Recruiters infer personal traits from job applicants’ resumés and use these inferences in evaluating job applicants’ employability. No research to date, however, has determined if resumé reviewers’ inferences of applicants’ personality drawn solely from resumé biographical data are valid. In the present study, resumé reviewers (N = 52) examined one of two applicant resumés and then described the applicant’s personality based on the Big 5 taxonomy. Validities of reviewers’ inferences concerning applicant personality were assessed by correlating resumé reviewers’ judgments with applicants’ self-reported Big 5 personality scores. Results suggested that valid personality inferences are possible based solely on resumé evaluation. We also found evidence suggesting that attending a brief training session may enhance reviewers’ accuracy when inferring applicants’ personality from resumé information.

Introduction

Resumé evaluation has been identified as the initial phase of personnel selection, and, as a result, it is a practice used even more frequently than employment interviews (Dipboye & Jackson, 1999). On this basis, resumé reviewers serve as an organization’s gatekeepers whose primary task involves deciding which job applicants will receive further consideration and which will be turned away. Indeed, this conception seems not far from the truth. Cable and Judge (1997) found, for example, that recruiters’ impressions of applicants’ employability were correlated (r = .64) with an organization’s decision to offer a job. Results such as these have prompted researchers to design studies to empirically determine what it is about applicants that influence recruiters’ impressions of their employability. In particular, one piece of applicant information that has received such attention is the role of applicants’ resumé data in recruiters’ employability evaluations (e.g., Brown & Campion, 1994; Thoms, McMasters, Roberts, & Dombkowski, 1999).

Researchers have suggested that applicants’ resumé information is a specific type of biographical data (biodata), in that resumé biodata represents a culmination of applicants’ life experiences (e.g., education and work experience) deemed applicable for a work context (Brown & Campion, 1994; Rubin, Bommer, & Baldwin, 2002). Analogous to validated, job-specific biodata instruments, resumé biodata are believed to be useful in characterizing or predicting applicants’ psychological attributes, such as abilities, interests, and personality. For instance, studies have found that the resumé biodata reported on applicants’ resumés is significantly correlated with applicants’ dispositions and personality (Cole, Feild, & Giles, 2003b; Rubin et al., 2002). Research has also shown recruiters’ inferences of applicants’ dispositional traits based solely on resumé review impact their judgments regarding applicant employability (Brown & Campion, 1994; Cole, Feild, Giles, & Harris, 2004). Despite extant research that has shown recruiters form impressions of applicants’ personal traits during resumé evaluation and, subsequently, employ these
inferences to form first impressions of applicants’ suitability, apparently no study has been conducted on the validity of such inferences.

The present study was designed to address this gap in the literature. Specifically, the main purpose was to examine the validity of resume reviewers’ inferences of applicants’ personality following a review of applicants’ resumes. A second purpose was to determine if a brief training program on inferring applicant personality from resume information might enhance the validity of resume reviewers’ inference making.

To address these objectives, we asked a group of undergraduates to review one of two actual applicant resumes and judge the extent to which 25 personality adjectives (based on the Big 5 taxonomy) accurately described the applicant’s personality. The resume reviewers judged the applicant’s personality at two points in time (time 1 and, 8 weeks later, time 2). In between these two time periods (4 weeks after time 1), the resume reviewers were trained to make them more aware of information commonly reported on applicant resumes and that has been found to be correlated with applicants’ personality (Cole, Feild, & Giles, 2003a, 2003b). We then examined the correlations between the resume reviewers’ inferences of applicant personality (pre- and post-training) and applicants’ self-reported scores on a personality inventory.

Method

Participants

Resume reviewers were 52 undergraduates enrolled in a capstone strategic management course in a college of business. Participants’ gender was roughly equal (56% male), 85% were Caucasian, and averaged 21 years of age (SD = 1.2). Most (73%) reported having previously interviewed for a full-time job, with 62% of participants having received at least one job offer.

Stimulus Material and Task

The study’s stimulus materials were (a) the resumes of two job applicants and (b) a position hiring scenario and resume rating booklet. As part of an earlier study, graduating seniors provided us with their actual resume and completed the NEO–FFI (Costa & McCrae, 1992) personality inventory. From this group of resumes, we selected two to include in this study.

The position-hiring scenario began by stating that this hiring scenario could occur in many organizations. Resume reviewers were told to review the hypothetical situation and to do the following:

Step 1: Assume that you are employed as a college recruiter for a large organization that has successfully hired previous graduates from [university name]. Once again, you have been asked to review [university name] graduating senior resums for a managerial trainee position. In addition, to help you with your screening duty, your HR department has provided you with a job description of the managerial trainee position.

Step 2: Read the job description to familiarize yourself with the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to successfully perform the job. Then, assume you are the recruiter and assume that you have just received this resume from a new college graduate who is applying for the open position. The applicant resume is enclosed with your resume rating booklet.

Resume reviewers were told to think about the extent to which the information reported on the resume reflects the applicant’s personality. Reviewers judged the applicant’s personality attributes using adjective trait rating scales developed to assess the Big 5 taxonomy of personality. Reviewers indicated the extent to which 25 personality adjectives (five per personality trait) described the applicant (1 = strongly disagree; 6 = strongly agree).

Costa and McCrae (1992) reported that 21 of the 25 adjectives correlated (p < .001) with their respective Big 5 personality dimension (p. 49). The remaining four adjectives were taken directly from Goldberg’s (1992) inventory. Past studies (e.g., Barrick, Patton, & Haugland, 2000) have chosen similar adjectives to examine the validity of observers’ ratings of individuals’ personality. Previous research (available from the first author) has shown that the adjective trait rating scales were internally consistent, exhibited acceptable test-retest reliability coefficients, and displayed convergent validity with the NEO–FFI (Costa & McCrae, 1992), a widely used Big 5 personality inventory.

The independent variables in the study were applicants’ Big 5 personality traits as inferred by the resume reviewers and measured by the 25 adjective traits. The traits were neuroticism (αtime 1 = .60, αtime 2 = .65), extraversion (αtime 1 = .89, αtime 2 = .92), openness to experience (αtime 1 = .88, αtime 2 = .87), agreeableness (αtime 1 = .84, αtime 2 = .82), and conscientiousness (αtime 1 = .87, αtime 2 = .88). Intraclass correlation coefficients (ICC1) for recruiters rating the same applicant resume at time 1 and time 2 were: neuroticism, .03 and .07; extraversion, .13 and .33; openness to experience, .39 and .36; agreeableness, .15 and .00; and conscientiousness, .18 and .38, respectively.

Applicants’ Personality Traits

The dependent variables were applicants’ Big 5 personality trait scores assessed by the NEO–FFI (Costa & McCrae, 1992). The NEO–FFI contains 12-item scales for each of
five personality traits. Reliability and validity information can be found in Costa and McCrae (1992). Applicant 1’s self-reported scores on the personality inventory were neuroticism (2.8), extraversion (3.0), openness to experience (3.2), agreeableness (4.1), and conscientiousness (4.0); applicant 2’s self-reported scores were neuroticism (1.6), extraversion (4.6), openness to experience (4.2), agreeableness (3.5), and conscientiousness (4.7).

**Procedure**

During a regular class period (time 1), participants were given at random an envelope that contained one of the two applicant resumés, the position-hiring scenario, and the resumé rating booklet. Four weeks later, the students again received an envelope that contained the identical applicant resumé as time 1, the position-hiring scenario, and the resumé rating booklet.

**The Training**

A 45-min lecture was developed specifically for the current study. We covered topics related to Big 5 personality traits, resumé screening, and the association between resumé information and applicants’ personality. Content of the training was based on empirical studies examining resumé items’ relationships with applicants’ subjective attributes and personality traits (Brown & Campion, 1994; Cole et al., 2003a, 2003b; Rubin et al., 2002).

**Data Analysis**

We first computed the correlation (validity) coefficients between resumé reviewers’ inferences of applicants’ personality and applicants’ self-reported personality. To enable the computation, we first needed to assign the applicant’s self-reported personality scores to each independent observer who made personality inferences based on one of the two applicant’s resumés. That is, resumé recruiters that were randomly assigned applicant 1’s resumé were also assigned applicant 1’s self-reported personality scores and resumé recruiters that were randomly assigned applicant 2’s resumé were similarly assigned applicant 2’s self-reported personality scores. With the resumé reviewers’ personality inferences correctly matched with the appropriate self-reported personality scores, we then computed validity coefficients based on resumé reviewers’ inferences (both before and after training) and the applicants self-reports.

We also wished to empirically determine if the after training validity coefficients were significantly higher than their before training counterpart. Because the validity coefficients we wished to contrast were computed across the same individuals, we used a test for dependent correlations (Bobko, 1995, pp. 43–57).

**Results**

Correlation or validity coefficients between resumé reviewers’ inferences of applicants’ personality based solely on their review of applicants’ resumés and applicants’ self-reported personality scores are shown in Table 1. Validity coefficients are shown for resumé reviewers’ personality inferences both before and after they participated in resumé review training. Even before the training occurred, there was evidence that the resumé reviewers made valid inferences of two applicant personality traits. Reviewers’ inferences of applicants’ openness to experience (\( r = .44, p < .01 \)) and conscientiousness (\( r = .33, p < .01 \)) were correlated with applicants’ personality self-reports.

Table 1 shows that the validity coefficients associated with two personality traits improved significantly when compared to their before-training coefficients. Testing the equality of the dependent correlations showed that the validity coefficients concerning extraversion (\( t = 3.34, p < .01 \)) and conscientiousness (\( t = 2.63, p < .01 \)) improved after training and were significantly and positively correlated with applicants’ personality self-reports. Resumé reviewers’ inferences of neuroticism showed the most dramatic improvement (\( t = 8.52, p < .01 \)); the validity of the inferences changed from a negative validity coefficient to a positive one. However, the neuroticism coefficient was not significantly different (\( p < .05 \)).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Applicant personality trait</th>
<th>Validity of resume reviewer ratings before training</th>
<th>Validity of resume reviewer ratings after training</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>( N^a )</td>
<td>( r^b )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neuroticism</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>-.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extraversion</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Openness to experience</td>
<td>52</td>
<td><strong>.44</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreeableness</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>-.26*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conscientiousness</td>
<td>52</td>
<td><strong>.33</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Notes: All tests are two-tailed. \( a^a \)Sample size represents number of resume reviewers. \( b^b \)An underlined validity coefficient indicates that the before and after validity coefficients for a specific personality trait are significantly different (\( p < .05 \)). A bolded and underlined validity coefficient indicates that the before and after validity coefficients for a specific personality trait are significantly different (\( p < .01 \)). \( **p < .05 \).**
Discussion

A decade has passed since Brown and Campion’s (1994) call for research on the validity of recruiters’ inferences of applicant personality drawn from résumé information. To our knowledge, no published study has addressed Brown and Campion’s call by designing a study to empirically determine if valid personality inferences are possible based solely on résumé evaluation. We, therefore, conducted a study as an initial effort to address the issue. Results suggest that valid personality inferences may be possible. The present findings further imply that knowing what to look for on an applicant’s résumé might help one’s ability to make valid inferences.

Research is needed to determine if our results will generalize to actual, organizational recruiter samples. If organizational recruiters were able to make valid personality inferences, various practical implications could be anticipated. First, because applicants typically mail or send their résumés electronically, if résumé information were linked to applicant’s personality, substantial savings could accrue to an organization before investing in more-expensive, time-consuming selection techniques requiring on-site applicant presence. Second, résumé information generally possesses substantial face validity from an applicant’s perspective. Applicants expect to submit a résumé, and, therefore, résumés may also offer employing organizations benefits involving legal focal points and perceived fairness (cf. Elkins & Phillips, 2000). Third, personnel selection research has increasingly focused on the importance of person-job, person-team, and person-organization fit (Andersen, Lievens, van Dam, & Ryan, 2004). In their review, Andersen et al. (2004) posed the following query, “how can organizations select for person-job, person-team, and person-organization fit concurrently” (p. 493). Our position is that résumé biodata may be a pragmatic, prescreening method to evaluate applicants’ fit at each of these levels.

Clearly, more substantive research designs are needed to determine if the present findings generalize to an actual employment situation. Such future research should address the limitations of the present study. First, a control group was not included and, therefore, we cannot be certain that the training was in fact the reason why résumé reviewers’ inferences improved at time 2. Second, résumé reviewers were undergraduate students with little or no personnel selection experience. Previous studies, however, have found little difference between student volunteers and professional raters in tasks such as ours which mimic the early stages of the employment selection procedure (e.g., Watkins & Johnston, 2000). Nonetheless, we look forward to future research that extends the present findings to an organizational sample.

References


