosed their impairment over the telephone. Wheelchair users mentioned their disability in a manner consistent with the findings of Hastorf et al. (1979) concerning effective disclosure strategies. These investigators found that it was most effective for persons with a disability to acknowledge the impairment themselves and to do this briefly and nonchalantly, preferably following an event that involves the impairment. In addition, the applicants in the present investigation

followed up on the disclosure by stressing their strengths and the irrelevance of the disability for the job, as suggested by rehabilitation workers (Leviton, 1973; B. A. Wright, 1983). Therefore, it is possible that if the manner in which disclosure occurred had been different, evaluations may not have so clearly favored the applicants with a disability. Certainly, investigation of the optimum method of disclosure of a visible disability in a job interview deserves further study both in the laboratory as well as in the field.

Disclosure Over the Telephone Versus Disclosure Only During a Face-to-Face Encounter

But what about the merits of disclosing one's visible disability during the telephone screening or not doing so until a face-to-face interview? The data suggest that although nondisclosing applicants were rated more favorably on a variety of job relevant characteristics, they were less likely to be selected for the job.

The averaging model of impression formation would not have predicted these results. Nondisclosing applicants were generally perceived as having more desirable traits than disclosing applicants. They were also, however, perceived as less honest. This one characteristic could have acted as a "central" trait and may have been the most influential factor in being selected for the job. It is only if one "weights" the average of the evaluations disproportionately for honesty that the averaging model could account for the findings.

The shift-of-meaning phenomenon (Wyer, 1974; Zanna & Hamilton, 1977) provides a better explanation of the findings. In the present study, nondisclosing applicants were rated not only as significantly less honest but also as more likely to be satisfied with the job, more ambitious, and more secure than disclosing applicants. The averaging model predicts that the three positive job characteristics, satisfied, ambitious and secure, when averaged with an undesirable one, lack of honesty, will yield a favorable overall impression. Yet applicants who did not disclose their disability were less likely to be hired than those who did disclose their impairment. In the present context, the lack of honesty may have shifted the positive meaning of the traits ambitious, satisfied and secure. When these desirable characteristics were coupled with dishonesty, they may have connoted a smug and ruthless backstabber rather than a happy, confident, work-motivated achiever. Thus, the shift-of-meaning phenomenon appears to provide a better explanation than the averaging model for the present findings.

A primacy effect was expected in the present study, with ratings of face-to-face interviews paralleling ratings of telephone interviews. Because

of the honesty issue, it was difficult to determine whether primacy or recency effects influenced the ratings. Nevertheless, a recency effect may be found in the field where a significant time lapse exists between the initial telephone contact and the actual face-to-face interview.

In light of the present results, it is not at all clear that disclosure of one's disability during the telephone screening is the best strategy for job applicants with visible disabilities. First, in a "real-life" context, disclosing applicants may not benefit from the sympathy bias, because this generally operates only when ratings have no personal relevance for the evaluator. Therefore, disclosing applicants may never be granted the face-to-face interview. Second, the results of the present study were ambiguous: nondisclosing applicants were rated more favorably but they were also less likely to be selected for the job. A possible compromise may entail nondisclosure of the disability during the telephone interview but mentioning the impairment after a face-to-face interview has been arranged (e.g., "I'm looking forward to meeting you. Incidentally, you will recognize me easily—I'll probably be the only applicant in a wheelchair."). Field experiments are needed to provide definitive answers.

Nevertheless, we believe that laboratory analogue studies are useful. As Arvey and Campion's (1984) review indicates, students' and personnel officers' evaluations of job applicants are very similar and laboratory studies have reasonable external validity. Second, laboratory studies can provide answers to certain strategic questions that, in the "real world," would be too difficult or expensive to do. One issue that could profitably be investigated in an analogue format concerns primacy-recency effects; these could be examined by varying the interval between the telephone and face-to-face interviews. In order to determine whether the weighted averaging model or the shift-of-meaning phenomenon provides a better explanation of the discrepancies between positive ratings and negative hiring decisions, evaluators in such investigations could be asked to write brief personality sketches of applicants. In addition, analogue studies could investigate various methods of disclosing the disability in the context of a job interview (cf. Belgrave, 1984; Belgrave & Mills, 1981; Evans, 1976; Hastorf et a., 1979), both for male and female job applicants who have outstanding, mediocre, or poor job skills. Special attention in such studies should be accorded to the perceived honesty-dishonesty issue.

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